

Alfred Jones and the Party Perilous or Misunderstanding Mr Graham Greene

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What on earth is *Dr Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party* all about? Can it really be, as one reviewer believes, 'a bitter little parable about the subservience of the rich to riches; about the despair that deepens so much every day one lives, that death in the end seems to lose its point; about the ephemerality of happiness; and about the way in which a man may finally come to despise himself so much that life becomes intolerable for him'.¹ Seen like this, Graham Greene's story-parable – for it certainly cannot be considered an orthodox novel – is remarkably thin and – in many respects – uninformative. There is, for example, very little serious discussion of the attitude of wealthy people to money: that gradual debilitating disease of judgment and balance which leaves the victim convinced of imminent poverty, or the stealthy atrophy of every generous impulse. It is hard to find anything to do with money that could not have been more adequately examined in a normal domestic setting of the type found in Bennett or Galsworthy, or the opening chapters of *Sense and Sensibility*. Neither, I am sure, would it be useful to assume that Mr Greene constructed his parable with the object of indulging his well-known interest in Russian roulette – a version of which forms the prize-winning entertainment at the last of Dr Fischer's parties. There is a sense in which the explanations and commentaries do not seem to be able to account for the material, and yet given the brevity and apparent simplicity of the text this adds what can reasonably be regarded as a further curtain of bewilderment. What I hope to show – and obviously all such constructions must be extremely tentative – and at the same time, daringly presumptive, is that in *Dr Fischer of Geneva* we have a modern form of romance which yields a different reading if we can find the appropriate parallels to illuminate it.

Such material may perhaps be found in the myths which cluster around the story of Jason and the Argonauts (and involve a father, a daughter and an impoverished adventurer) and which Shakespeare adapted along with other half-understood mysteries such as the business of the caskets, in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Alfred Jones, Graham Greene's narrator, principal character and hard-up 'hero-adventurer', supplements his small private income by working as translator and correspondent at a chocolate factory in Vevey. His chance encounter in a snack bar with the young and very attractive daughter of a wealthy toothpaste manufacturer (Dr Fischer) leads to a short period of intense happiness – tragically curtailed when Anna-Luise is killed in a skiing accident. During the few months of the marriage and for a few months after his wife's death, Jones becomes involved in his father-in-law's bizarre dinner parties. The purpose of these parties is to enable Dr Fischer to see how much he can humiliate his rich, sycophantic 'friends' who have to comply with his instructions at table or risk the loss of some valuable trinket. Anna-Luise with childish precision had modified the word 'toadies' to the simpler and more concise expression, Toads, and it is this word which is always used to depict the collective entity of Dr Fischer's victims. In the end, following the Bomb party in the bonfire-illuminated garden on the snowy shores of Lake Geneva, Dr Fischer shoots himself and Jones is left at Vevey with his chocolate factory employment and his fading memories.

In the prosaic figure of Alfred Jones Mr Greene has obviously created a suitably disenchanting knight-errant for our time, a handless hero whose modern steed is a Fiat 500 and whose appurtenances include a small flat and bottle of whisky. From the first there is no mistaking Alfred Jones for anything other than a Greene protegee; he not only thinks of himself as a failure, but there is no doubt that in some senses, he actually *is* a failure. Compared with his father, Sir Frederick Jones – a career diplomat – Alfred Jones is obscurely employed and poorly paid, and in the hum-drum isolation of his existence retains little of his class position other than his pride and a convenient fluency in several languages. To add to his lack of worldly success there is the background tragedy that an earlier marriage ended with the death of wife and child in childbirth and that Jones lost his left hand in the London blitz. As far as friends and this world's chattels are concerned Jones is undeniably a failure, and remarkable only in the extent of his isolation from normal society. One has the feeling that such seclusion is deliberate and that the predicament is one which identifies Jones as a fitting candidate for peculiar honours. It is a posture akin to that of the traveller and seeker, of one who rides out alone on some perilous quest . . . although now the forest of the old Romances has become an industrial suburb – a chocolate factory – and the fastnesses of his social isolation are more a state of mind than terrestrial wildernesses.

Readers who are familiar with Dennis de Rougemont's *Passion*

and Society will be aware that one of the concomitants of the romantic quest is a thoroughly awkward impediment – preferably, in fact, a whole series of impediments – which must be surmounted, and that the ideal impediment is less a matter of external difficulty or danger, and more a question of some internal obstruction. The naked sword which lies between Tristram and Isolde when they are found by King Mark, asleep in the forest, is a stylised version of something more often apparent in terms of divisive class barriers, career ambitions, long separations and psychological inadequacies. Traditionally, of course, death, which by elevating love to the realm of the unattainable preserves it towards eternity, is seen as the only impediment potent enough to do full justice to romantic love. In its various forms the pattern can be followed from early anonymous works such as *Sir Orfeo* to more recently star-cross'd lovers in Elizabethan and Victorian literature. Graham Greene's story-parable obviously has all the difficulties necessary for a thoroughly romantic level of impediment; this is apparent some time before the author invokes the ultimate encouragement and Anna-Luise is interred in the Anglican Cemetery. One major difficulty – almost acquiring the status of an heraldic motif – is Alfred Jones' missing left hand. Dr Fischer loses no opportunity to exploit this mutilation; at their first meeting he asks Jones what is concealed by the glove; later, and the comment is not without ironic absurdity, he says he doubts whether a missing hand 'aids romance'. At the final party Dr Fischer somewhat curiously refers to Jones' 'deformed hand' and suggests that it may be necessary for the manservant to cut his meat for him. This rather odd device of a maimed hero seems to suggest more than the mere practicalities of such knightly activities as demolishing banquets and ladies and hints perhaps at some symbolic ritual wounding – some religious mutilation.

A further difficulty in the classic tradition of such things is Alfred Jones comparative poverty. Unlike Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* he has no wealthy friend to secure his acceptance in the golden circle at this modern Belmont.

I took a day off from work and drove down by the lake, but I very nearly turned back when I saw the extent of the grounds, the silver birches and the weeping willows and the great green cascade of the lawn in front of a pillared portico. A greyhound lay asleep like an heraldic emblem. I felt I should have gone to the tradesmen's entrance.

It is a far cry from the chocolate flavourings of commercial Vevey and when the Toads gather for the Porridge party it is at once obvious from the cut of Jones' suit and his Fiat that he does not belong by right of income. Another impediment a good deal more

interesting than the question of comparative poverty is the social stigma associated with Jones' unfortunate Christian name. Graham Greene underlines the awfulness.

Unfortunately for me my father combined diplomacy with the study of Anglo-Saxon history and, of course with my mother's consent, he gave me the name of Alfred, one of his heroes. (I believe she boggled at Aelfred). This Christian name, for some inexplicable reason, had become corrupted in the eyes of our middle-class world; it belonged exclusively now to the working classes and was usually abbreviated to Alf. Perhaps that was why Dr Fischer, the inventor of Dentophil Bouquet, never called me anything but Jones, even after I married his daughter. By itself such a Christian name is a useful impediment to romance (neither does Mr Greene tell us – any more than Jane Austen did in similarly awkward circumstances – what the lovers *do* actually call one another) and we cannot be unaware that in the old rituals, as in the older social conventions, it was vitally important to understand the nuances of meaning attached to someone's name. But if, in this particular context, 'Alfred' is primarily helpful in establishing Jones as a representative modern figure – suitably declassé, it is also likely that rather more is implied by the curious behaviour of Albert, Dr Fischer's truculent (English) manservant who makes a point of forgetting Jones' name entirely.

The distance between the ordinary circumstances of Jones' life and those of Dr Fischer's daughter is to be measured by the gap between not only their incomes, but their sources of income – Jones derives his modest salary from the Vevey chocolate factory which stands in complementary opposition to Dentophil Bouquet. The two products enjoy a mutual but opposed dependence. And as if all this were not quite enough to prepare us for that ultimate impediment there is yet another problem in the form of a very considerable age gap between the lovers. Alfred Jones is conscious of the ridiculousness of the position.

. . . a man with only one hand, who was well past fifty, who wrote letters all day about chocolate and who had induced a girl who wasn't yet twenty-one to live with him: not a legal crime of course . . .

Turning our attention to Anna-Luise, that lovely embodiment of the romantic quest, we find a girl whose attributes are very largely those of the many goddesses who have unfailingly inspired men's devotion. Not only is she beautiful and independent, but she walks alone untrammelled by family or society. She is mysterious to the point of being inexplicable, and of course she is utterly pagan.² When they attend Midnight Mass at the old abbey at St Maurice Anna-Luise remarks that she doesn't believe in 'all this

Christmas business' – although she would like to, and when she is dead Jones finds he does not know anything about such unimportant details as the church of her baptism and so arranges for her to be buried in the cemetery belonging to the Anglican Church because whereas the Swiss Protestants take their religion seriously, the Anglican burial ground 'seemed closer to our agnostic views'. There is also a sense in which Anna-Luise has much of the immortality of her predecessors, age will not weary her, and in her eternal youth she resembles the archetypal maiden-mother. In particular she is virtually the living reincarnation of her unhappy mother and all her memories, loyalties and upbringing have been centred on this woman. She too will follow her mother to an early grave. So extremely close is the identification that when old Mr Steiner (her mother's music-loving companion) suddenly catches sight of her in the music shop he is not only struck speechless, but very shortly afterwards suffers a severe heart attack.³ His subsequent existence parallels that of Jones in the kind of limbo reserved for wraith-like lovers who must remain for ever suspended between life and death – 'alone and palely loitering'. The resemblance between Anna-Luise and such similar enchantresses as Medea, Ariadne and Portia can be further traced in the way that just as her mother 'betrayed' Dr Fischer with Steiner, so the daughter in a sense again 'betrayed' her father with Jones, although on this occasion the betrayal took place less in terms of sexual encounter and more as the revelation of Dr Fischer's private humiliation – his wife's infidelity.⁴ (Fischer warns Jones that in due course she will prove unfaithful to him too). At the same time Anna-Luise warned her lover of the secret sign of danger and did her best to persuade him not to go near any of her father's parties. Seen retrospectively there is a sense in which the mother-maiden can be said to have destroyed her lovers just as uncompromisingly as she destroyed the father. (It is useful to see that on more than one occasion Jones is very clearly identified with the father figure, if not with Dr Fischer himself – at least once he tells Anna-Luise that he could be her father and adds the unspoken thought that he was perhaps 'a substitute for the father she didn't love and that I owed my success to Doctor Fischer'.)

If Anna-Luise is the physical embodiment of passion she is also firmly associated with the projection of passion into its proper environment – the limitlessness of death. Death is her true colouring and she wears it as easily as a 'different kind of sweater'. What had once been white is now red: it is just as easy as that. Naturally there is a sense that death has come as something anticipated, 'I'm a good skier but there are always accidents' – almost, indeed, as a matter of choice.

Well, as far as we can make out, there was a boy who fell up there and sprained his ankle. he shouldn't have been up on the *piste rouge* – he should have been on the *piste bleu*. She came over a rise and she hadn't much time to avoid him. She would have been all right probably if she had swung right, but I suppose she had not much time to think. She swung left towards the trees – you know the *piste* – but the snow is hard and tricky after the thaw and the freeze and she went right into a tree at top speed.

Again Anna-Luise's association with death is evident during the final party when the guests are invited to pull crackers that may contain a substantial cheque or, if they are less fortunate, a lethal explosive charge. Jones seizes the opportunity to regain his beloved and feels her presence beside him as he chooses the cracker which he believes must contain the explosive.

. . . why was it that as long as I held the cracker in my hand I felt the closeness of Anna-Luise? Anna-Luise was dead. She could only continue to exist somewhere if God existed. I put one end of the protruding paper tape between my teeth and I pulled with the other end. There was a feeble crack, and I felt as though Anna-Luise had withdrawn her hand from mine and walked away, between the bonfires, down towards the lake to die a second time.

At the same time this failure to die and so reunite himself with the object of his passion may not be the only, or the more important defeat.

One of the very minor characters whom we have briefly noticed already, is Albert, Dr Fischer's composite butler, man-servant and hall porter. This odd character goes through the almost ritual pantomime of forgetting – or pretending to forget – Jones' name, and even on one occasion, squaring up to him with dire threats about what will happen if he is gate-crashing. No one can doubt that Albert would more than earn his keep as custodian of the perilous castle or that his unsociable disposition would not entirely fit him for the role of the porter at the barred gate. Then, suddenly, mysteriously, he changes and is transformed into a model of courtesy and respect. At first we are inclined to think that this apparently inexplicable change has something to do with sympathy for Jones following his wife's death, but Anna-Luise had specifically warned her lover that Albert was not an old family servant and had only been engaged by her father after her mother's death. If Albert is part of Dr Fischer's new arrangements and his attempt to forget the past, it becomes considerably less likely that Albert's improved behaviour is a matter of natural sympathy and far more probable that he is either acting on instructions or

that some other factor is influencing his performance. One such explanation might be that Albert is beginning to consider that Jones has some *right* to join the society of the Toads, and this would also suggest that in some way or other Jones has descended to a Toad level. And clearly, in at least one direction there has been a very obvious failure: Jones is still very much alive, and nothing more patently reflects failure in the pursuit of passion than to continue living. It is a failure most apparent in the episode when Jones sits in his flat and realizes that his first attempt to kill himself with aspirins in half a pint of spirits, 'the elixir of death in the glass' has failed. But this may not be all. If we look at other models we find that there is frequently a form of concealed test which takes place at a time when no one is expecting it and when the princess or the fleece has already been won. Such of course is the test of true love invoked by Portia when she asks Bassanio to weigh his obligation to the learned doctor for having saved his dear friend against his promise to his wife. On the face of it Mr Greene's story-parable postulates a test in which Jones is offered a valuable trinket in return for the minor humiliation of eating cold porridge – it is this rather silly business which the greed of the rich induces the Toads to fail, that 'subservience of the rich to riches' but which presents no difficulty at all to Jones. He comes armed from head to heel, not only with a poor man's pride – enhanced by the residual consciousness of English class position – but strong in the delight of possessing in Dr Fischer's daughter a far more valuable prize. The reader watches Jones' triumph with a cheerful sense of vindicated rectitude. We are confident that we too should behave like Jones. Unfortunately, as Sir Gawaine once discovered, tests are not always quite so transparent, and the temptation to sell one's pride for a gold watch no more the real test than choosing a cracker when Anna-Luise is dead.

Yet Mr Greene has not entirely misled us, for just as in Dr Fischer's parties the Toads were tested in terms of humiliation, 'his bet on their greed against their humiliation', so in the real test there is also some question of humiliation, but it is no longer a test to see whether the Toads will bring shame on themselves because they are so pathologically greedy. Instead there is the very different matter whether Jones will seek to humiliate his father-in-law. The issue is set out in a dialogue which reappears in several different forms and is evidently of central importance.

'I have no friends,' he said in the words of his servant Albert. He added, 'These people are acquaintances. One can't avoid acquaintances. You mustn't think I dislike such people. I don't dislike them. One dislikes one's equals. I despise them.'
'Like I despise you?'

'Oh, but you don't, Jones, you don't. You are not speaking accurately. You don't despise me. You hate me or think you do.'

'I know I do.'

He gave at that assurance the little smile which Anna-Luise had told me was dangerous. It was a smile of infinite indifference. It is interesting to notice that Jones had in fact been given a clue by Anna-Luise. They had their only serious disagreement about his intention to visit her father with news of their marriage and she had made a point of warning him that the situation would be most dangerous when – or if – her father smiled. When this actually happens Jones is far too preoccupied with his self-righteous anger to interpret the signal correctly. As is so often the way in such tales everything hinges on a mistaken identification; Jones fails to recognise the true nature of his danger, fails to see that no one entirely escapes humiliation and that no one is justified in reaching for a stone. An important pointer to this failure occurs about half way through the book when Jones dreams vividly about the funeral of Anna-Luise's mother – a funeral which, of course, he had not attended. He tells his wife that in his dream he had watched her father weeping beside the open grave.

He was dressed in a dark suit and he stood beside an open grave. I watched him from the other side of the hole and I called out to him in a tone of mockery, 'Who are you burying Doctor? Is it your Dentophil Bouquet that did it?' He raised his eyes and looked at me. He was weeping and I felt the deep reproach of his tears.

Whether or not Dr Fischer actually wept – Steiner says he did, Anna-Luise that he did not (but she was wrong about her mother's relationship with Steiner) – is not very important. What matters is that Jones dreamt he saw him weeping and saw the reproach in his eyes. And when, after this dream, after this verification of the heart, Jones – in the hope of humiliating Dr Fischer still more than he is already humiliated – persists in assuring the doctor that he despises him, he utterly fails to see that he is adopting his father-in-law's most profoundly evil characteristic. In large measure he is taking over the persona of the man he professes to loathe.

After this it is not entirely surprising that when Death makes a second and somewhat overdue appearance it is Dr Fischer whom she rescues. (Following the Bomb Party and his brief moments of conversation with Jones and Steiner, Dr Fischer had walked off alone along the snowy lake shore and shot himself through the head.) But although Mr Greene has warned us that people don't die for love except in novels, this is not exactly what we had been hoping for. The problem is that the lines have become twisted and

that what commences as a romantic pagan sketch appears to be developing into an embryo Christian parable. Graham Greene nudges us towards the difference when he makes Dr Fischer lift a cracker at the commencement of the final party.

He raised the Christmas cracker rather as the priest at Midnight Mass had raised the Host, as though he intended to make a statement of grave importance to a disciple – ‘this is my body’.

He repeated: ‘I want . . .’ and lowered the cracker again.

And if the identification is still obscure it is further confounded by Steiner’s insistence that he will spit at Dr Fischer and by Mr Greene’s choice of words in showing Steiner. Fischer and Jones standing in the fading glow of the great bonfires.

It was as though we were all waiting for something to happen, but not one of us knew what it would be: a jeer, a blow, a simple turning away.

The reverberations of such language are unmistakable. Then, quite suddenly there is a further twist and Steiner who has been most adamant for spitting and hatred tells Jones that he pities Dr Fischer. It is all rather curious and not least because, in the event, it is Dr Fischer who having asked Steiner and Jones whether they are sure he wants to live, turns the question back to them and supplies his own answer, ‘Yes, perhaps you do.’ And, of course, Dr Fischer is correct – for long after Fischer’s death Jones is still writing letters at the chocolate factory in Vevey and meeting Steiner for coffee. For Jones Death has become a supreme irrelevance; as he himself says, ‘There was no longer any reason to follow Anna-Luise if it was only into nothingness.’

Although as art this is the only satisfactory ending, there remains an irritating sense of unfinished business. Fathers may die if they please, but lovers, we protest, should know better than to abandon the romantic quest merely because a cracker will not explode or some other such trumpery reason. Above all authors should be obliged to sign an undertaking not to confuse their public by sullyng Pagan Romance with Christian verities.

- 1 Spectator review by Francis King.
- 2 If the recent publication by Debrett on modern manners and etiquette is reasonably authoritative the fact that Anna-Luise sleeps with Jones prior to their civil marriage is probably not significant.
- 3 Page 70: In the car Anna-Luise said, ‘He spoke to me. He knew my name.’
‘He said Anna not Anna-Luise. He knew your mother’s name.’
- 4 Page 103: ‘My wife in one case. My daughter in the other.’