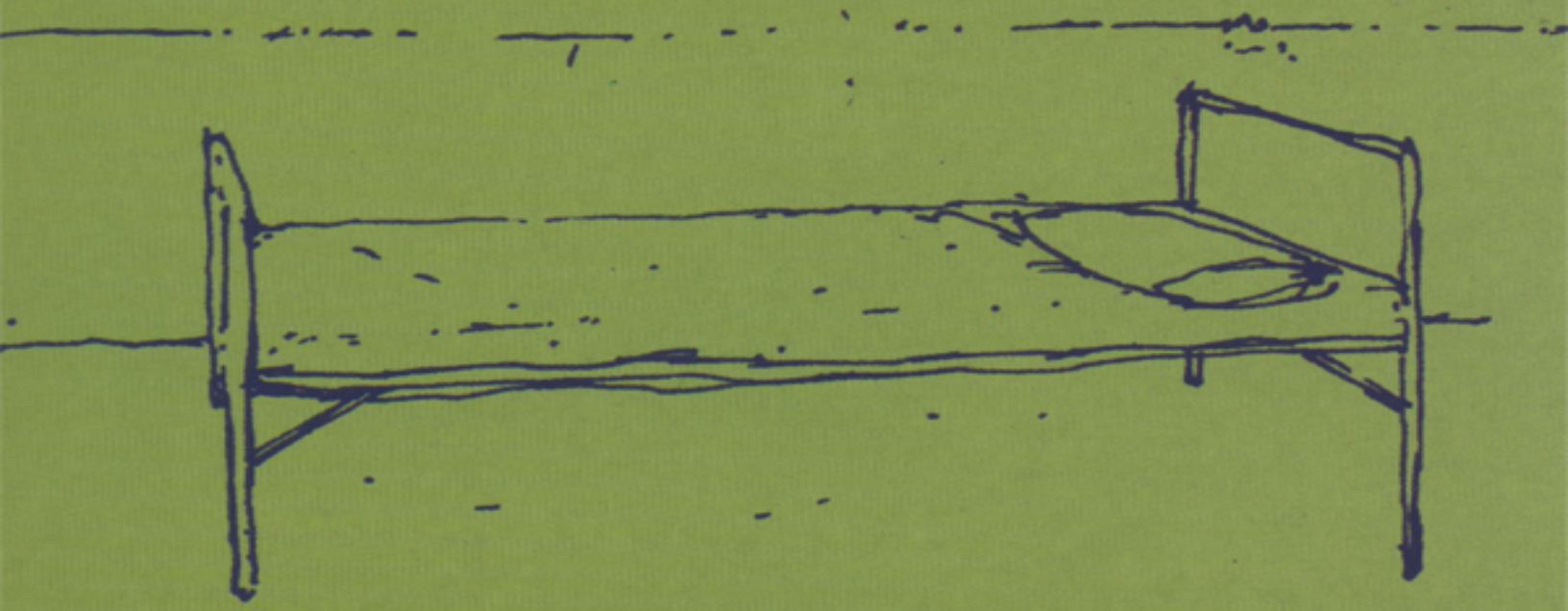
It's a Battlefield

GRAHAM GREENE

'No serious writer of this century has more thoroughly invaded and shaped the public imagination than did Graham Greene' *Time*



VINTAGE CLASSICS

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About the Author

Graham Greene was born in 1904. On coming down from Balliol College, Oxford, he worked for four years as sub-editor on *The Times*. He established his reputation with his fourth novel, *Stamboul Train.* In 1935 he made a journey across Liberia, described in *Journey Without Maps*, and on his return was appointed film critic of the *Spectator.* In 1926 he had been received into the Roman Catholic Church and visited Mexico in 1938 to report on the religious persecution there. As a result he wrote *The Lawless Roads* and, later, his famous novel *The Power and the Glory. Brighton Rock* was published in 1938 and in 1940 he became literary editor of the *Spectator.* The next year he undertook work for the Foreign Office and was stationed in Sierra Leone from 1941 to 1943. This later produced the novel, *The Heart of the Matter*, set in West Africa.

As well as his many novels, Graham Greene wrote several collections of short stories, four travel books, six plays, three books of autobiography – *A Sort of Life, Ways of Escape* and *A World of My Own* (published posthumously) – two of biography and four books for children. He also contributed hundreds of essays, and film and book reviews, some of which appear in the collections *Reflections* and *Mornings in the Dark.* Many of his novels and short stories have been filmed and *The Third Man* was written as a film treatment. Graham Greene was a member of the Order of Merit and a Companion of Honour.

Graham Greene died in April 1991.

ALSO BY GRAHAM GREENE

Novels

The Man Within

A Gun for Sale

The Confidential Agent

The Ministry of Fear

The Third Man

The End of the Affair

The Quiet American

A Burnt-Out Case

Travels with my Aunt

Dr Fischer of Geneva or *The Bomb Party*

The Tenth Man

Stamboul Train

England Made Me

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The Heart of the Matter

The Fallen Idol

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May We Borrow Your Husband?

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Lord Rochester's Monkey

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Children's Books

The Little Train

The Little Horse-Bus

The Little Steamroller

The Little Fire Engine

GRAHAM GREENE

It’s a Battlefield

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

‘In so far as the battlefield presented itself to the bare eyesight of men, it had no entirety, no length, no breadth, no depth, no size, no shape, and was made up of nothing except small numberless circlets commensurate with such ranges of vision as the mist might allow at each spot. . . . In such conditions, each separate gathering of English soldiery went on fighting its own little battle in happy and advantageous ignorance of the general state of the action; nay, even very often in ignorance of the fact that any great conflict was raging.’

Kinglake

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THE Assistant Commissioner was careful of his appearance before meeting men younger than himself. It gave him the same kind of confidence as dressing for dinner had done in eastern forests. He opened the cupboard door and brushed his dark suit before the mirror, his narrow yellow face bent close to the glass. Young men had certain savage qualities; they moved quickly; they sometimes carried poisoned weapons. He brushed slowly in rhythm with the plodding jungle step of his mind. He said to his secretary: 'I've put my telephone number on the desk. If there's anything urgent . . .' As usual before a sentence was finished he became lost in the difficulties of expression. Slowly, with a fateful accumulation of hesitant sounds, he hacked his way forward. 'Er – urgent, you will please – er – ring up the number, and – er – ask for me.' Bowler-hatted, umbrella over the left arm, he passed down long passages lined with little glass cells. Telephone bells rang, electric buzzers whirred like cicadas along his route, but his thoughts stepped carefully on, undeflected, undelayed, certainly unhurried.

By the time he reached the courtyard, he had decided that he did not care for politics. In Northumberland Avenue he said to himself that justice was not his business.

All round Trafalgar Square the lights sprang out, pricking the clear grey autumn evening. The buses roared up Parliament Street and swung in a great circle. A policeman at the corner of the avenue recognized the Assistant Commissioner and saluted him. The Assistant Commissioner nodded and crossed carefully where the signs pointed. I've got nothing to do with justice, he thought, my job is simply

to get the right man, and the cold washed air did not prevent his thoughts going back to damp paths steaming in the heat under leaves like hairy hands. One pursued by this path and that, and only as a last resort, when there was no other means of ensuring a murderer's punishment, did one burn his village. Justice had nothing to do with the matter. One left justice to magistrates, to judges and juries, to members of Parliament, to the Home Secretary.

The Assistant Commissioner paused for a moment before a shop window in Pall Mall filled with carpets. One could not live long in the east without learning something about them. The Assistant Commissioner was interested, but he had no idea whether the colouring was beautiful or coarse, whether the pattern pleased or repelled; he was interested because he could apply certain formulas to determine whether the carpet had been made in the east. He satisfied himself, as far as he was able without touching, that the carpets were genuine before he went on to the Haymarket corner. It never occurred to him to buy one; in his flat he had a few rugs on hardwood floors. A newspaper poster caught his eye: 'Drover Appeal Result', and another further up the Haymarket, 'Bus-Man's Appeal: Result'. An opportunity for investigation occurred to him, and he bought a paper, asking the man whether any particular interest had been shown in the news that night. The man shook his head and pointed to his mouth; he was dumb and the Assistant Commissioner walked on, frowning a little.

From Piccadilly he turned up a side street. He was not a man to waste a walk, even to an appointment. Women were coming out of offices on the ground floors of the tall blank buildings. He paused before one number. There had been an agitation recently in the Sunday press over brothels in London, and the police were paying particular attention to a certain flat. The Assistant Commissioner pursed lips which frequent fevers had drained of colour and left dry and pale. He considered morality no more his business than polities. It

was impossible to keep the brothels closed. They sprang up like mushrooms overnight in the most unlikely places. One, he knew, had existed for years next door to a most respectable club. If you had them watched, your police were bribed; it was much better to let them be. At the top of the Burlington Arcade he noticed two policemen and another stood outside the Galleries on the opposite side of the street. Vine Street was posting its men in a new way, and he made a mental note to get Bullen to ring up the Inspector.

He entered the Berkeley suspiciously; he liked his appointments either at Scotland Yard or a Minister's house, and he could not understand why he had been brought to a restaurant. The pale leaf colours, the sofas, and the mirrors which flashed back from every side his own lined and jaundiced face irritated him as much as a bowl of flowers on a desk.

'Dear Commissioner.' He saw the private secretary detach himself from two women. Tall, with round smooth features and ashen hair, he shone with publicity; he had the glamour and consciousness of innumerable photographs. His face was like the plate-glass window of an expensive shop. One could see, very clearly and to the best effect, a few selected objects: a silver casket, a volume of Voltaire exquisitely bound, a self-portrait by an advanced and fashionable Czechoslovakian. 'Dear Commissioner.' He greeted the older man again with amusement, patronage, frankness and guile, putting his hand on his arm and guiding him to a remote corner. 'A sherry?'

The Assistant Commissioner said slowly: 'I should like a whisky and – er – soda.' He felt suddenly old and dusty; as if he had just returned from one of his torrid tedious marches, with a man left dangling in the jungle for the birds to peck, to find at headquarters a young cool messenger from the Governor. The secretary said: 'The Minister's so sorry not to see you himself. It's the debate, you know, on licensing. He can't leave the House for a minute. Frankly, I'm worried

about him. He'll knock himself up. First the town planning, then the juvenile offenders, and now the licensing.'

The Assistant Commissioner did not listen; he had learnt to husband his hearing; he cast his mind back over the work of the afternoon. The morning's work had already been docketed in his mind while he ate his lunch from a tray in his room. First the report of the finger-print experts on Ruttledge's marks and the knowledge that all the work on the Paddington Trunk Case must be done over again; whoever had murdered Mrs Janet Crowle it wasn't Ruttledge; then the report on the new wireless invention; and the exhibits in the Streatham Common murder and rape which he had wished to examine personally, the handkerchief rusty with blood and the piece of matted hair and the cheap wool béret.

'It's a battlefield,' said the secretary. 'Back and forth into the lobby. I know for certain he had no tea.'

I shall go over the ground myself, the Assistant Commissioner thought. The photograph of the two wooden chairs and the pressed grass did not tell enough.

'I don't want him to break down now, with two clear years in sight. Of course at the Dissolution he'll get a peerage.'

The Assistant Commissioner brought his mind back with difficulty from the Streatham villas. 'It was – er – about Drover . . .?' Somebody in another corner of the lounge began to laugh. 'My dear, it was divine. They tied the pram on top of the taxi and Michael –'

'Yes,' the secretary said, 'it was about Drover. Now that the appeal has failed, it all rests on the Home Secretary. The poor dear man is worried, very worried, and all on top too of the licensing.' The secretary's wide pale face glistened softly under the concealed lighting and he leant forward with an infinite suggestion of frankness, with an overwhelming effect of guile. 'To tell you the truth, he'd have been glad, he'd have been tremendously relieved, if the appeal had been allowed.'

‘Impossible,’ the Assistant Commissioner said, ‘there was no possible – er – line that the Defence could – could take.’

‘Exactly. I was in Court. The Minister, you see, thought that the L.C.J. might give some excuse for a reprieve. But there was nothing at all to get hold of.’

‘The policeman died,’ the Assistant Commissioner said stubbornly, ‘we got the man.’

‘But the Minister, you know, doesn’t want the poor devil’s blood. Nobody does. It was a political meeting. Everyone was excited. Drover thought the bobby was going to hit his wife. He had the knife in his pocket. That, of course, is the snag. Why did he carry the knife?’

‘They all do,’ the Assistant Commissioner said. ‘Helps to scrape away oil, mud. Cut up bread and – er – cheese.’

‘Have another whisky?’

‘No, no, thank you.’

The private secretary laid a square white hand on the Assistant Commissioner’s arm. ‘You know we must help him. He’s in the devil of a state.’

‘Do you mean – Drover?’

‘No, no. The Minister, of course. My dear chap, if you could have seen him this afternoon. The devils. They made him fight every inch of the way; the Local Option Clause; the Tied Houses. And he’s never at his best when he misses his cup of tea. Really, you know, I could almost have wept. And I had to send him in a note that Drover’s appeal had failed. We must help him, or he’ll never get through the Session.’

‘Anything that I can do,’ the Assistant Commissioner began in an embarrassed way. He was embarrassed because he did not know what the devil it was all about. He was annoyed that the working of his mind should be blocked like this. The Drover case was over; the Paddington trunk case, the Streatham murder required all the thought he could give to them. He ought, he knew, to leave them to his subordinates in the Criminal Investigation Department, the specialists in finger-prints and blood tests, the detective-in-

spectors who could go through the routine of inquiry blindfold. But it was his weakness, though in the east, in the enervating heat, it had been his strength, that he could never leave his department alone.

The private secretary's amiability spread luxuriantly like a quickly-growing creeper. 'I knew we could rely on you.' He proceeded to put the matter into a Parliamentary nutshell; the antitheses and balancing clauses, the calculated touches of humour when he spoke of the Opposition, had as little meaning to the Assistant Commissioner as the jargon of an art critic. 'You mean,' he said, 'that the Home Secretary would like to reprieve him?'

'Ah,' the private secretary wailed softly, leaning back on the leaf-green sofa, dabbing gently again and again at an automatic lighter, 'how you simplify. The affair is more complex than that. But we can start from that basis – the Minister would like to reprieve. But, you see, there are the strikes.'

'The strikes?'

'The cotton workers are out, and the railwaymen may be out next week. Drover is a Communist. Will it be taken as a confession of weakness if we reprieve him?'

The Assistant Commissioner opened his mouth to speak; he wanted to affirm that politics were not his business, but the secretary forestalled him. 'And if we hang him, will that be regarded too as a confession of weakness? Will they imagine that we are afraid to be magnanimous?'

'They?' the Assistant Commissioner asked. 'Who are they?'

'The Communists.'

'Ten – er thousand members.'

'Yes, yes, officially, but every striker, while he is out, is a Red more or less. One doesn't trouble about shades.'

'But what can they do?'

The private secretary leant forward and remarked impressively: 'If resentment kept them out a week longer, if

over-confidence kept them out a week longer, it would cost the country fifty million.' He tapped the Commissioner's knee. 'More taxes and we lose the next election. What happens then?'

The Assistant Commissioner did not answer. Stooping over the trampled grass on Streatham Common, he would not have raised his eyes to a pyrotechnic display at the Crystal Palace, however brightly the sky was lit by rockets. The private secretary laughed and said, again with a frankness which gave the impression of deep guile: 'No peerage for the Minister anyway. And no under-secretaryship for me.'

'I don't understand,' the Assistant Commissioner began. It was one of his favourite expressions; extraordinary the number of occasions on which he could apply it: on first nights; when discussing the latest novel; in a picture gallery; when faced with an example of corruption. But turning over in mind the woollen béret, noting the texture of the wool, the pattern of the crochet, he understood more than the most sensitive artist, noticed more than the most inquisitive woman.

'The Minister argued in this way. You, more than any other single man, have your fingers on London: the poorer parts in particular.'

The narrow yellow face showed no pleasure; the Assistant Commissioner loved accuracy. 'The poorer parts only. I don't – er understand *this* place.'

'Oh,' the secretary said with airy amusement, 'I can answer for this place. If you can answer for – shall we say the docks, for Paddington, Notting Hill, and King's Cross, the suburbs, Balham and Streatham, the –'

'Streatham,' the Assistant Commissioner murmured, interrupting the secretary's shabby pageant.

'If during the next week you can send in a private report on what you think the effect of a reprieve or an execution would be –'

‘I don’t like it,’ the Assistant Commissioner said with an unusual lack of hesitation.

‘A personal favour, dear chap,’ the private secretary pleaded, ‘because he’s so tired, so worried –’

‘He’s got the report of the case, the judge’s notes.’

‘But if you could see him now, fighting every inch of the way, local opinion, tied houses.’

‘If he finds it hard to decide, he might see the man for himself.’

‘Would that be possible? Not for the Minister, of course, he’s far too busy with the licensing, but perhaps for me.’ The secretary smiled and tapped his cigarette. ‘He depends, you know, a good deal on my advice.’ Modestly he held the Minister’s dependence up under the wide concealed light as a whimsical curiosity, a quaintly ugly antique.

‘I’ll take you to the prison now if it would – er interest, help you.’

‘Does that mean that you consent, that you’ll let us know,’ he dabbed again at his automatic lighter, ‘what people think about it?’

Again the Assistant Commissioner corrected him: ‘The poorer parts,’ and again with a studied gesture towards the leaf-green sofas and the two women whom he had left and who now smiled at him from a far corner, the secretary answered for the Berkeley. ‘Oh, I can speak for the rest.’

The Assistant Commissioner, digging blunt nails into the sofa and heaving himself upright, said sharply: ‘Have you ever been inside a prison?’

‘Never.’

‘You will be – interested.’ He watched the bland face with distaste: he distrusted any man who showed so little sign of employment. Light employment, ‘half-time work’, had no meaning for the Assistant Commissioner, throwing his whole shrewd slow mind into every detail of his duty, into a crocheted béret, a second-hand trunk, a park chair, a cloakroom ticket; nor did the men with whom he spent his

days disguise the fact that they worked – worked seriously, with a sense of responsibility, to keep life in them – detectives, bus-drivers, pawnbrokers, thieves.

‘Most interesting, I’m sure.’

He preferred the morbid watchers at the prison gates, waiting for the striking of the clock, the posting of the typed notice (‘carried out in the presence of .the Governor, the prison doctor . . .’). Shivering in winter with the early cold, in summer touched by the pale heatless sun, they were made aware of what it was that kept them safe behind their shop counters, in their walk from fishmonger to grocer: they knew something of the stones, the rope, and the lime (‘The executioner was Pierpoint’).

‘I have never seen a murderer,’ the private secretary said. ‘As far as I know of course.’

Yes, the Assistant Commissioner thought, I prefer those others. He said: ‘We can take a bus from the Ritz.’ He did not see why the country should pay for a taxi in order to satisfy the private secretary’s interest, or to help the Home Secretary to a decision which he should be able to reach without difficulty, all the papers being before him, including the judge’s notes.

‘I have a car just round the corner.’

Something worried the Assistant Commissioner. He stood hesitating on the threshold of Piccadilly. Something had been said which he did not understand, it belonged to an alien world, but it was his duty to understand, something about. . . . The lights were all lit, the shop girls crowded the pavement on the way to the Underground. ‘What were they saying?’ he asked, ‘about a pram on – er a taxi?’

The secretary laughed. ‘A pram – on a taxi – how can I tell?’ He laughed so loudly that two shop girls turned small vivid faces towards him; a clerk in dark clothes, carrying an attaché case, halted suddenly and stared at them, watching the two men turn the corner, rolling the phrase over on his tongue: ‘A pram on a taxi,’ convinced that he would never

forget the meaningless joke which had set the men laughing.

The secretary sat with his bowler hat upon his knees, his right arm through a rest, talking of this and that. The blinds clicked down in the windows of the Knightsbridge *modistes*, and the end of Sloane Street was lost in blue haze; in the King's Road furniture was being carried indoors for the night. 'But perhaps you don't read novels.' Over Battersea Bridge the gulls came sweeping down to the level of the glass, and the lights from the Embankment crossed the grey flow, touched two barges piled with paper, rested on the mud, and the stranded boats and the walls of the mill. 'It all depends, of course, on her husband.' The fish-and-chip shops were opening, and all down the Battersea Bridge Road and past Clapham Junction, through a wilderness of trams and second-hand clothes shops and public lavatories and evening institutes, the Assistant Commissioner wondered, as he often wondered, at the beauty of the young tinted faces. Their owners handed over pennies for packets of fried chips, they stood in queues for the cheapest seats at the cinemas, and through the dust and dark and degradation they giggled and chattered like birds. They were poor, they were overworked, they had no future, but they knew the right tilt of a béret, the correct shade of lipstick. 'I should so much prefer Oslo.' They are admirable, he thought, and as the car left the crowds and the tramlines, he was saddened for a moment like a man leaving his home. Candahar Road, Khyber Terrace, Kabul Street, the Victorian villas wavered in the mist like a shaking of shakos in old imperial wars.

The car climbed a hill and crossed the railway line by an hotel. Turning, the beams of the head-lamps caught a few bare trees, and a sandpit where children played in the dark. The car followed a long straight road beside the cutting, and a train overtook them, tearing south, dropping sparks on the

roof. The secretary nodded towards a dark mass across the line. ‘Is that the prison?’

‘A school for girls.’

The car turned again; a policeman opened the door of a blue box beside a public-house, and a red tongue of light flickered up a glass globe on the roof. They drove between an allotment and a nursery garden towards a gate twenty feet high and, behind a wall, the roofs of square buildings and a tall hexagonal tower. ‘We are here,’ the Assistant Commissioner said, and they both sat quiet for a moment in the car, while a train went by unseen past the allotments, and the nursery gardens. ‘Odd to hear that in your cell,’ the secretary said with a touch of gloom.

‘They can tell the time by it,’ the Assistant Commissioner said.

The gates slid softly open pushed by a warder along a metal run, then closed behind them. They were surrounded by stone and hard lamplight. Somewhere a great many men were singing. ‘Block C’s at a concert,’ the chief warder explained, and passing the door of the hall, they heard the tinkle of a piano which had not been tuned for a long time. Up in the glass chamber at the top of the hexagonal tower warders walked to and fro.

‘The Governor’s at the concert,’ the chief warder said.

‘Don’t disturb him. This gentleman wants to take a look at Drover.’

The chief warder turned his old benevolent eyes towards the secretary. ‘Has the gentleman been here before?’

‘No,’ said the secretary. ‘No. It’s all very interesting.’ In the hall a man’s voice was droning rhythmically; the Assistant Commissioner caught the words, ‘fold up our tents like the Arabs.’

The chief warder halted. ‘Ah, that’ll be Adams. He’s a wonderful reciter. Real artistes we have here. Make a donkey weep some of ’em.’

‘What did he do?’ the secretary asked.

‘Tried to cut somebody’s throat or something silly of the sort,’ the chief warder said kindly. ‘Ah, but you listen to this one. He’s a treat.’ A baritone began to sing. Through the cold night air the Assistant Commissioner imagined for a moment that between the verses he could hear the footsteps of the warders pacing in the tower.

They walked on, and the chief warder, pointing at one great cube of stone after another, began to explain to the secretary the geography of the prison. ‘That’s Block A. The new prisoners all go there. If they behave themselves they get shifted to that one there, that’s Block B. Block C, the one we passed, that’s the highest grade. Of course if there’s any complaint against them, they get shifted down. It’s just like a school,’ the warder said, raising his old kind eyes with an expression of reverence towards Block A.

‘And what happens to them in Block C?’ the secretary asked.

‘They have certain privileges. Have as many library books as they want. And they have more butter with their bread.’ A heavy hollow bell began to ring in the tower. ‘Every man to his cell except Block C,’ the warder explained.

‘Certainly,’ the secretary said, ‘your school comparison was sound. And how long before they can reach Block C?’

‘Some do it in a year,’ the warder said.

A searchlight in the top of the tower moved slowly round the prison, picking out grey stone after grey stone, while the bell clanged and clanged. Then the bell stopped and the light went out, and after its brilliance the lamps at every corner, the lamps over every doorway lost for a moment their harshness. Shadows fell like earth from a tilted spade.

‘Just like children,’ the warder said. ‘We look after ’em just like children. I don’t suppose you had prisons like this out east, sir?’

‘No,’ said the Assistant Commissioner, ‘not – er – quite like this.’