The Quiet American
Graham Greene

Chapter 1

I

After dinner I sat and waited for Pyle in my room over the rue Catinat; he had said, 'I'll be with you at latest by ten,' and when midnight struck I couldn't stay quiet any longer and went down into the street. A lot of old women in black trousers squatted on the landing: it was February and I suppose too hot for them in bed. One trishaw driver pedalled slowly by towards the riverfront and I could see lamps burning where they had disembarked the new American planes. There was no sign of Pyle anywhere in the long street.

Of course, I told myself, he might have been detained for some reason at the American Legation, but surely in that case he would have telephoned to the restaurant—he was very meticulous about small courtesies. I turned to go indoors when I saw a girl waiting in the next doorway. I couldn't see her face, only the white silk trousers and the long flowered robe, but I knew her for all that. She had so often waited for me to come home at just this place and hour.

'Phuong,' I said—which means Phoenix, but nothing nowadays is fabulous and nothing rises from its ashes. I knew before she had time to tell me that she was waiting for Pyle too. 'He isn't here.'

'Je sais. Je t'ai vu seul à la fenêtre.'

'You may as well wait upstairs.' I said. 'He will be coming soon.'

'I can wait here.'

'Better not. The police might pick you up.'

She followed me upstairs. I thought of several ironic and unpleasant jests I might make, but neither her English nor her French would have been good enough for her to understand the irony, and, strange to say, I had no desire to hurt her or even to hurt myself. When we reached the landing all the old women turned their heads, and as soon as we had passed their voices rose and fell as though they were singing together.

'What are they talking about?'

'They think I have come home.'

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Inside my room the tree I had set up weeks ago for the Chinese New Year had shed most of its yellow blossoms. They had fallen between the keys of my typewriter. I picked them out. 'Tu es troublé,' Phuong said.

'It's unlike him. He's such a punctual man.'

I took off my tie and my shoes and lay down on the bed. Phuong lit the gas stove and began to boil the water for tea. It might have been six months ago. 'He says you are going away soon now,' she said.

'Perhaps.'

'He is very fond of you.'

'Thank him for nothing,' I said.

I saw that she was doing her hair differently, allowing it to fall black and straight over her shoulders. I remembered that Pyle had once criticized the elaborate hairdressing which she thought became the daughter of a mandarin. I shut my eyes and she was again the same as she used to be: she was the hiss of steam, the clink of a cup, she was a certain hour of the night and the promise of rest.

'He will not be long,' she said as though I needed comfort for his absence.

I wondered what they talked about together. Pyle was very earnest and I had suffered from his lectures on the Far East, which he had known for as many months as I had years. Democracy was another subject of his—he had pronounced and aggravating views on what the United States was doing for the world. Phuong on the other hand was wonderfully ignorant; if Hitler had come into the conversation she would have interrupted to ask who he was. The explanation would be all the more difficult because she had never met a German or a Pole and had only the vaguest knowledge of European geography, though about Princess Margaret of course she knew more than I. I heard her put a tray down on the end of the bed.

'Is he still in love with you, Phuong?'

To take an Annamite to bed with you is like taking a bird: they twitter and sing on your pillow. There had been a time when I thought none of their voices sang like Phuong's. I put out my hand and touched her arm—their bones too were as fragile as a bird's.

'Is he, Phuong?'

She laughed and I heard her strike a match. 'In love?'—perhaps it was one of the phrases she didn't understand.

'May I make your pipe?' she asked.

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When I opened my eyes she had lit the lamp and the tray was already prepared. The lamplight made her skin the colour of dark amber as she bent over the flame with a frown of concentration, heating the small paste of opium, twirling her needle.

'Does Pyle still not smoke?' I asked her.

'No.'

'You ought to make him or he won't come back.' It was a superstition among them that a lover who smoked would always return, even from France. A man's sexual capacity might be injured by smoking, but they would always prefer a faithful to a potent lover. Now she was kneading the little ball of hot paste on the convex margin of the bowl and I could smell the opium. There is no smell like it. Beside the bed my alarm-clock showed twelvetwenty, but already my tension was over. Pyle had diminished. The lamp lit her face as she tended the long pipe, bent over it with the serious attention she might have given to a child. I was fond of my pipe: more than two feet of straight bamboo, ivory at either end. Two-thirds of the way down was the bowl, like a convolvulus reversed, the convex margin polished and darkened by the frequent kneading of the opium. Now with a flick of the wrist she plunged the needle into the tiny cavity, released the opium and reversed the bowl over the flame, holding the pipe steady for me. The bead of opium bubbled gently and smoothly as I inhaled.

The practised inhaler can draw a whole pipe down in one breath, but I always had to take several pulls. Then I lay back, with my neck on the leather pillow, while she prepared the second pipe.

I said, 'You know, really, it's as clear as daylight. Pyle knows I smoke a few pipes before bed, and he doesn't want to disturb me. He'll be round in the morning.'

In went the needle and I took my second pipe. As I laid it down, I said, 'Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about at all.' I took a sip of tea and held my hand in the pit of her arm. 'When you left me,' I said, 'it was lucky I had this to fall back on. There's a good house in the rue d'Ormay. What a fuss we Europeans make about nothing. You shouldn't live with a man who doesn't smoke, Phuong.'

'But he's going to marry me,' she said. 'Soon now.'

'Of course, that's another matter.'

'Shall I make your pipe again?'

'Yes.'

I wondered whether she would consent to sleep with me that night if Pyle never came, but I knew that when I had smoked four pipes I would no longer want her. Of course it would be agreeable to feel her thigh beside me in the bed—she always slept on her back, and when I woke in the morning I could start the day with a pipe, instead of with my own company. 'Pyle won't come now,' I said. 'Stay here,

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Phuong.' She held the pipe out to me and shook her head. By the time I had drawn the opium in, her presence or absence mattered very little.

'Why is Pyle not here?' she asked.

'How do I know?' I said.

'Did he go to see General Thé?'

'I wouldn't know.'

'He told me if he could not have dinner with you, he wouldn't come here.'

'Don't worry. He'll come. Make me another pipe.' When she bent over the flame the poem of Baudelaire's came into my mind: 'Mon enfant, ma soeur . . .' How did it go on?

Aimer à loisir,

Aimer et mourir

Au pays qui te ressemble.

Out on the waterfront slept the ships, 'dont l'humeur est vagabonde.' I thought that if I smelt her skin it would have the faintest fragrance of opium, and her colour was that of the small flame. I had seen the flowers on her dress beside the canals in the north, she was indigenous like a herb, and I never wanted to go home. 'I wish I were Pyle,' I said aloud, but the pain was limited and bearable—the opium saw to that. Somebody knocked on the door.

'Pyle,' she said.

'No. It's not his knock.'

Somebody knocked again impatiently. She got quickly up, shaking the yellow tree so that it showered its petals again over my typewriter. The door opened. 'Monsieur Fowlair,' a voice commanded.

'I'm Fowler,' I said. I was not going to get up for a policeman— I could see his khaki shorts without lifting my head.

He explained in almost unintelligible Vietnamese French that I was needed immediately—at once—rapidly—at the Sureté.

'At the French Sureté or the Vietnamese?'

'The French.' In his mouth the word sounded like 'Françung.'

'What about?'

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He didn't know: it was his orders to fetch me.

'Toi aussi,' he said to Phuong.

'Say vous when you speak to a lady,' I told him. 'How did you know she was here?'

He only repeated that they were his orders.

'I'll come in the morning.'

'Sur le chung,' he said, a little, neat, obstinate figure. There wasn't any point in arguing, so I got up and put on my tie and shoes. Here the police had the last word: they could withdraw my order of circulation: they could have me barred from Press Conferences: they could even, if they chose, refuse me an exit permit. These were the open legal methods, but legality was not essential in a country at war. I knew a man who had suddenly and inexplicably lost his cook—he had traced him to the Vietnamese Sureté, but the officers there assured him that he had been released after questioning. His family never saw him again. Perhaps he had joined the Communists; perhaps he had been enlisted in one of the private armies which flourished round Saigon—the Hoa-Haos or the Caodaists or General Thé. Perhaps he was in a French prison. Perhaps he was happily making money out of girls in Cholon, the Chinese suburb. Perhaps his heart had given way when they questioned him. I said, 'I'm not going to walk. You'll have to pay for a trishaw.' One had to keep one's dignity.

That was why I refused a cigarette from the French officer at the Sureté. After three pipes I felt my mind clear and alert: it could take such decisions easily without losing sight of the main question— what do they want from me? I had met Vigot before several times at parties—I had noticed him because he appeared incongruously in love with his wife, who ignored him, a flashy and false blonde. Now it was two in the morning and he sat tired and depressed in the cigarette smoke and the heavy heat, wearing a green eyeshade, and he had a volume of Pascal open on his desk to while away the time. When I refused to allow him to question Phuong without me he gave way at once, with a single sigh that might have represented his weariness with Saigon, with the heat, or with the whole human condition.

He said in English, 'I'm so sorry I had to ask you to come.'

'I wasn't asked. I was ordered.'

'Oh, these native police—they don't understand.' His eyes were on a page of Les Pensées as though he were still absorbed in those sad arguments. 'I wanted to ask you a few questions—about Pyle.'

'You had better ask him the questions.'

He turned to Phuong and interrogated her sharply in French. 'How long have you lived with Monsieur Pyle?'

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'A month—I don't know,' she said.

'How much has he paid you?'

'You've no right to ask her that,' I said. 'She's not for sale.'

'She used to live with you, didn't she?' he asked abruptly. 'For two years.'

'I'm a correspondent who's supposed to report your war— when you let him. Don't ask me to contribute to your scandal sheet as well.'

'What do you know about Pyle? Please answer my questions, Monsieur Fowler. I don't want to ask them. But this is serious. Please believe me it is very serious.'

'I'm not an informer. You know all I can tell you about Pyle. Age thirty-two, employed in the Economic Aid Mission, nationality American.'

'You sound like a friend of his,' Vigot said, looking past me at Phuong. A native policeman came in with three cups of black coffee.

'Or would you rather have tea?' Vigot asked.

'I am a friend,' I said. 'Why not? I shall be going home one day, won't I? I can't take her with me. She'll be all right with him. It's a reasonable arrangement. And he's going to marry her, he says. He might, you know. He's a good chap in his way. Serious. Not one of those noisy bastards at the Continental. A quiet American,' I summed him precisely up as I might have said, 'a blue lizard,' 'a white elephant.'

Vigot said, 'Yes.' He seemed to be looking for words on his desk with which to convey his meaning as precisely as I had done. 'A very quiet American.' He sat there in the little hot office waiting for one of us to speak. A mosquito droned to the attack and I watched Phuong. Opium makes you quick-witted—perhaps only because it calms the nerves and stills the emotions. Nothing, not even death, seems so important. Phuong, I thought, had not caught his tone, melancholy and final, and her English was very bad. While she sat there on the hard office-chair, she was still waiting patiently for Pyle. I had at that moment given up waiting, and I could see Vigot taking those two facts in.

'How did you meet him first?' Vigot asked me.

Why should I explain to him that it was Pyle who had met me? I had seen him last September coming across the square towards the bar of the Continental: an unmistakably young and unused face flung at us like a dart. With his gangly legs and his crew-cut and his wide campus gaze he seemed incapable of harm. The tables on the street were most of them full. 'Do you mind?' he had asked with serious courtesy. 'My name's Pyle. I'm new here,' and he had folded himself around a chair and ordered a beer. Then he looked quickly up into the hard noon glare.

"Was that a grenade?' he asked with excitement and hope.

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'Most likely the exhaust of a car,' I said, and was suddenly sorry for his disappointment. One forgets so quickly one's own youth: once I was interested myself in what for want of a better term they call news. But grenades had staled on me; they were something listed on the back page of the local paper—so many last night in Saigon, so many in Cholon: they never made the European press. Up the street came the lovely flat figures—the white silk trousers, the long tight jackets in pink and mauve patterns slit up the thigh. I watched them with the nostalgia I knew I would feel when I had left these regions for ever. 'They are lovely, aren't they?' I said over my beer, and Pyle cast them a cursory glance as they went up the rue Catinat.

'Oh, sure,' he said indifferently: he was a serious type. 'The Minister's very concerned about these grenades. It would be very awkward, he says, if there was an incident—with one of us, I mean.'

'With one of you? Yes, I suppose that would be serious. Congress wouldn't like it.' Why does one want to tease the innocent? Perhaps only ten days ago he had been walking back across the Common in Boston, his arms full of the books he had been reading in advance on the Far East and the problems of China. He didn't even hear what I said; he was absorbed already in the dilemmas of Democracy and the responsibilities of the West; he was determined—I learnt that very soon—to do good, not to any individual person but to a country, a continent, a world. Well, he was in his element now with the whole universe to improve.

'Is he in the mortuary?' I asked Vigot.

'How did you know he was dead?' It was a foolish policeman's question, unworthy of the man who read Pascal, unworthy also of the man who so strangely loved his wife. You cannot love without intuition.

'Not guilty,' I said. I told myself that it was true. Didn't Pyle always go his own way? I looked for any feeling in myself, even resentment at a policeman's suspicion, but I could find none. No one but Pyle was responsible. Aren't we all better dead? the opium reasoned within me. But I looked cautiously at Phuong, for it was hard on her. She must have loved him in her way: hadn't she been fond of me and hadn't she left me for Pyle? She had attached herself to youth and hope and seriousness and now they had failed her more than age and despair. She sat there looking at the two of us and I thought she had not yet understood. Perhaps it would be a good thing if I could get her away before the fact got home. I was ready to answer any questions if I could bring the interview quickly and ambiguously to an end, so that I might tell her later, in private, away from a policeman's eye and the hard office chairs and the bare globe where the moths circled.

I said to Vigot, 'What hours are you interested in?'

'Between six and ten.'

'I had a drink at the Continental at six. The waiters will remember. At six forty-five I walked down to the quay to watch the American planes unloaded. I saw Wilkins of

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the Associated News by the door of the Majestic. Then I went into the cinema next door. They'll probably remember—they had to get me change. From there I took a trishaw to the Vieux Moulin—I suppose I arrived about eight thirty—and had dinner by myself. Granger was there—you can ask him. Then I took a trishaw back about a quarter to ten. You could probably find the driver. I was expecting Pyle at ten, but he didn't turn up.'

'Why were you expecting him?'

'He telephoned me. He said he had to see me about something important.'

'Have you any idea what?'

'No. Everything was important to Pyle.'

'And this girl of his?—do you know where she was?'

'She was waiting for him outside at midnight. She was anxious. She knows nothing. Why, can't you see she's waiting for him still?'

'Yes,' he said.

'And you can't really believe I killed him for jealousy—or she for what? He was going to marry her.'

'Yes.'

'Where did you find him?'

'He was in the water under the bridge to Dakow.'

The Vieux Moulin stood beside the bridge. There were armed police on the bridge and the restaurant had an iron grille to keep out grenades. It wasn't safe to cross the bridge at night, for all the far side of the river was in the hands of the Vietminh after dark. I must have dined within fifty yards of his body.

'The trouble was,' I said, 'he got mixed up.'

'To speak plainly,' Vigot said, 'I am not altogether sorry. He was doing a lot of harm.'

'God save us always,' I said, 'from the innocent and the good.'

'The good?'

'Yes, good. In his way. You're a Roman Catholic. You wouldn't recognize his way. And anyway, he was a damned Yankee.'

'Would you mind identifying him? I'm sorry. It's a routine, not a very nice routine.'

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I didn't bother to ask him why he didn't wait for someone from the American Legation, for I knew the reason. French methods are a little old-fashioned by our cold standards: they believe in the conscience, the sense of guilt, a criminal should be confronted with his crime, for he may break down and betray himself. I told myself again I was innocent, while he went down the stone stairs to where the refrigerating plant hummed in the basement.

They pulled him out like a tray of ice-cubes, and I looked at him. The wounds were frozen into placidity. I said, 'You see, they don't re-open in my presence.'

'Comment?'

'Isn't that one of the objects? Ordeal by something or other? But you've frozen him stiff. They didn't have deep freezes in the Middle Ages.'

'You recognize him?'

'Oh yes.'

He looked more than ever out of place: he should have stayed at home. I saw him in a family snapshot album, riding on a dude ranch, bathing on Long Island, photographed with his colleagues in some apartment on the twenty-third floor. He belonged to the skyscraper and the express elevator, the ice-cream and the dry Martinis, milk at lunch, and chicken sandwiches on the Merchant Limited.

'He wasn't dead from this,' Vigot said, pointing at a wound in the chest. 'He was drowned in the mud. We found the mud in his lungs.'

'You work quickly.'

'One has to in this climate.'

They pushed the tray back and closed the door. The rubber padded.

'You can't help us at all?' Vigot asked.

'Not at all.'

I walked back with Phuong towards my flat. I was no longer on my dignity. Death takes away vanity—even the vanity of the cuckold who mustn't show his pain. She was still unaware of what it was about, and I had no technique for telling her slowly and gently. I was a correspondent: I thought in headlines. 'American official murdered in Saigon.' Working on a newspaper one does not learn the way to break bad news, and even now I had to think of my paper and to ask her, 'Do you mind stopping at the cable office?' I left her in the street and sent my wire and came back to her. It was only a gesture: I knew too well that the French correspondents would already be informed, or if Vigot had played fair (which was possible), then the censors would hold my telegram till the French had filed theirs. My paper would get the news first under a Paris date-line. Not that Pyle was very important. It wouldn't

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have done to cable the details of his true career, that before he died he had been responsible for at least fifty deaths, for it would have damaged Anglo-American relations, the Minister would have been upset. The Minister had a great respect for Pyle—Pyle had taken a good degree in—well, one of those subjects Americans can take degrees in: perhaps public relations or theatrecraft, perhaps even Far Eastern studies (he had read a lot of books).

'Where is Pyle?' Phuong asked. 'What did they want?'

'Come home,' I said.

'Will Pyle come?'

'He's as likely to come there as anywhere else.'

The old women were still gossiping on the landing, in the relative cool. When I opened my door I could tell my room had been searched: everything was tidier than I ever left it.

'Another pipe?' Phuong asked.

'Yes.'

I took off my tie and my shoes; the interlude was over; the night was nearly the same as it had been. Phuong crouched at the end of the bed and lit the lamp. Mon enfant, ma soeur—skin the colour of amber. Sa douce langue natale.

'Phuong,' I said. She was kneading the opium on the bowl. 'Il est mort, Phuong.' She held the needle in her hand and looked up at me like a child trying to concentrate, frowning. 'Tu dis?'

'Pyle est mort. Assassiné.'

She put the needle down and sat back on her heels, looking at me. There was no scene, no tears, just thought—the long private thought of somebody who has to alter a whole course of life.

'You had better stay here tonight,' I said.

She nodded and taking up the needle again began to heat the opium. That night I woke from one of those short deep opium sleeps, ten minutes long, that seem a whole night's rest, and found my hand where it had always lain at night, between her legs. She was asleep and I could hardly hear her breathing. Once again after so many months I was not alone, and yet I thought suddenly with anger, remembering Vigot and his eye-shade in the police station and the quiet corridors of the Legation with no one about and the soft hairless skin under my hand, 'Am I the only one who really cared for Pyle?'

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