The Honorary Consul
Graham Greene

Chapter 1

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 verso running head 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 horsedrawn 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.

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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

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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.

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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 some hidden corridor of his nature from which his wife was excluded. He never complained. She would stand beside him for long minutes, holding the maté gourd in her left hand, and when he opened his eyes Julio Moreno would take it from her without a word spoken. Only a relaxation of the muscles around the stern and unbeaten mouth appeared to her like an expression of thanks.'

Doctor Plarr, who had been brought up by his father on the works of Dickens and Conan Doyle, found the novels of Doctor Jorge Julio Saavedra hard to read, but he regarded the effort as part of his medical duties. In a few days he would have to take one of his regular dinners with Doctor Saavedra at the Hotel Nacional and he must be ready to make some comment on the book which Doctor Saavedra had so warmly inscribed 'To my friend and counsellor Doctor Eduardo Plarr, this my first book to show him I have not always been a political novelist and to disclose, as I can only do to a close friend, the first fruit of my inspiration.' Doctor Saavedra was in fact far from taciturn, but Doctor Plarr suspected he regarded himself as a Moreno manqué. Perhaps it was significant that he had given Moreno one of his own Christian names . . .

Doctor Plarr had never caught anyone else reading in the whole city. When he dined out he saw only books imprisoned behind glass to guard them from humidity. He never met anyone unawares reading by the river or even in one of the city squares – except occasionally El Litoral, the local paper. There were sometimes lovers on the benches or tired women with shopping baskets, or tramps, but never readers. A tramp would proudly occupy a whole bench. No one cared to share the bench with a tramp, so unlike the rest of the world he could stretch at full length.

Perhaps reading in the open air was a habit he had acquired from his father who always took a book with him when he went farming, and in the orange scented air of his abandoned country Doctor Plarr had got through all the works of Dickens except Christmas Tales. People when they first saw him sitting on a bench with an open book had looked at him with keen curiosity. Perhaps they thought it was a custom peculiar to foreign doctors. It was not exactly unmanly, but it was certainly foreign. The men here preferred to stand at street corners and talk, or sit drinking cups of coffee and talk, or lean out of a window and talk. And all the time, while they talked, they touched each other to emphasize a point or just from friendship. In public Doctor Plarr touched nobody, only his book. It was a sign, like his English passport, that he would always remain a stranger; he would never be properly assimilated.

He began to read again. 'She herself worked in an unbroken silence, accepting the hard toil, like the bad seasons, as a law of nature.'

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Doctor Saavedra had enjoyed a period of critical and popular success in the capital. When he began to feel himself neglected by the reviewers – and still worse by the hostesses and the newspaper-reporters – he had come to the north where his great-grandfather had been governor and where he was shown the proper respect due to a famous novelist from the capital, even though there were probably few people who actually read his books. Strangely enough the mental geography of his novels remained unaltered. Wherever he might choose to live now, he had found his mythical region once and forever as a young man, the result of a holiday which he had taken in a small town by the sea, in the far south near Trelew. He had never encountered a Moreno, but he had imagined him very clearly one evening in the bar of a small hotel, where a man sat in melancholy silence over a drink.

Doctor Plarr had learnt all this in the capital from an old friend and jealous enemy of the novelist, and he found the knowledge of Saavedra's background of some value when he came to treat his patient, who had suffered from bouts of voluble manic-depression. The same character appeared again and again in all his books, his history changed a little, but never his strong sad silence. The friend and enemy, who had accompanied the young Saavedra on that voyage of discovery, had exclaimed scornfully, 'And do you know who the man was? He was a Welshman, a Welshman. Who has ever heard of a Welshman with machismo? There are a lot of Welshmen in those parts. He was drunk, that was all. His weekly drunk when he came in from the country.'

A ferry left for the invisible shore of scrub and swamp, and later the same ferry returned. Doctor Plarr found it difficult to concentrate on the taciturnity of Julio Moreno's heart. Moreno's wife left him at last with a casual labourer on his land who had youth and good looks and some facility in talking, but she was unhappy in the city by the sea where her lover remained unemployed. He soon became habitually drunk in bars and garrulous in bed, and she felt a nostalgia for the long silences and the dry salt ruined earth. So back she came to Moreno, who made room for her without a word at the table where he had prepared a meagre dinner, and afterwards he sat mutely in his customary chair with his chin in his hands while she stood beside him holding his maté gourd. There were still another hundred pages to come, though the story, it seemed to Doctor Plarr, might well have ended there. However Julio Moreno's machismo had not yet found full expression, and when he indicated to his wife, in the fewest possible words, his decision to visit the city of Trelew, Doctor Plarr felt quite certain of what would happen there. Julio Moreno would encounter the labourer in a bar of the city and then there would be a fight with knives, won of course by the younger man. Hadn't his wife, when he left, seen in Moreno's eyes 'the expression of an exhausted swimmer who surrenders to the dark tide of his ineluctable destiny'?

It could not be said that Doctor Saavedra wrote badly. There was a heavy music in his style, the drum-beats of destiny were never very far away, but Doctor Plarr sometimes had a longing to exclaim to his melancholy patient, 'Life isn't like that. Life isn't noble or dignified. Even Latin-American life. Nothing is ineluctable. Life has surprises. Life is absurd. Because it's absurd there is always hope. Why, one day we may even discover a cure for cancer and the common cold.' He turned to the last page. Sure enough Julio Moreno's life blood was draining away between the broken

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tiles on the floor of the Trelew bar and his wife (how had she got there so quickly?) stood by his side, though for once she was not hold ing a maté gourd. 'A relaxation of the muscles around the hard unbeaten mouth told her, before the eyes closed on the immense weariness of existence, that he found her presence welcome.'

Doctor Plarr closed the book with a bang of irritation. The Southern Cross lay on its cross-piece in a night which was full of stars. No towns or television masts or lighted windows broke the flat black horizon. If he went home might there still be the danger of a telephone call?

When the time had come to leave his last patient, the finance secretary's wife who was suffering from a touch of fever, he was determined not to go home before the early morning. He wanted to keep away from the telephone until it was too late for any unprofessional call. There was one particular possibility, at this hour on this day, of being troubled. Charley Fortnum, he knew, was dining with the Governor, who needed an interpreter for his guest of honour, the American Ambassador. Clara, now she had overcome her fear of using the telephone, might easily call him and demand his company, with her husband out of the way, and he had no wish to see her on this Tuesday night of all nights. His sexual feeling was anaesthetized by anxiety. He knew how likely it was that Charley would return unexpectedly early; for the dinner would certainly, sooner or later, be cancelled for a reason he had no right to know in advance.

Doctor Plarr decided that it was better to keep out of the way until midnight. The Governor's party would have surely dispersed by that time, and Charley Fortnum would be well on his way home. I am not a man with machismo, Doctor Plarr reflected ruefully, though he could hardly imagine Charley Fortnum coming at him with a knife. He got up from the bench. The hour was late enough for the professor of English.

He did not find Doctor Humphries, as he expected, at the Hotel Bolívar. Doctor Humphries had a small room with a douche on the ground floor with a window opening on the patio which contained one dusty palm and a dead fountain. He had left his door unlocked and this perhaps showed his confidence in stability. Doctor Plarr remembered how at night his father in Paraguay would lock even the internal doors of his house, the bedrooms, the lavatories, the unused guest rooms, not against robbers but against the police, the military and the official assassins, though they would certainly not have been deterred long by locked doors.

In Doctor Humphries' room there was hardly space for a bed, a dressing-table, two chairs, a basin and the douche. You had to fight your way between them as though they were passengers in a crowded subway. Doctor Plarr saw that Doctor Humphries had pasted a new picture on the wall, from the Spanish edition of Life, showing the Queen perched on a horse at Trooping the Colour. The choice was not necessarily a mark of patriotism or nostalgia: patches of damp were continually appearing on the plaster of the room and Doctor Humphries covered them with the nearest picture which came to hand. Perhaps however his choice did show a certain preference for wakening with the Queen's face rather than Mr Nixon's on the wall (Mr Nixon's face would surely have appeared somewhere in the same number of

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Life). Inside the small room it was cool, but even the coolness was humid. The douche behind the plastic curtain had a faulty washer and dripped upon the tiles. The narrow bed was pulled together rather than made – the bumpy sheet might have been hastily drawn over a corpse, and a mosquito net hung bundled above it like a grey cloud threatening rain. Doctor Plarr was sorry for the selfstyled doctor of letters: it was not the kind of surroundings in which any one with free will – if such a man existed – would have chosen to await death. My father, he thought with disquiet, must be about the same age as Humphries now, and perhaps he survives in even worse surroundings.

A scrap of paper was inserted in the frame of Humphries' looking-glass – 'Gone to the Italian Club.' Perhaps he had been expecting a pupil and that was the reason why he had left his door unlocked. The Italian Club was in a once impressive colonial building across the road. There was a bust of somebody, perhaps of Cavour or Mazzini, but the stone was pockmarked and the inscription no longer readable; it stood between the house, which had a stone garland of flowers over every tall window, and the street. Once there had been a great number of Italians living in the city, but now all that was left of the club was the name, the bust, the imposing façade which bore a nineteenth-century date in Roman numerals. There were a few tables where you could eat cheaply without paying a subscription, and only one Italian was left, the solitary waiter who had been born in Naples. The cook was of Hungarian origin and served little else but goulash, a dish in which he could easily disguise the quality of the ingredients, a wise thing to do since the best beef went down the river to the capital, more than eight hundred kilometres away.

Doctor Humphries was seated at a table close to an open window with a napkin tucked into his frayed collar. However hot the day he was always dressed in a suit with a tie and a waistcoat like a Victorian man of letters living in Florence. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles; probably the prescription had not been revised for years, for he bent very low over the goulash to see what he was eating. His white hair was streaked the colour of youth by nicotine, and there were smears of nearly the same colour on his napkin from the goulash. Doctor Plarr said, 'Good evening, Doctor Humphries.'

'Ah, you found my note?'

'I'd have looked in here anyway. How did you know I was coming to your room?'

'I didn't, Doctor Plarr. But I thought somebody might look in, somebody . . .'

'I had been going to suggest we had dinner at the Nacional,' Doctor Plarr explained. He looked around the restaurant for the waiter without any anticipation of pleasure. They were the only clients.

'Very kind of you,' Doctor Humphries said. 'Another day, if you'll let me have what I believe the Yankees call a raincheck. The goulash here is not so bad, one grows a little tired of it, but at least it's filling.' He was a very thin old man. He gave the impression of someone who had worked a long while at eating in the hopeless hope of filling an inexhaustible cavity.

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For want of anything better Doctor Plarr too ordered goulash. Doctor Humphries said, 'I am surprised to see you. I would have thought the Governor might have invited you . . . he must need someone who speaks English for his dinner tonight.'

Doctor Plarr realized why the message had been stuck into the looking-glass. There could have been a last minute slip in the Governor's arrangements. It had happened once, and Doctor Humphries had been summoned . . . After all there were only three Englishmen who were available. He said, 'He has invited Charley Fortnum.'

'Oh yes, of course,' Doctor Humphries said, 'our Honorary Consul.' He underlined the adjective in a tone of embittered denigration. 'This is a diplomatic dinner. I suppose the Honorary Consul's wife could not appear for reasons of health?'

'The American Ambassador is unmarried, Doctor Humphries. It's informal – a stag-party.'

'A very suitable occasion one might have thought for inviting Mrs Fortnum to entertain the guests. She must be accustomed to stag-parties. But why does the Governor not invite you or me?'

'Be fair, doctor. You and I have no official position here.'

'But we know a lot more about Jesuit ruins than Charley Fortnum does. According to El Litoral the Ambassador has come here to see the ruins, not the tea or the maté crop, though that hardly seems likely. American Ambassadors are usually men of business.'

'The new Ambassador wants to create a good impression,' Doctor Plarr said. 'Art and history. He can't be suspected of a take-over bid there. He wants to show a scholarly interest in our province, not a commercial one. The secretary of finance has not been invited, even though he speaks a little English. Otherwise a loan might have been suspected.'

'And the Ambassador – doesn't he speak enough Spanish for a polite toast and a few platitudes?'

'They say he is making rapid progress.'

'What a lot you always seem to know about everything, Plarr. I only know what we read in El Litoral. He's off to the ruins tomorrow, isn't he?'

'No, he went there today. Tonight he returns to B.A. by air.'

'The paper's wrong then?'

'The official programme was a little inaccurate. I suppose the Governor didn't want any incidents.'

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'Incidents here? What an idea! I haven't seen an incident in this province in twenty years. Incidents only happen in Córdoba. The goulash isn't so very bad, is it?' he asked hopefully.

'I've eaten worse,' Doctor Plarr said without trying to remember on what occasion.

'I see you've been reading one of Saavedra's books. What do you think of it?'

'Very talented,' Doctor Plarr said. Like the Governor he didn't want any incidents, and he recognized the malice which remained alive and kicking in the old man long after discretion had died from a lifetime's neglect.

'You can really read that stuff? You believe in all that machismo?'

'While I read it,' Doctor Plarr said with care, 'I can suspend my disbelief.'

'These Argentinians – they all believe their grandfathers rode with the gauchos. Saavedra has about as much machismo as Charley Fortnum. Is it true Charley's having a baby?'

'Yes.'

'Who's the lucky father?'

'Why not Charley?'

'An old man and a drunk? You're her doctor, Plarr. Tell me a little bit of the truth. I don't ask for a very big bit.'

'Why do you always want the truth?'

'Contrary to common belief the truth is nearly always funny. It's only tragedy which people bother to imagine or invent. If you really knew what went into this goulash you'd laugh.'

'Do you know?'

'No. People always conspire to keep the truth from me. Even you lie to me, Plarr.'

'Me?'

'You lie to me about Saavedra's novel and Charley Fortnum's baby. Let's hope, for his sake, it's a girl.'

'Why?'

'It's so much more difficult to detect the father from the features.' Doctor Humphries began to wipe his plate clean with a piece of bread. 'Can you tell me why I'm always

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hungry, doctor? I don't eat well, and yet I eat an awful lot of what they call nourishing food.'

'If you really wanted the truth I would have to examine you, take an X-ray . . .'

'Oh no, no. I only want the truth about other people. It's always other people who are funny.'

'Then why ask me?'

'A conversational gambit,' the old man said, 'to hide my embarrassment while I help myself to that last piece of bread.'

'Do they grudge us bread here?' Doctor Plarr called across a waste of empty tables, 'Waiter, some more bread.'

The only Italian came shuffling towards them. He carried a bread basket with three pieces of bread and he watched with black anxiety when the number was reduced to one. He might have been a junior member of the Mafia who had disobeyed the order of his chief.

'Did you see the sign he made?' Doctor Humphries asked.

'No.'

'He put out two of his fingers. Against the evil eye. He thinks I have the evil eye.'

'Why?'

'I once made a disrespectful remark about the Madonna of Pompeii.'

'What about a game of chess when you have finished?' Doctor Plarr asked. He had to pass the time somehow, away from his apartment and the telephone by the bed.

'I've finished now.'

They went back to the little over-lived-in room in the Hotel Bolívar. The manager was reading El Litoral in the patio with his flies open for coolness. He said, 'Someone was asking for you on the telephone, doctor.'

'For me?' Humphries exclaimed with excitement. 'Who was it? What did you tell them?'

'No, it was for Doctor Plarr, professor. A woman. She thought the doctor might be with you.'

'If she rings again,' Plarr said, 'don't say that I am here.'

'Have you no curiosity?' Doctor Humphries asked.

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'Oh, I can guess who it is.'

'Not a patient, eh?'

'Yes, a patient. There's no urgency. Nothing to worry about.'

Doctor Plarr found himself checkmated in under twenty moves, and he began impatiently to set the pieces out again.

'Whatever you may say you are worried about something,' the old man said.

'It's that damn douche. Drip drip drip. Why don't you have it mended?'

'What harm does it do? It's soothing. It sings me to sleep.'

Doctor Humphries began with a king's pawn opening. 'KP4,' he said. 'Even the great Capablanca would sometimes begin as simply as that. Charley Fortnum,' he added, 'has got his new Cadillac.'

'Yes.'

'How old's your home-grown Fiat?'

'Four – five years old.'

'It pays to be a consul, doesn't it? Permission to import a car every two years. I suppose he's got a general lined up in the capital to buy it as soon as he's run it in.'

'Probably. It's your move.'

'If he got his wife made a consul too they could import a car a year between them. A fortune. Is there any sexual discrimination in the consular service?'

'I don't know the rules.'

'How much did he pay to get appointed, do you suppose?'

'That's a canard, Humphries. He paid nothing. It's not the way our Foreign Office works. Some very important visitors wanted to see the ruins. They had no Spanish. Charley Fortnum gave them a good time. It was as simple as that. And lucky for him. He wasn't doing very well with his maté crop, but a Cadillac every two years makes a lot of difference.'

'Yes, you could say he married on his Cadillac. But I'm surprised that woman of his needed the price of a Cadillac. Surely a Morris Minor would have done.'

'I'm being unfair,' Doctor Plarr said. 'It wasn't only because he looked after royalty. There were quite a number of Englishmen in the province in those days – you know that better than I do. And there was one who got into a mess over the border – the

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time when the guerrillas went across – and Fortnum knew the local ropes. He saved the Ambassador a lot of trouble. All the same he was lucky – some Ambassadors are more grateful than others.'

'So now if we are in a spot of trouble we have to depend on Charley Fortnum. Check.'

Doctor Plarr had to exchange his queen for a bishop. He said, 'There are worse people than Charley Fortnum.'

'You are in bad trouble now and he can't save you.'

Doctor Plarr looked quickly up from the board, but the old man was only referring to the game. 'Check again,' he said. 'And mate.' He added, 'That douche has been out of order for six months. You don't always lose to me as easily as that.'

'Your game's improved.'

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