A Burnt-out Case

Graham Greene

Chapter 1

I

The cabin-passenger wrote in his diary a parody of Descartes: 'I feel discomfort, therefore I am alive,' then sat pen in hand with no more to record. The captain in a white soutane stood by the open windows of the saloon reading his breviary. There was not enough air to stir the fringes of his beard. The two of them had been alone together on the river for ten days – alone, that is to say, except for the six members of the African crew and the dozen or so deck-passengers who changed, almost indistinguishably, at each village where they stopped. The boat, which was the property of the Bishop, resembled a small battered Mississippi paddle-steamer with a high nineteenth-century forestructure, the white paint badly in need of renewal. From the saloon windows they could see the river before them unwind, and below them on the pontoons the passengers sat and dressed their hair among the logs of wood for the engine.

If no change means peace, this certainly was peace, to be found like a nut at the centre of the hard shell of discomfort – the heat that engulfed them where the river narrowed to a mere hundred metres: the shower that was always hot from the ship's engine: in the evening the mosquitoes, and in the day the tsetse flies with wings raked back like tiny jet-fighters (a board above the bank at the last village had warned them in three languages: 'Zone of sleeping sickness. Be careful of the tsetse flies'). The captain read his breviary with a fly-whisk in his hand, and whenever he made a kill he held up the tiny corpse for the passenger's inspection, saying 'tsetse' – it was nearly the limit of their communication, for neither spoke the other's language with ease or accuracy.

This was somewhat the way in which the days passed. The passenger would be woken at four in the morning by the tinkling sound of the sanctus bell in the saloon, and presently from the window of the Bishop's cabin, which he shared with a crucifix, a chair, a table, a cupboard where cockroaches lurked, and one picture – the nostalgic photograph of some church in Europe covered in a soutane of heavy snow – he would see the congregation going home across the gang-plank. He would watch them as they climbed the steep bank and disappeared into the bush, swinging lanterns like the carol singers he had once seen during his stay in a New England village. By five the boat was on the move again, and at six as the sun rose he would eat his breakfast with the captain. The next three hours, before the great heat had begun, were for both men the best of the day, and the passenger found that he could watch, with a kind of inert content, the thick, rapid, khaki-coloured stream against which the small boat fought its way at about three knots, the engine, somewhere below the altar and the Holy Family, groaning like an exhausted animal and the big wheel churning away at the stern. A lot of effort it seemed for so slow a progress. Every few hours a fishing village came into sight, the houses standing high on stilts

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to guard them against the big rains and the rats. At times a member of the crew called up to the captain, and the captain would take his gun and shoot at some small sign of life that only he and the sailor had eyes to detect among the green and blue shadows of the forest: a baby crocodile sunning on a fallen log, or a fishing eagle which waited motionless among the leaves. At nine the heat had really begun, and the captain, having finished reading his breviary, would oil his gun or kill a few more tsetse flies, and sometimes, sitting down at the dining-table with a box of beads, he would set himself the task of manufacturing cheap rosaries.

After the midday meal both men retired to their cabins as the forests sauntered by under the exhausting sun. Even when the passenger was naked it was difficult for him to sleep, and he was never finally able to decide between letting a little draught pass through his cabin or keeping the hot air out. The boat possessed no fan, and so he woke always with a soiled mouth, and while the warm water in the shower cleaned his body it could not refresh it.

There yet remained another hour or two of peace towards the end of the day, when he sat below on a pontoon while the Africans prepared their chop in the early dark. The vampire bats creaked over the forest and candles flickered, reminding him of the Benedictions of his youth. The laughter of the cooks went back and forth from one pontoon to the other, and it was never long before someone sang, but he couldn't understand the words.

At dinner they had to close the windows of the saloon and draw the curtains to, so that the steersman might see his way between the banks and snags, and then the pressure-lamp gave out too great a heat for so small a room. To delay the hour of bed they played quatre cent vingt et un wordlessly like a ritual mime, and the captain invariably won as though the god he believed in, who was said to control the winds and waves, controlled the dice too in favour of his priest.

This was the moment for talk in garbled French or garbled Flemish if they were going to talk, but they never talked much. Once the passenger asked, 'What are they singing, father? What kind of song? A love song?'

'No,' the captain said, 'not a love song. They sing only about what has happened during the day, how at the last village they bought some fine cooking-pots which they will sell for a good profit farther up the river, and of course they sing of you and me. They call me the great fetishist,' he added with a smile and nodded at the Holy Family and the pull-out altar over the cupboard where he kept the cartridges for his gun and his fishing-tackle. He killed a mosquito with a slap on his naked arm and said, 'There's a motto in the Mongo language, "The mosquito has no pity for the thin man."'

'What do they sing about me?'

'They are singing now, I think.' He put the dice and counters away and listened. 'Shall I translate for you? It is not altogether complimentary.'

'Yes, if you please.'

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'"Here is a white man who is neither a father nor a doctor. He has no beard. He comes from a long way away – we do not know from where – and he tells no one to what place he is going nor why. He is a rich man, for he drinks whisky every evening and he smokes all the time. Yet he offers no man a cigarette."'

'That had never occurred to me.'

'Of course,' the captain said, 'I know where you are going, but you have never told me why.'

'The road was closed by floods. This was the only route.'

'That wasn't what I meant.'

About nine in the evening they usually, if the river had not widened and thus made navigation easy, pulled into the bank. Sometimes they would find there a rotting upturned boat which served as shelter when it rained for unlikely passengers. Twice the captain disembarked his ancient bicycle and bounced off into the dark interior to try to obtain some cargo from a colon living miles away and save it from the hands of the Otraco company, the great monopolist of the river and the tributaries, and there were times, if they were not too late in tying up, when they received unexpected visitors. On one occasion a man, a woman, and a child, with sickly albino skins that came from years of heat and humidity, emerged from the thick rain-forest in an old station wagon; the man drank a glass or two of whisky, while he and the priest complained of the price that Otraco charged for fuelling wood and spoke of the riots hundreds of miles away in the capital, while the woman sat silent holding the child's hand and stared at the Holy Family. When there were no European visitors there were always the old women, their heads tied up in dusters, their bodies wrapped in mammycloths, the once bright colours so faded that you could scarcely detect the printed designs of match-boxes, sodawater siphons, telephones, or other gimmicks of the white man. They shuffled into the saloon on their knees and patiently waited under the roaring pressure-lamp until they were noticed. Then, with an apology to his passenger, the captain would send him to his cabin, for these were confessions that he had to hear in secret. It was the end of one more day.

II

For several mornings they were pursued by yellow butterflies which were a welcome change from the tsetses. The butterflies came tacking into the saloon as soon as it was light, while the river still lay under a layer of mist like steam on a vat. When the mist cleared they could see one bank lined with white nenuphars which from a hundred yards away resembled a regiment of swans. The colour of the water in this wider reach was pewter, except where the wheel churned the wake to chocolate, and the green reflection of the woods was not mirrored on the surface but seemed to shine up from underneath the paper-thin transparent pewter. Two men who stood in a pirogue had their legs extended by their shadows so that they appeared to be wading knee-deep in the water. The passenger said, 'Look, father, over there.

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Doesn't that suggest to you an explanation of how Christ was thought to be walking on the water?' but the captain, who was taking aim at a heron standing behind the rank of nenuphars, did not bother to answer. He had a passion for slaughtering any living thing, as though only man had the right to a natural death.

After six days they came to an African seminary standing like an ugly red-brick university at the top of the clay bank. At this seminary the captain had once taught Greek, and so they stopped here for the night, partly for old times' sake and partly to enable them to buy wood at a cheaper price than Otraco charged. The loading began immediately – the young black seminarists were standing ready, before the ship's bell rang twice, to carry the wood on to the pontoons so that the boat might be cast off again at the first hint of light. After their dinner the priests gathered in the common-room. The captain was the only one to wear a soutane. One father, with a trim pointed beard, dressed in an open khaki shirt, reminded the passenger of a young officer of the Foreign Legion he had once known in the East whose recklessness and ill-discipline had led to an heroic and wasteful death; another of the fathers might have been taken for a professor of economics, a third for a lawyer, a fourth for a doctor, but the too easy laughter, the exaggerated excitement over some simple game of cards with matches for stakes had the innocence and immaturity of isolation – the innocence of explorers marooned on an icecap or of men imprisoned by a war which has long passed out of hearing. They turned the radio on for the evening news, but this was just habit, the imitation of an act performed years ago for a motive they no longer remembered clearly; they were not interested in the tensions and changing cabinets of Europe, they were barely interested in the riots a few hundred miles away on the other side of the river, and the passenger became aware of his own safety among them – they would ask no intrusive questions. He was again reminded of the Foreign Legion. If he had been a murderer escaping from justice, not one would have had the curiosity to probe his secret wound.

And yet – he could not tell why – their laughter irritated him, like a noisy child or a disc of jazz. He was vexed by the pleasure which they took in small things – even in the bottle of whisky he had brought for them from the boat. Those who marry God, he thought, can become domesticated too – it's just as hum-drum a marriage as all the others. The word 'Love' means a formal touch of the lips as in the ceremony of the Mass, and 'Ave Maria' like 'dearest' is a phrase to open a letter. This marriage like the world's marriages was held together by habits and tastes shared in common between God and themselves – it was God's taste to be worshipped and their taste to worship, but only at stated hours like a suburban embrace on a Saturday night.

The laughter rose higher. The captain had been caught cheating, and now each priest in turn tried to outdo his neighbour by stealing matches, making surreptitious discards, calling the wrong suit – the game, like so many children's games, was about to reach an end in chaos, and would there be tears before bed? The passenger got impatiently up and walked away from them around the dreary common-room. The face of the new Pope, looking like an eccentric headmaster, stared at him from the wall. On top of a chocolate-coloured dresser lay a few romans policiers and a stock of missionary journals. He opened one: it reminded him of a school magazine. There was an account of a football match at a place called Oboko and an old boy was writing the first instalment of an essay called 'A Holiday in Europe'. A wall-calendar

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bore the photograph of another mission: there was the same kind of hideous church built of unsuitable brick beside a priest's verandahed house. Perhaps it was a rival school. Grouped in front of the buildings were the fathers: they were laughing too. The passenger wondered when it was that he had first begun to detest laughter like a bad smell.

He walked out into the moonlit dark. Even at night the air was so humid that it broke upon the cheek like tiny beads of rain. Some candles still burned on the pontoons and a torch moved along the upper deck, showing him where the boat was moored. He left the river and found a rough track which started behind the classrooms and led towards what geographers might have called the centre of Africa. He followed it a short way, for no reason that he knew, guided by the light of moon and stars; ahead of him he could hear a kind of music. The track brought him into a village and out the other side. The inhabitants were awake, perhaps because the moon was full: if so they had marked its exact state better than his diary. Men were beating on old tins they had salvaged from the mission, tins of sardines and Heinz beans and plum jam, and someone was playing a kind of home-made harp. Faces peered at him from behind small fires. An old woman danced awkwardly, cracking her hips under a piece of sacking, and again he felt taunted by the innocence of the laughter. They were not laughing at him, they were laughing with each other, and he was abandoned, as he had been in the living-room of the seminary, to his own region where laughter was like the unknown syllables of an enemy tongue. It was a very poor village: the thatch of the clay huts had been gnawed away a long time since by rats and rain, and the women wore only old clouts, which had once seen service for sugar or grain, around their waists. He recognized them as pygmoids – bastard descendants of the true pygmies. They were not a powerful enemy. He turned and went back to the seminary.

The room was empty, the card-game had broken up, and he passed to his bedroom. He had become so accustomed to the small cabin that he felt defenceless in this vast space which held only a washstand with a jug, basin and glass, a chair, a narrow bed under a mosquito-net, and a bottle of boiled water on the floor. One of the fathers, who was presumably the Superior, knocked and came in. He said, 'Is there anything you want?'

'Nothing. I want nothing.' He nearly added, 'That is my trouble.'

The Superior looked in the jug to see whether it was full. 'You will find the water very brown,' he said, 'but it is quite clean.' He lifted the lid of a soap-dish to assure himself that the soap had not been forgotten. A brand-new orange tablet lay there.

'Lifebuoy,' the Superior said proudly.

'I haven't used Lifebuoy,' the passenger said, 'since I was a child.'

'Many people say it is good for prickly heat. But I never suffer from that.'

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Suddenly the passenger found himself unable any longer not to speak. He said, 'Nor I. I suffer from nothing. I no longer know what suffering is. I have come to an end of all that too,'

'Too?'

'Like all the rest. To the end of everything.'

The Superior turned away from him without curiosity. He said, 'Oh well, you know, suffering is something which will always be provided when it is required. Sleep well. I will call you at five.'

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