



*The end
of the affair*

GRAHAM GREENE

THE END OF THE AFFAIR

Graham Greene was born in 1904. On coming down from Balliol College, Oxford, he worked for four years as sub-editor on *The Times*. He established his reputation with his fourth novel, *Stamboul Train*. In 1935 he made a journey across Liberia, described in *Journey Without Maps*, and on his return was appointed film critic of the *Spectator*. In 1926 he had been received into the Roman Catholic Church and visited Mexico in 1938 to report on the religious persecution there. As a result he wrote *The Lawless Roads* and, later, his famous novel *The Power and the Glory*. *Brighton Rock* was published in 1938 and in 1940 he became literary editor of the *Spectator*. The next year he undertook work for the Foreign Office and was stationed in Sierra Leone from 1941 to 1943. This later produced the novel, *The Heart of the Matter*, set in West Africa.

As well as his many novels, Graham Greene wrote several collections of short stories, four travel books, six plays, three books of autobiography – *A Sort of Life*, *Ways of Escape* and *A World of My Own* (published posthumously) – two of biography and four books for children. He also contributed hundreds of essays, and film and book reviews, some of which appear in the collections *Reflections* and *Mornings in the Dark*. Many of his novels and short stories have been filmed and *The Third Man* was written as a film treatment. Graham Greene was a member of the Order of Merit and a Companion of Honour.

Graham Greene died in April 1991.

ALSO BY GRAHAM GREENE

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Graham Greene

THE END
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VINTAGE

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TO C.

**Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and
into them enters suffering in order that they may have
existence.**

LÉON BLOY

BOOK ONE

1

A STORY has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead. I say 'one chooses' with the inaccurate pride of a professional writer who – when he has been seriously noted at all – has been praised for his technical ability, but do I in fact of my own will *choose* that black wet January night on the Common, in 1946, the sight of Henry Miles slanting across the wide river of rain, or did these images choose me? It is convenient, it is correct according to the rules of my craft to begin just there, but if I had believed then in a God, I could also have believed in a hand, plucking at my elbow, a suggestion, 'Speak to him: he hasn't seen you yet.'

For why should I have spoken to him? If hate is not too large a term to use in relation to any human being, I hated Henry – I hated his wife Sarah too. And he, I suppose, came soon after the events of that evening to hate me: as he surely at times must have hated his wife and that other, in whom in those days we were lucky enough not to believe. So this is a record of hate far more than of love, and if I come to say anything in favour of Henry and Sarah I can be trusted: I am writing against the bias because it is my professional pride to prefer the near-truth, even to the expression of my near-hate.

It was strange to see Henry out on such a night: he liked his comfort and after all – or so I thought – he had Sarah. To me comfort is like the wrong memory at the wrong place or time: if one is lonely one prefers discomfort. There was too much comfort even in the bed sitting-room I had at the wrong – the south – side of the Common, in the relics of other people's furniture. I thought I would go for a walk through the rain and have a drink at

the local. The little crowded hall was full of strangers' hats and coats and I took somebody else's umbrella by accident – the man on the second floor had friends in. Then I closed the stained-glass door behind me and made my way carefully down the steps that had been blasted in 1944 and never repaired. I had reason to remember the occasion and how the stained glass, tough and ugly and Victorian, stood up to the shock as our grandfathers themselves would have done.

Directly I began to cross the Common I realized I had the wrong umbrella, for it sprang a leak and the rain ran down under my macintosh collar, and then it was I saw Henry. I could so easily have avoided him; he had no umbrella and in the light of the lamp I could see his eyes were blinded with the rain. The black leafless trees gave no protection: they stood around like broken waterpipes, and the rain dripped off his stiff dark hat and ran in streams down his black civil servant's overcoat. If I had walked straight by him, he wouldn't have seen me, and I could have made certain by stepping two feet off the pavement, but I said, 'Henry, you are almost a stranger,' and saw his eyes light up as though we were old friends.

'Bendrix,' he said with affection, and yet the world would have said *he* had the reasons for hate, not me.

'What are you up to, Henry, in the rain?' There are men whom one has an irresistible desire to tease: men whose virtues one doesn't share. He said evasively, 'Oh, I wanted a bit of air,' and during a sudden blast of wind and rain he just caught his hat in time from being whirled away towards the north side.

'How's Sarah?' I asked because it might have seemed odd if I hadn't, though nothing would have delighted me more than to have heard that she was sick, unhappy, dying. I imagined in those days that any suffering she underwent would lighten mine, and if she were dead I could be free: I would no longer imagine all the things one does imagine under my ignoble circumstances. I could even like poor silly Henry, I thought, if Sarah were dead.

He said, 'Oh, she's out for the evening somewhere,' and

set that devil in my mind at work again, remembering other days when Henry must have replied just like that to other inquirers, while I alone knew where Sarah was. 'A drink?' I asked, and to my surprise he put himself in step beside me. We had never before drunk together outside his home.

'It's a long time since we've seen you, Bendrix.' For some reason I am a man known by his surname – I might never have been christened for all the use my friends make of the rather affected Maurice my literary parents gave me.

'A long time.'

'Why, it must be – more than a year.'

'June 1944,' I said.

'As long as that – well, well.' The fool, I thought, the fool to see nothing strange in a year and a half's interval. Less than five hundred yards of flat grass separated our two 'sides'. Had it never occurred to him to say to Sarah, 'How's Bendrix doing? What about asking Bendrix in?' and hadn't her replies ever seemed to him . . . odd, evasive, suspicious? I had fallen out of their sight as completely as a stone in a pond. I suppose the ripples may have disturbed Sarah for a week, a month, but Henry's blinkers were firmly tied. I had hated his blinkers even when I had benefited from them, knowing that others could benefit too.

'Is she at the cinema?' I asked.

'Oh no, she hardly ever goes.'

'She used to.'

The Pontefract Arms was still decorated for Christmas with paper streamers and paper bells, the relics of commercial gaiety, mauve and orange, and the young landlady leant her breasts against the bar with a look of contempt for her customers.

'Pretty,' Henry said, without meaning it, and stared around with a certain lost air, a shyness, for somewhere to hang his hat. I got the impression that the nearest he had ever before been to a public bar was the chophouse off Northumberland Avenue where he ate lunch with his colleagues from the Ministry.

‘What will you have?’

‘I wouldn’t mind a whisky.’

‘Nor would I, but you’ll have to make do with rum.’

We sat at a table and fingered our glasses: I had never had much to say to Henry. I doubt whether I should ever have troubled to know Henry or Sarah well if I had not begun in 1939 to write a story with a senior civil servant as the main character. Henry James once, in a discussion with Walter Besant, said that a young woman with sufficient talent need only pass the mess-room windows of a Guards’ barracks and look inside in order to write a novel about the Brigade, but I think at some stage of her book she would have found it necessary to go to bed with a Guardsman if only in order to check on the details. I didn’t exactly go to bed with Henry, but I did the next best thing, and the first night I took Sarah out to dinner I had the cold-blooded intention of picking the brain of a civil servant’s wife. She didn’t know what I was at; she thought, I am sure, I was genuinely interested in her family life, and perhaps that first awakened her liking for me. What time did Henry have breakfast? I asked her. Did he go to the office by tube, bus or taxi? Did he bring his work home at night? Did he have a briefcase with the royal arms on it? Our friendship blossomed under my interest: she was so pleased that anybody should take Henry seriously. Henry was important, but important rather as an elephant is important, from the size of his department; there are some kinds of importance that remain hopelessly damned to unseriousness. Henry was an important assistant secretary in the Ministry of Pensions – later it was to be the Ministry of Home Security. Home Security – I used to laugh at that later in those moments when you hate your companion and look for any weapon . . . A time came when I deliberately told Sarah that I had only taken Henry up for the purpose of copy, copy too for a character who was the ridiculous, the comic element in my book. It was then she began to dislike my novel. She had an enormous loyalty to Henry (I could never deny that), and in those clouded hours when the demon took charge of my brain

and I resented even harmless Henry, I would use the novel and invent episodes too crude to write ... Once when Sarah had spent a whole night with me (I had looked forward to it as a writer looks forward to the last word of his book) I had spoilt the occasion suddenly by a chance word which broke the mood of what sometimes seemed for hours at a time a complete love. I had fallen sullenly asleep about two and woke at three, and putting my hand on her arm woke Sarah. I think I had meant to make everything well again, until my victim turned her face, bleary and beautiful with sleep and full of trust, towards me. She had forgotten the quarrel, and I found even in her forgetfulness a new cause. How twisted we humans are, and yet they say a God made us; but I find it hard to conceive of any God who is not as simple as a perfect equation, as clear as air. I said to her, 'I've lain awake thinking of Chapter Five. Does Henry ever eat coffee beans to clear his breath before an important conference?' She shook her head and began to cry silently, and I of course pretended not to understand the reason - a simple question, it had been worrying me about my character, this was not an attack on Henry, the nicest people sometimes eat coffee beans ... So I went on. She wept awhile and went to sleep. She was a good sleeper, and I took even her power to sleep as an added offence.

Henry drank his rum quickly, his gaze wandering miserably among the mauve and orange streamers. I asked, 'Had a good Christmas?'

'Very nice. Very nice,' he said.

'At home?' Henry looked up at me as though my inflection of the word sounded strange.

'Home? Yes, of course.'

'And Sarah's well?'

'Yes.'

'Have another rum?'

'It's my turn.'

While Henry fetched the drinks I went into the lavatory. The walls were scrawled with phrases: 'Damn you, landlord, and your breasty wife.' 'To all pimps and whores a

merry syphilis and a happy gonorrhea.' I went quickly out again to the cheery paper streamers and the clink of glass. Sometimes I see myself reflected too closely in other men for comfort, and then I have an enormous wish to believe in the saints, in heroic virtue.

I repeated to Henry the two lines I had seen. I wanted to shock him, and it surprised me when he said simply, 'Jealousy's an awful thing.'

'You mean the bit about the breasty wife?'

'Both of them. When you are miserable, you envy other people's happiness.' It wasn't what I had ever expected him to learn in the Ministry of Home Security. And there – in the phrase – the bitterness leaks again out of my pen. What a dull lifeless quality this bitterness is. If I could I would write with love, but if I could write with love, I would be another man: I would never have lost love. Yet suddenly across the shiny tiled surface of the bar-table I felt something, nothing so extreme as love, perhaps nothing more than a companionship in misfortune. I said to Henry, 'Are *you* miserable?'

'Bendrix, I'm worried.'

'Tell me.'

I expect it was the rum that made him speak, or was he partly aware of how much I knew about him? Sarah was loyal, but in a relationship such as ours had been you can't help picking up a thing or two ... I knew he had a mole on the left of his navel because a birthmark of my own had once reminded Sarah of it: I knew he suffered from short sight, but wouldn't wear glasses with strangers (and I was still enough of a stranger never to have seen him in them): I knew his liking for tea at ten: I even knew his sleeping habits. Was he conscious that I knew so much already, that one more fact would not alter our relation? He said, 'I'm worried about Sarah, Bendrix.'

The door of the bar opened and I could see the rain lashing down against the light. A little hilarious man darted in and called out, 'Wot cher, everybody,' and nobody answered.

'Is she ill? I thought you said ...'

'No. Not ill. I don't think so.' He looked miserably around – this was not his *milieu*. I noticed that the whites of his eyes were bloodshot; perhaps he hadn't been wearing his glasses enough – there are always so many strangers, or it might have been the after-effect of tears. He said, 'Bendrix, I can't talk here,' as though he had once been in the habit of talking somewhere. 'Come home with me.'

'Will Sarah be back?'

'I don't expect so.'

I paid for the drinks, and that again was a symptom of Henry's disturbance – he never took other people's hospitality easily. He was always the one in a taxi to have the money ready in the palm of his hand, while we others fumbled. The avenues of the Common still ran with rain, but it wasn't far to Henry's. He let himself in with a latch-key under the Queen Anne fanlight and called, 'Sarah. Sarah.' I longed for a reply and dreaded a reply, but nobody answered. He said, 'She's out still. Come into the study.'

I had never been in his study before: I had always been Sarah's friend, and when I met Henry it was on Sarah's territory, her haphazard living-room where nothing matched, nothing was period or planned, where everything seemed to belong to that very week because nothing was ever allowed to remain as a token of past taste or past sentiment. Everything was used there; just as in Henry's study I now felt that very little had ever been used. I doubted whether the set of Gibbon had once been opened, and the set of Scott was only there because it had – probably – belonged to his father, like the bronze copy of the Discus Thrower. And yet he was happier in his unused room simply because it was his: his possession. I thought with bitterness and envy: if one possesses a thing securely, one need never use it.

'A whisky?' Henry asked. I remembered his eyes and wondered if he were drinking more than he had done in the old days. Certainly the whiskies he poured out were generous doubles.

'What's troubling you, Henry?' I had long abandoned

that novel about the senior civil servant: I wasn't looking for copy any longer.

'Sarah,' he said.

Would I have been frightened if he had said that, in just that way, two years ago? No, I think I should have been overjoyed – one gets so hopelessly tired of deception. I would have welcomed the open fight if only because there might have been a chance, however small, that through some error of tactics on his side I might have won. And there has never been a time in my life before or since when I have so much wanted to win. I have never had so strong a desire even to write a good book.

He looked up at me with those red-rimmed eyes and said, 'Bendrix, I'm afraid.' I could no longer patronize him; he was one of misery's graduates: he had passed in the same school, and for the first time I thought of him as an equal. I remember there was one of those early brown photographs in an Oxford frame on his desk, the photograph of his father, and looking at it I thought how like the photograph was to Henry (it had been taken at about the same age, the middle forties) and how unlike. It wasn't the moustache that made it different – it was the Victorian look of confidence, of being at home in the world and knowing the way around, and suddenly I felt again that friendly sense of companionship. I liked him better than I would have liked his father (who had been in the Treasury). We were fellow strangers.

'What is it you're afraid of, Henry?'

He sat down in an easy chair as though somebody had pushed him and said with disgust, 'Bendrix, I've always thought the worst things, the very worst, a man could do ...' I should certainly have been on tenterhooks in those other days: strange to me, and how infinitely dreary, the serenity of innocence.

'You know you can trust me, Henry.' It was possible, I thought, that she had kept a letter, though I had written so few. It is a professional risk that authors run. Women are apt to exaggerate the importance of their lovers and they never foresee the disappointing day when an indis-

creet letter will appear marked 'Interesting' in an autograph catalogue priced at five shillings.

'Take a look at this then,' Henry said.

He held a letter out to me: it was not in my handwriting. 'Go on. Read it,' Henry said. It was from some friend of Henry's and he wrote, 'I suggest the man you want to help should apply to a fellow called Savage, 159 Vigo Street. I found him able and discreet, and his employees seemed less nauseous than those chaps usually are.'

'I don't understand, Henry.'

'I wrote to this man and said that an acquaintance of mine had asked my advice about private detective agencies. It's terrible, Bendrix. He must have seen through the pretence.'

'You really mean . . .?'

'I haven't done anything about it, but there the letter sits on my desk reminding me . . . It seems so silly, doesn't it, that I can trust her absolutely not to read it though she comes in here a dozen times a day. I don't even put it away in a drawer. And yet I can't trust . . . she's out for a walk now. A *walk*, Bendrix.' The rain had penetrated his guard also and he held the edge of his sleeve towards the gas fire.

'I'm sorry.'

'You were always a special friend of hers, Bendrix. They always say, don't they, that a husband is the last person really to know the kind of woman . . . I thought tonight, when I saw you on the Common, that if I told you, and you laughed at me, I might be able to burn the letter.'

He sat there with his damp arm extended, looking away from me. I had never felt less like laughing, and yet I would have liked to laugh if I had been able.

I said, 'It's not the sort of situation one laughs at, even if it is fantastic to think . . .'

He asked me longingly, 'It *is* fantastic. You do think that I'm a fool, don't you . . .?'

I would willingly have laughed a moment before, and yet now, when I only had to lie, all the old jealousies returned. Are husband and wife so much one flesh that if

one hates the wife one has to hate the husband too? His question reminded me of how easy he had been to deceive: so easy that he seemed to me almost a conniver at his wife's unfaithfulness, like the man who leaves loose notes in a hotel bedroom connives at theft, and I hated him for the very quality which had once helped my love.

The sleeve of his jacket steamed away in front of the gas and he repeated, still looking away from me, 'Of course, I can tell you think me a fool.'

Then the demon spoke, 'Oh no, I don't think you a fool, Henry.'

'You mean, you really think it's ... possible?'

'Of course it's possible. Sarah's human.'

He said indignantly, 'And I always thought you were her friend,' as though it was I who had written the letter.

'Of course,' I said, 'you know her so much better than I ever did.'

'In some ways,' he said gloomily, and I knew he was thinking of the very ways in which I had known her the best.

'You asked me, Henry, if I thought you were a fool. I only said there was nothing foolish in the idea. I said nothing against Sarah.'

'I know, Bendrix. I'm sorry. I haven't been sleeping well lately. I wake up in the night wondering what to do about this wretched letter.'

'Burn it.'

'I wish I could.' He still had it in his hand and for a moment I really thought he was going to set it alight.

'Or go and see Mr Savage,' I said.

'But I can't pretend to *him* that I'm not her husband. Just think, Bendrix, of sitting there in front of a desk in a chair all the other jealous husbands have sat in, telling the same story ... Do you think there's a waiting-room, so that we see each other's faces as we pass through?' Strange, I thought, you would almost have taken Henry for an imaginative man. I felt my superiority shaken and the old desire to tease awoke in me again. I said, 'Why not let me go, Henry?'