
INTERLUDE WITH THE LEHRS

No Surrender in *The Power and the Glory*

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The *Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene describes the wanderings of an unnamed Catholic priest on the run in a persecuted part of Mexico during the late 1930s. The novel is based on Greene's own travel book, titled *The Lawless Roads*, in which we find descriptions of the author's observations as he travels across Mexico in 1938. Fiction in the novel and fact in the travel account parallel each other in various ways and many are the affinities of character, incident and place. For this reason, *The Power and the Glory* has a special relation to reality, for not only are the fictional characters and events treated as if they actually happened but there is an aesthetic narrative quality of telling the truth about it all.

Greene's story of a fugitive priest contains unforgettable descriptions of encounters with people of all sorts. *The Power and the Glory* has, in truth, often been described as a book of encounters. It begins with the episode of the priest's meeting with Mr. Tench, the dentist. We then read of the priest being given shelter and food by the twelve-year-old daughter of Captain Fellows. The next encounter of the priest is with his 'woman' in the native village where his illegitimate daughter also lives. Driven on by the hot pursuit of the police on his trail, the priest has now to tolerate the company of a half-caste who is determined to betray him to the authorities. Arrested on a charge of being drunk (the state of Tabasco prohibits liquor) the priest spends some time in jail and is sent into a communal cell where he naturally meets various types of people. Once released, the priest now seeks to obtain freedom across the border and he is in fact given refuge in the comfortable home of Mr. Lehr and his sister. And so it goes on. In the end, the persecuted priest is recognized by the police lieutenant, arrested and taken to the capital city to be executed.

The major encounters of the novel are undoubtedly those between the whisky priest and the police lieutenant. Both men are engaged on

special missions. The religious man is intent on saving souls while the secular man is committed to ending social injustice. Other encounters, of course, take place and we will do well to consider one of these; namely, the arrival of the runaway priest at the house of the two German-Americans, Mr. Lehr and his sister.

Before we do this, however, we will examine in some detail the nature and the quality of the whisky priest's wanderings. After all, it is this need to trek over swamps and through forests that brings about so many encounters with men, women and children of different origins. One reason for the priest's constant movement is, of course, his position as an outlaw of the land. In the persecuted state of Tabasco, priests are wanted men and the whole energy of the police and military authorities is concentrated on capturing the last remaining priest in the region.

On account of just this, the priest can find no refuge or rest. He is on the run. And if he is not to be captured, he must keep on running; few are the occasions when he can actually remain in hiding for long. The thrill of the chase, over ground that is trackless, mountainous or wooded, is a major attraction of the book. Of course, there is more to the book than just the thrill of adventure and pursuit. The wanderings of the priest have an inner as much as an external cause. The scandalous whisky priest is being hounded by God as much as he is being pursued by the police lieutenant. God and the Church require the priest to be more worthy of his sacred vocation. The whisky priest is himself aware of how inadequate he is in the qualities of a good priest or even of a good man. By his own admission, he has not really *chosen* to remain in the persecuted state. Circumstances seem to have forced him to do so. Moreover, his life as a Catholic priest is full of surrenders.

The years behind him were littered with surrenders — feast days and days of abstinence had been the first to go. Then he had ceased to trouble, more than occasionally, about his breviary . . . Then the altar stone went too.

The very goodness of the priest's actions in administering the Sacraments and generally helping the peasants is a reflection of his grievous sin as he is living in sacrilege. To most readers the priest is hardly an exemplary representative of the Faith. We are likely to see him as a mockery of the Church he serves. And yet, in spite of serious failings in the man of God, we cannot help admiring him for his special kind of service to God.

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Before most men and women, the unnamed whisky priest is rotten. He has let his side down and is a disgrace to the Church and its faithful members. When he is locked in the prison cell together with a score of other people, the pious woman in jail finds it right to scold the priest for not doing his duty by rebuking the shameless lovers in the dark recess of the cell. Being the only priest for hundreds of miles around seems to make him sinfully proud in thinking he can make up his own rules and neglect his formal training in devotion and piety. And yet, for all his doubts and shortcomings, the priest has one saving quality. He never doubts his duty to carry out, unworthy that he is, the work of God's love among the unfortunate poor. Circumstances may have constrained him to remain but after ten years of persecution he is not ready to surrender. He would stay another week, another month, another year. The insistence in the novel is on fidelity towards the people.

Here then we have a recurring theme of Greene's writing. For most of his career, Greene has been forwarding the idea that it is not the regular and unblemished members of the Church (or of the State) who are great human beings. It is rather the doubters and the failures of secular and religious organizations that are worthy of our sympathy. Greene admires those who are prepared to confront the issues of life's experiences. That is why he is in sympathy with both the priest and the lieutenant. Each in his own way, the priest and the lieutenant are guilty of wicked deeds. But they have not stood aside from the needs of ordinary people around them.

The Power and the Glory is a novel in which the moral issues of evil, doubt and spiritual misery are successfully clothed in the realistic adventures of a man on the run from the police. The intriguing theme of pursuit by the police is linked to the metaphysical theme of God's pursuit of man. This double pursuit increases the adventurous turmoil of the novel's writing. Action is in the foreground and not merely there to keep ideas moving. The real Greene always has action first and in *The Power and the Glory* action is marvellously set against an authentic

geographical background.

Spiritually, the priest is being tested for Christian virtue by having his soul hounded by the grace of God. Is he worthy of his priestly vocation? Can he continue to live in sacrilege and be saved? Being the only priest for hundreds of miles around, he can afford to neglect certain duties and obligations but he is in this way putting his soul in peril. On a more immediate level, the priest is being pursued by worldly forces that are after his blood. It is far from being a glamorous chase of easy thrills and lucky escapes. The manhunt for the whisky priest is enacted on very inhospitable territory.

Not only is there an atmosphere of moral and religious persecution but the terrain over which peasants and gentry have to travel is a torture in itself. Being a runaway, the priest has to travel from one parish to another on foot or on mule. (There are hardly any roads in Tabasco). This constant need to keep on moving brings the priest in contact with different kinds of people so that the encounters we mentioned earlier become part of an elaborate design that has its climax in the arrival of a *new* priest to continue the Church's mission.

Until the arrival of this newcomer, the whisky priest has been the only Catholic priest in the country. And he is far from being an example to others, depending as he does on alcohol and often experiencing abject fear. Indeed, when the priest is first arrested it is not because he is recognized as a Catholic priest (there is a price on his head); it is because he is drunk and carrying liquor. Hardly a triumph to the priest who aspires to glorious martyrdom under persecution and hardly a victory to his captors who have launched a persecution precisely to disgrace the Church.

The arrest of the priest does not last long and he is released. The journey across swamp and forest must continue. The land is rugged, directionless and full of rough tracks. To travel over such ground is to risk danger and harm. Is there any meaning in it? Yes, there is. To wander over this "wasteland" is to fulfil an adventure of discovery. Not a discovery of exotic sights or of forgotten places. It is a discovery of humanity in circumstances that are hardly flattering to the human condition. For instance, the priest's stay in the communal prison cell is most revealing. The priest learns that in such miserable conditions it is not only possible but easy to love people.

The episodic nature of the book suggests the method by which the priest is able to meet different people. At the same time, it is the method by which he is put under test. At the end of Part Two,

Chapter Four, the priest, having wandered for many days (and presumably crossed the border) comes to a safe village which still has its church building standing and neatly whitewashed. After enduring ten years of religious persecution, it looks as if the priest will now have his reward and be able to settle down in a normal parish. Once, in pre-persecution days, the priest had enjoyed the fame and the authority of an ordered parish life. Perhaps this time there will be a return to that kind of life. It is a good point in the novel to begin the next part of the story.

Part Three shows the whisky priest being hosted by the good Protestant pair, Mr. Lehr and his sister. All comforts are available to the weary priest. The Lehrs lack little in ordinary decent living. They do not even have to boil their drinking water, a precaution that is imperative in other towns and villages. Surrounded and sheltered by this shell of civilization, the whisky priest begins to feel the excess of luxury. When he gets up to drink, it is not because he is thirsty but merely to satisfy a sense of luxury. Still more morally dangerous is the priest's slipping into idleness. Three full days have already passed, and he has done nothing.

One may well think that the priest deserves a rest and he does well to savour the leisured atmosphere of the Lehr household. It is not beyond expectations that the priest should now enjoy the comforts of leisurely reading a magazine and of pleasantly bathing in the nearby stream. And yet, in the midst of all this, the priest begins to harbour serious doubts about his pastoral role. Not only does he sense that he is slipping into sinful idleness and unworthily enjoying material comforts but he also realizes that he is tainted by the stain of betrayal. The very shoes that he has been given to wear begin to look 'like the badge of a deserter'.

The tranquility of the Lehrs' hacienda is certainly not what the priest is seeking. Out in the mountains and the forests, he did not feel such guilt. Here, in the Lehrs' house, where he is clothed and fed, he looks on himself as a deserter.

It is as if Graham Greene is saying that out in the forests and across the swamps, where the priest suffers humiliating setbacks and hardship, it is possible to emerge purified and renewed. But here, in the comfort and security of the Lehrs', the priest can draw no spiritual value because he is not really being tested for virtue. The Lehrs' household certainly poses a temptation. It is the temptation of sliding into idleness and false pacifism. This is no test for the whisky priest!

He knows a better test, that of suffering and self-denial. In the hurried sermon he gives to his own villagers during Mass (at the time he is trying to hide from the police), the priest realizes that he could now talk to people about suffering without a touch of hypocrisy because he has learnt to love men and women with that kind of charity without which faith cannot survive.

The priest knows where his true mission lies. It lies not in seeking personal comfort and contentment. He is meant to give service to others. The German-American Mr. Lehr is undoubtedly a decent man and a sincere Lutheran who, aided by the Gideon Bible, can find peace and live a good life. But the whisky priest will have nothing to do with 'this admirable mode of life'. His mission does not lie in modesty and cleanliness. Nor does it reside in the Gideon Bible passages that seek to oversimplify the consolation of spiritual comfort. (For instance, if you are losing confidence in men then read I *Corinthians*, xii.)

In most instances in life, success and failure write themselves in a person's appearance and life-style. Consider the Lehrs. The way that Mr. Lehr is dressed suggests a life of ease and leisure. No deprivation or shabbiness is experienced. Indeed, no pain. What a contrast to the stranger whom Mr. Tench, the dentist, meets at the beginning of the story: a small man with a round and hollow face charred with a three-days' beard and dressed in a shabby city suit.

In Greene's novel, the focus on outward dress and appearance is intended to show the inner truth of the story. The unnamed priest must be shown to be bare of outward essentials, even if it is merely a priest's cassock or a well-shaven face. At the start of Part Two in the story, having travelled over difficult terrain for over twelve hours, the priest, completely on his own, except for the company of his mule, stops to bathe his face in a pond – and there he is surprised to see the reflected 'round, stubby, hollow features' of a face.

At any other time, the awareness of such a miserable face may well have embarrassed or angered the priest. But here, the change in his facial features from pre-persecution days (so well revealed if we consider the photograph of the priest hanging in the police station) carries with it a moment of exhilaration and humility. His parishioners will not recognize him now for he can say to himself that he has succeeded in making his face fit more closely to the one God intended for him. Stripped of his outward dignity, he is even more dignified in the presence of God. And fellow human beings can identify with him even though he is poor in body and weak in spirit.

Once the image of the Church and its members is, in our minds, stripped of the inessentials of pomp and glory, the whisky priest, personally undeserving of being entrusted with God's mission on earth, does not appear to us as being a mockery of religion. Padre José, having conformed to the state's law that all priests must marry, is a fraud. The whisky priest is not. If the priest had indeed become a mockery of the Church, the government authorities would have been delighted to have him as an exhibit and refrained from ordering his death. Padre José is 'kept' alive by the authorities in order to be able to heap ridicule on him. To the reader, Padre José is a pathetic figure; to most characters in the book, he is a comic fool. Padre José has bought safety by marrying and so has lost his self-respect.

Ordinarily, a man who discards the essentials of civilized living and who is (among other things) a drunkard, a coward and a renegade, easily loses our sympathy and is condemned a failure. The Lehrs, of course, are no failures. They behave nobly, live decently and act as good Christians. They are close to *our* standards. Not only do the Lehrs give refuge to the whisky priest and treat him well but they offer him a civilized life and good conversation. Life in the village where the Lehrs live is likewise attractive. The priest is respected and has an authoritative hold over the parishioners. Wouldn't we rather have the whisky priest reformed and settled here? What encouragement is it to us to see him return to the squalor and wickedness of a persecuted state?

In a strange way, the unworthy priest in *The Power and the Glory* is no discouragement to our sense of admiration or optimism. We are eager to support him in his thoughts and share in his acts. If he is to stay with the Lehrs, his mission is betrayed. If he is to act on the premise that he has already suffered enough persecution over a period of more than ten years and, therefore, deserves a rest, our admiration for him will fade. That we can so adjust our sympathies that we place the Lehrs in the wrong while agreeing with the priest is, naturally, a tribute to Greene's skilful writing.

The interlude with the Lehrs could have been the happy ending of the story. Even in our actual world, we expect 'release' from exile or persecution to be a warranted and deserving conclusion to anyone who has spent years in pain or solitude on behalf of one's faith or ideology. The interlude with the Lehrs could have been the beginning of a new phase in the priest's life. After all, the villagers there need him and his voice is heard with some acceptance. There was the

possibility that the priest's condition of persecuted anonymity would have changed into comfortable freedom and a pre-persecution status as a parish priest. From a fugitive and a criminal, he could have remained a guest of the Lehrs and an authority with the villagers. The tribulations of life at its basest levels (misery, drunkenness, prison, theft and cruelty) could have changed into the triumph of a pastoral life lived 'in a very moral place'.

The extreme situation of the Tabasco scenes, replete with poverty, persecution and disorder would have been modified into a normal one of decent living and relative order. Greene, however, avoids the crudity of such a 'happy' ending and in the novel there is no easy victory or defeat. The struggle in which the priest is engaged is an unending one. It can only continue. And it does – with the arrival of the new priest.

An ending such as might have been suggested by the Lehr episode would have clashed with the demands of the plot, in that the priest, earlier on had already heard about the American gangster (who is now slowly drying) and this has established an irresistible link between the two men. In a fit of feverish imagination, before he is rescued and taken to the Lehrs' household, the whisky priest feels the connection with the American gunman as if he is responsible. It is clear that the novel carries the burden of its own title – *The Power and the Glory*. There should be a heroic ending. And so, the priest must cross the border again to face danger and death. What heroic end awaits him in this last lap of his wandering life?

Readers of the novel know that the death of the whisky priest at the hands of a firing squad is hardly a matter of triumph or glory. In a sense, it is an anti-heroic ending. This is especially borne out by the contrasts and parallelisms of the story-book martyr as presented by the Mexican mother to her children. The saint's story that the mother is reading to Luis and his sister demands that it should have a heroic conclusion. Juan, the boy martyr in the story, meets his violent end by raising both arms above his head, calling out 'Hail, Christ the King'. As such, it is an appropriate death. But the whisky priest in the novel knows no such heroism. Struggling to keep on his feet as he faces the firing squad, he ends up dead 'in a routine heap beside the wall – something unimportant which has to be cleared away'. It is this last unheroic death that seems to bear the mark of actuality (at least in Mexico of 1938); more so than the romantic martyrdom of the story-book hero that the Mexican mother is reading to her children.

Greene's craftsmans... orthodox vision can turn scorn for the scandalous priest into admiration for his imperfect fidelity to the Faith. What makes the priest a martyr is not the heroics of proclaiming Christ as King. It is his persistent, though often wavering, loyalty to his vocation as priest. Admittedly, fidelity to his religious duties is so shabby and wearisome that we may think it to be unreal. For one thing, the priest is putting the salvation of his soul in peril as he is technically living in sin. Moreover, in persisting to say Mass and hear confessions, he is foolishly playing into the hands of his pursuers. Why does he not leave the persecuted state of Tabasco? After ten years on the run he deserves to be rescued and saved. But would escape across the border and a well-earned rest such as he experiences at the Lehrs' have carried conviction with the readers?

Greene's version of reality in the novel requires no interlude or ending but a continuation. Better still, it needs a sense of regeneration. Clearly this is the message at the end of *The Power and the Glory* when the boy Luis welcomes the new priest on the scene. Having had a dream about the priest who was executed that very morning, Luis wakes up to the sound of somebody knocking at the outer door. He goes to see – and there finds a man wanting to come in. It is a new priest. The boy triumphantly swings the door open.

What makes the whisky priest a remarkable character in the book is the fact that the end of this ordinary man will haunt the imagination long after his ignoble death. The final irony is complete. The whisky priest is ignorant of the power of his example. He does not realize that his death has a strong influence on the development of Luis's character. The conversion of Luis and the honour paid by the boy to the new priest are signs of continuity and regeneration. The interlude with the Lehrs, if it had continued, would have meant only surrender.