



# Introduction

‘We try to keep our hands clean at the British Embassy.’  
‘Perhaps that’s why you’ll never understand South America.’  
*The Honorary Consul*

In my early twenties I was invited to tea with Graham Greene by ‘Pistol Mary’, a racy old Catholic who had got to know him in Kenya at the time of the Mau Mau uprising. She lived on a hilltop outside Lisbon, and every year Greene and his friend Father Leopold Duran would drive across the Spanish border and say a Mass in her elegant drawing room.

I was too tongue-tied to recall very well that first meeting. The person who shook my hand was a tall, thin figure with a flat face and watery blue eyes as if he’d just walked out of a gale. He was based at the time in Antibes and talked about missing English sausages and strawberries. When the drinks tray appeared he made a lunge for a whisky bottle, joking that in France they called this brand ‘Vatican soixante-neuf’.

But one fragment of our conversation I do remember vividly. I asked which of his books he considered the best. ‘*The Heart of the Matter*,’ he said, ‘but I hated the hero.’ And his favourite? He answered without hesitation. ‘*The Honorary Consul*’.

His reply delighted me because *The Honorary Consul* was the first book by Greene I had read. It also held a personal significance. In its year of publication (1973), my family had arrived in Buenos Aires and the novel touched on many elements of the situation in which we found ourselves. It was

the start of the period that became known as the ‘Dirty War’, with people kidnapped every day, and since my father was judged to be a target – he was Consul-General and, later, Chargé d’Affaires – he was protected by six ex-SAS bodyguards in a round-the-clock state of alert.

The novel had a further resonance because I had worked for several months as a cowhand in Corrientes, where the action is set, on an *estancia* much like Charley Fortnum’s. Later, I would finish a novel in Victoria Ocampo’s wooden house in Mar del Plata where Greene had commenced writing his. Read for the first time at sixteen, *The Honorary Consul* made an impact that only now, in the year of Greene’s centenary, have I come to appreciate – as well as why Greene should believe that this was ‘perhaps the novel that I prefer to all the others’.

In 1969, the year that he first visited Argentina, Greene gave a lecture at Hamburg University in which he described how he was motivated in his work by the ‘virtue of disloyalty’. From an early age Greene knew the apparatus and gestures of disloyalty.

*The Honorary Consul* might take place in the middle of South America, but it leads back – like each of his novels – to a tree-lined suburb clinging to the outskirts of London where his father was headmaster of the local school. ‘In Berkhamsted,’ Greene wrote, ‘was the first mould of which the shape was to be endlessly reproduced.’

His boyhood was not happy, despite its middle-class security. He recoiled in horror when he had to recollect his life at school and the remote figure of his father: ‘I had no feelings about him. He embodied Authority too much.’ Greene’s response – to recast his father in his fiction as the oppressive figure of Authority – reflects the attitude of Aquino, the guerrilla-cum-poet in *The Honorary Consul*. ‘In my poem, the father went on following the child all through his life – he was the schoolmaster, and then he was the priest, the police officer, the prison warden, and last he was General Stroessner himself.’

Greene was shy and fellow pupils teased him for being the headmaster's son. He famously compared his experience of school to the Hell described by Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The devil in those days was a boy called Carter. On one occasion one of his few friends, a boy called Watson, betrayed him to Carter. The experience devastated Greene. He suggested that Watson's desertion and Carter's tormenting inspired him to write out of a desire for revenge and to prove he was good at something. The pair set a pattern of abandonment and betrayal that he explores again in *The Honorary Consul*.

As for many unhappy children, books provided Greene with his initial way of escape. Greene's grandfather had died in St Kitts and his teenage appetite was for Victorian heroes who subscribed to a muscular Christianity that they practised in exotic locations – 'just republics', Greene wrote in *The Captain and the Enemy*, 'where a man can make his fortune without fuss and bother.'

Greene reveals his literary tastes in *The Honorary Consul* – one of eight books he set in and around Latin America – largely through the character of Doctor Plarr, an isolated English national who is our main guide. 'In his childhood his father had read him stories of heroism, of wounded men rescued under fire, of Captain Oates walking out into the snow.' Greene's father had read him these stories, also passing on a liking for Conan Doyle, Chesterton and Stevenson – writers on whom Greene could rely to provide 'the missed heartbeat, the appalled glee'. Adulterers in the throes of sexual passion, explorers threatened by the men they led, a shadow pattering down a dark street – these were the shapes that flared in Greene's adolescent head.

The detective story that occupies Father Rivas's attention in *The Honorary Consul* is a text quite as sacred to the novel's purpose as the Bible. Aged twelve, Greene's favourite character in fiction was the detective Dixon Brett, his favourite authors John Buchan, Marjorie Bowen, and Rider Haggard. Like Maurice Castle, the double agent in *The Human Factor*, he dreamed of following 'his childhood hero Allan Quatermain

. . . towards the interior of the dark continent where he hoped that he might find a permanent home, in a city where he could be accepted as a citizen, as a citizen without any pledge of faith, not the City of God or Marx, but the city called Peace of Mind.'

So off he went, to the lands of Haggard and Henty, and in the discrepancy between those 'just republics' he imagined he would find and what he actually found, he staked his claim to another landscape: the one he has popularised as Greenland. 'I can only say it is the land in which I have passed much of my life.'

What is Greenland? One mustn't take too seriously the author's proclaimed distaste for the territory. It is commonly a frontier zone in the back of beyond where the pervading smell is the police station; the usual time of day, the pink gin hour on the veranda; the only certainties those possessed by children. Over the border posts, God and the Devil wheel like vultures, and a loose fence separates the good man from the bad.

For the rest of his life Greene was attracted to this torpid region like a bluebottle. What excited his novelist's instincts was the gap that existed between a person and his office; between the creed and the act; between uncompromising dogma and its compromising opposite – compassion, love, 'the human factor'. He believed: 'The novelist's station is on the border between the just and the unjust, between doubt and clarity', and into that tender space he buzzed.

In Greene's world, the characters who come closest to salvation are those who shatter the rules and stumble out across the wire. In Greenland you turn your back on your god, but in the manner of your denial you approach a state of grace. The reason? As a priest explains at the end of *The Heart of the Matter*: 'The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart.' A Graham Greene hero does know this. His men and women might betray their faith in Catholicism or Marxism or the country on their passport, but by following the dictates of the heart they remain a better sort of patriot. 'We have our own country,' Sarah

tells Castle in *The Human Factor*, the novel that Greene interrupted to write his story of a kidnapped British diplomat. ‘You and I and Sam. You’ve never betrayed that country.’

Of all the frontier zones in Greenland, none is more emblematic or evocative than the setting for *The Honorary Consul*.

‘Doctor Plarr appreciated the dangers of a frontier.’

The river port of Corrientes lies on the border of four countries all once in the grip of military dictatorship: Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and the ‘world-abandoned’ republic of Paraguay. In 1969, while working on *Travels with My Aunt*, Greene accepted a commission from the *Sunday Telegraph* and travelled by river from Buenos Aires to Asunción. The boat stopped in Corrientes for only half an hour in the evening, but that was enough. ‘Something in the atmosphere of this town struck my imagination – I don’t know what it was,’ Greene told the French journalist Marie-Françoise Allain in *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene* (1981). ‘There was nothing to see, just a little harbour and a few houses, and yet a sort of surreptitious charm was already at work.’ Look closer at his own description in *Ways of Escape* (1980) and you can make out the distinguishing features of Greenland: ‘a few lights along the quay, a solitary sentinel outside a warehouse, a small public garden with something resembling a classical temple, and the slow tide of a great river . . .’ The scene penetrated into his imagination, he wrote, like the first injection of a drug.

As Greene described it, the novel had its origins in a dream that had no connection with the book: ‘I had a dream about an American ambassador – a favourite of women and a good tennis player whom I encountered in a bar – but in my dream there was no kidnapping, no guerrillas, no mistaken identity, nothing to identify it with *The Honorary Consul* except the fact that the dream lodged inexplicably in my head for months and during those months the figures of Charley Fortnum and Doctor Plarr stole up around the unimportant Ambassador of my dream and quietly liquidated him.’

It remained for Greene to discover the scene of the action.

He recalled the half hour he had spent in Corrientes and decided to return. The small city by the great Paraná river exerted something of the pull that the thin prostitute Clara had for Doctor Plarr, seeing her for the first time in her cell as she leaned down to make her bed. 'There's an old saying locally that once you discover Corrientes you keep going back . . .'

When researching *The Honorary Consul*, Greene followed a friend's advice that all novelists would do well to pin above their desks: 'You must never when you write a novel include something which has happened to you without in some way changing it.' How Greene altered his experiences in Corrientes reveals something of his novelist's method – which was, he admitted, wildly impatient of those who write without first-hand knowledge of their subject.

According to his account in *Ways of Escape*, he passed two happy weeks in Corrientes. 'My friends in Buenos Aires couldn't understand my interest in a city which I had seen so briefly from a boat . . . Nothing, they assured me, really *nothing*, ever happened in Corrientes.'

But Corrientes was not so dull. On first morning as he lay in bed he looked at the local paper *El Litoral*: 'On the main news page I read what was very nearly the story I had come there to write – a Paraguayan consul from a town near Corrientes had been kidnapped in mistake for the Paraguayan Ambassador and a demand for the release of political prisoners had been delivered to General Stroessner, who was on a fishing holiday in the south of Argentina.'

On his second day, Father Oscar Maturet was excommunicated by the local Archbishop; four churches were closed by the police with the backing of the Seventh Infantry Brigade; and a Mass was said in an empty church while the congregation stood outside carrying banners 'GIVE US BACK OUR PRIEST'.

On his fourth day, Greene went for a walk with the director of the airport and saw two policemen standing guard over a body covered in a large piece of brown paper. It turned out

that the director had met the murderer and said to him: 'He was your friend. Why did you do it?' The murderer replied: 'He was stronger, but I had a knife'. A few days after that a small bomb was discovered in the cathedral and a man drove his wife and family off the jetty into the Paraná.

Some of these incidents find their way into *The Honorary Consul* – although Greene did not come by all his research so effortlessly. 'I needed Fortnum, the "HC", to meet Clara his future wife in a Corrientes brothel, but I was told in Buenos Aires that the nearest brothel was some six hundred kilometres away. Brothels were now illegal and only private ones existed for the rich. Luckily on arrival in Corrientes I met a knowledgeable Englishman, a representative of Ford cars, who told me, 'Nonsense, this is a garrison town,' and led me to El Tiburon (The Shark) where the hostess dozed in a deck-chair in the street outside.'

This then was the background to *The Honorary Consul*. But what about the story he had come to Corrientes to write?

The idea of a kidnap nods to Greene's childhood admiration for Stevenson (a distant cousin) and had been incubating since he came down from Oxford. In 1924, Greene made a trip to Trier, in French-occupied Germany, where he came into contact with an organisation that kidnapped people and smuggled them over the border to demand a ransom. Quite how it resurfaced 45 years on, Greene leaves characteristically opaque, but it is likely that he absorbed references to several kidnappings that occurred at this time (1969–71) in the countries adjoining Corrientes.

Before he moved to Argentina, my father had served as the Press Attaché in Rio de Janeiro where he used to take out to lunch an amiable journalist on the *Jornal do Brasil* called Fernando Gabeira who turned out to be a covert member of MR-8, a revolutionary group that in 1969 kidnapped the American Ambassador, Charles Elbrick.

Two years later, on 8 January 1971, the British Ambassador in Uruguay was kidnapped by the Tupamaros. In a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, Greene denied that he had drawn on Sir

Geoffrey Jackson's experience. 'I began it some fifteen months before Sir Geoffrey was kidnapped.' Greene nevertheless noted some interesting parallels to his own story, including Jackson's Catholicism, his appetite for reading detective stories, and the letter he wrote to his wife. 'There was even, he believed, a priest among his kidnapers.'

Closer to Charley Fortnum's situation was that of Stanley Sylvester, a charming, silver-haired cricket enthusiast who was Britain's Honorary Consul in Rosario. Is it significant that Rosario was the Argentine town in *The Honorary Consul* where the shadowy head of Fortnum's kidnapers, 'El Tigre', based himself?

Sylvester was within a year of retiring as general manager of the Swift refrigeration plant when in May 1971 he was seized on his doorstep by the ERP. The leader of the group had worked for Swift (two of Greene's kidnapers are employees of an orange-canning factory). Sylvester was freed after Swift agreed to the ERP's demands to distribute food and school texts to the shanty towns and to improve the workers' conditions at the plant.

One of Sylvester's few pastimes was to play chess with his captors – exactly as Greene has his kidnapers do. It's clear that Sylvester came to feel the same jab of sympathy for their predicament as Elbrick and Jackson experienced for MR-8 and the Tupamaros, and that Fortnum felt for the members of 'Juventud Febrerista'. When the police tried to remove Sylvester's pullover from him following his release, he refused with the Fortnumish remark: 'No, that was given to me by the boys.'

Whatever the origins of Charley Q. Fortnum, he was to evolve into one of Greene's most cherished characters. Just before Greene began writing *The Honorary Consul*, he told his companion Yvonne Cloetta: 'C'est terrible de penser que je vais désormais vivre pendant trois ans avec un certain *Charley Fortnum*.' And yet later Greene corrected himself: 'I'm surprised at that reflexion – but perhaps I was remembering how depressed I was when I had to endure the company of Query in writing *A Burnt-Out Case*. In fact I grew quite attached to

Charley Fortnum.' The initial Q – 'I keep it dark,' says Fortnum – possibly hints at the author's original apprehension.

Greene modelled Fortnum's physical appearance on Ford Madox Ford; his office on an old ambition. At Oxford Greene had thought of applying to become a consul 'somewhere in the Levant', and almost realised his ambition during the Second World War, when he was sent on an Intelligence Mission. 'My cover would have been the post of consul in Monrovia, but the Liberians wouldn't have me . . .'

It's tempting to see in Charley Fortnum the projection of the frayed, seedy official that Greene might have become, sitting beneath a cracked portrait of the Queen while outside the Union Jack flutters upside down. Nobody wants 'poor Charley' either. An old man and a drunk, he's worthless in London, Buenos Aires and Corrientes. 'All he has done for our relations with Argentina is to marry a local whore.'

Fortnum's precursors are Wormald in *Our Man in Havana* (1958) and Jones in *The Comedians* (1966), figures propelled into circumstances they are not, on the surface, wildly competent to handle. *The Comedians* is Greene's novel closest in spirit to *The Honorary Consul* and betrays a mistrust of diplomats whose profession it is to conceal their true thoughts and feelings. The narrator Brown – an English hotelier in Haiti – has a mistress who is married to the ambassador of a small South American state that Brown has forgotten. 'I don't like ambassadors much,' he tells the cashier, to which the cashier replies: 'They are a necessary evil.'

'You believe that evil is necessary? Then you're a Manichean like myself.'

As well as the Manichean theme, *The Honorary Consul* picks up several strands from the earlier novel. Brown's impatient relationship with the boastful adventurer Jones anticipates Plarr's relationship with Fortnum; both Plarr and Brown being exiles who find themselves playing 'the part of an Englishman concerned over the fate of a fellow countryman.' And exactly as Plarr is a cold fish for most of *The Honorary Consul*, so Brown can't get enormously worked up about the fate of the ludicrous Jones. Right up until the moment when

he feels a liberating shiver of sexual jealousy, Brown finds it impossible to get excited about very much. ‘Somewhere years ago I had forgotten how to be involved in anything.’ In Greene’s canon, Brown’s lack of involvement – an incapacity to feel love, even guilt – is the cardinal sin. At the end of *The Comedians* a young Haitian priest delivers the novel’s message: ‘The Church sometimes condemns violence, but it condemns indifference more harshly. Violence can be the expression of love, indifference never.’ In other words, blood on your hands is preferable to Pilate’s water. So long as you march to the heart’s drumbeat anything is forgivable.

Confronted by the man who has abducted him, Charley Fortnum muses: ‘It seems an odd thing for a priest to become a murderer.’

In the same year that *The Comedians* was published a former priest was gunned down in open combat with a Colombian military patrol. Camilio Torres had been a friend at university of Gabriel García Márquez and baptised his first child. By the time of his death he was a thirty-seven-year-old guerrilla with the ELN, the same force that in 2003 kidnapped two British tourists.

Torres was an inspiration to Third World priests like Oscar Maturé, whom Greene had read about in *Corrientes*, and more relevantly to Fortnum’s kidnapper (and Plarr’s old school chum) Father León Rivas. ‘I spoke in a sermon once about Father Torres,’ says Rivas. ‘The police reported me to the Archbishop and the Archbishop forbade me to preach any more.’

Up until Rivas, Greene restricts his priests largely to walk-on parts. In *The Comedians*, *Brighton Rock* and *The Heart of the Matter*, a priest appears in the closing pages to remind us that the action has taken place on a Catholic stage and to assure us of the appalling strangeness of God’s mercy. This is why God, for many, is the stumbling block in Greene’s fiction; one of his less successful characters, on a par with his waif-like women.

One exception to Greene’s roster of peremptory Catholic clerics was the ‘whisky priest’ in *The Power and the Glory* (1940), Greene’s ‘breakthrough’ novel set in Mexico during

the time of the Church's persecution by the military. But Greene's Mexican priest doesn't wish to participate in the political struggle; indeed, he prays to be caught by his communist pursuers, who at the same time are tracking a dangerous gunman. Pinned to the policeman's wall the two images of the fugitive priest and the wanted gunman remain separate impulses in the novel – uniting 33 years later in León Rivas, a character who can no longer tolerate the idea that 'a priest is only a witness.' Like Camilio Torres before him, Rivas refuses any longer to stand on the sidelines. He has to be involved.

And so in a magnificently bungled operation he kidnaps the alcoholic, unimportant Charley Fortnum, holder of a title that all admit to be 'a bit bogus', in mistake for the teetotal, Coca-Cola-loving and *bona fide* American Ambassador.

In an introduction to one of his last books, *Why the Epigraph* (1989), Greene addresses those wishing to know what his work is about. 'Read only the epigraph,' he advises, 'for the epigraph is what the novel is about.'

*The Honorary Consul* takes for its epigraph a fragment of Thomas Hardy:

All things merge into one another—  
good into evil, generosity into  
justice, religion into politics . . .

The implication of Hardy's words is that any Greene character worth their salt is condemned to end up as their opposite or 'other'. In a quintessential frontier town like Corrientes, the borders are porous – geographically as well as morally – and the urge to cross over into foreign or enemy territory is irresistible. Just as the communist lieutenant in *The Power and the Glory* has 'a priest's walk', so does Father Rivas in taking up arms become 'a bit like the General [Stroessner]'. In the same way Mother Sanchez' brothel merges into the convent cloister; the prostitute Clara into the votive figure of St Theresa above her cell; Fortnum into Mason, 'the inseparable twins'; the Bible into the detective story; God into the Devil.

‘I believe in the evil of God,’ says Father Rivas.

What he goes on to say is the clearest statement in his fiction of Greene’s credo: ‘The God I believe in must be responsible for all the evil as well as for all the saints. He has to be a God made in our image with a night-side as well as a day-side. When you speak of the horror, Eduardo, you are speaking of the night-side of God. I believe the time will come when the night-side will wither away, like your communist state, Aquino, and we shall see only the simple daylight of the good God. You believe in evolution, Eduardo, even though sometimes whole generations of men slip backwards to the beasts. It is a long suffering, evolution, and I believe God is suffering the same evolution as we are, but perhaps with more pain.’

*All things merge in one another.* Central to the final Mass that Rivas administers in the cramped hut is the example of Christ becoming one with God the Father. But conspicuous in *The Honorary Consul* is a rash of other sons who merge into their fathers. Hanging like a crucifix over the plot is Doctor Eduardo Plarr’s father, a ‘very English’ idealist who cared for the poor and, because he was prepared to die for his cause, waved Plarr off to safety downriver when he was fourteen. Plarr – ‘a man without a father’ – believes it was his ‘father’s nearness’ that brought him back to Corrientes. ‘Are we never going to finish with our fathers?’ he asks himself, before remarking to Rivas: ‘We all of us seem to live with dead fathers, don’t we?’ At school, Plarr had looked up to none other than Rivas as a paternal figure; but after Fortnum’s capture, it’s the face of the Honorary Consul that Plarr conjures up when he thinks of his father. The circle completes itself on the last page when Fortnum decides to call his son – Plarr’s child – Eduardo. ‘You see I loved Eduardo in a way,’ Fortnum tells Clara of the man who betrayed him. ‘He was young enough to be my son.’

As always with Greene, love is the thing, and Plarr and Fortnum are the two characters most affected by it. Plarr, with his thin lawyer’s face, is a walking exemplar of the Syrian poem quoted in *The Heart of the Matter*: ‘The cold heart is

more precious than diamond.’ For Plarr, ‘caring is the only dangerous thing’ – which is why he snaps at Rivas: ‘You promised not to involve me.’ He has chosen to live on the frontier; at the same time he walks it as a tightrope, reluctant to take a step for terror of falling into ‘the darkness of involvement or guilt’. Certainly, he does not want to fall in love – ‘I’m not sure what the word love means . . . I know how to fuck – I don’t know how to love.’ But all this changes when he meets Mrs Fortnum, the thin unremarkable girl he recognises from the brothel, and sees in her his own unfeelingness. ‘He had been drawn to her indifference, even her enmity.’ Mercilessly, he tries to stamp out what she arouses in him, but with each stamp he grows more conscious of the feeling that heralds his redemption. ‘I *am* jealous,’ he at last admits of Charley Fortnum, ‘I’m jealous because he loves her.’

Fortnum’s love is a marvellous thing. His unexpected concern for Clara and her unborn child is the real kidnap in the novel, and leads Fortnum to live for the first time in his life ‘in the region of truth.’ It changes him from a forgetful, melancholy, sentimental, afraid-of-horses, self-pitying, ‘whisky consul’ who represents a country he knows nothing about, into a clear-sighted, unhating, forgiving, saintly figure; not cowardly or pathetic at all, but a man of innocent goodness who knows the Testament better than the priest. ‘Even an Honorary Consul is human,’ Plarr observes to the British Ambassador, a man who regards Fortnum as ‘pitifully small beer’. And it’s because of his humanity that Fortnum wins the game.

The extent to which Greene was attached to Fortnum is evident in a remark he makes to Marie-Françoise Allain. He is talking about his work as a novelist, but all of a sudden merges into his fictional character. ‘The writer builds on the foundations of his own deficiencies: a deficiency is often a blessing. The honorary consul, despite his defects, succeeds in loving. He succeeds thanks to his failings.’

The novel’s ending is his most optimistic.

Greene called *The Honorary Consul* ‘one of the novels I found hardest to write.’ Yvonne Cloetta, his companion of 32 years,

recalled a moment when he suffered a sudden block. 'He had already written two-thirds of the book and he really thought he would have to abandon it. He was driven to despair and he said, "I can understand how Hemingway came to fire a bullet through his brain. It's the only way out.'" She watched him sitting on the brink of despair, collapsed in an arm chair. 'Then all of a sudden, he stood up and uttered the magic words: "Back to the wall. Greene.'" It took him more than three years, working with a discipline that he gives to the pompous novelist Doctor Saavedra: 'I write five hundred words a day after my breakfast. No more no less.' The structure is complex and ambitious, deceptive as Greene's prose. To Anthony Burgess, Greene sought in his writing 'a kind of verbal transparency which refuses to allow language to become a character in its own right.' His sentences are lean, lucid, free of the 'beastly' adverb as well as authorial comment and moral judgement. His protagonists' thoughts are indicated in dialogue, or preferably in action. He catches their character in a simple gesture: Plarr's grey-haired father locking the rooms in his house at night; Clara making a little jump every time she's excited; Father Rivas exposing himself as a priest when he breaks eggs. Few novelists are so alert to the way a character rubs up against his physical surroundings. 'Almost everything is sensuality,' believed Greene. 'The way one holds a teacup is sometimes more revealing than the way one makes love.'

From Haggard and Stevenson, Greene knew the value of adventure and the importance of telling a story. He begins at the beginning, in the here and now – perhaps one reason he appears so modern – and continues with a minimum of flashback to the end. He is not interested in any tiresome philosophy, but – as he wrote in a film review for the *Spectator* – 'a belief in the importance of a human activity truthfully reported.'

No film, however, can capture his sense of mystery, his voluptuous drabness. Greenland may exist in its celluloid details – 'I cannot invent' – but the atmosphere is his own. From Conrad he admits to catching the trick of comparing something abstract to something concrete ('silence like a thin

rain', the brothel madam's kindliness mislaid like a pair of spectacles). If we remember anything of his prose it is likely to be one of these images. See how ineradicably he describes something that is not there, like Aquino's missing fingers: 'the hand without them looked like something drawn up in a fish-net from the river where eels were active.'

*The Honorary Consul* was published when Greene was 69 and from the first he was confident of his achievement. 'I do think it's quite good myself . . .' he wrote to a friend. The critic Paul O'Prey judged it his 'most subtle, complex and accomplished novel', an opinion that Greene came to share. Ten years before he died, he told Marie-Françoise Allain: 'My favourite book, the one that bothers me least, is *The Honorary Consul*, and no doubt the next is *The Power and the Glory*.'

'Why?'

'Because I've succeeded in showing how the characters change, evolve. *The Power and the Glory* was more like a seventeenth-century play in which the actors symbolise a virtue or a vice, pride, pity, etc. The priest and the lieutenant remained themselves to the end . . .

'Now in *The Honorary Consul*, the doctor evolves, the priest too, up to a point. By the end of the novel they have become different men. That's not easy to bring off, but I think in this book I've succeeded.'

Nicholas Shakespeare, 2004

For Victoria Ocampo with love,  
and in memory of the many happy weeks  
I have passed at San Isidro  
and Mar del Plata.

# THE HONORARY CONSUL

Not one of the characters in this book is based on a living character, from the British Ambassador to the old man José. The province and the city in Argentina where the scene is principally set bear, of course, resemblances to a real city and a real province. I have left them nameless because I wished to take certain liberties and not to be tied down to the street plan of a particular city or the map of a particular province.

# PART ONE

## CHAPTER I

Doctor Eduardo Plarr stood in the small port on the Paraná, among the rails and yellow cranes, watching where a horizontal plume of smoke stretched over the Chaco. It lay between the red bars of sunset like a stripe on a national flag. Doctor Plarr found himself alone at that hour except for the one sailor who was on guard outside the maritime building. It was an evening which, by some mysterious combination of failing light and the smell of an unrecognized plant, brings back to some men the sense of childhood and of future hope and to others the sense of something which has been lost and nearly forgotten.

The rails, the cranes, the maritime building – these had been what Doctor Plarr first saw of his adopted country. The years had changed nothing except by adding the line of smoke which when he arrived here first had not yet been hung out along the horizon on the far side of the Paraná. The factory that produced it had been built when he came down from the northern republic with his mother more than twenty years before on the weekly service from Paraguay. He remembered his father as he stood on the quay at Asunción beside the short gangway of the small river boat, tall and grey and hollow-chested, and promised with a mechanical optimism that he would join them soon. In a month – or perhaps three – hope creaked in his throat like a piece of rusty machinery.

It seemed in no way strange to the fourteen-year-old boy, though perhaps a little foreign, that his father kissed his wife on her forehead with a sort of reverence, as though she were a mother more than a bed-mate. Doctor Plarr had considered himself in those days quite as Spanish as his mother, while his father was very noticeably English-born. His father

belonged by right, and not simply by a passport, to the legendary island of snow and fog, the country of Dickens and of Conan Doyle, even though he had probably retained few genuine memories of the land he had left at the age of ten. A picture book, which had been bought for him at the last moment before embarkation by *his* parents, had survived – *London Panorama* – and Henry Plarr used often to turn over for his small son Eduardo the pages of flat grey photographs showing Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, and a vista of Oxford Street, filled with hansoms and horse-drawn cabs and ladies who clutched long skirts. His father, as Doctor Plarr realized much later, was an exile, and this was a continent of exiles – of Italians, of Czechs, of Poles, of Welsh, of English. When Doctor Plarr as a boy read a novel of Dickens he read it as a foreigner might do, taking it all for contemporary truth for want of any other evidence, like a Russian who believes that the bailiff and the coffin-maker still follow their unchanged vocations in a world where *Oliver Twist* is somewhere imprisoned in a London cellar asking for more.

At fourteen he could not understand the motives which had made his father stay behind on the quay of the old capital on the river. It took him more than a few years of life in Buenos Aires before he began to realize that the existence of an exile did not make for simplicity – so many documents, so many visits to government offices. Simplicity belonged by right to those who were native-born, those who could take the conditions of life, however bizarre, for granted. The Spanish language was Roman by origin, and the Romans were a simple people. *Machismo* – the sense of masculine pride – was the Spanish equivalent of *virtus*. It had little to do with English courage or a stiff upper lip. Perhaps his father in his foreign way was trying to imitate *machismo* when he chose to face alone the daily increasing dangers on the other side of the Paraguayan border, but it was only the stiff lip which showed upon the quay.

The young Plarr and his mother reached the river port at almost this hour of the evening on their way to the great noisy

capital of the republic in the south (their departure having been delayed some hours by a political demonstration), and something in the scene – the old colonial houses, a crumble of stucco in the street behind the waterfront – two lovers embracing on a bench – a moonstruck statue of a naked woman and the bust of an admiral with a homely Irish name – the electric light globes like great ripe fruit above a soft-drink stand – became lodged in the young Plarr's mind as a symbol of unaccustomed peace, so that, at long last, when he felt an urgent need to escape somewhere from the skyscrapers, the traffic blocks, the sirens of police-cars and ambulances, the heroic statues of liberators on horseback, he chose to come back to this small northern city to work, with all the prestige of a qualified doctor from Buenos Aires. Not one of his friends in the capital or his coffee-house acquaintances came near to understanding his motive: he would find a hot humid unhealthy climate in the north, they all assured him of that, and a town where nothing ever happened, not even violence.

'Perhaps it's unhealthy enough for me to build a better practice,' he would reply with a smile which was quite as unmeaning – or false – as his father's expression of hope.

In Buenos Aires, during the long years of separation, they had received one letter only from his father. It was addressed on the envelope to both of them, *Señora e hijo*. The letter had not come through the post. They found it stuck under the door of the apartment on a Sunday evening about four years after their arrival when they returned from the cinema where they had watched *Gone with the Wind* for the third time. His mother never missed a revival, perhaps because the old film and the old stars made civil war seem for a few hours something static and undangerous. Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh bobbed up again through the years in spite of all the bullets.

The envelope was very dirty and scrumpled and it was marked 'By Hand', but they were never to learn by whose hand. It was not written on their old notepaper, which had been elegantly stamped in Gothic type with the name of the *estancia*, but on the lined leaves of a cheap notebook. The letter was full, like the voice on the quay had been, of

pretended hope – ‘things’, his father wrote, were bound to settle down soon; it was undated, so perhaps the ‘hope’ had been exhausted for a long time before the letter arrived. They never heard from his father again; not even a report or a rumour reached them either of his imprisonment or of his death. He had concluded the letter with Spanish formality, ‘It is my great comfort that the two whom I love best in the world are both in safety, your affectionate husband and father, Henry Plarr.’

Doctor Plarr could not measure himself exactly how much he had been influenced to return to the small river port by the sense that here he would be living near the border of the country where he had been born and where his father was buried – whether in a prison or a patch of ground he would probably never know. He had only to drive a few kilometres north-east and look across the curve of the river. He had only like the smugglers to take a canoe . . . He felt sometimes like a watchman waiting for a signal. There was of course a more immediate motive. Once to a mistress he had said, ‘I left Buenos Aires to get away as far as possible from my mother.’ It was true she had mislaid her beauty and become querulous over her lost *estancia* as she lived on into middle age in the great sprawling muddled capital with its *fantástica arquitectura* of skyscrapers in mean streets rising haphazardly and covered for twenty floors by Pepsi-Cola advertisements.

Doctor Plarr turned his back on the port and continued his evening promenade along the bank of the river. The sky was dark by now so that he could no longer distinguish the plume of smoke or see the line of the opposite bank. The lamps of the ferry which linked the city to the Chaco approached like an illuminated pencil at a slow-drawn wavering diagonal as it fought through the current moving heavily south. The Three Marys hung in the sky like all that was left of a broken rosary chain – the cross lay where it had fallen elsewhere. Doctor Plarr, who every ten years, without quite knowing why, renewed his English passport, felt a sudden desire for company which was not Spanish.

There were only two other Englishmen, so far as he was

aware, in the city, an old English teacher who had adopted the title of doctor without ever having seen the inside of a university, and Charley Fortnum, the Honorary Consul. Since the morning months ago when he had begun sleeping with Charley Fortnum's wife, Doctor Plarr found he was ill at ease in the Consul's company; perhaps he was plagued by primitive sensations of guilt; perhaps he was irritated by the complacency of Charley Fortnum who appeared so modestly confident of his wife's fidelity. He talked with pride rather than anxiety of his wife's troubles in her early pregnancy as though they were a kind of compliment to his prowess until Doctor Plarr was almost ready to exclaim, 'But who do you suppose is the father?'

There remained Doctor Humphries . . . though it was still too early to go and find the old man where he lived at the Hotel Bolívar.

Doctor Plarr found a seat under one of the white globes which lit the river-front and took a book out of his pocket. From where he sat he could keep his eye on his car parked by the Coca-Cola stall. The book Doctor Plarr carried with him was a novel written by one of his patients, Jorge Julio Saavedra. Saavedra too bore the title of doctor, but it was an authentic title, for twenty years ago he had been awarded an honorary degree in the capital. The novel, which had been Doctor Saavedra's first and most successful, was called *The Taciturn Heart*, and it was written in a heavily loaded melancholy style, full of the spirit of *machismo*.

Doctor Plarr found it hard to read more than a few pages at a time. These noble and uncommunicative characters in Latin-American literature seemed to him too simple and too heroic ever to have had living models. Rousseau and Chateaubriand were a greater influence in South America than Freud – there was even a city in Brazil named after Benjamin Constant. He read: 'Julio Moreno would sit for hours in silence, on those days when the wind blew continuously from the sea and salted their few hectares of dry earth, shrivelling the rare plants which had survived the last wind, his chin in his hands, his eyes closed as though he wished to live only in