

THE MINISTRY OF FEAR

AN ENTERTAINMENT



Grahame Greene

Introduction by

RICHARD GREENE



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Introduction

Spies, fugitives, double-agents, traitors, informers: Graham Greene seemed to carry these stock characters of fiction inside his skin. His imagination endowed them with moral urgency. He found in the plots of the common thriller, its concealments and duplicities, the elements of a more universal tale. His characters become the agents of the divided heart and their yearning for safety, escape, refuge, becomes a fable of the modern world.

Graham Greene's childhood would have divided any heart. Born in 1904, he was the son of a master (later headmaster) of Berkhamsted School in Hertfordshire. After a quiet childhood, he was sent at the age of thirteen to live as a boarder in the school. This placed him on the other side of a symbolic green baize door which separated the family quarters from the school. The other boys assumed he was a Judas, reporting to his father all that happened in the dormitory. Two of his friends subjected him to elaborate mental cruelties, which he recalled as torture.

Greene fell apart, made attempts at suicide, and eventually ran away to Berkhamsted Common, intending to become, as he wrote in his autobiography, *A Sort of Life* (1971), 'an invisible watcher, a spy on all that went on'. His parents brought him back into the family quarters, but he was never the same. In a family with a devastating history of mental illness, he showed signs of depression and instability. Taking the advice of another son, Raymond, then in

training to be a physician, Greene's parents sent him to London in 1920 for a six-month course of psychoanalysis. His therapist belonged to no particular school, but seems to have done some good by urging the young Greene to record his dreams and to get on with his writing.

What lay undiagnosed for many years was bipolar illness or manic depression. Throughout his life he was profoundly restless and bored. His ill-advised marriage to Vivien Dayrell-Browning in 1927, was undertaken impulsively, and was gradually undermined by his promiscuity, a common feature of the disease. To marry Vivien, he converted to her Roman Catholic faith, a difficult commitment that led to his best known novels *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and *The End of the Affair* (1951). Trapped in what Catholics understood to be mortal sin, he sensed Hell just beyond the surfaces of ordinary life.

In the early days of World War II, Greene's wife and their two children were evacuated to Oxford, while he worked in the Ministry of Information and as a fire-warden during the Blitz. His house in Clapham Common was destroyed by a landmine (a parachute-bomb) while he was staying with his mistress at a studio in Gower Mews, which was itself later bombed. As a fire-warden, he witnessed terrible destruction in Bloomsbury. On 16 April 1941, he was among the rescuers when a bomb struck a building in Malet Street where 350 Canadian airmen were billeted. On that particular night of stretchers, corpses and flying glass, Gower Street was hit repeatedly and Greene himself was lucky to escape with just a wounded hand.

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That summer, Greene's sister Elisabeth recruited him to MI6, and after a period of training, he was sent to Freetown, Sierra Leone, with orders to inspect cargo ships and keep an eye on Vichy forces in neighbouring French Guinea. Here, in a little two-storey house in the midst of a swamp which local people used as a latrine, Greene finished a new thriller, *The Ministry of Fear*, which was published in May 1943. Since he could not be sure of surviving the war, he wanted to write a book that would be popular and turn in some money for his wife and children.

He had already produced three successful thrillers. Another book, *Brighton Rock*, began as an 'entertainment' but changed utterly in the writing – it became a dark study of the unrepentant soul. So too, *The Ministry of Fear* took on unexpected resonance: a tightly constructed tale of spies, it grew into a mysterious autobiographical fantasy. For example, it is hard not to see the private mental hospital to which the hero Arthur Rowe (or Digby) is consigned as a version of Berkhamsted School, in which the patients live in a dormitory watched over by the equivalent of a prefect, while the doctor lives, as a headmaster might, on the other side of a green baize door.

The unemployed journalist Arthur Rowe is an unlikely hero for a spy novel. A prototype of Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* he is ruled by pity. He feels responsible for all the sorrow he perceives. He accepts the risk of being hanged when he puts his desperately ill wife out of her misery. Greene was himself guilt-ridden over how marriage to him had transformed Vivien from a spirited young woman into someone tired, pretentious and needy. Repeatedly in his novels from this time, he writes of how identity is formed

by suffering and shown in the lines of a face. He was thinking of Vivien, for whose misery he had no answer – except possibly his own suicide.

Rowe's problems were, in a way, simpler than Greene's. The novel begins with a man whose memory is dominated by that one paradoxical act of mercy killing. Having been released from an asylum, to which a sympathetic court sentenced him, he yearns for the lost pleasures of childhood, the world before memory. He is drawn to a church fête in Bloomsbury, and stumbles into a spy operation. He wins a cake that is actually meant to convey microfilm to a German spy. It seems a trivial point for a novel to turn on, but this cake is the essence of childish pleasure, and he is assured that it is made with 'real eggs'. Authenticity is what treason tastes like.

In a straightforward sense, the novel is about hope, memory, loss and wholeness. Throughout are references to Charlotte M. Young's popular children's story *The Little Duke* (1854), in which a boy succeeds his father as Duke of Normandy and survives the malice of the King of France on the way to becoming a wise and fearless ruler. This was how an Edwardian child, like Graham Greene, would have learned to think of adult life. One would mature into happiness and virtue – an expectation that is savaged in the *The Ministry of Fear*.

Greene mined his youthful reading in other ways, especially the novels of William Le Queux, who, according to the official history of MI5, managed to whip up a spy mania in the years just before the First World War. Among his more fantastic claims was that Germans were equipped with state-of-the-art technology, such as exploding Christmas crackers.

CHAPTER 1

The Free Mothers

None passes without warrant.

The Little Duke

1

There was something about a fête which drew Arthur Rowe irresistibly, bound him a helpless victim to the distant blare of a band and the knock-knock of wooden balls against coconuts. Of course this year there were no coconuts because there was a war on: you could tell that too from the untidy gaps between the Bloomsbury houses – a flat fireplace halfway up a wall, like the painted fireplace in a cheap dolls' house, and lots of mirrors and green wallpapers, and from round a corner of the sunny afternoon the sound of glass being swept up, like the lazy noise of the sea on a shingled beach. Otherwise the square was doing its very best with the flags of the free nations and a mass of bunting which had obviously been preserved by somebody ever since the Jubilee.

Arthur Rowe looked wistfully over the railings – there were still railings. The fête called him like innocence: it was entangled in childhood, with vicarage gardens and girls in white summer frocks and the smell of herbaceous borders and security. He had no inclination to mock at these elaborately naïve ways of making money for a cause. There was the inevitable clergyman presiding over a rather timid

game of chance; an old lady in a print dress that came down to her ankles and a floppy garden hat hovered officially, but with excitement, over a treasure-hunt (a little plot of ground like a child's garden was staked out with claims), and as the evening darkened – they would have to close early because of the blackout – there would be some energetic work with trowels. And there in a corner, under a plane tree, was the fortune-teller's booth – unless it was an impromptu outside lavatory. It all seemed perfect in the late summer Sunday afternoon. 'My peace I give unto you. Not as the world knoweth peace . . .' Arthur Rowe's eyes filled with tears, as the small military band they had somehow managed to borrow struck up again a faded song of the last war: *Whate'er befall I'll oft recall that sunlit mountainside.*

Pacing round the railings he came towards his doom: pennies were rattling down a curved slope on to a chequer-board – not very many pennies. The fête was ill-attended; there were only three stalls and people avoided those. If they had to spend money they would rather try for a dividend – of pennies from the chequer-board or savings-stamps from the treasure-hunt. Arthur Rowe came along the railings, hesitantly, like an intruder, or an exile who has returned home after many years and is uncertain of his welcome.

He was a tall stooping lean man with black hair going grey and a sharp narrow face, nose a little twisted out of the straight and a too sensitive mouth. His clothes were good but gave the impression of being uncared for; you would have said a bachelor if it had not been for an indefinable married look . . .

'The charge,' said the middle-aged lady at the gate,

'is a shilling, but that doesn't seem quite fair. If you wait another five minutes you can come in at the reduced rate. I always feel it's only right to warn people when it gets as late as this.'

'It's very thoughtful of you.'

'We don't want people to feel cheated – even in a good cause, do we?'

'I don't think I'll wait, all the same. I'll come straight in. What exactly is the cause?'

'Comforts for free mothers – I mean mothers of the free nations.'

Arthur Rowe stepped joyfully back into adolescence, into childhood. There had always been a fête about this time of the year in the vicarage garden, a little way off the Trumpington Road, with the flat Cambridgeshire fields beyond the extemporised bandstand, and at the end of the fields the pollarded willows by the stickleback stream and the chalk-pit on the slopes of what in Cambridgeshire they call a hill. He came to these fêtes every year with an odd feeling of excitement – as if anything might happen, as if the familiar pattern of life that afternoon might be altered for ever. The band beat in the warm late sunlight, the brass quivered like haze, and the faces of strange young women would get mixed up with Mrs Troup, who kept the general store and post office, Miss Savage the Sunday School teacher, the publicans' and the clergy's wives. When he was a child he would follow his mother round the stalls – the baby clothes, the pink woollies, the art pottery, and always last and best the white elephants. It was always as though there might be discovered on the white-elephant stall some magic ring which would give three wishes or the heart's desire, but the odd

thing was that when he went home that night with only a second-hand copy of *The Little Duke*, by Charlotte M. Yonge, or an out-of-date atlas advertising Mazawattee tea, he felt no disappointment: he carried with him the sound of brass, the sense of glory, of a future that would be braver than today. In adolescence the excitement had a different source; he imagined he might find at the vicarage some girl whom he had never seen before, and courage would touch his tongue, and in the late evening there would be dancing on the lawn and the smell of stocks. But because these dreams had never come true there remained the sense of innocence . . .

And the sense of excitement. He couldn't believe that when he had passed the gate and reached the grass under the plane trees nothing would happen, though now it wasn't a girl he wanted or a magic ring, but something far less likely – to mislay the events of twenty years. His heart beat and the band played, and inside the lean experienced skull lay childhood.

'Come and try your luck, sir?' said the clergyman in a voice which was obviously baritone at socials.

'If I could have some coppers.'

'Thirteen for a shilling, sir.'

Arthur Rowe slid the pennies one after the other down the little inclined groove and watched them stagger on the board.

'Not your lucky day, sir, I'm afraid. What about another shilling's-worth? Another little flutter in a good cause?'

'I think perhaps I'll flutter farther on.' His mother, he remembered, had always fluttered farther on, carefully dividing her patronage in equal parts, though she left the coconuts and the gambling to the children.

At some stalls it had been very difficult to find anything at all, even to give away to the servants.

Under a little awning there was a cake on a stand surrounded by a small group of enthusiastic sight-seers. A lady was explaining, 'We clubbed our butter rations – and Mr Tatham was able to get hold of the currants.'

She turned to Arthur Rowe and said, 'Won't you take a ticket and guess its weight?'

He lifted it and said at random, 'Three pounds five ounces.'

'A very good guess, I should say. Your wife must have been teaching you.'

He winced away from the group. 'Oh no, I'm not married.'

War had made the stall-holders' task extraordinarily difficult: second-hand Penguins for the Forces filled most of one stall, while another was sprinkled rather than filled with the strangest second-hand clothes – the cast-offs of old age – long petticoats with pockets, high lacy collars with bone supports, routed out of Edwardian drawers and discarded at last for the sake of the free mothers, and corsets that clanked. Baby clothes played only a very small part now that wool was rationed and the second-hand was so much in demand among friends. The third stall was the traditional one – the white elephant – though black might have described it better since many Anglo-Indian families had surrendered their collections of ebony elephants. There were also brass ashtrays, embroidered match-cases which had not held matches now for a very long time, books too shabby for the bookstall, two postcard albums, a complete set of Dickens cigarette-cards, an electro-plated egg-boiler,

a long pink cigarette-holder, several embossed boxes for pins from Benares, a signed postcard of Mrs Winston Churchill, and a plateful of mixed foreign copper coins . . . Arthur Rowe turned over the books and found with an ache of the heart a dingy copy of *The Little Duke*. He paid sixpence for it and walked on. There was something threatening, it seemed to him, in the very perfection of the day. Between the plane trees which shaded the treasure-ground he could see the ruined section of the square; it was as if Providence had led him to exactly this point to indicate the difference between then and now. These people might have been playing a part in an expensive morality for his sole benefit . . .

He couldn't, of course, not take part in the treasure-hunt, though it was a sad declension to know the nature of the prize, and afterwards there remained nothing of consequence but the fortune-teller – it was a fortune-teller's booth and not a lavatory. A curtain made of a cloth brought home by somebody from Algiers dangled at the entrance. A lady caught his arm and said, 'You must. You really must. Mrs Bellairs is quite wonderful. She told my son . . .' and clutching another middle-aged lady as she went by, she went breathlessly on, 'I was just telling this gentleman about wonderful Mrs Bellairs and my son.'

'Your younger son?'

'Yes. Jack.'

The interruption enabled Rowe to escape. The sun was going down: the square garden was emptying: it was nearly time to dig up the treasure and make tracks, before darkness and blackout and siren-time. So many fortunes one had listened to, behind a

country hedge, over the cards in a liner's saloon, but the fascination remained even when the fortune was cast by an amateur at a garden fête. Always, for a little while, one could half-believe in the journey overseas, in the strange dark woman, and the letter with good news. Once somebody had refused to tell his fortune at all – it was just an act, of course, put on to impress him – and yet that silence had really come closer to the truth than anything else.

He lifted the curtain and felt his way in.

It was very dark inside the tent and he could hardly distinguish Mrs Bellairs, a bulky figure shrouded in what looked like cast-off widow's weeds – or perhaps it was some kind of peasant's costume. He was unprepared for Mrs Bellairs's deep powerful voice: a convincing voice. He had expected the wavering tones of a lady whose other hobby was watercolours.

'Sit down, please, and cross my hand with silver.'

'It's so dark.'

But now he could just manage to make her out: it was a peasant's costume with a big head-dress and a veil of some kind tucked back over her shoulder. He found a half-crown and sketched a cross upon her palm.

'Your hand.'

He held it out and felt it gripped firmly as though she intended to convey: expect no mercy. A tiny electric night-light was reflected down on the girdle of Venus, the little crosses which should have meant children, the long, long line of life . . .

He said, 'You're up-to-date. The electric nightlight, I mean.'

She paid no attention to his flippancy. She said, 'First the character, then the past: by law I am

not allowed to tell the future. You're a man of determination and imagination and you are very sensitive – to pain, but you sometimes feel you have not been allowed a proper scope for your gifts. You want to do great deeds, not dream them all day long. Never mind. After all, you have made one woman happy.'

He tried to take his hand away, but she held it too firmly: it would have been a tug of war. She said, 'You have found the true contentment in a happy marriage. Try to be more patient, though. Now I will tell you your past.'

He said quickly, 'Don't tell me the past. Tell me the future.'

It was as if he had pressed a button and stopped a machine. The silence was odd and unexpected. He hadn't hoped to silence her, though he dreaded what she might say, for even inaccuracies about things which are dead can be as painful as the truth. He pulled his hand again and it came away. He felt awkward sitting there with his hand his own again.

Mrs Bellairs said, 'My instructions are these. What you want is the cake. You must give the weight as four pounds eight and a half ounces.'

'Is that the right weight?'

'That's immaterial.'

He was thinking hard and staring at Mrs Bellairs's left hand which the light caught: a square ugly palm with short blunt fingers prickly with big art-and-crafty rings of silver and lumps of stone. Who had given her instructions? Did she refer to her familiar spirits? And if so, why had she chosen him to win the cake? or was it really just a guess of her own? Perhaps she was backing a great number of weights, he thought,

Director: Fritz Lang. Starring: Stephen Neale, Carla Hilfe, Willi Hilfe and others. Suffused with dread and paranoia, this Fritz Lang adaptation of a novel by Graham Greene is a plunge into the eerie shadows of a world turned upside down by war. En route to London after being released from a mental institution, Stephen Neale (Ray Milland) stops at a seemingly innocent village fair, after which he finds himself caught in the web of a sinister underworld with possible Nazi connections. Lang was among the most illustrious of the European émigré filmmakers working in Hollywood during World War II, Ministry of Fear. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. Ministry of Fear is a 1944 film noir crime film directed by Fritz Lang. Based on a novel by Graham Greene, the film tells the story of a man just released from a mental asylum who finds himself caught up in an international spy ring and pursued by foreign agents after inadvertently receiving something they want. The original music for the film was composed by Miklós Rózsa and Victor Young. Share this Rating. Title: Ministry of Fear (1944). 7,2/10. Want to share IMDb's rating on your own site? Still a very good espionage thriller of the old school with a title that reaches out and grabs you to make you want to see what the "Ministry of Fear" is all about. 42 of 46 people found this review helpful. Was this review helpful to you? Ministry of Fear is a 1944 American film noir crime film directed by Fritz Lang. Based on the 1943 novel by Graham Greene, the film tells the story of a man just released from a mental asylum who finds himself caught up in an international spy ring and pursued by Nazi agents after inadvertently receiving something they want. The original music for the film was composed by Victor Young. It was exactly the mood evoked by the first chapter of Graham Greene's The Ministry of Fear. At the start of Greene's book, Arthur Rowe goes to a charity fête in the middle of the London Blitz. A fortune teller tips him off to win the Guess-The-Weight-Of-The-Cake competition. Then someone tries to kill him. It is a mixture of surreal threat and the reassuringly familiar. About thirty family and friends were involved in our seaside holiday, and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. The awful state of the world probably heightened the pleasure of being together, rather than spoiling it.