IV • A Terrible Promiscuous Compassion

Another thinly-wadded specter who must be brought into witness as a possible observer of the fall of Icarus is the police officer Major Henry Scobie, who suffers through the pages of Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter*. For those who have not read the book, no summary can capture the complexities of the man himself or of the tone the author takes toward him. But I must try, for Scobie is for me one of those fictional characters without whom the world would be a much emptier place. If only there were a way to have told him that.

Scobie is a fifty-year-old assistant commissioner of police in a West African coastal town. An Englishman, he has been stationed in the town for fifteen years and has just been passed over for promotion to commissioner, probably because he has been too honest and honorable to play the political games required for advancement. For fourteen years he has been married to Louise, a melancholy and discontented woman whose unhappiness and sense of humiliation have been so increased over his failure to become commissioner that she begs him somehow to find the money to send her to live in South Africa until it is time for him to retire. We know almost nothing about their earlier lives apart from the fact that their only child, a nine-year-old girl, has died three years before while at school in England, and that Scobie feels responsible for having made his wife the unhappy and insecure creature she has become. “No man could guarantee love forever,” he thinks at one point, “but he had sworn fourteen years ago, at Ealing, silently, during the horrible little elegant ceremony among the lace and candles, that he would at least always see to it that she was happy.” This noble and presumptuous oath he is determined to keep.

Neither Scobie himself nor the reader can tell how much his bond to his wife remains composed of love and how much
of the pity and sense of responsibility that have come to dominate his feelings toward her. To some degree this sense of responsibility for her happiness has been heightened by his lessening need for her and his increasing wish for a kind of simplicity and peace offered by his barely furnished office—"a table, two kitchen chairs, a cupboard, some rusty handcuffs hanging on a nail like an old hat, a filing cabinet" (p. 8), and by the bathroom with "the bath of scratched enamel with a single tap which always ceased to work before the end of the dry season: the tin bucket under the lavatory seat emptied once a day: the fixed basin with another useless tap: bare floorboards: drab green black-out curtains" (p. 37). He had come to dread the thought of retirement, cooped up with Louise in a prettified comfortable home with artistic curtains and a tiled bath, "no office anywhere" (p. 41). But the yearning is even more profound than this, and in the midst of a rare moment of anger and honesty toward his wife, he cries out angrily: "'You haven't any conception . . . of what peace means.' It was as though she had spoken lightly of a woman he loved." Peace seems to him "the most beautiful word in the language: My peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you: O Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, grant us thy peace. In the Mass he pressed his fingers against his eyes to keep the tears of longing in." (p. 61)

But his sense of responsibility arises most powerfully from the kind of appeal it is his peculiar affliction not to be able to resist—the appeal that ugliness and failure make to his pity. On the day she learns of his failure to be promoted, he comes home from work to find Louise in bed, and he watches her through the muslin net. "Her face had the yellow-ivory tinge of atabrine: her hair, which had once been the colour of bottled honey, was dark and stringy with sweat. These were the times of ugliness when he loved her, when pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion" (p. 16). And later that evening when he watches "her fist open and close, the damp inefficient powder lying like snow in the ridges of the knuckles" and listens to her pathetic "O Ticki, Ticki . . . you won't leave me ever, will you? I haven't got any friends,"
he “lifted the moist hand and kissed the palm: he was bound by the pathos of her unattractiveness” (p. 23).

It is this same appeal that leads Scobie to dent his integrity a little by not reporting a minor wartime infraction of a fat, ugly Portuguese sea captain who when he was caught “kept on wiping his eyes with the back of his hand like a child—an unattractive child, the fat boy of the school” (p. 49). His affection for the corrupt and ugly town has a similar basis:

Why, he wondered, swerving his car to avoid a dead pye-dog, do I love this place so much? Is it because here human nature hasn’t had time to disguise itself? Nobody here could even talk about a heaven on earth. Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on this side flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meannesses, that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up. Here you could love human beings nearly as God loved them, knowing the worst. (P. 32)

And, as we shall see, it is in great part his inability to resist the unattractiveness of another woman (“the ugliness was like handcuffs on his wrists” [p. 172]) that eventually leads to his destruction.

At the same time, however, unlike some who enjoy the pathos of failure and unattractiveness, he cannot bear to see suffering:

And now, Scobie thought, I must return home. . . . I shall read in her face the story of what she has been thinking all day. She will have been hoping that everything is fixed, that I shall say, “I’ve put your name down at the agents for South Africa,” but she’ll be afraid that nothing so good as that will ever happen to us. She’ll wait for me to speak, and I shall try to talk about anything under the sun to avoid seeing her misery. . . . I shall go in and I’ll say, “Good evening, sweetheart,” and she’ll say, “Good evening, darling. What kind of a day?” and I’ll talk and talk, but all the time I shall know I’m coming nearer to the moment when I shall say, “What about you, darling?” and let the misery in. (Pp. 56–57)

At one point, in a rare moment of losing control, late in the book, he cries out “I can’t bear to see suffering, and I cause it all the time” (p. 259).

It would be possible to argue that Scobie is most deeply
motivated by this inability to stand others’ suffering and by his yearning for peace, and a severely hostile view might accuse Scobie of hating suffering only because it keeps him from finding peace. (In another of Greene’s novels, *The Quiet American*, it is suggested that one of the characters cannot stand suffering because of a selfish desire for peace of mind, but the suggestion is made by the character himself, Fowler, who is shown to be far more worthy and complex than this, and undeserving of his harsh self-judgment.) If I had to reduce Scobie to those two dimensions, I would say that the reason he wants peace so much is that he suffers so acutely the suffering of others, a relation that we shall observe again and one that surely holds for many good people. At one point Scobie puts the two in this conjunction: “When we say to someone, ‘I can’t live without you,’ what we really mean is, ‘I can’t live feeling you may be in pain, unhappy, in want.’ That’s all it is. When they are dead our responsibility ends. There’s nothing more we can do about it. We can rest in peace” (p. 167). It is possible Greene wants us to bridle at the shift in the final sentence from “they” to “we,” but I think he only wants us to notice it with interest.

This all seems too simple, though. I do not suppose it is possible to prove or demonstrate that Scobie’s wish for other’s happiness has an existence independent of his inability to stand their suffering, and perhaps it is pointless even to try to distinguish between the two. He would no doubt accuse himself of the conjunction. But I think it does have an existence of its own and want to believe it does. I believe he is thinking essentially of the other and not himself when he prays, even though “vaguely and ramblingly,” that Louise “might be happy now at this moment and so remain, that no evil should ever come to her through him” (p. 163). And I believe the same is true when he prays, “O God, give me death before I give them unhappiness” even though, or perhaps because, “the words sounded melodramatically in his own ears” (p. 206) and even though the line is preceded by a complex interplay between the two. I believe it, above all, when he begs on his knees: “Oh God . . . if, instead. I
should abandon you, punish me, but let the others get some happiness” (p. 244).

Greene makes certain that we wonder fairly early in the book about both the possibility of making others happy and the presumption of trying to do so. At one point, when Scobie thinks, “If I could just arrange for her happiness,” the narrator goes on to comment “and in the confusing night he forgot for the while what experience had taught him—that no human being can really understand another, and no one can arrange another’s happiness” (p. 84). And a little later, Scobie himself has a momentary realization of greater significance than he gives it: “It occurred to him as it hadn’t occurred to him, for years, that she loved him: poor dear, she loved him: she was someone of human stature with her own sense of responsibility, not simply the object of his care and kindness” (p. 97). Although I do not think it would be fair to place too much weight on the word object and to accuse him of treating people like things, it is true that he rarely listens when his wife talks, except for “notes of distress” (p. 21); and it is true that he does not allow others the full human stature he assigns to himself—that stature which includes the obligation to take responsibility for others and the right to exercise pity while refusing it for oneself. He gives himself the privilege as well as the burden of lying to others if he believes it will lessen their pain, and he will do so even when he cannot believe he could “fall so far as this and survive” (pp. 228–29). He feels there is “only one person in the world who was unpi-

able—himself” (p. 192). Though there is certainly pride in this, he does not usually feel prideful—it is more as though his own pity for others is so strong that it closes him off from the sense that he, himself, needs or deserves it. Only on one occa-

sion does he exhibit the ugliest facet of this self-exemption, when he says to the untrustworthy Syrian trader Yusef, “I don’t think the time’s ever like to come, Yusef, when I shall need your pity” (p. 95). (Such a time, of course, does come, as it must to any fictional character who would voice such a sentiment.) Only on rare occasions does he lapse into self-

pity.
What ultimately and most deeply seems to rule Scobie is an "automatic terrible pity that goes out to any human need" (p. 227). For him it is a "terrible promiscuous passion" (p. 172), one that I believe falls somewhere in between the two states of mind defined so well in Bernano's *The Diary of a Country Priest* when the priest writes "and it's a long while now since I gave up trying to identify with true pity—the strong gentle pity of the saints—my childish shrinking from other people's pain." It is a pity of such an order that he can ask whether if "we knew . . . the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? if one reaches what they call the heart of the matter?" (p. 128). Unlike many whom pity seems to place at a contemplative or scornful distance, Scobie's is accompanied by an equally automatic feeling of responsibility. When his wife has made him promise to find a way to pay her fare to South Africa, she falls quickly asleep "like a tired carrier who has slipped his load. . . . The load lay beside him now, and he prepared to lift it" (p. 41). Listening to the labored breathing of a dying child, "as if she were carrying a weight with great effort up a long hill," he feels "it was an inhuman situation not to be able to carry it for her" (p. 130).

On one occasion Greene puts it this way: "He couldn’t shut his eyes or ears to any human need of him: he was not the centurian, but a man in the ranks who had to do the bidding of a hundred centurians, and when the door opened, he could tell the command was going to be given again—the command to stay, to love, to accept responsibility, to lie" (p. 203).

Unlike most forms of pity, his is so intimately involved with an ability to see the other’s point of view, even the point of view of those he dislikes ("inexorably the other’s point of view rose on the path like a murdered innocent" [p. 196], that one almost wants to quarrel with Greene over his insistence on using the word *pity* rather than *sympathy* or even *compassion*. But Greene is right. There is just enough condescension in his absolute insistence that he be the one to take the responsibility, that the other’s need is greater than his, to make Greene’s word the right one. Like Miss Lonelyhearts he sees himself as a savior, not one of those needing to be saved.
I have expanded as much as I have on Scobie’s character before going on to tell his story partly because I get lost in my fascination with him and partly because the story makes little sense, is scarcely believable, until one is more than a little acquainted with these dimensions of Scobie. Perhaps it will not make much sense to some even so. At any rate, Scobie’s determination to make his wife happy is such that he compromises his integrity by borrowing money for her fare to South Africa from Yusef, someone too shady for a policeman to become involved with, even though the arrangement is strictly a business one.

Shortly after his wife leaves, his official duties require him to travel to an outlying village to witness the arrival of a group of survivors from a torpedoed ship, survivors who had just spent forty days in an open lifeboat. Among them two make special demands on his pity as they are carried past him on their stretchers. The first is a small girl, no more than six, whose parents were both lost and who is on the verge of death herself. “She was deeply and unhealthily asleep; her fair hair was tangled and wet with sweat; her open mouth was dry and cracked, and she shuddered regularly and spasmodically” (p. 124). Scobie can accept that the child will die, “but that the child should have been allowed to survive forty days and nights in the open boat—that was the mystery, to reconcile that with the love of God. And yet he could believe in no God who was not human enough to love what he had created” (pp. 124–25).

The other is introduced so:

The face was ugly with exhaustion: the skin looked as though it were about to crack over the cheekbones: only the absence of lines showed that it was a young face. The French officer said, “She was just married—before she sailed. Her husband was lost. Her passport says she is nineteen. She may live. You see, she still has some strength.” Her arms as thin as a child’s lay outside the blanket, and her fingers clapsed a book firmly. Scobie could see the wedding-ring loose on her dried up finger.

“What is it?”

“Timbres,” the French officer said. He added bitterly, “When this damned war started, she must have been still at school.”

Scobie always remembered how she was carried into his life on a stretcher, grasping a stamp-album, with her eyes fast shut. (P. 125)
That evening he is haunted by the sense of the misery behind the peaceful-looking lights of the rest-house, which has been converted into a temporary hospital. "It was as if he had shed one responsibility only to take on another. This was a responsibility he shared with all human beings, but there was no comfort in that, for it sometimes seemed to him that he was the only one who recognized it. In the Cities of the Plain a single soul might have changed the mind of God" (p. 126). As one is reading along, I do not think we take much note of the pride Scobie reveals here or even of the fact that some others like the French officer and the missionary's wife have taken on considerable responsibility; for he is juxtaposed against others who do not seem much affected, and he does reveal a greater degree of anguish than any of the others. And shortly after that prideful note, we witness a scene in which we are compelled to view Scobie with sympathy and respect.

Wandering restlessly outside the temporary hospital, he is asked by the missionary's wife, who is serving as nurse, to stay in the little cubicle with the dying six-year-old and the still unconscious girl with the stamp album while she goes off to get some medicine. Reluctantly he sits down and silently prays that nothing will happen before she gets back. This prayer is not answered, for a moment later, the child's heavy uneven breathing (a burden that it was already "an inhuman situation" not to be able to carry for her) "broke, choked, began again with terrible effort" and "her six-year-old face convulsed like a navvy's with labour" (p. 130). At this point he utters an incredible prayer, one that is, in a sense granted, something we must remember when at the end of the book we and others are making final earthly judgments on Scobie. "'Father,' he prayed, 'give her peace. Take away my peace forever, but give her peace.' The sweat broke out on his hands. 'Father . . . ' " (p. 130; author's ellipsis). Hearing this, the child who has not been told of her parents' deaths and who has from time to time been asking for her father, in "a small scraping voice" repeats the word "Father,"
and looking up he saw the blue and bloodshot eyes watching him. He thought with horror: this is what I thought I’d missed. He would have called Mrs. Bowles, only he hadn’t the voice to call with. He could see the breast of the child struggling for breath to repeat the heavy word; he came over to the bed and said, “Yes, dear. Don’t speak, I’m here.” The nightlight cast the shadow of his clenched fist on the sheet and it caught the child’s eye. An effort to laugh convulsed her, and he moved his hand away. “Sleep, dear,” he said, “you are sleepy. Sleep.” A memory that he had carefully buried returned, and taking out his handkerchief he made the shadow of a rabbit’s head fall on the pillow beside her. “There’s your rabbit,” he said, “to go to sleep with. It will stay until you sleep. Sleep.” The sweat poured down his face and tasted in his mouth as salt as tears. “Sleep.” He moved the rabbit’s ears up and down, up and down. Then he heard Mrs. Bowles’ voice, speaking low just behind him. “Stop that,” she said harshly, “the child’s dead.” (P. 130)

Although the scene sometimes strikes me as heavy-handed, just too, too poignant, it has enormous impact and must help complicate any easy judgment one would make about the relation that develops between Scobie and the other still unconscious occupant of the room.

I must take a moment, though, to comment here on a passage in this scene that I have so far left out. Just before his terrible prayer, as Scobie is watching the child struggling to breathe, he thinks: “This is what parents feel year in and year out, and I am shrinking from a few minutes of it. They see their children dying slowly every hour they live” (p. 130). Even in the heavy context of the scene, that perception seems a kind of willful morbidity on Scobie’s part, the invention of a weight that, in fact, most parents do not carry. Although it is true that all living things, our children included, can be said to start dying at the moment of their birth, it is perverse to view them in such a light, as perverse as if we were to look at puppies or young birds and young flowers and to notice chiefly their drift toward death. Such morbidity is not so much an attentiveness to that roar on the other side of silence as a ventriloquism that produces it.4

Scobie’s relation with Helen Rolt, the young girl with the album, develops innocently and accidently, although as we
have seen, he has been haunted from the first by the image of her clutching the stamp album. The next day while he is back in the hospital reading to a young boy, she wakes for long enough to listen, “the eyes large as a child’s in the starved face” (p. 135), to say “Thank you” when he has finished, and when Scobie turns “reluctantly to take in the young devastated face” (p. 137), to exchange a word or two with him.

About a month later, back at home, Scobie notices a blackout violation in one of the Nissen huts where the minor officials live, a hut that had been unoccupied the day before. When he knocks on the door, it is opened by the girl, who has been released from the hospital. She still bears the ugly marks of her ordeal: “The young worn-out face, with the hair gone dead . . . the pyjamas she was wearing were too large for her: the body was lost in them. They fell in ugly folds. He looked to see whether the ring was still loose upon her finger, but it had gone altogether” (pp. 142–43; author’s ellipsis). Scared by the air raid sirens and obviously starved for a sympathetic ear, she asks him to stay for a drink and talks to him about her family and her days at school; and by the time they part, she feels more relaxed and peaceful than she has for some time.

A week later he brings her some stamps that he has collected from various people around the town, and they talk at length. She speaks frankly about her responses to the death of her husband and he about his to the death of his daughter. As she tells him of her recent discomfort on the beach where everyone pretended to be happy and Flight-Lieutenant Bagster stroked her leg, and about her utter lack of any talents or skills to give her a livelihood (“I’m not really good at anything,” she says), his sense of responsibility grows; and as he sees her bend to pick up one of the stamps and takes in “the straight hair falling in rats’ tails over the nape as though the Atlantic had taken the strength out of it forever, the hollowed face,” it seems to him that “he had not felt so much at ease with another human being for years—not since Louise was young” (p. 171). Still feeling “safe” because of his age and his feeling that “his body in this climate had lost the sense of lust”
(p. 171), he watches her with “sadness and affection and enormous pity because a time would come when he couldn’t show her around in a world where she was at sea. When she turned and the light fell on her face she looked ugly, with the temporary ugliness of a child. The ugliness was like handcuffs on his wrists” (p. 172). He is even more trapped when, after again telling him how safe she feels with him and how good she feels he is, she says, “I have a feeling that you’d never let me down,” words that come to him “like a command he would have to obey, however difficult” (p. 172).

At this point a somewhat drunken Freddie Bagster knocks on the door and begs her to let him in. She whispers to Scobie not to answer and putting her arm in his, standing pressed against him, watches the door with “her mouth a little open as though she were out of breath. He had the sense of an animal which had been chased to its hole.” When Bagster leaves, “she raised her mouth and they kissed. What they had both thought was safety proved to be the camouflage of an enemy who works in terms of friendship, trust, and pity” (p. 173).

They make love that night, and on his way home before dawn Scobie knows a few moments of jubilation; but that is all. Once back home he begins to think about the future and to envy the butterfly that died in the act of love: “But human beings were condemned to consequences. The responsibility as well as the guilt were his—he was not a Bagster: he knew what he was about. He had sworn to preserve Louise’s happiness, and now he had accepted another and contradictory responsibility. He felt tired by all the lies he would sometime have to tell: he felt the wounds of those victims who had not yet bled” (p. 175).

Before long Helen becomes irritated by the caution that he takes to hide their relation and grows increasingly jealous of his wife. And one night there is an ugly scene in which she rejects his statement that he cannot marry her because he is a Catholic, with an angry, “It’s a wonderful excuse. . . . It doesn’t stop you from sleeping with me—it only stops you marrying me’ ” (p. 193).
PART ONE

Scobie, of course, takes on the responsibility, says, “‘Yes,’... heavily as though he were accepting a penance,” and thinks, “How much older she is than she was a month ago. She hadn’t been capable of a scene then, but she had been educated by love and secrecy: he was beginning to form her. He wondered whether, if this went on long enough, she would be indistinguishable from Louise. In my school, he thought wearily, they learn bitterness and frustration and how to grow old.” His patient apologies and efforts to comfort her only infuriate her more, and she finally bursts into tears and screams at him: “‘Go to hell. Clear out . . . and don’t come back’” (p. 195).

He leaves thinking how much easier life would be for him if he took her at her word, but then he thinks of her alone in the hut wondering if her words are irrevocable and her future would consist only of Mrs. Carter and Bagster until she went home to England “with nothing to remember but her misery.” And he thinks: “I would never go back there, to the Nissen hut, if it meant that she were happy and I suffered. But if I were happy and she suffered . . . that was what he could not face” (pp. 195–96; author’s ellipsis). A moment later he decides, “She’s right . . . who could bear my caution?”

Here, I think, Greene finds him more foolish and pathetic than I do, for he introduces Scobie’s next act with an odd shift from Scobie’s to the narrator’s point of view. As he opens the door to his own house, he sees a rat and thinks, “This was what Louise had hated and feared: he had at least made her happy.” But there is a comma after “happy” and the sentence continues “and now ponderously, and with planned and careful recklessness, he set about trying to make things right for Helen” (p. 196).

He does this by taking a sheet of his official stationery (in order to put himself entirely in her hands) and composing a letter to her in which he tells her that he loves her “more than myself, more than my wife, more than God I think” (p. 196) and that he wants more than anything else in the world to make her happy. He goes out in the rain to deliver the letter wondering why he wrote “‘more than God’” when she would
have been satisfied with "‘more than Louise.’ Even if that’s true, why did I write it?” (p. 197). And slipping the letter under the door, remembering “the childish figure carried past him on the stretcher, he was saddened to think how much had happened, how uselessly, to make him now say to himself with resentment: She will never again be able to accuse me of caution” (p. 197). For me the human frailty of that moment of resentment helps keep Scobie a mortal, although I must note that even as he experiences the resentment he is enough the observer of himself to be saddened by the pity of it all.

It turns out that the letter slips under the rug where it is retrieved by a servant who turns it over to Yusef who later uses it to blackmail Scobie into assisting in a smuggling operation, an event that adds to his growing self-loathing and despair. But he ends up binding himself even more tightly to Helen. For when he knocks on her door the next night, reluctantly, hoping that she will still be angry and will not want him, she is desperately thankful and he promises always to come if she wants him. Even more than this, she asks him to promise never to pay attention to her when she tells him to go away, and he does so “with a sense of despair, as though he were signing away the whole future” (p. 203). And still one further knot in the cord: “If you hadn’t come back . . . ’ she said, and became lost in thought between the lamps. He could see her searching for herself, frowning in the effort to see where she could have been. . . . ‘I don’t know. Perhaps I’d have slutted with Bagster, or killed myself, or both. I think both” (pp. 203-4; author’s ellipsis). To this he says, “I’ll always be here if you need me, as long as I’m alive,’ which for him constituted an oath as ineffaceable as the vow [to his wife] at the Ealing altar” (p. 205).

When he gets home that night, there is a telegram from his wife: “Have written am on my way home have been a fool stop love—and then that name as formal as a seal” (p. 205). The timing is unfortunately melodramatic, but one must forgive Greene such things, as one does Dickens or Hardy, if one is to share in the riches he has to offer.
For a moment he lapses toward self-pity: “Why me . . . why do they need me—a dull, middle-aged police officer who has failed for promotion? I’ve got nothing to give them that they can’t get elsewhere: why can’t they leave me in peace?” (p. 206). Then he tries to pray, but the “Lord’s Prayer lay as dead on his tongue as a legal document: it wasn’t his daily bread that he wanted, but so much more. He wanted happiness for others and solitude and peace for himself” (p. 206). Suddenly he says aloud: “I don’t want to plan anymore. . . . They wouldn’t need me if I were dead,” and a few moments later lets a notion of suicide into his mind:

The priests told you it was the unforgiveable sin, the final expression of an unrepentant despair, and of course one accepted the Church’s teaching. But they taught also that God had sometimes broken his own laws, and was it more impossible for him to put out a hand of forgiveness into a suicidal darkness and chaos than to have woken himself in the tomb, behind the stone? Christ had not been murdered: you couldn’t murder God: Christ had killed himself: he had hanged himself on the Cross. . . . (Pp. 206–7)

Upon first reading I think one notes in the commentary on Christ only the beginning of a rationalization that one fears might help clear the path toward self-destruction. Upon reflection, though, one may well be bothered by the pride involved in the analogy between himself and Christ, latent though it is.

When Louise returns, Scobie devotes himself to making her feel loved and wanted, and in this effort finally accedes to her request for him to go to mass and take Communion with her. This is a devastating step for him, for without real repentance about the adultery and an honest determination to stop it, such an act means damnation—taking his God in mortal sin. He sees this as much worse than the adultery itself, for as he tries to explain to an uncomprehending Helen: “There is a difference—a big difference. . . . Now I’m just putting our love above—well, my safety. But the other—the other’s really evil. It’s like the Black Mass, the man who steals the sacrament to desecrate it. It’s striking God when he’s down—in my power” (p. 232).
On the way to confession, he tries desperately to persuade himself, as he puts it, “to save my own soul and abandon her to Bagster and despair” or else to commit the “ordinary honest wrong answer: to leave Louise, forget that private vow, resign my job” (p. 234). Knowing he can do neither, he still enters the church, where he kneels and prays for a miracle: “‘O God, convince me, help me, convince me. Make me feel that I am more important than that child. . . . Make me put my own soul first. Give me trust in your mercy to the one I abandon’” (pp. 243-44). And just before entering the confessional he adds, “‘O God . . . if, instead, I should abandon you, punish me, but let the others get some happiness’” (p. 244).

There is no miracle. He confesses the adultery but cannot promise he will not see Helen alone again. He cannot even though upon his wife’s return Helen had written him a note releasing him from his promise never to abandon her and ending, “My dear my dear leave me if you want to or have me as your hore [sic] if you want to.” Even as the priest, Father Rank, is explaining as he already knows, that no one can forgive the uncontrite, he is capable of noticing the weariness of the priest and thinking, “What is the good of keeping him in this discomfort?” (p. 245). When he leaves the confessional, it seems to Scobie “that he had left for his exploration only the territory of despair” (pp. 245-46).

At mass the next morning, he feels immeasurably distant from the other celebrants and sees himself as worse than the priests at Black Mass who at least were performing the act of damnation with an emotion larger than human love—hate of God or devotion to Satan—whereas he “was desecrating God because he loved a woman—was it even love, or was it just a feeling of pity and responsibility?” (p. 248). Kneeling at the rail, he thinks again that only a miracle can save him, “but God would never work a miracle to save himself. I am the Cross, he thought: He will never speak the word to save Himself from the Cross, but if only wood were made so that it didn’t feel, if only the nails were senseless as people believe” (p. 249). Just as Father Rank is approaching with the wafer,
he makes one last attempt at prayer; " 'O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them,' and was aware of the pale papery taste of his eternal sentence on the tongue" (p. 250).

A few days later, Scobie is told he is to be promoted to commissioner, which, of course, makes his wife very happy. But Scobie feels only an increasing loneliness and despair and a sense that his whole personality has disintegrated from the deceptions in which he has become involved, a feeling that is heightened when he comes to be nearly certain that Ali, his servant of fifteen years whom he has loved and trusted, has begun to spy on him. His self-awareness and self-loathing are such that he tries to tell himself that he is "just trying to find a companion in this region of lies" (p. 255) and wonders whether the next stage for him will be the corruption of others. He comes to feel that he has "no shape left, nothing you could touch and say: This is Scobie" (p. 275). He feels that "even self-pity was denied him because he knew so exactly the extent of his guilt" (p. 262). He is deprived even of the satisfaction of feeling that his sacrifice has been good for Helen, for she remains bitter about his wife and his secrecy and refuses to accept that he too is suffering. He is human enough to shout angrily on one occasion, " 'The sacrifice isn't all on your side. . . . I've given up the future. I've damned myself' " (p. 258) and, when she continues to mock his belief in hell, to take her furiously by the wrists and say: " 'I believe. I tell you I believe I am damned for all eternity—unless a miracle happens. . . . What I've done is far worse than murder—that's an act, a blow, a stab, a shot: it's over and done, but I'm carrying my corruption around with me. It's the coating of my stomach. I can never void it. . . . Never pretend I haven't shown my love' " (p. 259). In a moment, though, his anger drains out and he says, " 'I can't bear to see suffering, and I cause it all the time.' "

In what some will find an admirable extension of compassion and some an absurd extension of pride, he continues to worry about the pain he is inflicting on God as well. Upon thinking of the repeated Communion services he will have to
attend with his wife, he has a “sudden picture before his eyes
of a bleeding face, of eyes closed by the continuous shower of
blows: the punch-drunk head of God reeling sideways”
(p. 264). And he sees himself striking God under the eye and
watching “the bruised skin break,” “watching God bleed”
(p. 265). And throughout this period, without letting his
motives rise to full consciousness, he sows some seeds for
pretending he has angina, which he has learned from a doctor
would lead to the possibility of a suicide that would fool the
doctors and insurance companies.

His increasing weariness and despair allow him to say
things to Yusef about his distrust of Ali, which leads to the
murder of that once beloved servant, for which he then, and
with some justice, feels responsible. The shock of this fills him
with determination “to clean up whatever the cost. Life is
going to start again: the nightmare of love is finished”
(p. 278). And he sets off for Helen’s hut with the full intention
of saying a final good-bye. En route he encounters her walk­
ing down the road, so distracted that she has not seen the car.
He runs after her, and when she turns “it was the face he had
seen at Pende carried past him [on the stretcher]—defeated,
broken, as ageless as a smashed glass” (p. 278). She tells him
she has been looking for him, and then, insisting he not
speak, she tells him sincerely and gallantly, yet unconsciously
making clear in every sentence how devastating it will be for
her, that she cannot go on ruining him anymore and that she
is going away immediately. Had she been able to manage
more stoically and briefly, it seems possible he for once would
have allowed another to make the sacrifice, have shown
himself capable of the humility that allows another to
to sometimes carry the burden, of being the saved and not the
savior. But she is so pathetic in her childish bravery and goes
on about it so long that it is hard to imagine anyone, much
less Scobie, abandoning her.

At one point, as she is explaining why she is going on so
long (“Don’t speak, dear, I’m really being quite good, but I
can’t say these things to another living soul. In books there’s
always a confidant. But I haven’t got a confidant. I must say
them all at once’ ” [p. 281]), he thinks directly, “If I were
dead, she would be free of me” (p. 281). And after her
childish “ ‘Now, dear, I’m going to do it. Shut your eyes.
Count three hundred slowly, and I won’t be in sight. Turn the
car quickly dear, and drive like hell. I don’t want to hear you
go. And I’ll stop my ears. . . . ’ ” he prays: “Oh
God . . . kill me now, now. My God, you’ll never have
more complete contrition. What a mess I am. I carry suffering
with me like a bloody smell. Kill me. Put an end to me. Ver­
min don’t have to exterminate themselves. Kill me. Now.
Now. Now. Before I hurt you again” (p. 281). Finally,
neither of them can go through with the parting; but by the
end of the scene, he has decided to kill himself.

That evening, as his wife is talking happily about giving a
party on Christmas Eve and then going on to midnight mass,
he looks “up at her with momentary hatred as she sat so
cheerfully there, so smugly it seemed to him, arranging his
further damnation. He was going to be Commissioner. She
had what she wanted—her sort of success, everything was all
right with her now” (p. 283). And he thinks:

> It was the hysterical woman who felt the world laughing behind
> her back that I loved. I love failure: I can’t love success. And how
> successful she looks, sitting there: one of the saved—and he saw
> laid across that wide face like a news-screen the body of
> Ali . . . , the exhausted eyes of Helen, and all the faces of the
> lost, his companions in exile, the unrepentant thief, the soldier
> with the sponge. Thinking of what he had done and was going to
do, he thought, with love, even God is a failure. (P. 284)

The hatred passes a moment later, however, when after
pretending an angina attack he touches her to tell her not to
worry about him and thinks “she wasn’t so successful as all
that: she would never be married to the Commissioner of
Police” (p. 284). After she has gone to bed, he begins very care­
fully to doctor up his diary in such a way that the coroner and
insurance inspectors will be convinced he died of angina. He is
careful not only for his life insurance but because “the happi­
ness of others had to be protected. It was not so easy to forget a
suicide as a middle aged man’s death from angina:” (p. 288).
The most poignant and revealing moments toward the end of the book are his dialogues with God. After getting the doctor to give him the package of evipan he will use to kill himself, he goes to the church, where he sits far in the back. Knowing that no prayer was effective in a state of mortal sin, he watches two devout old women with “sad envy,” and thinks this “was what human love had done to him—it had robbed him of love for eternity” (p. 288). And he goes on to the terrible thought that it “was no use pretending as a young man might that the price was worth while” (p. 288). But if “he couldn’t pray he could at least talk,” and here I must quote at length, for the passage is so rich in all the awarenesses and impulses that make Scobie the rich and perplexing character he is:

O God, I am the only guilty one because I’ve known the answers all the time. I’ve preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can’t observe your suffering . . . . I can only imagine it. But there are limits to what I can do to you—or them. I can’t desert either of them while I’m alive, but I can die and remove myself from their blood-stream. . . . And you too, God—you are ill with me. . . . You’ll be better off if you lose me once and for all. I know what I’m doing. I’m not pleading for mercy. I’m going to damn myself, whatever that means. I’ve longed for peace and I’m never going to know peace again. But you’ll be at peace when I am out of your reach. . . .

No one can speak a monologue for long alone: another voice will always make itself heard: . . . it spoke from the cave of his body: . . . You say you love me, and yet you’ll do this to me—rob me of you forever. I made you with love. I’ve wept your tears. I’ve saved you from more than you will ever know. I planted in you this longing for peace only so that one day I could satisfy your longing and watch your happiness. And now you push me away, you put me out of your reach. Can’t you trust me as you’d trust a faithful dog? I have been faithful to you for two thousand years. All you have to do now is ring a bell, go into a box, confess . . . the repentance is already there, straining at your heart. It’s not repentance you lack, just a few simple actions: to go up to the Nissen hut and say good-bye. Or if you must, continue rejecting me but without lies anymore. Go to your house and say good-bye to your wife and live with your mistress. If you live you will come back to me sooner or later. One of them will suffer, but can’t you trust me to see that the suffering isn’t too great?

The voice was silent in the cave and his own voice replied
hopelessly: No. I don’t trust you. I love you but I’ve never trusted you. If you made me, you made this feeling of responsibility that I’ve always carried about like a sack of bricks. . . . I can’t shift my responsibility to you. . . . I can’t make one of them suffer so as to save myself. I’m responsible and I’ll see it through the only way I can. (Pp. 289-90)

Despite all this, there is a part of Scobie that very much does not want to die, an important perspective to consider when it comes to gauging the extent of his sacrifice and possible saintliness. Despite all his pain and unhappiness, the thought that he will never see or touch Helen again gives him “a constriction in his breast worse than any pain he had ever invented to [Doctor] Travis” (p. 294); and on the night he has determined to kill himself, when bedtime came “he felt a terrible unwillingness to let his wife go [to bed]. There was nothing to do when she had once gone but die” (p. 295). A voice within him cries out: “Nothing, nobody, can force me to die”; and he prays, “Oh God . . . help me to leave you” (p. 296). To delay the moment, he asks his wife to read to him and watches her with a “hungry absorption of what he was never going to see again,” the “graying hair, the line of nerves upon the face, the thickening body” holding him “as her beauty never had” (p. 296). When he has forced himself to say his final goodnight without any demonstrations that would arouse her suspicion and she has gone upstairs he sits with the fatal dose of evipan “like seeds in the palm of his hand” as a voice says to him:

Throw away the tablets. You’ll never be able to collect enough again. You’ll be saved. Give up play-acting. Mount the stairs to bed and have a good night’s sleep. In the morning you’ll be woken by your boy, and you’ll drive down to the police station for a day’s ordinary work. The voice dwelt on the word “ordinary” as it might have dwelt on the word “happy” or “peaceful”. (Pp. 297-98)

He answers himself aloud, “No,” and downs the tablets six at a time. He starts an entry in his diary and breaks it off abruptly as though he had been stopped by a heart attack and sits bolt upright waiting for death. He tries to pray, “but the
Hail Mary evaded his memory.” Then he tries an Act of Con­
trition, “but when he reached, ‘I am sorry and beg pardon,’ a
cloud formed over the door and drifted down over the whole
room and he couldn’t remember what it was that he had to be
sorry for” (p. 298). The cloud grows into what seems a storm
to him, and he is taken from us thus:

It seemed to him as though someone outside the room were seek­
ing him, calling him, and he made a last great effort to indicate
that he was here. He got on his feet and heard the hammer of his
heart beating out a reply. He had a message to convey, but the
darkness and the storm drove it back within the case of his breast,
and all the time outside the house, outside the world that drummed
like hammer blows within his ear, someone wandered, seeking to
get in, someone appealing for help, someone in need of him. And
automatically at the call of need, at the cry of a victim, Scobie
strung himself to act. He dredged his consciousness up from an
infinite distance in order to make some reply. He said aloud,
“Dear God, I love . . . ” but the effort was too great and he did
not feel his body when it struck the floor or hear the small tinkle of
the medal as it span like a coin under the ice-box—the saint whose
name nobody could remember. (Pp. 298–99; author’s ellipsis)

That saint in the final sentence, strictly speaking, is the one
on the holy medal given him by the Portuguese sea captain he
had taken pity on, “a very obscure saint” whose name the
captain does not remember. But set off as it is at the end of the
sentence and chapter, one must also, if one does not already,
wonder about the extent to which that strange label belongs
to Scobie.

Let me be careful to follow the book though, for Greene
leaves that issue dangling and hurries to the questions that
we, and Scobie too, would most like answered. Was the
suicide discovered? Did his death accomplish what he hoped
it would? Officially the death is classified as due to angina
pectoris and one presumes will remain so. But a young man
who had become infatuated with Louise discovers discrep­
cencies in the colors of the ink and tells her that Scobie had do­
tored up his diary. Before learning this, Louise had said, “‘It’s
odd how easily I can talk about him . . . now that he’s
gone. Yet I did love him, Wilson. I did love him, but he seems
so very very gone’ ” (p. 301). And she also tells Wilson that she had known about Helen all along: “‘It’s why I came home. Mrs. Carter wrote to me. She said everybody was talking. Of course he never realized that. He thought he’d been so clever. And he nearly convinced me—that it was finished. Going to Communion the way he did’ ” (p. 301). Greene is very hard on Louise here, for he has her go on to answer Wilson’s query about how he squared that with his conscience with a glib: “‘Some Catholics do, I suppose. Go to Confession and start over again. I thought he was more honest, though. When a man’s dead, one begins to find out’ ” (p. 301). And when Wilson tells her that he took money from Yusef (for her passage, we remember), she says, “‘I can believe that now’ ” (p. 301). A moment later—it is three days after the funeral—Wilson, who is in fact a secret agent, says, “‘I’m straight, Louise. I love you’ ” (p. 301) and the two “didn’t kiss: it was too soon for that, but they sat in the hollow room, holding hands, listening to the vultures clambering on the iron roof” (p. 302). The ironies are heavy and ugly, and perhaps overdone, but I think Scobie would feel that he had accomplished one of his ends insofar as his wife’s suffering is hardly very acute. When Wilson discovers the altered diary and begins to speculate, she interrupts him with horror: “‘Oh no, he couldn’t have done that. After all, in spite of everything, he was a Catholic’ ” (p. 302). At this Greene breaks off and turns to Helen, who is returning from the beach with Bagster where they have already had four drinks.

When he begs to come in, she says, “‘All right,’ ” for there “seemed to be no reason so far as she could see to deny anyone anything anymore for ever” (p. 303). And when he moves her toward the bed for what he calls a “prang,” she thinks: “‘Why not . . . if he wants it. Bagster is as good as anyone else. There’s nobody in the world I love, and out of it doesn’t count’ ” (p. 303; author’s ellipsis). She lies back “mutely” on the bed and shuts her eyes: “I’m alone, she thought, without self-pity, stating it as an explorer might after his companions have died from exposure” (p. 303).
When he notes her lack of enthusiasm and asks if she does not love him a little, she answers that she does not love anyone; and upon his accusation that she loved Scobie, for which he apologizes quickly, she repeats that she does not love anyone. “‘You can’t love the dead, can you? They don’t exist, do they? It would be like loving the dodo, wouldn’t it?’ questioning him as if she expected an answer, even from Bagster. She kept her eyes shut because in the dark she felt nearer to death, the death which had absorbed him” (p. 304).

Bagster is decent enough not to persist, for which she feels relieved, though she agrees to see him tomorrow. As he is leaving, she asks him whether he believes in a god. To his “‘Oh, well, I suppose so,’ ” she responds “‘I wish I did. . . . I wish I did.’ ” When he has gone we are given this final view of her:

She was alone again in the darkness behind her lids, and the wish struggled in her body like a child: her lips moved, but all she could think of to say was, “For ever and ever, Amen. . . .” The rest she had forgotten. She put her hand out beside her and touched the other pillow, as though perhaps after all there was one chance in a thousand that she was not alone, and if she were not alone now she would never be alone again. (P. 304; author’s ellipsis)

It is difficult to decide from this the extent to which we and Scobie should be content to find her in no greater pain than this, especially in view of the ambiguities in that final paragraph. I take some hope from that wish to believe which is struggling in her body like a child, and I think that “one chance in a thousand” of never being alone again refers as much to the possibility of her finding a god as finding Scobie still beside her.

The book ends with a short conversation between Louise and Father Rank, to whom Greene has earlier given the sort of credentials that should make us seriously attentive to what he has to say. When she asks him drearily whether he hasn’t any comfort to give her, he answers: “‘You’ve been given an awful lot of comfort in your life, Mrs. Scobie. If what Wilson thinks is true, it’s he [Scobie] who needs our comfort’ ” (p.
305). And in answer to her question whether he knows all that she knows about him, he responds: "Of course I don't. . . . A priest only knows the unimportant things,'" and to her puzzlement adds impatiently, "'Oh, I mean the sins. . . . A man doesn't come to us and confess his virtues'" (p. 305). When she asks if he knew about Mrs. Rolt [Helen], he responds, "'Poor woman.'" The conversation goes on as follows until the end of the book:

"I don't see why."
"I'm sorry for anyone happy and ignorant who gets mixed up in that way with one of us."
"He was a bad Catholic."
"That's the silliest phrase in common use," Father Rank said.
"And at the end, this—horror. He must have known that he was damning himself."
"Yes, he knew that all right. He never had any trust in mercy—except for other people."
"It's no good even praying . . ."
Father Rank clapped the cover of the diary to and said, furiously, "For goodness' sake, Mrs. Scobie, don't imagine you—or I—know a thing about God's mercy."
"The church says . . ."
"I know the church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart."
"You think there's some hope then?" she wearily asked.
"Are you so bitter against him?"
"I haven't any bitterness left."
"And do you think God's likely to be more bitter than a woman?" he said with harsh insistence, but she winced away from the arguments of hope.
"Oh why, why, did he have to make such a mess of things?"
Father Rank said, "It may seem an odd thing to say—when a man's as wrong as he was—but I think, from what I saw of him, that he really loved God."
She had denied just now that she felt any bitterness, but a little more of it drained out now like tears from exhausted ducts. "He certainly loved no one else," she said.
"And you may be in the right of it there, too," Father Rank replied. (Pp. 305-6; author's ellipses)

As respectful readers, we must, of course, accept Father Rank's remark as the last word and give it appropriate weight. But I am unwilling to take it as the final and ultimate
word about so complex a consciousness and heart as Scobie’s, if indeed any human, no matter how simple, does not deserve more than one such word. Perhaps because he judged himself so continuously and harshly I have a peculiarly strong aversion to judging him at all. I hope his God will feel the same way. I wish sometimes the book had ended with his death—with that last automatic dredging up of his consciousness “at the call of need, at the cry of a victim” (p. 299). Then it would be easier, for a while at least, simply to admire and pity and be moved by him, to rest for a while in the awe of contemplating someone who deliberately chooses what he believes is eternal damnation in an effort to reduce the suffering of others. For whatever his other motives, however great his self-deception, it is only that motive which permits him to take his life.

But by ending as he has with the issue of Scobie’s relative love for God and man, Greene has thrown so deliberate a gauntlet, one cannot ignore it entirely, even though it could with equal justice be termed a curved ball one is entitled to duck and even though a merely moderate pursuit of the challenge leads to moral and religious conundrums whose subtleties could nourish whole armies of Scholastic philosophers. Setting aside for a moment the relation between love of God and love of man, I would be willing to accept the notion that he loved no one but God provided it was understood that the no one else included himself and that the definition of “love” implied is not the only one possible. I would agree that his degree of condescension, his inability except at rare moments to see the other in terms apart from those defined by his pity and sense of responsibility, his unwillingness to let them make sacrifices and choices or to carry the burdens, his willingness to pretend and to lie to them, in short, his essential failure to respect them, to say nothing of his own frequent acknowledgement that he feels pity rather than love, are not compatible with any relation we should easily or usefully call “love.” I know I do not want to be loved that way. But I believe also, as Scobie sometimes does and Greene perhaps does, that the quality of his response to ugliness and failure is
of an order that can hold the word “love.” At least I do not resist when I read about him watching Louise sleeping, her face with “the yellow-ivory tinge of atabrine,” her hair “dark and stringy with sweat,” and am told these “were the times of ugliness when he loved her, when pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion” (p. 16). Nor when he thinks that

people said you couldn’t love two women, but what was this emotion if it were not love? This hungry absorption of what he was never going to see again? The greying hair, the line of nerves upon the face, the thickening body, held him as her beauty never had. She hadn’t put on her mosquito boots, and her slippers were badly in need of mending. It isn’t beauty that we love, he thought, it’s failure—the failure to stay young forever, the failure of nerves, the failure of the body. Beauty is like success; we can’t love it for long. He felt a terrible desire to protect—but that’s what I’m going to do, I am going to protect her from myself forever. (P. 296)

Suppose one had an ugly and sickly child. It might be better to behave in such a way as to help the child learn independence and self-respect. But would it not be love if one wished desperately to protect it from realities, about both itself and oneself. Apart from considering the quality of his response to failure, I would want to ask whether there is not a degree of caring, regardless of how destructive or wrongheaded, that is entitled to be called “love,” and to suggest that Scobie’s caring may be of that order.

With respect to the relation between Scobie’s love for God and love for man, or anyone’s, or with respect to the meaning of such terms, it is hard to imagine saying anything that is not pompous, silly, or embarrassing, which is no doubt why Greene gave that commentary entirely over to his characters. And it is no doubt why I want to begin by letting another speak the most simpleminded reconciliation of the two. It is not a formulation that Father Rank or Scobie or Greene would accept. Nor can I really accept it, though neither can I reject it. The formulation is Leigh Hunt’s, and my mother used to recite it to me as she gave me my bath when I was a very little child.
Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
And saw, within the moonlight of his room,
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
An angel writing in a book of gold:—
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the presence in the room he said,
“What writest thou?”—The vision rais’d its head,
And with a look made all of sweet accord,
Answer’d, “The names of those who love the Lord.”
“And is mine one?” said Abou. “Nay, not so,”
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerly still; and said, “I pray thee, then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow men.”
The angel wrote, and vanish’d. The next night
It came again with a great wakening light,
And show’d the names whom love of God had blest,
And lo! Ben Adhem’s name led all the rest.

I do not think I ever asked my mother exactly what was
meant by love of fellow men or how Abou Ben Adhem showed
his, and I do not think she ever told me; nor had either of us
yet been taught to distrust anyone who could speak of himself
without ironic self-awareness as possessing such a love. That
warm bath of water and sentiment washed easily together.

Scobie views himself most often as one who has chosen
love of man (or women) over love of God ("This is what
human love had done to him—it had robbed him of love for
eternity" [p. 288]); or, to be more accurate, he believes that
what he is obligated to do from love of humans is opposed to
what he believes are his obligations to God. “He was dese­
crating God because he loved a woman—was it even love, or
was it just a feeling of pity and responsibility” (p. 248). He
thinks, “O God, I can’t leave her. Or Louise. You don’t need
me as they need me. You have your good people, your Saints,
and all the company of the blessed” (pp. 259–60).

Father Rank, of course, is suggesting somewhat the reverse
of this; and though he does not go quite so far as to suggest
that Scobie’s love of God approaches that of a saint, the book
as a whole forces us to look at him in such a light. I am not
thinking only of the explicit connection made as he dies with the saint whose name no one remembered, but of the fervor with which he believes in his own unworthiness and sinfulness in God’s eyes and his absolute acquiescence in what he believes will be his just punishment. He is saintlike in the frequency and degree of his self-laceration and in his renunciation of many of the usual claims of self. And in the degree of his compassion for the unattractive and unfit. Helen and Louise are not quite lepers, but they are among the outcasts: “It was the face for which nobody would go out of the way . . . the face which would soon be used to rebuffs and indifference, that demanded his allegiance” (p. 172). He loves the town in which he works because all the sores of injustice, cruelty, and meanness are exposed. He is saintlike in his sense of life as a spiritual test and the extent to which he yearns for peace. At one point, quite early in the book, even before he is much trapped by complications, it seems to him “that life was immeasurably long. Couldn’t the test of man have been carried out in fewer years? Couldn’t we have committed our first major sin at seven, have ruined ourselves for love or hate at ten, have clutched at redemption on a fifteen-year-old deathbed” (p. 52). And finally, he seems saintlike, to me at least, in that strange combination of pride which makes him feel he must be much better than other people, and humility, which makes him quite certain he is worse. It is paradoxical, of course, to speak so of one who could not even be buried in consecrated ground, much less be canonized, were the truth known about either his life or death. But these are paradoxes that Greene clearly delights in and are the kinds of paradoxes that have been welcomed by many with a deep devotion to the spirit rather than the letter of Christian faith.

I do not want to add paradox to paradox, but I cannot leave the question of Scobie’s allegiance to God or man without turning to another formulation of the issue, one by which Scobie emerges in a different though not quite contradictory light. The formulation is the one George Orwell erects in his “Reflections on Gandhi.” That essay begins with the provocative pronouncement that “Saints should always
be judged guilty until they are proved innocent” and goes on to develop a dichotomy between the human and the saintly in which saintliness is defined largely in Gandhi’s terms as requiring a disciplined asceticism and a rejection of individual loyalties and loves, both sexual and spiritual, in favor of a love for God or humanity as a whole. Orwell grants that the saintly attitude is “perhaps a noble one,” but also terms it “inhuman.” “The essence of being human,” he insists, “is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one’s love upon other human individuals” (p. 182). Given such a division, Scobie would seem to fall onto the human side, for surely few have been more defeated and broken up by life as a result of individual human attachments. Scobie’s special difficulty, and special quality, is that he also seeks perfection and measures himself with the kind of yardstick normally used by saints.

Orwell continues by arguing that we should not too readily assume that most people reject the ideals of saintliness because they are too difficult, “in other words, that the average human being is a failed saint” (p. 183). He believes that many people “genuinely do not wish to be saints” and thinks it probable that “some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings.” Finally he insists that the two ideals are “incompatible. One must choose between God and Man” (p. 183). Poor Scobie’s plight can perhaps most sympathetically be understood if we see him as one who is seriously beset by both temptations, and despite his own belief in the incompatibility of the two ideals, and his certainty that he has made a choice between God and Man, one who has chosen both.

But Scobie has already suffered too much for me to want to go on stretching him out on the rack of these divisions. Let me give him one last bruise and then try to bandage him a little. In a recent introduction to the novel, Greene asserts that it has
not successfully conveyed his real intentions. He says that he “had meant the story of Scobie to enlarge a theme I had touched on in *The Ministry of Fear*, the disastrous effect on human beings of pity as distinct from compassion,” that the “character of Scobie was intended to show that pity can be the expression of an almost monstrous pride,” and that “the particular motive of his suicide, to save even God from himself, was the final twist of his inordinate pride. Perhaps Scobie should have been a subject for cruel comedy rather than for tragedy.”

I think we must acknowledge that Scobie does exhibit a quite monstrous pride: in his certainty that he must be the responsible, pitying, and self-sacrificial one, in the extent of his concern with his own worthiness, and above all, in his sense of himself as a kind of moral and rhetorical adversary of God and sometimes even as a pitter of God. And I think it is almost fair to characterize his concern for others as pity rather than compassion. But I would note immediately that there is almost never any scorn in his pity, that his concern with his own worthiness is nearly always related to the plight of others, that his distance from the suffering is rarely such as to permit only what Greene elsewhere calls “a formal compassion,” and that the God who governs the world Scobie inhabits seems to manage things and psyches in such a way as to demand an adversary. One need not go so far as to share Bertrand Russell’s vision of all mankind adrift on the seas of an indifferent universe to share with Scobie some difficulty in trusting to the mercy of the God who has presumably watched over that lifeboat in which the widowed Helen and orphaned child drifted for forty days. And though I do not think it excuses the pride, we should be aware that Scobie is not full of pride, not puffed up with it. He is not a proud man. Even after we have finished the book and seen the full extent of his presumption, I think we can still see in him the same man that Greene presents as he goes to sleep at Pende on the night before the lifeboat survivors arrive. He is described as praying out of habit:

He said the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and then, as sleep began to clog his lids, he added an Act of Contrition. It was a formality
not because he felt himself free from serious sin but because it had
never occurred to him that his life was important enough one way
or the other. He didn't drink, he didn't fornicate, he didn't even
lie, but he never regarded this absence of sin as virtue. When he
thought about it at all, he regarded himself as a man in the ranks,
the member of an awkward squad, who had no opportunity to
break the more serious military rules. "I missed Mass yesterday
for insufficient reason. I neglected my evening prayers." This was
no more than admitting what every soldier did—that he had
avoided a fatigue when the occasion offered. "O God, bless—"
but before he could mention names he was asleep. (Pp. 118-19)

Is it too paradoxical to say that Scobie is afflicted with a self-
deflating pride?

On Scobie's behalf I would also note how little pleasure he
takes in his feelings of guilt and self-loathing, how little sense
of self-exaltation as he prepares his self-sacrifice. It is true that
after he secures the evipan we are told that the "solemnity of
the crime lay over his mind almost like happiness"; but that is
momentary and occurs chiefly because "it was action at
last—he had fumbled and muddled too long" (p. 288). And
there is some self-indulgence and love of his own failure as
well as pride in his extended dialogues with God. But it is
minimal—only a touch now and again of that condition
which Baudelaire describes as produced by hashish but which
is easily achieved without it, in which "remorse, that odd in-
gredient of pleasure, is soon drowned in the delicious con-
templation of remorse, in a sort of voluptuous self-analysis"
and in which the moral drunkard "admires his remorse" and
"glories in himself." And none at all of the passionate longing
for suffering of the sort reported about the founder of the
Sacred Heart order whose "love of pain and suffering was
insatiable."

"She said that she could cheerfully live till the day of judgment,
provided she might always have matter for suffering for God; but
that to live for a single day without suffering would be intolerable.
She said again that she was devoured by two unassuageable
fevers, one for the holy communion, the other for suffering,
humiliation, and annihilation. 'Nothing but pain,' she contin-
ually said in her letters, 'makes my life supportable.' "

Mostly what Scobie experiences toward the end is only pain, loneliness, and a sense of loss.

In his behalf also, I would note that he is almost never self-righteous and has none of that anger at injustice which compels a Swift, Conrad, or Nathanael West toward cruelties of his own. And though he cannot stand to watch suffering, his pity never turns to rage as does Miss Lonelyhearts' when he beats to death the frog he has accidently stepped on or when he twists the arm of the old homosexual, "twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent" (p. 18) His immoderate compassion is not, as Conrad says of Stevie Verloc, "succeeded by the pain of an innocent but pitiless rage" (SA, p. 144).

He does resemble Stevie though, in the extent to which his pity is automatic and irresistible. And at the risk of generating a snicker, I want even to suggest that we can view Scobie's initial sexual relation with Helen as arising not so much from lust as from the same "tenderness to all pain and all misery" that leads Stevie in his "desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy" to the "point of a bizarre longing to take them in bed with him" (SA, p. 143) to be comforted as he had been comforted as a child.

Finally, I want to return to my earlier wish to rest in the awesomeness of his sacrifice. For no matter what the balance of pride and humility, no matter what the mix of adjunct motives, regardless of the effectiveness of the sacrifice, when all else has been said, it is awesome to contemplate someone who has chosen eternal damnation in the effort to reduce the suffering of others. That Scobie does not believe in flames and torment does not reduce the awesomeness; for what he does believe he is giving up forever is peace, and it is peace for which he has most longed throughout his life.

It is odd that Scobie remains for me such a haunting figure because the book is in some ways such an obviously manipulative one. The scenes and characters seem shaped toward their ends with nearly the tidiness and clarity of the novels that Greene calls his "entertainments." At moments (though only at moments for me), one feels that Scobie behaves as he
does not so much from the necessities of his character as from Greene’s determination to organize his destruction. The reason Scobie and the book transcend all this for me, I suspect, is that the truth of Scobie is validated by Greene’s own pity, which like Scobie’s is a terrible automatic and promiscuous passion that infects as well as ennobles him and his writing. It is what allows Greene to begin a chapter “The sirens were wailing for a total blackout, wailing through the rain which fell in interminable tears” (p. 141) or to drench us in the pathos of Scobie’s continuing to wiggle the ears of his handkerchief rabbit for the orphaned child after the child is dead. But it is also what allows him to produce Scobie’s consciousness with a fervor that attests to its truth. In retrospect, or in conscious intention, Greene may have thought he was writing a story about the ugliness of pride. In fact, he not only shares Scobie’s compassion for all those whom Scobie pities, but pities Scobie as well. And despite his momentary pleasure at the end in a ventriloquism that distances us into an intellectual consideration of Scobie’s relative love for man and God, the book forces—not urges, forces—us too to read with a similar compassion.

How we finally evaluate such compassion—by Scobie, by Greene, by us—relates to how much we believe in the possibility, value, and efficacy of the kind of perception Scobie rarely retained with respect to either his wife or Helen, the perception that “she was someone of human stature with her own sense of responsibility, not simply the object of his care and kindness” (p. 97). This, God help us, belongs to some larger mysteries of self and other, to which we shall be turning later.

I am unable to resist, however, a final note—a note whose ugliness warns how difficult it should be to settle upon a fitting view of those like Scobie who too easily make us the objects of their compassion, far more difficult than is comprehended by most current psycho-moral pieties. The note is a remark made by an uncle of the young boy in Agee’s The Morning Watch. He mouths thus of the Christ whose agony Richard is trying so desperately to apprehend: “Well
who asked him to die for me? I didn’t. He needn’t try and collect on the debt . . . because there’s no debt, far’s I’m concerned’” (p. 113).