The Comedians
Graham Greene

Chapter 1

I

WHEN I think of all the grey memorials erected in London to equestrian generals, the heroes of old colonial wars, and to frock-coated politicians who are even more deeply forgotten, I can find no reason to mock the modest stone that commemorates Jones on the far side of the international road which he failed to cross in a country far from home, though I am not to this day absolutely sure of where, geographically speaking, Jones's home lay. At least he paid for the monument – however unwillingly – with his life, while the generals as a rule came home safe and paid, if at all, with the blood of their men, and as for the politicians – who cares for dead politicians sufficiently to remember with what issues they were identified? Free Trade is less interesting than an Ashanti war, though the London pigeons do not distinguish between the two. Exegi monumentum. Whenever my rather bizarre business takes me north to Monte Cristi and I pass the stone, I feel a certain pride that my action helped to raise it.

There is a point of no return unremarked at the time in most lives. Neither Jones nor I knew of it when it came, although, like the pilots of the old pre-jet air-liners, we should have been trained by the nature of our two careers to better observance. Certainly I was quite unaware of the moment when it receded one sullen August morning on the Atlantic in the wake of the Medea, a cargo-ship of the Royal Netherlands Steamship Company, bound for Haiti and Portau- Prince from Philadelphia and New York. At that period of my life I still regarded my future seriously – even the future of my empty hotel and of a love-affair which was almost as empty. I was not involved, so far as I could tell, with either a burnt-out case Jones or Smith, they were fellow passengers, that was all, and I had no idea of the pompes funèbres they were preparing for me in the parlours of Mr Fernandez. If I had been told I would have laughed, as I laugh now on my better days.

The level of the pink gin in my glass shifted with the movement of the boat, as though the glass were an instrument made to record the shock of the waves, as Mr Smith said firmly in reply to Jones, 'I've never suffered from mal de mer, no sir. It's the effect of acidity. Eating meat gives you acidity, drinking alcohol does the same.' He was one of the Smiths of Wisconsin, but I had thought of him from the very first as the Presidential Candidate because, before I even knew his surname, his wife had so referred to him, as we leant over the rail our first hour at sea. She made a jerking movement with her strong chin as she spoke which seemed to indicate that, if there were another presidential candidate on board, he was not the one she intended. She said, 'I mean my husband there, Mr Smith – he was Presidential Candidate in 1948. He's an idealist. Of course, for that very reason, he stood no chance.' What could we have been talking about to lead her to that statement? We were idly watching the flat grey sea which seemed to lie within the three-mile-limit like an animal passive and

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ominous in a cage waiting to show what it can do outside. I may have spoken to her of an acquaintance who played the piano and perhaps her mind leapt to Truman's daughter and thus to politics – she was far more politically conscious than her husband. I think she believed that, as a candidate, she would have stood a better chance than he, and, following the pointer of her protruding chin, I could well imagine it possible. Mr Smith, who wore a shabby raincoat turned up to guard his large innocent hairy ears, was pacing the deck behind us, one lock of white hair standing up like a television aerial in the wind, and a travelling-rug carried over his arm. I could imagine him a homespun poet or perhaps the dean of an obscure college, but never a politician. I tried to remember who Truman's opponent had been in that election year – surely it had been Dewey, not Smith, while the wind from the Atlantic took away her next sentence. I thought she said something about vegetables, but the word seemed an unlikely one to me then.

Jones I met a little later under embarrassing circumstances, for he was engaged in trying to bribe the bedroom steward to swop our cabins. He stood in the doorway of mine with a suitcase in one hand and two five-dollar bills in the other. He was saying, 'He hasn't been down yet. He won't make a fuss. He's not that kind of a chap. Even if he notices the difference.' He spoke as if he knew me.

'But Mr Jones . . .' the steward began to argue.

Jones was a small man, very tidily dressed in a pale grey suit with a double-breasted waistcoat, which somehow looked out of place away from lifts, office crowds, the clatter of typewriters – it was the only one of its kind in our scrubby cargoship peddling the sullen sea. He never changed it, I noticed later, not even on the night of the ship's concert, and I began to wonder whether perhaps his suitcases contained no other clothes at all. I thought of him as someone who, having packed in a hurry, had brought the wrong uniform, for he certainly did not mean to be conspicuous. With the little black moustache and the dark Pekinese eyes I would have taken him for a Frenchman – perhaps someone on the Bourse – and it was quite a surprise to me when I learnt that his name was Jones.

'Major Jones,' he replied to the steward with a note of reproof.

I was almost as embarrassed as he was. On a cargo-steamer there are few passengers and it is uncomfortable to nourish a resentment. The steward with his hands folded said to him righteously, 'There's really nothing I can do, sir. The cabin was reserved for this gentleman. For Mr Brown.' Smith, Jones and Brown – the situation was improbable. I had a half-right to my drab name, but had he? I smiled at his predicament, but Jones's sense of humour, as I was to find, was of a simpler order. He looked at me with grave attention and said, 'This is really your cabin, sir?'

'I have an idea it is.'

'Someone told me it was unoccupied.' He shifted slightly so that his back was turned to my too obvious cabin-trunk standing just inside. The bills had disappeared, perhaps up his sleeve, for I had seen no movement towards his pocket.

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'Have they given you a bad cabin?' I asked.

'Oh, it's only that I prefer the starboard side.'

'Yes, so do I, on this particular run. One can leave the porthole open,' and as though to emphasize the truth of what I said the boat began a slow roll as it moved further into the open sea.

'Time for a pink gin,' Jones said promptly, and we went upstairs together to find the small saloon and the black steward who took the first opportunity as he added water to my gin to whisper in my ear, 'I'm a British subject, sah.' I noticed that he made no such claim to Jones.

The door of the saloon swung open and the Presidential Candidate appeared, an impressive figure in spite of the innocent ears: he had to lower his head in the doorway. Then he looked all round the saloon before he stood aside so that his wife could enter under the arch of his arm, like a bride under a sword. It was as though he wanted to satisfy himself first that there was no unsuitable company present. His eyes were of clear washed blue and he had homely sprouts of grey hair from his nose and ears. He was a genuine article, if ever there was one, a complete contrast to Mr Jones. If I had troubled to think of them then at all, I would have thought that they could mix together no better than oil and water.

'Come in,' Mr Jones said (I somehow couldn't bring myself to think of him as Major Jones), 'come in and take a snifter.' His slang, I was to find, was always a little out of date as though he had studied it in a dictionary of popular usage, but not in the latest edition.

'You must forgive me,' Mr Smith replied with courtesy, 'but I don't touch alcohol.'

'I don't touch it myself,' Jones said, 'I drink it,' and he suited the action to the words. 'The name is Jones,' he added, 'Major Jones.'

'Pleased to meet you, Major. My name's Smith. William Abel Smith. My wife, Major Jones.' He looked at me inquir ingly, and I realized that somehow I had lagged behind in the introductions.

'Brown,' I said shyly. I felt as though I were making a bad joke, but neither of them saw the point.

'Ring the bell again,' Jones said, 'there's a good chap.' I had already graduated into the position of the old friend, and, although Mr Smith was nearer the bell, I crossed the saloon to touch it; in any case he was busy wrapping the travellingrug around his wife's knees, though the saloon was well enough warmed (perhaps it was a marital habit). It was then, in reply to Jones's affirmation that there was nothing like a pink gin to keep away sea-sickness, Mr Smith made his statement of faith. 'I've never suffered from mal de mer, no sir . . . I've been a vegetarian all my life,' and his wife capped it. 'We campaigned on that issue.'

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'Campaigned?' Jones asked sharply as though the word had woken the major within him.

'In the Presidential Election of 1948.'

'You were a candidate?'

'I'm afraid,' Mr Smith said with a gentle smile, 'that I stood very little chance. The two great parties . . .'

'It was a gesture,' his wife interrupted fiercely. 'We showed our flag.'

Jones was silent. Perhaps he was impressed, or perhaps like myself he was trying to recall who the main contestants had been. Then he tried the phrase over on his tongue as though he liked the taste of it: 'Presidential Candidate in '48.' He added, 'I'm very proud to meet you.'

'We had no organization,' Mrs Smith said. 'We couldn't afford it. But all the same we polled more than ten thousand votes.'

'I never anticipated so much support,' the Presidential Candidate said.

'We were not at the bottom of the poll. There was a candidate – something to do with agriculture, dear?'

'Yes, I have forgotten the exact name of his party. He was a disciple of Henry George, I think.'

'I must admit,' I said, 'that I thought the only candidates were Republican and Democrat – oh, and there was a Socialist too, wasn't there?'

'The Conventions attract all the publicity,' Mrs Smith said, 'vulgar rodeos though they are. Can you see Mr Smith with a lot of drum majorettes?'

'Anyone can run for President,' the Candidate explained with gentleness and humility. 'That is the pride of our democracy. I can tell you, it was a great experience for me. A great experience. One that I shall never forget.'

II

Ours was a very small boat. I believe that a full complement of passengers would have numbered only fourteen, and the Medea was by no means full. This was not the tourist season, and in any case the island to which we were bound was no longer an attraction for tourists.

There was a spick-and-span negro with a very high white collar and starched cuffs and gold-rimmed glasses who was bound for Santo Domingo; he kept very much to himself, and at table he answered politely and ambiguously in monosyllables. For instance when I asked him what was the principal cargo that the captain was likely

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to take aboard in Trujillo – I corrected myself, 'I'm sorry. I mean Santo Domingo,' he nodded gravely and said, 'Yes.' He never himself asked a question and his discretion seemed to rebuke our own idle curiosity. There was also a traveller for a firm of pharmaceutical manufacturers – I have forgotten the reason he gave for not travelling by air. I felt sure that it was not the correct reason, and that he suffered from a heart trouble which he kept to himself. His face had a tight papery look, above a body too big for the head, and he lay long hours in his berth.

My own reason for taking the boat – and I sometimes suspected that it might be Jones's too – was prudence. In an airport one is so swiftly separated on the tarmac from the crew of the plane; in a harbour one feels the safety of foreign boards under the feet – I counted as a citizen of Holland so long as I stayed on the Medea. I had booked my passage through to Santo Domingo and I told myself, however unconvincingly, that I had no intention of leaving the ship before I received certain assurances from the British chargé – or from Martha. The hotel which I owned on the hills above the capital had done without me for three months; it would certainly be void of clients, and I valued my life more highly than an empty bar and a corridor of empty bedrooms and a future empty of promise. As for the Smiths, I really think it was love of the sea which had brought them on board, but it was quite a while before I learnt why they had chosen to visit the republic of Haiti.

The captain was a thin unapproachable Hollander scrubbed clean like a piece of his own brass rail who only appeared once at table, and in contrast the purser was untidy and ebulliently gay with a great liking for Bols gin and Haitian rum. On the second day at sea he invited us to drink with him in his cabin. We all squashed in except for the traveller in pharmaceutical products who said that he must always be in bed by nine. Even the gentleman from Santo Domingo joined us and answered, 'No,' when the purser asked him how he found the weather.

The purser had a jovial habit of exaggerating everything, and his natural gaiety was only a little damped when the Smiths demanded bitter lemon and, when that was unavailable, Coca-Cola. 'You're drinking your own deaths,' he told them and began to explain his own theory of how the secret ingredients were manufactured. The Smiths were unimpressed and drank the Coca-Cola with evident pleasure. 'You will need something stronger than that where you are going,' the purser said.

'My husband and I have never taken anything stronger,' Mrs Smith replied.

'The water is not to be trusted, and you will find no Coca- Cola now that the Americans have moved out. At night when you hear the shooting in the streets you will think perhaps that a strong glass of rum . . .'

'Not rum,' Mrs Smith said.

'Shooting?' Mr Smith inquired. 'Is there shooting?' He looked at his wife where she sat crouched under the travelling- rug (she was not warm enough even in the stuffy cabin) with a trace of anxiety. 'Why shooting?'

'Ask Mr Brown. He lives there.'

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I said, 'I've not often heard shooting. They act more silently as a rule.'

'Who are they?' Mr Smith asked.

'The Tontons Macoute,' the purser broke in with wicked glee. 'The President's bogey-men. They wear dark glasses and they call on their victims after dark.'

Mr Smith laid his hand on his wife's knee. 'The gentleman is trying to scare us, my dear,' he said. 'They told us nothing about this at the tourist bureau.'

'He little knows,' Mrs Smith said, 'that we don't scare easily,' and somehow I believed her.

'You understand what we're talking about, Mr Fernandez?' the purser called across the cabin in the high voice some people employ towards anyone of an alien race.

Mr Fernandez had the glazed look of a man approaching sleep. 'Yes,' he said, but I think it had been an equal chance whether he replied yes or no. Jones, who had been sitting on the edge of the purser's bunk, nursing a glass of rum, spoke for the first time. 'Give me fifty commandos,' he said, 'and I'd go through the country like a dose of salts.'

'Were you in the commandos?' I asked with some surprise.

He said ambiguously, 'A different branch of the same outfit.'

The Presidential Candidate said, 'We have a personal introduction to the Minister for Social Welfare.'

'Minister for what?' the purser said. 'Welfare? You won't find any Welfare. You should see the rats, big as terriers . . .'

'I was told at the tourist bureau that there were some very good hotels.'

'I own one,' I said. I took out my pocket-book and showed him three postcards. Although printed in bright vulgar colours they had the dignity of history, for they were relics of an epoch over for ever. On one a blue tiled bathing-pool was crowded with girls in bikinis: on the second a drummer famous throughout the Caribbean was playing under the thatched roof of the Creole bar, and on the third – a general view of the hotel – there were gables and balconies and towers, the fantastic nineteenth-century architecture of Port-au-Prince. They at least had not changed.

'We had thought of something a little quieter,' Mr Smith said.

'We are quiet enough now.'

'It would certainly be pleasant, wouldn't it, dear, to be with a friend? If you have a room vacant with a bath or a shower.'

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'Every room has a bath. Don't be afraid of noise. The drummer's fled to New York, and all the bikini girls stay in Miami now. You'll probably be the only guests I have.'

These two clients, it had occurred to me, might be worth a good deal more than the money they paid. A presidential candidate surely had status; he would be under the protection of his embassy or what was left of it. (When I had left Port-au-Prince the embassy staff had already been reduced to a chargé, a secretary, and two Marine guards, who were all that remained of the military mission.) Perhaps the same thought occurred to Jones. 'I might join you too,' he said, 'if no other arrangements have been made for me. It would be a bit like staying on shipboard if we stuck together.'

'Safety in numbers,' the purser agreed.

'With three guests I shall be the most envied hôtelier in Port-au-Prince.'

'It's not very safe to be envied,' the purser said. 'You would do much better, all three of you, if you continued with us. Myself I don't care to go fifty yards from the water-front. There is a fine hotel in Santo Domingo. A luxurious hotel. I can show you picture-postcards as good as his.' He opened the drawer and I caught a brief glimpse of a dozen little square packets – French letters which he would sell at a profit to the crew when they went on shore to Mère Catherine's or one of the cheaper establishments. (His sales talk, I felt certain, would consist of some grisly statistics.) 'What have I done with them?' he demanded uselessly of Mr Fernandez, who smiled and said, 'Yes,' and he began to search the desk littered with printed forms and paper-clips and bottles of red, green and blue ink, and some old-fashioned wooden pen-holders and nibs, before he discovered a few limp postcards of a bathing-pool exactly like mine and a Creole bar which was only distinguishable because it had a different drummer.

'My husband is not on a vacation,' Mrs Smith said with disdain.

'I'd like to keep one if you don't mind,' Jones said, choosing the bathing-pool and the bikinis, 'one never knows . . .' That phrase represented, I think, his deepest research into the meaning of life.

III

Next day I sat in a deck-chair on the sheltered starboard side and let myself roll languidly in and out of the sun with the motions of the mauve-green sea. I tried to read a novel, but the heavy foreseeable progress of its characters down the uninteresting corridors of power made me drowsy, and when the book fell upon the deck, I did not bother to retrieve it. My eyes opened only when the traveller in pharmaceutical products passed by; he clung to the rail with two hands and seemed to climb along it as though it were a ladder. He was panting heavily and he had an expression of desperate purpose as though he knew to what the climb led and knew that it was worth his effort, but knew too that he would never have the strength to reach the end. Again I drowsed and found myself alone in a blacked-out room and someone touched me with a cold hand. I woke and it was Mr Fernandez who had, I

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suppose, been surprised by the steep roll of the boat and had steadied himself against me. I had the impression of a shower of gold dropping from a black sky as his spectacles caught the fitful sun. 'Yes,' he said, 'yes,' smiling an apology as he lurched upon his way.

It seemed as though a sudden desire for exercise had struck everyone except myself on the second day out. For next it was Mr Jones – I still couldn't bring myself to call him Major – who passed steadily up the centre of the deck adjusting his gait to the movement of the ship. 'Squally,' he called to me as he went by, and again I had the impression that English was a language he had learnt from books – perhaps on this occasion from the work of Dickens. Then, unexpectedly, back came Mr Fernandez, skidding in a wild way, and after him, painfully, the pharmacist on his laborious climb. He had lost his place, but he stuck the race out stubbornly. I began to wonder when the Presidential Candidate would appear, he must have had a heavy handicap, and at that moment he emerged from the saloon beside me. He was alone and looked unnaturally detached like one of the figures in a weatherhouse without the other. 'Breezy,' he said, as though he were correcting Mr Jones's English style and sat down in the next chair.

'I hope Mrs Smith is well.'

'She's fine,' he said, 'fine. She's down there in the cabin getting up her French grammar. She said she couldn't concentrate with me around.'

'French grammar?'

'They tell me that's the language spoken where we are going. Mrs Smith is a wonderful linguist. Give her a few hours with a grammar and she'll know everything except the pronunciation.'

'French hasn't come her way before?'

'That's no problem for Mrs Smith. Once we had a German girl staying in the house – it wasn't half a day before Mrs Smith was telling her to keep her room tidy in her own language. Another time we had a Finn. It took Mrs Smith nearly a week before she could get her hands on a Finnish grammar, but then there was no stopping her.' He paused and said with a smile that touched his absurdity with a strange dignity, 'I've been married for thirty-five years and I've never ceased to admire that woman.'

'Do you often,' I asked disingenuously, 'take holidays in these parts?'

'We try to combine a vacation,' he said, 'with our mission. Neither Mrs Smith nor I are ones for undiluted pleasure.'

'I see, and your mission this time is bringing you . . . ?'

'Once,' he said, 'we took our vacation in Tennessee. It was an unforgettable experience. You see, we went as freedom riders. There was an occasion in Nashville on the way down when I feared for Mrs Smith.'

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'It was a courageous way to spend a holiday.'

He said, 'We have a great love for coloured people.' He seemed to think it was the only explanation needed.

'I'm afraid they'll prove a disappointment to you where you are going now.'

'Most things disappoint till you look deeper.'

'Coloured people can be as violent as the whites in Nashville.'

'We have our troubles in the U.S.A. All the same I thought – perhaps – the purser was pulling my leg.'

'He intended to. The joke's against him. The reality's worse than anything he can have seen from the waterfront. I doubt if he goes far into the town.'

'You would advise us like he did – to go on to Santo Domingo?'

'Yes.'

His eyes looked sadly out over the monotonous repetitive scape of sea. I thought I had made an impression. I said, 'Let me give you an example of what life is like there.'

I told Mr Smith of a man who was suspected of being concerned in an attempt to kidnap the President's children on their way home from school. I don't think there was any evidence against him, but he had been the prize sharpshooter of the republic at some international gathering in Panama, and perhaps they thought it needed a prize marksman to pick off the Presidential guard. So the Tontons Macoute surrounded his house – he wasn't there – and set it on fire with petrol and then they machine-gunned anyone who tried to escape. They allowed the fire-brigade to keep the flames from spreading, and now you could see the gap in the street like a drawn tooth.

Mr Smith listened with attention. He said, 'Hitler did worse, didn't he? And he was a white man. You can't blame it on their colour.'

'I don't. The victim was coloured too.'

'When you look properly at things, they are pretty bad everywhere. Mrs Smith wouldn't like us to turn back just because . . .'

'I'm not trying to persuade you. You asked me a question.'

'Then why is it – if you'll excuse another – that you are going back?'

'Because the only thing I own is there. My hotel.'

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'I guess the only thing we own – Mrs Smith and me – is our mission.' He sat staring at the sea, and at that moment Jones passed. He called at us over his shoulder, 'Four times round,' and went on.

'He's not afraid either,' Mr Smith said, as though he had to apologize for showing courage, as a man might apologize for a rather loud tie which his wife had given him by pointing out that others wore the same.

'I wonder if it's courage in his case. Perhaps he's like me and he hasn't anywhere else to go.'

'He's been very friendly to us both,' Mr Smith said firmly. It was obvious that he wished to change the subject.

When I knew Mr Smith better I recognized that particular tone of voice. He was acutely uneasy if I spoke ill of anyone – even of a stranger or of an enemy. He would back away from the conversation like a horse from water. It amused me sometimes to draw him unsuspectingly to the very edge of the ditch and then suddenly urge him on, as it were, with whip and spurs. But I never managed to teach him how to jump. I think he soon began to divine what I was at, but he never spoke his displeasure aloud. That would have been to criticize a friend. He preferred just to edge away. This was one characteristic at least he did not share with his wife. I was to learn later how fiery and direct her nature could be – she was capable of attacking anyone, except of course the Presidential Candidate himself. I had many quarrels with her in the course of time, she suspected that I laughed a little at her husband, but she never knew how I envied them. I have never known in Europe a married couple with that kind of loyalty.

I said, 'You were talking about your mission just now.'

'Was I? You must excuse me, talking about myself like that. Mission is too big a word.'

'I'm interested.'

'Call it a hope. But I guess a man in your profession wouldn't find it very sympathetic.'

'You mean it's got something to do with vegetarianism?'

'Yes.'

'I'm not unsympathetic. My job is to please my guests. If my guests are vegetarian . . .'

'Vegetarianism isn't only a question of diet, Mr Brown. It touches life at many points. If we really eliminated acidity from the human body we would eliminate passion.'

'Then the world would stop.'

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He reproved me gently, 'I didn't say love,' and I felt a curious sense of shame. Cynicism is cheap – you can buy it at any Monoprix store – it's built into all poor-quality goods.

'Anyway you're on the way to a vegetarian country,' I said.

'How do you mean, Mr Brown?'

'Ninety-five per cent of the people can't afford meat or fish or eggs.'

'But hasn't it occurred to you, Mr Brown, that it isn't the poor who make the trouble in the world? Wars are made by politicians, by capitalists, by intellectuals, by bureaucrats, by Wall Street bosses or Communist bosses – they are none of them made by the poor.'

'And the rich and powerful aren't vegetarian, I suppose?'

'No sir. Not usually.' Again I felt ashamed of my cynicism. I could believe for a moment, as I looked at those pale blue eyes, unflinching and undoubting, that perhaps he had a point. A steward stood at my elbow. I said, 'I don't want soup.'

'It's not time for soup yet, sah. The captain asks you kindly to have a word with him, sah.'

The captain was in his cabin – an apartment as bare and as scrubbed as himself, with nothing personal anywhere except for one cabinet-sized photograph of a middle-aged woman who looked as if she had emerged that instant from her hairdresser's where even her character had been capped under the drying helmet. 'Sit down, Mr Brown. Will you take a cigar?'

'No, no thank you.'

The captain said, 'I wish to come quickly to the point. I have to ask your cooperation. It is very embarrassing.'

'Yes?'

He said in a tone heavy with gloom, 'If there is one thing I do not like on a voyage it is the unexpected.'

'I thought at sea . . . always . . . storms . . .'

'Naturally I am not talking of the sea. The sea presents no problem.' He altered the position of an ash-tray, of a cigarbox, and then he moved a centimetre closer to him the photograph of the blank-faced woman whose hair seemed set in grey cement. Perhaps she gave him confidence: she would have given me a paralysis of the will. He said, 'You have met this passenger Major Jones. He calls himself Major Jones.'

'I've spoken to him.'

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'What are your impressions?'

'I hardly know . . . I hadn't thought . . .'

'I have just received a cable from my office in Philadelphia. They wish me to report by cable when and where he lands.'

'Surely you know from his ticket . . .'

'They wish to be sure that he does not alter his plans. We go on to Santo Domingo . . . You have yourself explained to me that you have booked to Santo Domingo, in case at Portau- Prince . . . he may have the same intention.'

'Is it a police question?'

'It may be – it is my conjecture only – that the police are interested. I want you to understand that I have nothing against Major Jones. This is very possibly a routine inquiry set on foot because some filing-clerk . . . But I thought . . . you are a fellow Englishman, you live in Port-au-Prince, on my side a word of warning, and on yours . . .'

I was irritated by his absolute discretion, absolute correctness, absolute rectitude. Had the captain never slipped up once, in his youth or in his cups, in the absence of that well coiffured wife of his? I said, 'You make him sound like a cardsharper. I assure you that he hasn't once suggested a game.'

'I never said . . .'

'You want me to keep my eyes open, my ears open?'

'Exactly. No more. If it were anything serious they would surely have asked me to detain him. Perhaps he has run away from his debtors. Who knows? Or some woman business,' he added with distaste, meeting the gaze of the hard woman with the stony hair.

'Captain, with all respects, I'm not trained to be an informer.'

'I am not asking anything like that, Mr Brown. I cannot very well demand of an old man like Mr Smith . . . in the case of Major Jones . . .' Again I was aware of the three names, interchangeable like comic masks in a farce. I said, 'If I see anything that merits a report – I'm not going to look for it, mind.' The captain gave a little sigh of self-commiseration. 'As if there were not enough responsibilities for one man on this run . . .'

He began to tell me a long anecdote about something which had occurred two years before in the port we were coming to. At one in the morning there had been the sounds of shots and half an hour later an officer and two policemen had appeared at the gangway: they wanted to search his ship. Naturally he had refused permission. This was sovereign territory of the Royal Netherlands Steamship Company. There

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had been a lot of argument. He had complete belief in his night-watchman – wrongly as it turned out, for the man had been asleep at his post. Then on his way to speak to the officer of the watch the captain had noticed a trail of blood spots. It led him to one of the boats and there he had discovered the fugitive.

'What did you do?' I asked.

'He was attended by the ship's doctor and then, of course, I handed him over to the proper authorities.'

'Perhaps he was seeking political asylum.'

'I do not know what he was seeking. How could I? He was quite illiterate, and in any case he had no money for his passage.'

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