LOSER TAKES ALL

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*by*

GRAHAM GREENE


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DEAR FRERE,

As we have been associated in business and friendship for a quarter of a century I am dedicating this frivolity without permission to you. Unlike some of my Catholic critics, you, I know, when reading this little story, will not mistake me for 'I', nor do I need to explain to you that this tale has not been written for the purposes of encouraging adultery, the use of pyjama tops, or registry office marriages. Nor is it meant to discourage gambling.

Affectionately and gratefully,

GRAHAM GREENE.

FIRST PUBLISHED 1955
REPRINTED 1955

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS
KINGSWOOD, SURREY

# PART ONE

# I

I SUPPOSE the small greenish statue of a man in a wig on a horse is one of the famous statues of the world. I said to Cary, "Do you see how shiny the right knee is? It's been touched so often for luck, like St. Peter's foot in Rome."

She rubbed the knee carefully and tenderly as though she were polishing it. "Are you superstitious?" I said.

"Yes."

"I'm not."

"I'm so superstitious I never walk under ladders. I throw salt over my right shoulder. I try not to tread on the cracks in pavements. Darling, you're marrying the most superstitious woman in the world. Lots of people aren't happy. We are. I'm not going to risk a thing."

"You've rubbed that hoof so much, we ought to have plenty of luck at the tables."

"I wasn't asking for luck at the tables," she said.

## 2

THAT night I thought that our luck had begun in London two weeks before. We were to be married at St. Luke's Church, Maida Hill, and we were going to Bournemouth for the honeymoon. Not, on the face of it, an exhilarating programme, but I thought I didn't care a damn where we went so long as Cary was there. Le Touquet was within our means, but we thought we could be more alone in Bournemouth—the Ramages and the Truefitts were going to Le Touquet. "Besides, you'd lose all our money at the Casino," Cary said, "and we'd have to come home."

"I know too much about figures. I live with them all day."

"You won't be bored at Bournemouth."

"No. I won't be bored."

"I wish it wasn't your second honeymoon. Was the first very exciting—in Paris?"

"We could only afford a week-end," I said guardedly.

"Did you love her a terrible lot?"

"Listen," I said, "it was more than fifteen years ago. You hadn't started school. I couldn't have waited all that time for you."

"But did you?"

"The night after she left me I took Ramage out to dinner and stood him the best champagne I could get. Then I went home and slept for nine hours right across the bed. She was one of those people who kick at night and then say you are taking up too much room."

"Perhaps I'll kick."

"That would feel quite different. I hope you'll kick. Then I'll know you are there. Do you realise the terrible amount of time we'll waste asleep, not knowing a thing? A quarter of our life."

It took her a long time to calculate that. She wasn't good at figures as I was. "More," she said, "much more. I like ten hours."

"That's even worse," I said. "And eight hours at the office without you. And food—this awful business of having meals."

"I'll try to kick," she said.

That was at lunch-time the day when our

so-called luck started. We used to meet as often as we could for a snack at the Volunteer which was just round the corner from my office—Cary drank cider and had an unquenchable appetite for cold sausages. I've seen her eat five and then finish off with a hard-boiled egg.

"If we were rich," I said, "you wouldn't have to waste time cooking."

"But think how much more time we'd waste eating. These sausages—look, I'm through already. We shouldn't even have finished the caviare."

"And then the *sole meunière*," I said.

"A little fried spring chicken with new peas."

"A *soufflé Rothschild*."

"Oh, don't be rich, please," she said. "We mightn't like each other if we were rich. Like me growing fat and my hair falling out. . . ."

"That wouldn't make any difference."

"Oh yes, it would," she said. "You know it would," and the talk suddenly faded out. She was not too young to be wise, but she was too young to know that wisdom shouldn't be spoken aloud when you are happy.

I went back to the huge office block with its

glass, glass, glass, and its dazzling marble floor and its pieces of modern carving in alcoves and niches like statues in a Catholic church. I was the assistant accountant (an ageing assistant accountant) and the very vastness of the place made promotion seem next to impossible. To be raised from the ground floor I would have to be a piece of sculpture myself.

In little uncomfortable offices in the city people die and people move on: old gentlemen look up from steel boxes and take a Dickensian interest in younger men. Here, in the great operational room with the calculators ticking and the tape machines clicking and the soundless typewriters padding, you felt there was no chance for a man who hadn't passed staff college. I hadn't time to sit down before a loudspeaker said, "Mr. Bertram wanted in Room 10." (That was me.)

"Who lives in Room 10?" I asked.

Nobody knew. Somebody said, "It must be on the eighth floor." (He spoke with awe as though he were referring to the peak of Everest—the eighth floor was as far as the London County Council regulations allowed us to build towards Heaven.)

"Who lives in Room 10?" I asked the liftman again.

"Don't you know," he said sourly. "How long have you been here?"

"Five years."

We began to mount. He said, "You ought to know who lives in Room 10."

"But I don't."

"Five years and you don't know that."

"Be a good chap and tell me."

"Here you are. Eighth floor, turn left." As I got out, he said gloomily, "Not know Room 10!" He relented as he shot the gates. "Who do you think? The Gom, of course."

Then I began to walk very slowly indeed.

I have no belief in luck. I am not superstitious, but it is impossible when you have reached forty and are conspicuously unsuccessful not sometimes to half-believe in a malign providence. I had never met the Gom: I had only seen him twice; there was no reason so far as I could tell why I should ever see him again. He was elderly; he would die first, I would contribute grudgingly to a memorial. But to be summoned from the ground floor to the eighth

shook me. I wondered what terrible mistake could justify a reprimand in Room 10; it seemed to be quite possible that our wedding now would never take place at St. Luke's, nor our fortnight at Bournemouth. In a way I was right.

## 3

THE Gom was called the Gom by those who disliked him and by all those too far removed from him for any feeling at all. He was like the weather—unpredictable. When a new tape machine was installed, or new calculators replaced the old reliable familiar ones, you said, "The Gom, I suppose," before settling down to learn the latest toy. At Christmas little typewritten notes came round, addressed personally to each member of the staff (it must have given the typing pool a day's work, but the signature below the seasonal greeting, Herbert Dreuther, was rubber stamped). I was always a little surprised that the letter was not signed Gom. At that season of bonuses and cigars, unpredictable in amount, you sometimes heard him

called by his full name, the Grand Old Man.

And there was something grand about him with his mane of white hair, his musician's head. Where other men collected pictures to escape death duties, he collected for pleasure. For a month at a time he would disappear in his yacht with a cargo of writers and actresses and oddments—a hypnotist, a man who had invented a new rose or discovered something about the endocrine glands. We on the ground floor, of course, would never have missed him: we should have known nothing about it if we had not read an account in the papers—the cheaper Sunday papers followed the progress of the yacht from port to port: they associated yachts with scandal but there would never be any scandal on Dreuther's boat. He hated unpleasantness outside office hours.

I knew a little more than most from my position: Diesel oil was included with wine under the general heading of Entertainment. At one time that caused trouble with Blixon. My chief told me about it. Blixon was the other power at No. 45. He held about as many shares as Dreuther, but he was not proportionally consulted. He was small, spotty, undistinguished,

and consumed with jealousy. He could have had a yacht himself, but nobody would have sailed with him. When he objected to the Diesel oil, Dreuther magnanimously gave way and then proceeded to knock all private petrol from the firm's account. As he lived in London he employed the firm's car, but Blixon had a house in Hampshire. What Dreuther courteously called a compromise was reached—things were to remain as they were. When Blixon managed somehow to procure himself a knighthood, he gained a momentary advantage until the rumour was said to have reached him that Dreuther had refused one in the same Honours List. One thing was certainly true—at a dinner party, to which Blixon and my chief had been invited, Dreuther was heard to oppose a knighthood for a certain artist. "Impossible. He couldn't accept it. An O.M. (or possibly a C.H.) are the only honours that remain respectable." (It made matters worse that Blixon had never heard of the C.H.)

But Blixon bided his time. One more packet of shares would give him control and we used to believe that his chief prayer at night (he was a

churchwarden in Hampshire) was that these shares would reach the market while Dreuther was at sea.

## 4

WITH despair in my heart I knocked on the door of No. 10 and entered, but even in my despair I memorised details—they would want to know them on the ground floor. The room was not like an office at all—there was a bookcase containing sets of English classics and it showed Dreuther's astutenesss that Trollope was there and not Dickens, Stevenson and not Scott, thus giving an appearance of personal taste. There was an unimportant Renoir and a lovely little Boudin on the far wall, and one noticed at once that there was a sofa but not a desk. The few visible files were stacked on a Regency table, and Blixon and my chief and a stranger sat uncomfortably on the edge of easy chairs. Dreuther was almost out of sight—he lay practically on his spine in the largest and deepest

chair, holding some papers above his head and scowling at them through the thickest glasses I have ever seen on a human face.

"It is fantastic and it cannot be true," he was saying in his deep guttural voice.

"I don't see the importance . . ." Blixon said.

Dreuther took off his glasses and gazed across the room at me. "Who are you?" he said.

"This is Mr. Bertram, my assistant," the chief accountant said.

"What is he doing here?"

"You asked me to send for him."

"I remember," Dreuther said. "But that was half an hour ago."

"I was out at lunch, sir."

"Lunch?" Dreuther asked as though it were a new word.

"It was during the lunch hour, Mr. Dreuther," the chief accountant said.

"And they go out for lunch?"

"Yes, Mr. Dreuther."

"All of them?"

"Most of them, I think."

"How very interesting. I did not know. Do you go out to lunch, Sir Walter?"