

THE POWER AND THE GLORY

Graham Greene

Padre José put up his hand deprecatingly as if he were trying to indicate that he was not there, that he was gone, away, out of sight.

The old man said, 'Padre José.' They all watched him hungrily; they had been quite resigned until he had appeared, but now they were anxious, eager... He ducked and dodged away from them. 'Padre José,' the old man repeated. 'A prayer?' They smiled at him, waiting. They were quite accustomed to people dying, but an unforeseen hope of happiness had bobbed up among the tombs: they could boast after this that one at least of their family had gone into the ground with an official prayer.

'It's impossible,' Padre José said.

'Yesterday was her saint's day,' the woman said, as if that made a difference, 'She was five.' She was one of those garrulous women who show to strangers the photographs of their children, but all she had to show was a coffin.

'I am sorry.'

The old man pushed the coffin aside with his foot the better to approach Padre José; it was small and light and might have contained nothing but bones. 'Not a whole service, you understand - just a prayer. She was - innocent,' he said. The word in the little stony town sounded odd and archaic and local outdated like the Lopez tomb, belonging only here.

'It is against the law.'

'Her name,' the woman went on, 'was Anita. I was sick when I had her,' she explained, as if to excuse the child's delicacy which had led to all this inconvenience.

'The law...'

The old man put his finger to his nose. 'You can trust us. It is just the case of a short prayer. I am her grandfather. This is her mother, father, her uncle. You can trust us.'

But that was the trouble - he could trust no one. As soon as they got back home one or other of them would certainly begin to boast. He walked backwards all the time, weaving his plump fingers, shaking his head, nearly bumping into the Lopez tomb. He was scared, and yet a curious pride bubbled into his throat because he was being treated as a priest again, with respect. 'If I could,' he said, 'my children...'

Suddenly and unexpectedly there was agony in the cemetery. They had been used to losing children, but they hadn't been used to what the rest of the world knows best of all - the hope which peters out. The woman began to cry, dryly, without tears, the trapped noise of something wanting to be released; the old man fell on his knees with his hands held out. 'Padre José,' he said, 'there is no one else ...' He looked as if he were asking for a miracle. An enormous temptation came to Padre José to take the risk and say a prayer over the grave. He felt the wild attraction of doing one's duty and stretched a sign of the cross in the air; then fear came back, like a drug. Contempt and safety waited for him down by the quay: he wanted to get away. He sank hopelessly down on his knees and entreated them: 'Leave me alone.' He said, 'I am unworthy. Can't you see? - I am a coward.' The two old men faced each other on their knees among the

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tombs, the small coffin shoved aside like a pretext – an absurd spectacle. He knew it was absurd: a lifetime of self-analysis enabled him to see himself as he was, fat and ugly and old and humiliated. It was as if a whole seducing choir of angels had silently withdrawn and left the voices of the children in the patio – ‘Come to bed, José, come to bed,’ sharp and shrill and worse than they had ever been. He knew he was in the grip of the unforgivable sin, despair.