

Lucius, Prologue (Transcribed by Mike Hill)

Graham Greene

Prologue

The little town had grown since Winter's day, but the smell of coal dust and canal and tired brick were about the same. The memory came in through his nose of something deeply forgotten; he couldn't have told whether the memory was of happiness or unhappiness, he only knew that here had been his beginning. He put the documents back into the red despatch box and handed the box into the hands of his private secretary; the King's Arms, the Town Hall, the road that led uphill between the brick villas to ...

"We are nearly there," he said.

"Were you happy here?"

"I suppose so, Bates. Boys are, aren't they? I can't remember."

The streets were full of boys in black suits wearing red roses.

"The headmaster was disappointed that you couldn't come in time for the religious service."

"They expect a lot," Sir Luke Winter said.

"Of course, I told him you were very busy about Colombia."

"I think Griggs will have to be replaced. He can't get along with the Americans."

"It will break his heart, sir, after Teheran."

"One can't really take hearts into consideration, can one, Bates?"

They passed the parish church, massive and flinty. Bates said, "Late perp. They keep a crusader's helmet in there."

"How do you know?"

"I've been reading up an old guidebook. *Pelham's Guide to Bristow*. 1865. Don't seem to be any modern ones. I thought it would be a good thing if I slipped a few local references into your speech. After all this was your home—in a way—for five years."

"Hardly a home."

"I've just pencilled in a few touches. If you could find time to look them over. I thought the crusader would come in well when you speak of danger from the east: the need of western unity."

"The crusader was defeated, Bates, in the long run, and I hardly think they were a favorable example of western unity."

The car swung down the hill and the red brick buildings stood like beefeaters on either side of the road. Boys clustered under the arch and walked through the quad with women in silk dresses and girls with pony haircuts; they scuffed the gravel with their toes and answered in monosyllables to the brittle female chatter under the bright sun. The headmaster, who must have been watching from his study window, came out to greet them on the terrace. In his long black tail coat his face looked as if it was just being squeezed out of a tube: elongated and white and fresh like toothpaste. It occurred to Winter that headmasters had not been so young in his day, or had he merely outgrown them?

"We were getting anxious, Sir Luke ... in case Colombia ..."

"My young men can deal with Colombia. This is Mr Bates, headmaster."

The headmaster led the way into a room full of chintz chairs. "My wife, Lord Potter, the chairman of the Governors—but of course you probably know each other. The Bishop of Crewe." A waiter handed round sherry which

was not quite dry enough. “It’s a great honour for the school—the first foreign secretary in our history to be an old boy.”

“Who was head in your time?” Lord Potter asked.

“I’m afraid I don’t remember. One’s housemaster was more important.”

“You were at Collin’s, of course?” the headmaster said.

“Yes.”

“And the housemaster in your time would have been ...”

“Wooland. I hardly remember him—and Stonier.”

The headmaster’s wife said, “Stonier: wasn’t he the one who ...”

“Poor Stonier” her husband said quickly, and the bishop cleared his throat and fingered his pectoral cross and turned away towards the tray of sherry. It was like the conclusion of a sermon.

Sir Luke Winter said, “I don’t remember what happened to Stonier.”

“It was kept from the boys of course,” the headmaster said. “Perhaps, dear, we should go in to lunch?”

From the decisive way in which he unfolded his napkin it might have been thought that Winter was glad to see himself placed on the right of his hostess, the bishop on her left; it was a petty enough detail, but in the long climb from this town and this school perhaps he had needed to pay attention to many details—even to his name, and a bishop after all was a member of the Upper House. Strict etiquette would have demanded ... under the circumstances he could afford to be generous to the bishop. “I was sorry to miss your sermon,” he said. His face exhibited no regret; but then it often exhibited nothing. It was like the early map of an ill explored continent: large and white and indeterminate along the

coastline; only the two brown eyes were definitely placed like the sites of known cities.

“I think you would have been interested,” the Bishop of Crewe said with satisfaction. “It was on the text—Render unto Caesar.” He held up his fork streaked with a little cold salmon, like a pennant.

“A rather controversial text.”

“I wouldn’t have thought so ... duty to the State ... patriotism.”

“A Foreign Secretary, you see, deals so much with other countries. Patriotism is all right at home, but we are suffering quite acutely at the moment from patriotism in other places. Colombia for instance. Even Russian patriotism has presented certain difficulties.”

“The Prime Minister spoke very movingly the other day on patriotism ...”

Winter said, “We don’t see eye to eye on everything.” In politics a declaration of war can be dropped anywhere, even at a school lunch; he could see the bishop taking note of it. You could almost calculate the time and route of circulation: via St Albans to Lambeth, and then to Downing Street. The headmaster, who may have felt the tension or who may simply have been bored by the abstract argument which kept his head twisting from guest to guest and his smile meaningless, said, “We had quite a lot of trouble tracing you in the records, Sir Luke.”

“I took my mother’s name after I left school.”

“She was very famous wasn’t she?”

“I remember I could trade her signature at school for sixpence a time.” He was astonished himself at this flash of memory.

“Private enterprise. You were born to be a Conservative leader, I see,” the

Bishop of Crewe said with conscious malice.

“Perhaps just born to be a leader,” the headmaster’s wife retorted; her malice was quite unintentional, for she admired success.

“I am hardly a leader,” Sir Luke Winter replied.

“The PM is getting on in years,” the bishop said. Preferment had passed him by for ever—the only comfort was, now his tongue could wag.

“There is no age limit for prime ministers ... or judges ... or ...”

“Or bishops, you were going to say.”

Sir Luke Winter made a gesture over the cold chicken which had succeeded the cold salmon, as much as to say, “if the cap fits.” At the end of the table the headmaster raised his glass in an informal toast.

“Excellent hock,” the bishop said, but Winter found it a little sweet. It seemed to him like a meal chosen by a woman.

Winter asked, “What happened to—Stonier?” He found he had to make an effort to leave out the Mister from a name he had forgotten for so many years.

“Of course, it was long before our time,” the headmaster’s wife said.

“Yes?”

“I believe nobody ever really knew.”

“Knew what?”

“My husband’s predecessor never liked to talk about it. But we had the impression that he knew more than he cared to say. Of course, Stonier had resigned from the school before it happened. Luckily for everybody. Do you remember him at all, Sir Luke?”

He said reluctantly, “I remember him leaving. Of course, I was very young.” He moved his mouth uncomfortably; his whole face shifted: it was as though the unknown continent were being redrawn

by a new cartographer with more up-to-date knowledge.

“Did you like him? He can’t have been very—suitable.”

“I can remember so little. He was kind to me. I never saw him after I left.”

“Well, I think it was only a few weeks later that it happened. They wouldn’t have told you.”

“You have told me very little even now.”

“He killed himself.”

“Oh.”

He looked at the bowl of cold fruit salad which was being held under his nose: the apple like chips of ice. “No. No, thank you.”

“Fresh fruit. From our own garden,” the headmaster’s wife said, ignoring the bananas.

“Thirty-six years ago,” he said. “No. No thank you.” He had never felt so shaken, even after his defeat at Dulwich. He wanted to ask how the act had been done—the sad cure Milton had called it. It was Stonier who had introduced him to books.

He said, “They must have kept the secret very well.”

“So disturbing to boys at that age. When were you last at Bristow, Sir Luke?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t been down since I left.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll notice many changes: a new wing on the library, and as a war memorial we built a new gymnasium and squash courts. My husband would be delighted to show you around after the prize-giving.”

“I’m afraid I have to leave then for London.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I would have liked you to meet some of the masters, though I don’t suppose there are any who go back ...”

“They hardly could, could they?”

The headmaster's wife laughed nervously as though she had drawn unwelcome attention to his age. "Anyway, you won't find the *ceremony* different. Did you win many prizes, Sir Luke?"

"None at all."

"An unrecognised genius," the bishop said.

"Churchill was bad at school too," the headmaster's wife added brightly, "But I expect there were those who spotted ... that's the real excitement, isn't it, of a master's life. Spotting. A parent should judge more by the reports, my husband says, than by the position in class."

Suddenly Winter remembered; they must have been the last words Stonier ever spoke to him: "You've got it in you all right. You are going to go a long way." What was "It"? He hadn't meant his words as praise. As Winter drank his coffee, he thought what a foolish bit of vanity it had been to accept the headmaster's invitation. He began to remember in this place a great deal of degradation, and one of those successes one has to forget—they belonged, of course, to any great career. But he had not known until now what Stonier had done with himself.

The headmaster said, "We had better be getting to the Hall."

They walked across the quad—the headmaster wearing his MA gown; masters in black gowns and white ermine hoods converged on them and formed a procession. Their approach must have been signalled ahead so that at the very moment the procession entered the hall the music of the school song broke out from a piano in the gallery, and when they had reached their seats, they all stood at attention while the words were sung. A pedagogue behind Winter had a resonating

baritone. Most of them just moved their lips; the burden was carried by the boys.

"When your hat trick is over and the over's over,

You mustn't show your success:

When you have to convert and the ball goes under

You mustn't show your distress.

The game's a game but the school stands there:

The players pass, but their sons declare

Vivat Bristowa."

The headmaster paid a tribute to Sir Luke Winter ("Collins has produced some excellent centre forwards, but only one Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs") and to the Bishop of Crewe ("who gave us the most moving address I have ever heard in the school chapel on the twin merits of patriotism and Christianity"). He then read out the successes of the school year: the victory over Lancing, the excellent results at Bisley, the scholarships at Oxford and Cambridge. His fingers played over the leather backs of the prizes stacked on the table in front of him—*The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, Kinglake's *Eothon*.

Winter looked at one headmaster's portrait after another; beards gave place to side whiskers, side whiskers to moustaches, the clean shaven came last, but no growth of hair destroyed the common likeness: an air of conscious probity, of stern kindness. If you sought eccentricity, it could be found only in such details as the artist's treatment of the MA gown. Winter tried in vain to pick out the ruler of the roost in his day. While the headmaster announced a Domus Exhibition in Modern History at Balliol, a woman's face came up out of the confusion of faces below him as a pattern emerges among the bits and pieces of a kaleidoscope: an old face with a pointed

mouth and precise earrings. He had the impression it was watching him. He looked away and looked back. Why shouldn't she be watching him? He was the guest of honour.

"And now I call on our guest of honour, Sir Luke Winter ..."

He had forgotten to look at Bates's notes, but while the school clapped him, he turned over the leaves rapidly to find them. "Crusader's helmet in parish church." "Bristow Castle besieged by foreign enemy—French in time of King John." "Simon de Montfort, founder of Parliament, passed through on way to London." How on earth did Bates imagine he could work that in?

He spoke of the necessity of Western unity, a unity supported by a common culture to which schools like Bristow contributed learning, tradition, sportsmanship. He referred to the Crusaders ("a crusader's helmet hangs in the church here") when the unity of the West had been broken by internal dissensions. They must learn from these ancient mistakes. They might think he was talking politics, dull politics. Youth craved romance, but didn't we live in days quite as exciting and romantic as the Crusader? Just as Bristow Castle had in its time to withstand a foreign enemy, so all those who cherished Western traditions of democracy, Parliamentary government in all its variants—he thought he could slip in Simon de Montfort here but failed and shied away—all were under siege today, a long-drawn-out siege from the advocates of absolute power. He reminded them of what Lord Acton had said: power tends to corrupt. The woman went on watching him. He became uneasy; he knew he was not a very good speaker. He skipped a page of lip service to the United Nations and came rather flatly to his conclusion: the

debt he owed to Bristow and the masters of Bristow who had helped him shape his thoughts. He quickly tried to remember the name of his headmaster and failed. Stonier came to mind, but he could hardly mention him—"poor Stonier." He had no greater hope, he said, than that in the future men might be able to trace in the foreign policy he had tried, perhaps unsuccessfully to follow, the mark of a liberal (he was not of course speaking politically) education. The applause was polite. He looked at the woman down below. She sat with her hands in her lap.

The prize winners came up the steps and passed in front of the table. He shook hands with each and presented the prize which the headmaster picked out for him; the prizes hadn't changed much since his day—Macaulay's essays, *The Will to Believe*, bound in full calf with the Bristow arms upon the cover. The name Morley caught his attention: a tall boy with spots. He said "Congratulations," handing him *The Voyage of the Beagle*. It was a name which had been important to him once; he remembered plans for revenge. "Their sons declare Vivat Bristowa." Could this be Morley's son—or grandson? But again, he couldn't recall the face—only a pair of boots with trailing laces.

"Which house are you in?"

"Collin's, sir."

He said to the headmaster, holding out his hand for the next prize, "I think perhaps I knew his father."

"You should really visit Collin's before you go."

"I'm afraid there won't be time."

But when the prize-giving was over, Bates brought him bad news of the car. "The garage say it will take another three quarters of an hour."

“Time for Collin’s,” the headmaster said happily.

“We shall have to hire a car,” Winter said.

“You’ll find it difficult today. They’ve all been swept up by parents. You know by the time you dig one out your own car will be ready.”

He gave way. After all what was there to fear? Nobody survived at Collin’s from his day. Even the house would be changed, perhaps unrecognisable.

“This is Mr Carter. He’s in charge of Collin’s.”

“You were under Mr Wooland, I think, Sir Luke?”

“Yes, I think that was the name.” How carefully they must have looked up the records.

Carter drove him up the hill, past the long black ribbon of returning boys.

“Were you happy here, sir?” But now he replied differently: “I wouldn’t live those days again.”

“Of course, things are very different now.”

But the house was not different; the same steps ran up from the road to the back door where the boys entered, and the house was too massive to change in its yellow and grey bricks. “Shall we go in this way, sir, so that you can see the house before the boys return?” In France, he thought, they lured a criminal back to the scene of his crime.

The passage to the schoolroom was as long and dark as his memory, and the schoolroom itself was unchanged except that where the big cast iron stove had been was an electric radiator. The desks were as old and chipped and ink stained as thirty-five years ago. “We don’t put in new desks,” Carter said. “So many old boys like to search for the initials they cut ... I expect you ...”

“I cut none.”

“You remember the gymnasium?” It was brighter and cleaner than he remembered it; the apparatus, he supposed, was new.

“And the changing room?” It was a misnomer. This never changed; even the smell of steam and sweat and rubber and stale running drawers remained as in his time.

“Still a bit primitive, sir, but we haven’t much money to spend.”

“I remember *this*,” he said.

“Come upstairs and see the dormitories. We have improved those.” But as it happened, they never reached the dormitories. At the first turn of the stairs was a room he remembered more clearly than any other. “We’ll just look in on matron, if you don’t mind,” Carter said. He looked back over his shoulder. “Wouldn’t you like to, sir?”

“Oh yes, of course. Yes.”

The woman from the audience with the earrings and the tight sour mouth stood by the mantelpiece and watched him over Carter’s shoulder. It could hardly, he reassured himself, be the matron he had known thirty-six years ago—the years which had led him so far could not have left her here serving out cough mixtures and plasters. Besides surely his memory was not at fault that after another term or perhaps two she had left. All the same he was relieved when Carter said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I was looking for the matron.”

“She’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Come in, Sir Luke. I don’t suppose this room has changed.”

They had painted the medical cupboard primrose; he knew now that in his days it had been of framed oak, but on the shelves there was the same jumble of cartons and bottles and eye droppers. In the glass as he turned, he was aware of the woman watching.

“Spend much time here, Sir Luke?”
Carter asked with jocularly.

“Not very much. I remember the
matron—a very kind woman.”

“There must have been more than
one during your time.”

“I suppose so. I only remember one.”
He moved back towards the door, then
turned as if to say goodbye, and met the
woman’s furious stare.

“Well,” he said, “perhaps ... if we’re
going to see the dormitories ... my car
...”

She said, “You’ve changed your
name, haven’t you?”

“Yes. How ... have we met? I took my
mother’s.”

“Mary Winter? I remember her.”

“Really? Do you belong to the
theatre, Mrs ...”

“Heath. My name is different too, Sir
Luke. You would have known me as
Wilson. Stella Wilson. I’m glad you
remember me as a kind woman.” She
explained to Carter, “I was matron here
when Lucius was in the house.”

“Lucius?”

“Sir Luke.”

“Really? How very interesting. I was
just going to show Sir Luke the new
dormitories, but I expect you two would
like to talk over old times.”

“I doubt if they would interest Sir
Luke.”

“What about it, sir?”

“Of course. Why not? A few minutes
... my car must be nearly ready ...”

“You’ll find me in my room. You
remember where that was?”

“If I don’t, Miss Wilson will show
me.”

“Miss Wilson? Oh, I forgot. You’re
slipping into old times, sir.”

That wasn’t true. His heels were dug
in. Down that cliff of time he was
determined not to fall. Carter shut the
door and left them alone.

“Won’t you sit down? It seems odd to
call you Sir Luke. Darling comes easier
or Lucius. You’ve got rid of both names.”

“You’ve married?”

“It was always my real name; don’t
you remember?”

“I didn’t know.”

“I thought you did. But of course, I
suppose there were things even you
didn’t know ... or discover.”

“I didn’t know about—about Mr
Stonier’s death until today.”

“They hushed it up from the boys
and you were only a small boy, weren’t
you? That’s how they classed you
anyway. You’re a great man now, Sir
Luke. I hadn’t expected to recognise you
so easily. You have the same features.
Do they give nicknames in your career
now?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Do you remember much of that
time?”

“What time?”

“When you were here. When we were
all here.”

“No.”

“You owed a lot to John.”

“John?”

“One-Eye was the name, I think, they
gave him.”

“Oh, Mr Stonier—he taught very
well.”

He held his ground; passive,
immobile, his fat shapeless face
recording nothing. No opponent in the
House had ever had the satisfaction of
forcing an expression onto those
features, either of anger,
embarrassment—or even pleasure, for
he was a sad winner.

“I suppose you thought we neither of
us knew what you did, but we both of us
knew.”

“You must be talking about
something I don’t remember.”

“I don’t believe you. You couldn’t forget that.”

“It’s a very long time ago, Miss Wilson. I beg your pardon, Mrs Heath.”

“It’s only yesterday—I mean ...” She made a movement with her old hands, and he remembered how it was the only way she expressed impatience; she had seemed to him as a boy until the very end a monument of control. How old her hands had become, knobbly with neuritis. The last time he had ever spoken to her was when he came to this room for plaster and iodine; he had slipped and fallen on the gravel path and scraped his knee. When he pushed the door open, she was standing where she stood now. Her face was convulsed as though someone had struck her and was now raising his fist for a second blow. She said, “Not you. Oh no, not *you*.” He had hesitated in the doorway but then at the sight of the blood on his knee she had reverted to duty; only her hands as she took the plaster had made that movement of impatience. They were not then cramped with rheumatism, nor did a finger carry a wedding ring any more than it did now.

She said, “I came here specially to see you. But it doesn’t seem much use, does it, now that I’m here.”

He said, “If you would like some seats for the House ...” It was almost as though he was losing his head, as if he had been caught by vertigo from looking down so far into that abyss of time. Bates ought to have been there; he wondered angrily where Bates could be.

“Are you really human? Oh yes, I saw your blood once, didn’t I?” She sat down, groping with an old hand at her nearest supports as though she were struck by the same vertigo, looking down from the same point to the same wrinkle in the earth’s skin.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said, “... my car’s waiting ... Cabinet meeting tonight. Perhaps some other time.”

She gave the physical impression of shouting, but all that emerged was the dry inadequate voice of age. “He killed himself. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? He killed himself. He didn’t just resign and find another job, and then live happily ever after like you’ve done. He wouldn’t have liked me saying this, but he isn’t here to stop me, is he?” She picked up her bag and he flinched, thinking for a moment that she was going to throw it at him, but she was only searching for something concealed between the compact and the cigarette case. Perhaps to keep him there, until she found what she needed, she kept up her vague and cracked plaint like a woman keening for someone newly dead. “I’ve kept this with one purpose, to show it to you.”

“Why didn’t you send it, Mrs – Mrs Heath?”

“You are guarded by secretaries, aren’t you? He was fond of you even after you did that. Not like me. Oh no, he wasn’t like me at all. Too good to live. Do you still betray your friends?”

He was aware of the indignity of standing there, letting her talk, but at the same time he thought it would be worse to run away. He had always outstayed the longest row in the Commons: even over the South American Debt. He supposed now they would cry out that Griggs was betrayed, thrown to the Americans ... for what? His honorary degree at Harvard and the reception at Washington. She had something in her hand now, a letter. A lipstick came out too and rolled across the floor at him, a little gold object, as though someone was throwing money back at him.

She said, “Here. Read it. He never wrote to me again after that. You need only read the last page. The rest’s only—love. You’ll see he writes about you. He could forgive you, but I can’t. I can’t.”

He read, “As for Lucius, don’t hold it against him. There was a lot of good in him once. It was not really his fault that things went as they did. It was the power you and I gave him. Poor little devil, he’s learned the trick and he’ll go a long way now.”

It was an odd and disagreeable sensation being pitied; not one you associated with a political career, and it was not the less disagreeable when the man who did the pitying did it from the safe and invulnerable distance of death.

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