
The Heart of the Matter

Graham Greene

Chapter 1

I

Wilson sat on the balcony of the Bedford Hotel with his bald pink knees thrust against the ironwork. It was Sunday and the Cathedral bell clanged for matins. On the other side of Bond Street, in the windows of the High School, sat the young negresses in darkblue gym smocks engaged on the interminable task of trying to wave their wirespring hair. Wilson stroked his very young moustache and dreamed, waiting for his gin-and-bitters.

Sitting there, facing Bond Street, he had his face turned to the sea. His pallor showed how recently he had emerged from it into the port: so did his lack of interest in the schoolgirls opposite. He was like the lagging finger of the barometer, still pointing to Fair long after its companion has moved to Stormy. Below him the black clerks moved churchward, but their wives in brilliant afternoon dresses of blue and cerise aroused no interest in Wilson. He was alone on the balcony except for one bearded Indian in a turban who had already tried to tell his fortune: this was not the hour or the day for white men – they would be at the beach five miles away, but Wilson had no car. He felt almost intolerably lonely. On either side of the school the tin roofs sloped towards the sea, and the corrugated iron above his head clanged and clattered as a vulture alighted.

Three merchant officers from the convoy in the harbour came into view, walking up from the quay. They were surrounded immediately by small boys wearing school caps. The boys' refrain came faintly up to Wilson like a nursery rhyme: 'Captain want jig jig, my sister pretty girl school-teacher, captain want jig jig.' The bearded Indian frowned over intricate calculations on the back of an envelope – a horoscope, the cost of living? When Wilson looked down into the street again the officers had fought their way free, and the schoolboys had swarmed again round a single able-seaman: they led him triumphantly away towards the brothel near the police station, as though to the nursery.

A black boy brought Wilson's gin and he sipped it very slowly because he had nothing else to do except to return to his hot and squalid room and read a novel – or a poem. Wilson liked poetry, but he absorbed it secretly, like a drug. The Golden Treasury accompanied him wherever he went, but it was taken at night in small doses – a finger of Longfellow, Macaulay, Mangan: 'Go on to tell how, with genius wasted, Betrayed in friendship, befooled in love . . .' His taste was romantic. For public exhibition he had his Wallace. He wanted passionately to be indistinguishable on the surface from other men: he wore his moustache like a club tie – it was his highest common factor, but his eyes betrayed him – brown dog's eyes, a setter's eyes, pointing mournfully towards Bond Street.

'Excuse me,' a voice said, 'aren't you Wilson?'

He looked up at a middle-aged man in the inevitable khaki shorts with a drawn face the colour of hay.

'Yes, that's me.'

'May I join you? My name's Harris.'

'Delighted, Mr Harris.'

'You're the new accountant at the U.A.C.?'

'That's me. Have a drink?'

'I'll have a lemon squash if you don't mind. Can't drink in the middle of the day.'

The Indian rose from his table and approached with deference, 'You remember me, Mr Harris. Perhaps you would tell your friend, Mr Harris, of my talents. Perhaps he would like to read my letters of recommendation . . .' The grubby sheaf of envelopes was always in his hand. 'The leaders of society.'

'Be off. Beat it, you old scoundrel,' Harris said.

'How did you know my name?' Wilson asked.

'Saw it on a cable. I'm a cable censor,' Harris said. 'What a job! What a place!'

'I can see from here, Mr Harris, that your fortune has changed considerably. If you would step with me for a moment into the bathroom . . .'

'Beat it, Gunga Din.'

'Why the bathroom?' Wilson asked.

'He always tells fortunes there. I suppose it's the only private room available. I never thought of asking why.'

'Been here long?'

'Eighteen bloody months.'

'Going home soon?'

Harris stared over the tin roofs towards the harbour. He said, 'The ships all go the wrong way. But when I do get home you'll never see me here again.' He lowered his voice and said with venom over his lemon squash, 'I hate the place. I hate the people. I hate the bloody niggers. Mustn't call 'em that you know.'

'My boy seems all right.'

'A man's boy's always all right. He's a real nigger – but these, look at 'em, look at that one with a feather boa down there. They aren't even real niggers. Just West Indians and they rule the coast. Clerks in the stores, city council, magistrates, lawyers – my God. It's all right up in the Protectorate. I haven't anything to say against a real nigger. God made our colours. But these – my God! The Government's afraid of them. The police are afraid of them. Look down there,' Harris said, 'look at Scobie.'

A vulture flapped and shifted on the iron roof and Wilson looked at Scobie. He looked without interest in obedience to a stranger's direction, and it seemed to him that no particular interest attached to the squat grey-haired man walking alone up Bond Street. He couldn't tell that this was one of those occasions a man never forgets: a small cicatrice had been made on the memory, a wound that would ache whenever certain things combined – the taste of gin at mid-day, the smell of flowers under a balcony, the clang of corrugated iron, an ugly bird flopping from perch to perch.

'He loves 'em so much,' Harris said, 'he sleeps with 'em.'

'Is that the police uniform?'

'It is. Our great police force. A lost thing will they never find – you know the poem.'

'I don't read poetry,' Wilson said. His eyes followed Scobie up the sun-drowned street. Scobie stopped and had a word with a black man in a white Panama: a black policeman passed by, saluting smartly. Scobie went on.

'Probably in the pay of the Syrians too if the truth were known.'

'The Syrians?'

'This is the original Tower of Babel,' Harris said. 'West Indians, Africans, real Indians, Syrians, Englishmen, Scotsmen in the Office of Works, Irish priests, French priests, Alsatian priests.'

'What do the Syrians do?'

'Make money. They ran all the stores up country and most of the stores here. Run diamonds too.'

'I suppose there's a lot of that.'

'The Germans pay a high price.'

'Hasn't he got a wife here?'

'Who? Oh, Scobie. Rather. He's got a wife. Perhaps if I had a wife like that, I'd sleep with niggers too. You'll meet her soon. She's the city intellectual. She likes art,

poetry. Got up an exhibition of arts for the shipwrecked seamen. You know the kind of thing – poems on exile by aircraftsmen, watercolours by stokers, pokerwork from the mission schools. Poor old Scobie. Have another gin?’

‘I think I will,’ said Wilson.

II

Scobie turned up James Street past the Secretariat. With its long balconies it had always reminded him of a hospital. For fifteen years he had watched the arrival of a succession of patients; periodically at the end of eighteen months certain patients were sent home, yellow and nervy, and others took their place – Colonial Secretaries, Secretaries of Agriculture, Treasurers and Directors of Public Works. He watched their temperature charts every one – the first outbreak of unreasonable temper, the drink too many, the sudden stand for principle after a year of acquiescence. The black clerks carried their bedside manner like doctors down the corridors; cheerful and respectful they put up with any insult. The patient was always right.

Round the corner, in front of the old cotton tree, where the earliest settlers had gathered their first day on the unfriendly shore, stood the law courts and police station, a great stone building like the grandiloquent boast of weak men. Inside that massive frame the human being rattled in the corridors like a dry kernel. No one could have been adequate to so rhetorical a conception. But the idea in any case was only one room deep. In the dark narrow passage behind, in the charge-room and the cells, Scobie could always detect the odour of human meanness and injustice – it was the smell of a zoo, of sawdust, excrement, ammonia, and lack of liberty. The place was scrubbed daily, but you could never eliminate the smell. Prisoners and policemen carried it in their clothing like cigarette smoke.

Scobie climbed the great steps and turned to his right along the shaded outside corridor to his room: a table, two kitchen chairs, a cupboard, some rusty handcuffs hanging on a nail like an old hat, a filing cabinet: to a stranger it would have appeared a bare uncomfortable room but to Scobie it was home. Other men slowly build up the sense of home by accumulation – a new picture, more and more books, an odd-shaped paper-weight, the ash-tray bought for a forgotten reason on a forgotten holiday; Scobie built his home by a process of reduction. He had started out fifteen years ago with far more than this. There had been a photograph of his wife, bright leather cushions from the market, an easy-chair, a large coloured map of the port on the wall. The map had been borrowed by younger men: it was of no more use to him; he carried the whole coastline of the colony in his mind’s eye: from Kufa Bay to Medley was his beat. As for the cushions and the easychair, he had soon discovered how comfort of that kind down in the airless town meant heat. Where the body was touched or enclosed it sweated. Last of all his wife’s photograph had been made unnecessary by her presence. She had joined him the first year of the phoney war and now she couldn’t get away: the danger of submarines had made her as much a fixture as the handcuffs on the nail. Besides, it had been a very early photograph, and he no longer cared to be reminded of the unformed face, the expression calm and gentle with lack of knowledge, the lips parted obediently in the smile the photographer had demanded. Fifteen years form a face, gentleness ebbs

with experience, and he was always aware of his own responsibility. He had led the way: the experience that had come to her was the experience selected by himself. He had formed her face.

He sat down at his bare table and almost immediately his Mende sergeant clicked his heels in the doorway. 'Sah?'

'Anything to report?'

'The Commissioner want to see you, sah.'

'Anything on the charge sheet?'

'Two black men fight in the market, sah.'

'Mammy trouble?'

'Yes, sah.'

'Anything else?'

'Miss Wilberforce want to see you, sah. I tell her you was at church and she got to come back by-and-by, but she stick. She say she no budge.'

'Which Miss Wilberforce is that, sergeant?'

'I don't know, sah. She come from Sharp Town, sah.'

'Well, I'll see her after the Commissioner. But no one else, mind.'

'Very good, sah.'

Scobie, passing down the passage to the Commissioner's room, saw the girl sitting alone on a bench against the wall: he didn't look twice: he caught only the vague impression of a young black African face, a bright cotton frock, and then she was already out of his mind, and he was wondering what he should say to the Commissioner. It had been on his mind all that week.

'Sit down, Scobie.' The Commissioner was an old man of fiftythree — one counted age by the years a man had served in the colony. The Commissioner with twenty-two years' service was the oldest man there, just as the Governor was a stripling of sixty compared with any district officer who had five years' knowledge behind him.

'I'm retiring, Scobie,' the Commissioner said, 'after this tour.'

'I know.'

'I suppose everyone knows.'

'I've heard the men talking about it.'

'And yet you are the second man I've told. Do they say who's taking my place?'

Scobie said, 'They know who isn't.'

'It's damned unfair,' the Commissioner said. 'I can do nothing more than I have done, Scobie. You are a wonderful man for picking up enemies. Like Aristides the Just.'

'I don't think I'm as just as all that.'

'The question is what do you want to do? They are sending a man called Baker from Gambia. He's younger than you are. Do you want to resign, retire, transfer, Scobie?'

'I want to stay,' Scobie said.

'Your wife won't like it.'

'I've been here too long to go.' He thought to himself, poor Louise, if I had left it to her, where should we be now? and he admitted straight away that they wouldn't be here – somewhere far better, better climate, better pay, better position. She would have taken every opening for improvement: she would have steered agilely up the ladders and left the snakes alone. I've landed her here he thought, with the odd premonitory sense of guilt he always felt as though he were responsible for something in the future he couldn't even foresee. He said aloud, 'You know I like the place.'

'I believe you do. I wonder why.'

'It's pretty in the evening,' Scobie said vaguely.

'Do you know the latest story they are using against you at the Secretariat?'

'I suppose I'm in the Syrians' pay?'

'They haven't got that far yet. That's the next stage. No, you sleep with black girls. You know what it is, Scobie, you ought to have flirted with one of their wives. They feel insulted.'

'Perhaps I ought to sleep with a black girl. Then they won't have to think up anything else.'

'The man before you slept with dozens,' the Commissioner said, 'but it never bothered anyone. They thought up something different for him. They said he drank secretly. It made them feel better drinking publicly. What a lot of swine they are, Scobie.'

'The Chief Assistant Colonial Secretary's not a bad chap.'

'No, the Chief Assistant Colonial Secretary's all right.' The Commissioner laughed. 'You're a terrible fellow, Scobie. Scobie the Just.'

Scobie returned down the passage; the girl sat in the dusk. Her feet were bare: they stood side by side like casts in a museum: they didn't belong to the bright smart cotton frock. 'Are you Miss Wilberforce?' Scobie asked.

'Yes, sir.'

'You don't live here, do you?'

'No! I live in Sharp Town, sir.'

'Well, come in.' He led the way into his office and sat down at his desk. There was no pencil laid out and he opened his drawer. Here and here only had objects accumulated: letters, india-rubbers, a broken rosary – no pencil. 'What's the trouble, Miss Wilberforce?' His eye caught a snapshot of a bathing party at Medley Beach: his wife, the Colonial Secretary's wife, the Director of Education holding up what looked like a dead fish, the Colonial Treasurer's wife. The expanse of white flesh made them look like a gathering of albinos, and all the mouths gaped with laughter.

The girl said, 'My landlady – she broke up my home last night. She come in when it was dark, and she pull down all the partition, an' she thieve my chest with all my belongings.'

'You got plenty lodgers?'

'Only three, sir.'

He knew exactly how it all was: a lodger would take a oneroomed shack for five shillings a week, stick up a few thin partitions and let the so-called rooms for half a crown a piece – a horizontal tenement. Each room would be furnished with a box containing a little china and glass 'dashed' by an employer or stolen from an employer, a bed made out of old packing-cases, and a hurricane lamp. The glass of these lamps did not long survive, and the little open flames were always ready to catch some spilt paraffin; they licked at the plywood partitions and caused innumerable fires. Sometimes a landlady would thrust her way into her house and pull down the dangerous partitions, sometimes she would steal the lamps of her tenants, and the ripple of her theft would go out in widening rings of lamp thefts until they touched the European quarter and became a subject of gossip at the club. 'Can't keep a lamp for love or money.'

'Your landlady,' Scobie told the girl sharply, 'she say you make plenty trouble: too many lodgers: too many lamps.'

'No, sir. No lamp palaver.'

'Mammy palaver, eh? You bad girl?'

'No, sir.'

'Why you come here? Why you not call Corporal Laminah in Sharp Town?'

'He my landlady's brother, sir.'

'He is, is he? Same father same mother?'

'No, sir. Same father.'

The interview was like a ritual between priest and server. He knew exactly what would happen when one of his men investigated the affair. The landlady would say that she had told her tenant to pull down the partitions and when that failed she had taken action herself. She would deny that there had ever been a chest of china. The corporal would confirm this. He would turn out not to be the landlady's brother, but some other unspecified relation – probably disreputable. Bribes – which were known respectably as dashes – would pass to and fro, the storm of indignation and anger that had sounded so genuine would subside, the partitions would go up again, nobody would hear any more about the chest, and several policemen would be a shilling or two the richer. At the beginning of his service Scobie had flung himself into these investigations; he had found himself over and over again in the position of a partisan, supporting as he believed the poor and innocent tenant against the wealthy and guilty houseowner. But he soon discovered that the guilt and innocence were as relative as the wealth. The wronged tenant turned out to be also the wealthy capitalist, making a profit of five shillings a week on a single room, living rent free herself. After that he had tried to kill these cases at birth: he would reason with the complainant and point out that the investigation would do no good and undoubtedly cost her time and money; he would sometimes even refuse to investigate. The result of that inaction had been stones flung at his car window, slashed tyres, the nickname of the Bad Man that had stuck to him through all one long sad tour – it worried him unreasonably in the heat and damp; he couldn't take it lightly. Already he had begun to desire these people's trust and affection. That year he had blackwater fever and was nearly invalidated from the service altogether.

The girl waited patiently for his decision. They had an infinite capacity for patience when patience was required – just as their impatience knew no bounds of propriety when they had anything to gain by it. They would sit quietly all day in a white man's backyard in order to beg for something he hadn't the power to grant, or they would shriek and fight and abuse to get served in a store before their neighbour. He thought: how beautiful she is. It was strange to think that fifteen years ago he would not have noticed her beauty – the small high breasts, the tiny wrists, the thrust of the young buttocks, she would have been indistinguishable from her fellows – a black. In those days he had thought his wife beautiful. A white skin had not then reminded him of an albino. Poor Louise. He said, 'Give this chit to the sergeant at the desk.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'That's all right.' He smiled. 'Try to tell him the truth.'

He watched her go out of the dark office like fifteen wasted years.

III

Scobie had been out-manoeuvred in the interminable war over housing. During his last leave he had lost his bungalow in Cape Station, the main European quarter, to a senior sanitary inspector called Fellowes, and had found himself relegated to a square two-storeyed house built originally for a Syrian trader on the flats below – a piece of reclaimed swamp which would return to swamp as soon as the rains set in. From the windows he looked directly out to sea over a line of Creole houses; on the other side of the road lorries backed and churned in a military transport camp and vultures strolled like domestic turkeys in the regimental refuse. On the low ridge of hills behind him the bungalows of the station lay among the low clouds; lamps burned all day in the cupboards, mould gathered on the boots – nevertheless these were the houses for men of his rank. Women depended so much on pride, pride in themselves, their husbands, their surroundings. They were seldom proud, it seemed to him, of the invisible.

‘Louise,’ he called, ‘Louise.’ There was no reason to call: if she wasn’t in the living-room there was nowhere else for her to be but the bedroom (the kitchen was simply a shed in the yard opposite the back door), yet it was his habit to cry her name, a habit he had formed in the days of anxiety and love. The less he needed Louise the more conscious he became of his responsibility for her happiness. When he called her name he was crying like Canute against a tide – the tide of her melancholy and disappointment.

In the old days she had replied, but she was not such a creature of habit as he was – nor so false, he sometimes told himself. Kindness and pity had no power with her; she would never have pretended an emotion she didn’t feel, and like an animal she gave way completely to the momentary sickness and recovered as suddenly. When he found her in the bedroom under the mosquito-net she reminded him of a dog or a cat, she was so completely ‘out’. Her hair was matted, her eyes closed. He stood very still like a spy in foreign territory, and indeed he was in foreign territory now. If home for him meant the reduction of things to a friendly unchanging minimum, home to her was accumulation. The dressingtable was crammed with pots and photographs – himself as a young man in the curiously dated officer’s uniform of the last war: the Chief Justice’s wife whom for the moment she counted as her friend: their only child who had died at school in England three years ago – a little pious nine-year-old girl’s face in the white muslin of first communion: innumerable photographs of Louise herself, in groups with nursing sisters, with the Admiral’s party at Medley Beach, on a Yorkshire moor with Teddy Bromley and his wife. It was as if she were accumulating evidence that she had friends like other people. He watched her through the muslin net. Her face had the ivory tinge of atabrine: her hair which had once been the colour of bottled honey was dark and stringy with sweat. These were the times of ugliness when he loved her, when pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion. It was pity that told him to go: he wouldn’t have woken his worst enemy from sleep, leave alone Louise. He tiptoed out and down the stairs. (The inside stairs could be found nowhere else in this bungalow city except in Government House, and she had tried to make them an

object of pride with stair-carpet and pictures on the wall.) In the living-room there was a bookcase full of her books, rugs on the floor, a native mask from Nigeria, more photographs. The books had to be wiped daily to remove the damp, and she had not succeeded very well in disguising with flowery curtains the food safe which stood with each foot in a little enamel basin of water to keep the ants out. The boy was laying a single place for lunch.

The boy was short and squat with the broad ugly pleasant face of a Temne. His bare feet flapped like empty gloves across the floor.

‘What’s wrong with Missus?’ Scobie asked.

‘Belly humbug,’ Ali said.

Scobie took a Mende grammar from the bookcase: it was tucked away in the bottom shelf where its old untidy cover was least conspicuous. In the upper shelves were the flimsy rows of Louise’s authors – not so young modern poets and the novels of Virginia Woolf. He couldn’t concentrate: it was too hot and his wife’s absence was like a garrulous companion in the room reminding him of his responsibility. A fork fell on the floor and he watched Ali surreptitiously wipe it on his sleeve, watched him with affection. They had been together fifteen years – a year longer than his marriage – a long time to keep a servant. He had been ‘small boy’ first, then assistant steward in the days when one kept four servants, now he was plain steward. After each leave Ali would be on the landing-stage waiting to organize his luggage with three or four ragged carriers. In the intervals of leave many people tried to steal Ali’s services, but he had never yet failed to be waiting – except once when he had been in prison. There was no disgrace about prison; it was an obstacle that no one could avoid for ever.

‘Ticki,’ a voice wailed, and Scobie rose at once. ‘Ticki.’ He went upstairs.

His wife was sitting up under the mosquito-net, and for a moment he had the impression of a joint under a meat-cover. But pity trod on the heels of the cruel image and hustled it away. ‘Are you feeling better, darling?’

Louise said, ‘Mrs Castle’s been in.’

‘Enough to make anyone ill,’ Scobie said.

‘She’s been telling me about you.’

‘What about me?’ He gave her a bright fake smile; so much of life was a putting off of unhappiness for another time. Nothing was ever lost by delay. He had a dim idea that perhaps if one de layed long enough, things were taken out of one’s hands altogether by death.

‘She says the Commissioner’s retiring, and they’ve passed you over.’

‘Her husband talks too much in his sleep.’

'Is it true?'

'Yes, I've known it for weeks. It doesn't matter, dear, really.'

Louise said. 'I'll never be able to show my face at the club again.'

'It's not as bad as that. These things happen, you know.'

'You'll resign, won't you, Ticki?'

'I don't think I can do that, dear.'

'Mrs Castle's on our side. She's furious. She says everyone's talking about it and saying things. Darling, you aren't in the pay of the Syrians, are you?'

'No, dear.'

'I was so upset I came out of Mass before the end. It's so mean of them, Ticki. You can't take it lying down. You've got to think of me.'

'Yes, I do. All the time.' He sat down on the bed and put his hand under the net and touched hers. Little beads of sweat started where their skins touched. He said, 'I do think of you, dear. But I've been fifteen years in this place. I'd be lost anywhere else, even if they gave me another job. It isn't much of a recommendation, you know, being passed over.'

'We could retire.'

'The pension isn't much to live on.'

'I'm sure I could make a little money writing. Mrs Castle says I ought to be a professional. With all this experience,' Louise said, gazing through the white muslin tent as far as her dressing-table: there another face in white muslin stared back and she looked away. She said, 'If only we could go to South Africa. I can't bear the people here.'

'Perhaps I could arrange a passage for you. There haven't been many sinkings that way lately. You ought to have a holiday.'

'There was a time when you wanted to retire too. You used to count the years. You made plans – for all of us.'

'Oh well, one changes,' he said.

She said mercilessly, 'You didn't think you'd be alone with me then.'

He pressed his sweating hand against hers. 'What nonsense you talk, dear. You must get up and have some food . . .'

'Do you love anyone, Ticki, except yourself?'

'No, I just love myself, that's all. And Ali. I forgot Ali. Of course I love him too. But not you,' he ran on with worn mechanical raillery, stroking her hand, smiling, soothing . . .

'And Ali's sister?'

'Has he got a sister?'

'They've all got sisters, haven't they? Why didn't you go to Mass today?'

'It was my morning on duty, dear. You know that.'

'You could have changed it. You haven't got much faith, have you, Ticki?'

'You've got enough for both of us, dear. Come and have some food.'

'Ticki, I sometimes think you just became a Catholic to marry me. It doesn't mean a thing to you, does it?'

'Listen, darling, you want to come down and eat a bit. Then you want to take the car along to the beach and have some fresh air.'

'How different the whole day would have been,' she said, staring out of her net, 'if you'd come home and said, "Darling, I'm going to be the Commissioner."''

Scobie said slowly, 'You know, dear, in a place like this in wartime – an important harbour – the Vichy French just across the border – all this diamond smuggling from the Protectorate, they need a younger man.' He didn't believe a word he was saying.

'I hadn't thought of that.'

'That's the only reason. You can't blame anyone. It's the war.'

'The war does spoil everything, doesn't it?'

'It gives the younger men a chance.'

'Darling, perhaps I'll come down and just pick at a little cold meat.'

'That's right, dear.' He withdrew his hand: it was dripping with sweat. 'I'll tell Ali.'

Downstairs he shouted 'Ali' out of the back door.

'Massa?'

'Lay two places. Missus better.'

The first faint breeze of the day came off the sea, blowing up over the bushes and between the Creole huts. A vulture flapped heavily upwards from the iron roof and down again in the yard next door. Scobie drew a deep breath; he felt exhausted and victorious: he had persuaded Louise to pick a little meat. It had always been his responsibility to maintain happiness in those he loved. One was safe now, for ever, and the other was going to eat her lunch.