



VINTAGE

A GUN FOR SALE
GRAHAM GREENE

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Graham Greene

Title Page

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Copyright

About the Book

Raven is an ugly man dedicated to ugly deeds. His cold-blooded killing of the Minister of War is an act of violence with chilling repercussions, not just for Raven himself, but for the nation as a whole.

The money he receives in payment for the murder is made up of stolen notes. When the first of these is traced, Raven is a man on the run. As he tracks down the agent who has been double-crossing him, and attempts to elude the police, he becomes both hunter and hunted: an unwitting weapon of a strange kind of social justice.

About the Author

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 was 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. He died in April 1991.

Also by Graham Greene

Novels

The Man Within
It's a Battlefield
The Confidential Agent
The Ministry of Fear
The Third Man
The End of the Affair
Loser Takes All
The Quiet American
A Burnt-out Case
Travels with my Aunt
Dr Fischer of Geneva or
The Bomb Party
The Human Factor
The Tenth Man
Stamboul Train
England Made Me
Brighton Rock
The Power and the Glory
The Heart of the Matter
The Fallen Idol
Our Man in Havana
The Comedians
The Honorary Consul
Monsignor Quixote
The Captain and the Enemy

Short Stories

Collected Stories
Twenty-One Stories
The Last Word and Other Stories
May We Borrow Your Husband?

Travel

Journey Without Maps
The Lawless Roads
In Search of a Character
Getting to Know the General

Essays

Yours etc.
Reflections
Mornings in the Dark
Collected Essays

Plays
Collected Plays

Autobiography
A Sort of Life
Ways of Escape
Fragments of an Autobiography
A World of my Own

Biography
Lord Rochester's Monkey
An Impossible Woman

Children's Books
The Little Train
The Little Horse-Bus
The Little Steamroller
The Little Fire Engine

GRAHAM GREENE

A Gun for Sale

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Robert Macfarlane

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

A Gun for Sale starts with a bang. ‘Murder didn’t mean much to Raven. It was just a new job.’ It is an opening which places us unmistakably in the world of the detective thriller – the world of the gung-ho gumshoe, the sassy moll, and the smiler with the knife, where dialogue is as hard-boiled as a twenty-minute egg, and the action moves quicker than whisky over ice. In those first lines, we can hear a practice run of the celebrated beginning to Greene’s *Brighton Rock* (1938): ‘Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him.’ We can hear, too, advance echoes of unnumbered dark-minded thrillers, all the way down to James Ellroy’s 1997 masterpiece, *The Cold Six Thousand*, which starts, abruptly: ‘They sent him to Dallas to kill a nigger pimp named Wendell Durfee.’

It places us, to be absolutely precise, in the world of noir. You will be familiar with the images of noir, even if you do not know the films and the novels which make up the genre. Two silhouetted hit men in overcoats and fedoras approach a diner. A G-car cruises at walking pace down a street. A faceless figure in a belted coat stands in a white circle of street-light. A man cups a hand round a flaring match. ‘Film noir’ was first used as a phrase in Paris in 1946, when French cineastes were looking for a label for a new type of Hollywood product. In the late 1930s, the feel-good world of mainstream Hollywood had begun to spawn a dark filmic alter ego. Noir cinema moved in a world of fear, neurosis, and depthless dishonesty. Its ‘heroes’ were sleazy private eyes, informers, hit men, gangsters or crims. Policemen were bent, institutions were authoritarian tending to evil. The setting was sordid, confused, almost always urban. Dialogue was terse. There were few verbs, and no happy endings. Action drove character, not the other way round. Everything was cast in extravagantly stylised greyscale, with sudden Caravaggio-contrasts of light and dark.

The 1940s was the decade of the classic noir films, the 1930s the period when the genre was forming in cinema and in literature. *A Gun for Sale* was part of that formation. ‘All you need for a movie’, in the loaded phrase of neo-noir director Jean-Luc Godard, ‘is a girl and a gun’. It was out of these two ingredients that Greene made his fifth novel.

The ‘gun’ is an assassin called Raven, who is hired to kill the Czech Minister for War. Raven returns to England after a successful hit, only to be paid off in stolen notes by his contact, Cholmondeley, and nearly arrested as a consequence. Bent on revenge, and unaware that his assassination has tilted the world towards war, Raven tracks Cholmondeley down to the Midlands city of Nottwich. En route, he takes hostage the novel’s ‘girl’, Anne Crowder, who happens to be the partner of a detective-sergeant named Jimmy Mather. Mather sets off to Nottwich after Raven, who is himself chasing

Cholmondeley and his shadowy pay-masters. As this double-pursuit tapers to a violent climax, so the world edges closer to war.

A Gun for Sale was published in 1936; in 1942 it would be adapted into the less subtly titled *This Gun for Hire*, with a script co-written by the American pulp master W.R. Burnett (author of *Little Caesar*, *High Sierra* and *The Asphalt Jungle*). The promotional poster for the film showed Alan Ladd as Raven, standing in a grainy bright angled light, and casting a corvid shadow onto the white wall behind him. Greene did not approve of Burnett's script, but he can hardly have objected to the existence of the film, for his novel – like its 1934 predecessor, *Stamboul Train* – was clearly written with an eye to adaptation.

Cinema's influence on *A Gun for Sale* is visible everywhere. It is there in the B-movie strap-lines: 'His most vivid emotion was venom'; 'He had been made by hatred'; 'He bore the cold within him as he walked'. It is there, too, in the frequent cutaways, and in the long panning shots through the streets of London and over the suburbs of Nottwich. And it is there most obviously in the dozens of sudden leering close-ups: the zoom-ins on expressions, objects and body parts – the 'furious dewlapped face' of Mr Davenant, the harelip of which Raven is so violently ashamed, the 'jewelled fingers' of Cholmondeley, or the alien gas masks in which the medical students perform their strange carnival.

The thriller movie is the first of the two great cultural influences which converge in *A Gun for Sale*. The second is the adventure novel. Greene often spoke of H. Rider Haggard, Marjorie Bowen and John Buchan as among his favourite writers. It was from Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* – with its pursuit scenes over the moors of the Scottish borders, themselves a homage to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* – that Greene learned how to pace a chase, and learned also how powerful excitement could be as a way of bringing the reader to attention. These writers showed Greene that, as he once put it, 'action has a moral simplicity which thought lacks.'

Greene's adventure novels, however, diverged from their Edwardian antecedents in one important respect. The spy thrillers of Buchan and his like featured impeccably clubbable heroes: chaps with a patriot's sensibility and an ethic of fair play. Greene's, by contrast, starred anti-heroes – men driven by self-interest and self-loathing – of whom Raven is the first and one of the darkest. This was a necessary revision: the old, reassuringly simple value-systems of the Edwardian-era thriller, it seemed to Greene, could not hold in the predatory, paranoid, rudderless 1930s. In 1936, Greene wrote, Britain was 'no longer a Buchan world':

Patriotism had lost its appeal, even for a schoolboy, at Passchendaele, and the Empire brought first to mind the Beaverbrook Crusader, while it was difficult, during the years of the Depression, to believe in the high purposes of the City of London and of the British Constitution. The hunger-marchers seemed more real than the politicians.

For all its firecracker action and popular influences, *A Gun for Sale* is an intensely literary novel. While Orwell was mastering his style of artful plainness, and while Auden was coupling left-wing messages to popular verse forms, Greene was combining the tricks of the thriller-writer with the subtleties of the belletrist. His

ambition – like so many British writers of the 1930s – was to hitch high-culture ambitions to the higher-powered vehicles of low culture.

Greene's literary hand can be seen in the novel's careful patterning: the images – red berries, sourness, facial disfigurements, speech slurs – which recur, speaking to one another across the novel, and amplifying its themes. So, for instance, Sir Marcus, the villainous armaments mogul, hides a scar beneath his beard; a flaw which binds him symbolically to his nemesis, the harelipped Raven. Then there are the numerous images of globes: the light-fitting like a 'dull globe' in Anne's room, the 'naked globe' which illuminates Dr Yogel's grubby surgery 'globe', the earth which seems to move like 'an icy barren globe, through the vast darkness' – an image which quietly but deliberately invokes the post-apocalypse world of Byron's poem 'Darkness', where 'the icy earth/Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air'. All these globes are there, of course, to prime us for the repercussions of Raven's actions. We slowly come to know what Raven never does: that his assassination of the Czech minister – passed off as the act of a Serbian militant – has been commissioned by Sir Marcus precisely in order to trigger global warfare, and thus boost the fortunes of the armament industry's fortunes. This is a world of Lorenz-Effect geopolitics, where a single assassination can trigger the slaughter of millions.

The fears which preoccupy the characters of *A Gun for Sale* – of imminent world war, of possible gas attacks, of sinister political powers – would all have been real and present fears to Greene's first readers. Greene's choice of an armaments manufacturer as the villain of the piece was particularly timely. Left-wing political theory of the early 1930s had come increasingly to lay the blame for war past and war future at the door of capitalism, which was held to have contaminated state morality with finance. In particular, such theories denounced the massive interlocking interests of governments and the arms companies – Vickers, Krupp, Skoda, Schneider-Creusot. A series of dramatically titled books detailing this hypothesis were published: *Death and Profits* (1932), *The Bloody Traffic* (1933), *Salesmen of Death* (1933). Of these the best known was the dispassionate but damning *Merchants of Death: A Study of the International Armament Industry* (1934) by H.C. Engelbrecht and F.C. Hanighen, which triggered a 1935 Royal Commission on 'the war traffic' in Britain.

The figure of Sir Marcus – a spiritless but deadly destroying angel, for whom spilt blood is as nothing compared to a rocketing share price – would therefore have been a familiar to the public imagination, as would the excited and nervous gossip which fills the novel – in the newspaper office, on the street, in Dr Yogel's surgery – about the killing which is to be made in 'munitions shares'.

Almost everyone in *A Gun for Sale* is wounded, venal, vengeful or all three. One thinks of salacious Mr Davis, preying sexually on his showgirls, or the sharp-elbowed women who jostle outside a Nottwich jumble sale, waiting for it to open: 'They are quite capable', Greene has the nervous vicar note, in one of the novel's rare flashes of humour, 'of storming the doors'. Those few moments of compassion which do occur are nested within nastiness: the display of arid love, for instance, which passes between mean-minded Acky and his meaner-minded wife, when they are confronted by Raven.

Of these many bitter characters, the bitterest is Raven himself: our murderer and

our detective, our hero and our villain. Hatred, Greene writes melodramatically, ‘had constructed [Raven] into this thin smoky murderous figure in the rain, hunted and ugly ... He had never felt the least tenderness for anyone.’ Raven is not even evil, just perfectly indifferent – and this is what makes him all the more alarming.

Greene at one point describes Raven as carrying ‘a chip of ice in his breast’. It is a phrase which inevitably recalls the famous observation in his autobiography *A Sort of Life* (1971) that ‘there’s a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer’. Greene recalled being in hospital as a child, being treated for appendicitis, when a ten-year-old boy was brought in to the ward with a broken leg. The parents were told they could go home, but shortly after they had left, complications set in. The parents were summoned back; the boy died. While the other patients shut out the sounds of the mother’s cries of anguish with their radio headphones, Greene watched and listened. ‘This was something,’ he concluded chillingly, ‘which one day I might need’.

The similarities between Raven the assassin and Greene the novelist stretch beyond their shared pitilessness. Both also show a deep disdain for the pieties of liberal humanism. *A Gun for Sale*, indeed, can be seen as the start of Greene’s long-running attempt to destroy what Hywel Williams nicely described as ‘the ethical religion of the English: a decadent liberal Protestantism sliding into secular do-gooding agnosticism.’ Against the robust nineteenth-century trio of the progressive, the humane and the universal, Greene relentlessly pitted the squalid, the crooked and the fugitive. His major novels, beginning with *Stamboul Train* (1932) and intensifying in *A Gun for Sale*, confront and continually affront the persistent liberal-minded English belief that truth and decency are always obvious to those endowed with a rational and optimistic goodwill. This is why motives in Greene’s novels are always mixed, why the good are sometimes damned and sometimes not, and why the wicked often end up, if not blessed, at least free. His characters exist in a moral world where goodness and badness do not exist as opposed and separate states, but shade into one another by fine degrees.

This ambiguous pessimism – or clear-eyed realism – runs right through to the end of *A Gun for Sale*. Anne and Mather are in a train carriage returning from Nottwich to London. Watching the countryside pass them by in reverse, both know – as the first readers of Greene’s book would have known – that a world war has not been prevented, only postponed. ‘This darkening land,’ thinks Mathers as he gazes out of the window, ‘flowing backwards down the line, was safe for a few more years.’ Three, to be precise.

Robert Macfarlane, 2005

Chapter 1

1

MURDER DIDN'T MEAN much to Raven. It was just a new job. You had to be careful. You had to use your brains. It was not a question of hatred. He had only seen the Minister once: he had been pointed out to Raven as he walked down the new housing estate between the small lit Christmas trees, an old grubby man without friends, who was said to love humanity.

The cold wind cut Raven's face in the wide Continental street. It was a good excuse for turning the collar of his coat well above his mouth. A hare-lip was a serious handicap in his profession; it had been badly sewn in infancy, so that now the upper lip was twisted and scarred. When you carried about so easy an identification you couldn't help becoming ruthless in your methods. It had always, from the first, been necessary for Raven to eliminate a witness.

He carried an attaché case. He looked like any other youngish man going home after his work; his dark overcoat had a clerical air. He moved steadily up the street like hundreds of his kind. A tram went by, lit up in the early dusk: he didn't take it. An economical young man, you might have thought, saving money for his home. Perhaps even now he was on his way to meet his girl.

But Raven had never had a girl. The hare-lip prevented that. He had learnt, when he was very young, how repulsive it was. He turned into one of the tall grey houses and climbed the stairs, a sour bitter screwed-up figure.

Outside the top flat he put down his attaché case and put on gloves. He took a pair of clippers out of his pocket and cut through the telephone wire where it ran out from above the door to the lift shaft. Then he rang the bell.

He hoped to find the Minister alone. This little top-floor flat was the socialist's home; he lived in a poor bare solitary way and Raven had been told that his secretary always left him at half-past six; he was very considerate with his employees. But Raven was a minute too early and the Minister half an hour too late. A woman opened the door, an elderly woman with pince-nez and several gold teeth. She had her hat on and her coat was over her arm. She had been on the point of leaving and she was furious at being caught. She didn't allow him to speak, but snapped at him in German, 'The Minister is engaged.'

He wanted to spare her, not because he minded a killing but because his employers would prefer him not to exceed his instructions. He held the letter of introduction out to her silently; as long as she didn't hear his foreign voice or see the hare-lip she was safe. She took the letter primly and held it up close to her pince-nez. Good, he thought, she's short-sighted. 'Stay where you are,' she said, and walked back up the passage. He could hear her disapproving governess voice, then she was back in the passage saying, 'The Minister will see you. Follow me, please.' He couldn't understand the foreign speech, but he knew what she meant from her behaviour.

His eyes, like little concealed cameras, photographed the room instantaneously: the desk, the easy chair, the map on the wall, the door to the bedroom behind, the wide window above the bright cold Christmas street. A small oil-stove was all the heating, and the Minister was having it used now to boil a saucepan. A kitchen alarm-clock on the desk marked seven o'clock. A voice said, 'Emma, put in another egg.' The Minister came out from the bedroom. He had tried to tidy himself, but he had forgotten the cigarette ash on his trousers, and his fingers were ink-stained. The secretary took an egg out of one of the drawers in the desk. 'And the salt. Don't forget the salt,' the Minister said. He explained in slow English, 'It prevents the shell cracking. Sit down, my friend. Make yourself at home. Emma, you can go.'

Raven sat down and fixed his eyes on the Minister's chest. He thought: I'll give her three minutes by the alarm-clock to get well away: he kept his eyes on the Minister's chest: just there I'll shoot. He let his coat collar fall and saw with bitter rage how the old man turned away from the sight of his harelip.

The Minister said, 'It's years since I heard from him. But I've never forgotten him, never. I can show you his photograph in the other room. It's good of him to think of an old friend. So rich and powerful too. You must ask him when you go back if he remembers the time -' A bell began to ring furiously.

Raven thought: the telephone. I cut the wire. It shook his nerve. But it was only the alarm-clock drumming on the desk. The Minister turned it off. 'One egg's boiled,' he said and stooped for the saucepan. Raven opened his attaché case: in the lid he had fixed his automatic fitted with a silencer. The Minister said: 'I'm sorry the bell made you jump. You see I like my egg just four minutes.'

Feet ran along the passage. The door opened. Raven turned furiously in his seat, his hare-lip flushed and raw. It was the secretary. He thought: my God, what a household. They won't let a man do things tidily. He forgot his lip, he was angry, he had a grievance. She came in flashing her gold teeth, prim and ingratiating. She said, 'I was just going out when I heard the telephone,' then she winced slightly, looked the other way, showed a clumsy delicacy before his deformity which he couldn't help noticing. It condemned her. He snatched the automatic out of the case and shot the Minister twice in the back.

The Minister fell across the oil stove; the saucepan upset and the two eggs broke on the floor. Raven shot the Minister once more in the head, leaning across the desk to make quite certain, driving the bullet hard into the base of the skull, smashing it open like a china doll's. Then he turned on the secretary; she moaned at him; she hadn't any words; the old mouth couldn't hold its saliva. He supposed she was begging him for mercy. He pressed the trigger again; she staggered under it as if she had been kicked by an animal in the side. But he had miscalculated. Her unfashionable dress, the swathes of useless material in which she hid her body, had perhaps confused his aim. And she was tough, so tough he couldn't believe his eyes; she was through the door before he could fire again, slamming it behind her.

But she couldn't lock it; the key was on his side. He twisted the handle and pushed; the elderly woman had amazing strength; it only gave two inches. She began to scream some word at the top of her voice.

There was no time to waste. He stood away from the door and shot twice through the woodwork. He could hear the pince-nez fall on the floor and break. The voice

screamed again and stopped; there was a sound outside as if she were sobbing. It was her breath going out through her wounds. Raven was satisfied. He turned back to the Minister.

There was a clue he had been ordered to leave; a clue he had to remove. The letter of introduction was on the desk. He put it in his pocket and between the Minister's stiffened fingers he inserted a scrap of paper. Raven had little curiosity; he had only glanced at the introduction and the nickname at its foot conveyed nothing to him; he was a man who could be depended on. Now he looked round the small bare room to see whether there was any clue he had overlooked. The suitcase and the automatic he was to leave behind. It was all very simple.

He opened the bedroom door; his eyes again photographed the scene, the single bed, the wooden chair, the dusty chest of drawers, a photograph of a young Jew with a small scar on his chin as if he had been struck there with a club, a pair of brown wooden hairbrushes initialled J.K., everywhere cigarette ash: the home of an old lonely untidy man; the home of the Minister for War.

A low voice whispered an appeal quite distinctly through the door. Raven picked up the automatic again; who would have imagined an old woman could be so tough? It touched his nerve a little just in the same way as the bell had done, as if a ghost were interfering with a man's job. He opened the study door; he had to push it against the weight of her body. She looked dead enough, but he made quite sure with the automatic almost touching her eyes.

It was time to be gone. He took the automatic with him.

2

They sat and shivered side by side as the dusk came down; they were borne in their bright small smoky cage above the streets; the bus rocked down to Hammersmith. The shop windows sparkled like ice and 'Look,' she said, 'it's snowing.' A few large flakes went drifting by as they crossed the bridge, falling like paper scraps into the dark Thames.

He said, 'I'm happy as long as this ride goes on.'

'We're seeing each other tomorrow – Jimmy.' She always hesitated before his name. It was a silly name for anyone of such bulk and gravity.

'It's the nights that bother me.'

She laughed, 'It's going to be wearing,' but immediately became serious, 'I'm happy too.' About happiness she was always serious; she preferred to laugh when she was miserable. She couldn't avoid being serious about things she cared for, and happiness made her grave at the thought of all the things which might destroy it. She said, 'It would be dreadful now if there was a war.'

'There won't be a war.'

'The last one started with a murder.'

'That was an Archduke. This is just an old politician.'

She said: 'Be careful. You'll break the record – Jimmy.'

'Damn the record.'

She began to hum the tune she'd bought: 'It's only Kew to you'; and the large flakes fell past the window, melted on the pavement: 'a snowflower a man brought

from Greenland.'

He said, 'It's a silly song.'

She said, 'It's a lovely song – Jimmy. I simply can't call you Jimmy. You aren't Jimmy. You're outsize. Detective-sergeant Mather. You're the reason why people make jokes about policemen's boots.'

'What's wrong with "dear", anyway?'

'Dear, dear,' she tried it out on the tip of her tongue, between lips as vividly stained as a winter berry. 'Oh no,' she decided, 'I'll call you that when we've been married ten years.'

'Well – "darling"?''

'Darling, darling. I don't like it. It sounds as if I'd known you a long, long time.' The bus went up the hill past the fish-and-chip shops: a brazier glowed and they could smell the roasting chestnuts. The ride was nearly over, there were only two more streets and a turn to the left by the church, which was already visible, the spire lifted like a long icicle above the houses. The nearer they got to home the more miserable she became, the nearer they got to home the more lightly she talked. She was keeping things off and out of mind: the peeling wallpaper, the long flights to her room, cold supper with Mrs Brewer and next day the walk to the agent's, perhaps a job again in the provinces away from him.

Mather said heavily, 'You don't care for me like I care for you. It's nearly twenty-four hours before I see you again.'

'It'll be more than that if I get a job.'

'You don't care. You simply don't care.'

She clutched his arm. 'Look. Look at that poster.' But it was gone before he could see it through the steamy pane. 'Europe Mobilizing' lay like a weight on her heart.

'What was it?'

'Oh, just the same old murder again.'

'You've got that murder on your mind. It's a week old now. It's got nothing to do with us.'

'No, it hasn't, has it?'

'If it had happened here, we'd have caught him by now.'

'I wonder why he did it.'

'Politics. Patriotism.'

'Well. Here we are. It might be a good thing to get off. Don't look so miserable. I thought you said you were happy.'

'That was five minutes ago.'

'Oh,' she said out of her light and heavy heart, 'one lives quickly these days.' They kissed under the lamp; she had to stretch to reach him; he was comforting like a large dog, even when he was sullen and stupid, but one didn't have to send away a dog alone in the cold dark night.

'Anne,' he said, 'we'll be married, won't we, after Christmas?'

'We haven't a penny,' she said, 'you know. Not a penny – Jimmy.'

'I'll get a rise.'

'You'll be late for duty.'

'Damn it, you don't care.'

She jeered at him, 'Not a scrap – dear,' and walked away from him up the street to

No. 54, praying let me get some money quick, let *this* go on *this* time; she hadn't any faith in herself. A man passed her going up the road; he looked cold and strung-up, as he passed in his black overcoat; he had a hare-lip. Poor devil, she thought, and forgot him, opening the door of 54, climbing the long flights to the top floor, the carpet stopped on the first. She put on the new record, hugging to her heart the silly senseless words, the slow sleepy tune:

'It's only Kew
To you,
But to me
It's Paradise.
They are just blue
Petunias to you,
But to me
They are your eyes.'

The man with the hare-lip came back down the street; fast walking hadn't made him warm; like Kay in *The Snow Queen* he bore the cold within him as he walked. The flakes went on falling, melting into slush on the pavement, the words of a song dropped from the lit room on the third floor, the scrape of a used needle.

'They say that's a snowflower
A man brought from Greenland.
I say it's the lightness, the coolness, the whiteness
Of your hand.'

The man hardly paused; he went on down the street, walking fast; he felt no pain from the chip of ice in his breast.

3

Raven sat at an empty table in the Corner House near a marble pillar. He stared with distaste at the long list of sweet iced drinks, of *parfaits* and *sundaes* and *coupes* and splits. Somebody at the next table was eating brown bread and butter and drinking Horlick's. He wilted under Raven's gaze and put up his newspaper. One word 'Ultimatum' ran across the top line.

Mr Cholmondeley picked his way between the tables.

He was fat and wore an emerald ring. His wide square face fell in folds over his collar. He looked like a real-estate man, or perhaps a man more than usually successful in selling women's belts. He sat down at Raven's table and said, 'Good evening.'

Raven said, 'I thought you were never coming, Mr Cholmon-deley,' pronouncing every syllable.

'Chumley, my dear man, Chumley,' Mr Cholmondeley corrected him.

'It doesn't matter how it's pronounced. I don't suppose it's your own name.'

'After all I chose it,' Mr Cholmondeley said. His ring flashed under the great inverted bowls of light as he turned the pages of the menu. 'Have a *parfait*.'

‘It’s odd wanting to eat ice in this weather. You’ve only got to stay outside if you’re hot. I don’t want to waste any time, Mr Chol-mon-deley. Have you brought the money? I’m broke.’

Mr Cholmondeley said: ‘They do a very good Maiden’s Dream. Not to speak of Alpine Glow. Or the Knickerbocker Glory.’

‘I haven’t had a thing since Calais.’

‘Give me the letter,’ Mr Cholmondeley said. ‘Thank you.’ He told the waitress, ‘I’ll have an Alpine Glow with a glass of kümmel over it.’

‘The money,’ Raven said.

‘Here in this case.’

‘They are all fivers.’

‘You can’t expect to be paid two hundred in small change. And it’s nothing to do with me,’ Mr Cholmondeley said, ‘I’m merely the agent.’ His eyes softened as they rested on a Raspberry Split at the next table. He confessed wistfully to Raven, ‘I’ve got a sweet tooth.’

‘Don’t you want to hear about it?’ Raven said. ‘The old woman ...’

‘Please, please,’ Mr Cholmondeley said, ‘I want to hear nothing. I’m just an agent. I take no responsibility. My clients ...’

Raven twisted his hare-lip at him with sour contempt. ‘That’s a fine name for them.’

‘How long the waitress is with my *parfait*,’ Mr Cholmondeley complained. ‘My clients are really quite the best people. The acts of violence – they regard them as war.’

‘And I and the old man ...’ Raven said.

‘Are in the front trench.’ He began to laugh softly at his own humour; his great white open face was like a curtain on which you can throw grotesque images: a rabbit, a man with horns. His small eyes twinkled with pleasure at the mass of iced cream which was borne towards him in a tall glass. He said, ‘You did your work very well, very neatly. They are quite satisfied with you. You’ll be able to take a long holiday now.’ He was fat, he was vulgar, he was false, but he gave an impression of great power as he sat there with the cream dripping from his mouth. He was prosperity, he was one of those who possessed things, but Raven possessed nothing but the contents of the wallet, the clothes he stood up in, the hare-lip, the automatic he should have left behind. He said, ‘I’ll be moving.’

‘Good-bye, my man, good-bye,’ Mr Cholmondeley said, sucking through a straw.

Raven rose and went. Dark and thin and made for destruction, he wasn’t at ease among the little tables, among the bright fruit drinks. He went out into the Circus and up Shaftesbury Avenue. The shop windows were full of tinsel and hard red Christmas berries. It maddened him, the sentiment of it. His hands clenched in his pockets. He leant his face against a modiste’s window and jeered silently through the glass. A girl with a neat curved figure bent over a dummy. He fed his eyes contemptuously on her legs and hips; so much flesh, he thought, on sale in the Christmas window.

A kind of subdued cruelty drove him into the shop. He let his hare-lip loose on the girl when she came towards him with the same pleasure that he might have felt in turning a machinegun on a picture gallery. He said, ‘That dress in the window. How much?’

She said, ‘Five guineas.’ She wouldn’t ‘sir’ him. His lip was like a badge of class.

It revealed the poverty of parents who couldn't afford a clever surgeon.

He said, 'It's pretty, isn't it?'

She lisped at him genteelly, 'It's been vewwy much admired.'

'Soft. Thin. You'd have to take care of a dress like that, eh? Do for someone pretty and well off?'

She lied without interest, 'It's a model.' She was a woman, she knew all about it, she knew how cheap and vulgar the little shop really was.

'It's got class, eh?'

'Oh yes,' she said, catching the eye of a dago in a purple suit through the pane, 'it's got class.'

'All right,' he said. 'I'll give you five pounds for it.' He took a note from Mr Cholmondeley's wallet.

'Shall I pack it up?'

'No,' he said. 'The girl'll fetch it.' He grinned at her with his raw lip. 'You see, she's class. This the best dress you have?' and when she nodded and took the note away he said, 'It'll just suit Alice then.'

And so out into the Avenue with a little of his scorn expressed, out into Frith Street and round the corner into the German café where he kept a room. A shock awaited him there, a little fir tree in a tub hung with coloured glass, a crib. He said to the old man who owned the café, 'You believe in this? This junk?'

'Is there going to be war again?' the old man said. 'It's terrible what you read.'

'All this business of no room in the inn. They used to give us plum pudding. A decree from Caesar Augustus. You see I know the stuff, I'm educated. They used to read it us once a year.'

'I have seen one war.'

'I hate the sentiment.'

'Well,' the old man said, 'it's good for business.'

Raven picked up the bambino. The cradle came with it all of a piece: cheap painted plaster. 'They put him on the spot, eh? You see I know the whole story. I'm educated.'

He went upstairs to his room. It hadn't been seen to: there was still dirty water in the basin and the ewer was empty. He remembered the fat man saying, 'Chumley, my man, Chumley. It's pronounced Chumley,' flashing his emerald ring. He called furiously, 'Alice,' over the banisters.

She came out of the next room, a slattern, one shoulder too high, with wisps of fair bleached hair over her face. She said, 'You needn't shout.'

He said, 'It's a pigsty in there. You can't treat me like that. Go in and clean it.' He hit her on the side of the head and she cringed away from him, not daring to say anything but, 'Who do you think you are?'

'Get on,' he said, 'you humpbacked bitch.' He began to laugh at her when she crouched over the bed. 'I've bought you a Christmas dress, Alice. Here's the receipt. Go and fetch it. It's a lovely dress. It'll suit you.'

'You think you're funny,' she said.

'I've paid a fiver for this joke. Hurry, Alice, or the shop'll be shut.' But she got her own back calling up the stairs, 'I won't look worse than what you do with that split lip.' Everyone in the house could hear her, the old man in the café, his wife in the parlour, the customers at the counter. He imagined their smiles. 'Go it, Alice, what an

ugly pair you are.' He didn't really suffer; he had been fed the poison from boyhood drop by drop: he hardly noticed its bitterness now.

He went to the window and opened it and scratched on the sill. The kitten came to him, making little rushes along the drain pipe, feinting at his hand. 'You little bitch,' he said, 'you little bitch.' He took a small twopenny carton of cream out of his overcoat pocket and spilt it in his soap-dish. She stopped playing and rushed at him with a tiny cry. He picked her up by the scruff and put her on top of his chest of drawers with the cream. She wriggled from his hand, she was no larger than the rat he'd trained in the home, but softer. He scratched her behind the ear and she struck back at him in a preoccupied way. Her tongue quivered on the surface of the milk.

Dinner-time, he told himself. With all that money he could go anywhere. He could have a slap-up meal at Simpson's with the business men; cut off the joint and any number of veg.

When he got by the public call-box in the dark corner below the stairs he caught his name 'Raven'. The old man said, 'He always has a room here. He's been away.'

'You,' a strange voice said, 'what's your name – Alice – show me his room. Keep an eye on the door, Saunders.'

Raven went on his knees inside the telephone-box. He left the door ajar because he never liked to be shut in. He couldn't see out, but he had no need to see the owner of the voice to recognize: police, plain clothes, the Yard accent. The man was so near that the floor of the box vibrated to his tread. Then he came down again. 'There's no one there. He's taken his hat and coat. He must have gone out.'

'He might have,' the old man said. 'He's a soft-walking sort of fellow.'

The stranger began to question them. 'What's he like?'

The old man and the girl both said in a breath, 'A harelip.'

'That's useful,' the detective said. 'Don't touch his room. I'll be sending a man round to take his fingerprints. What sort of a fellow is he?'

Raven could hear every word. He couldn't imagine what they were after. He knew he'd left no clues; he wasn't a man who imagined things; he knew. He carried the picture of that room and flat in his brain as clearly as if he had the photographs. They had nothing against him. It had been against orders to keep the automatic, but he could feel it now safe under his armpit. Besides, if they had picked up any clue they'd have stopped him at Dover. He listened to the voices with a dull anger; he wanted his dinner; he hadn't had a square meal for twenty-four hours, and now with two hundred pounds in his pocket he could buy anything, anything.

'I can believe it,' the old man said. 'Why, tonight he even made fun of my poor wife's crib.'

'A bloody bully,' the girl said. 'I shan't be sorry when you've locked him up.'

He told himself with surprise: they hate me.

She said, 'He's ugly through and through. That lip of his. It gives you the creeps.'

'An ugly customer all right.'

'I wouldn't have him in the house,' the old man said. 'But he pays. You can't turn away someone who pays. Not in these days.'

'Has he friends?'

'You make me laugh,' Alice said. 'Him friends. What would he do with friends?'

He began to laugh quietly to himself on the floor of the little dark box: that's me

they're talking about, me: staring up at the pane of glass with his hand on his automatic.

'You seem kind of bitter? What's he been doing to you? He was going to give you a dress, wasn't he?'

'Just his dirty joke.'

'You were going to take it, though.'

'You bet I wasn't. Do you think I'd take a present from him? I was going to sell it back to them and show him the money, and wasn't I going to laugh?'

He thought again with bitter interest: they hate me. If they open this door, I'll shoot the lot.

'I'd like to take a swipe at that lip of his. I'd laugh. I'd say I'd laugh.'

'I'll put a man,' the strange voice said, 'across the road. Tip him the wink if our man comes in.' The café door closed.

'Oh,' the old man said, 'I wish my wife was here. She would not miss this for ten shillings.'

'I'll give her a ring,' Alice said. 'She'll be chatting at Mason's. She can come right over and bring Mrs Mason too. Let 'em all join in the fun. It was only a week ago Mrs Mason said she didn't want to see his ugly face in her shop again.'

'Yes, be a good girl, Alice. Give her a ring.'

Raven reached up his hand and took the bulb out of the fitment; he stood up and flattened himself against the wall of the box. Alice opened the door and shut herself in with him. He put his hand over her mouth before she had time to cry. He said, 'Don't you put the pennies in the box. I'll shoot if you do. I'll shoot if you call out. Do what I say.' He whispered in her ear. They were as close together as if they were in a single bed. He could feel her crooked shoulder pressed against his chest. He said, 'Lift the receiver. Pretend you're talking to the old woman. Go on. I don't care a damn if I shoot you. Say, hello, Frau Groener.'

'Hello, Frau Groener.'

'Spill the whole story.'

'They are after Raven.'

'Why?'

'That five-pound note. They were waiting at the shop.'

'What do you mean?'

'They'd got its number. It was stolen.'

He'd been double-crossed. His mind worked with mechanical accuracy like a ready-reckoner. You only had to supply it with the figures and it gave you the answer. He was possessed by a deep sullen rage. If Mr Cholmondeley had been in the box with him, he would have shot him: he wouldn't have cared a damn.

'Stolen from where?'

'You ought to know that.'

'Don't give me any lip. Where from?'

He didn't even know who Cholmondeley's employers were. It was obvious what had happened: they hadn't trusted him. They had arranged this so that he might be put away. A newsboy went by outside calling, 'Ultimatum. Ultimatum.' His mind registered the fact, but no more: it seemed to have nothing to do with him. He repeated. 'Where from?'