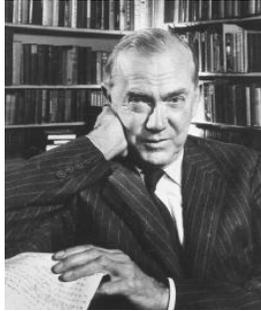


DOCTOR FISCHER OF GENEVA OR THE BOMB PARTY

by **Graham Greene**



THE AUTHOR

Graham Greene (1904-1991) was born in Berkhamsted, England. He had a very troubled childhood, was bullied in school, on several occasions attempted suicide by playing Russian roulette, and eventually was referred for psychiatric help. Writing became an important outlet for his painful inner life. He took a degree in History at Oxford, then began work as a journalist. His conversion to Catholicism at the age of 22 was due largely to the influence of his wife-to-be, though he later became a devout follower of his chosen faith. His writing career included novels, short stories, and plays. Some of his novels dealt openly with Catholic themes, including *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and *The End of the Affair* (1951), though the Vatican strongly disapproved of his portrayal of the dark side of man and the corruption in the Church and in the world. Others were based on his travel experiences, often to troubled parts of the world, including Mexico during a time of religious persecution, which produced *The Lawless Roads* (1939) as well as *The Power and the Glory*, *The Quiet American* (1955) about Vietnam, *Our Man in Havana* (1958) about Cuba, *The Comedian* (1966) about Haiti, *The Honorary Consul* (1973) about Paraguay, and *The Human Factor* (1978) about South Africa. His work with British Intelligence in Africa during World War II is reflected in *The Heart of the Matter*. Many of his novels were later made into films. Greene was also considered one of the finest film critics of his day, though one particularly sharp review attracted a libel suit from the studio producing Shirley Temple films when he suggested that the sexualization of children was likely to appeal to pedophiles. He even wrote film screenplays, the most successful of which was Orson Welles' award-winning version of *The Third Man* (1949). Despite his profound Catholic faith, his own life was marred by bouts of despair and moral inconsistencies – struggles with alcohol and drugs, sexual dalliances of all sorts, and eventual separation from his wife after almost twenty years of marriage. He died in Switzerland at the age of 87.

Doctor Fischer of Geneva or the Bomb Party (1980) was one of Greene's last novels. The work has been variously interpreted; some have seen it as a scathing critique of capitalism and the greed it fosters, even to the point of viewing in it support for the tenets of Marxism, while others have argued for a theological approach that focuses on the ease with which man is dragged down by greed to accept humiliation and debasement in order to get something for nothing.

PLOT SUMMARY

Alfred Jones, a translator and letter-writer in a chocolate factory on the shores of Lake Geneva, narrates the story. He is married to Anna-Luise, the daughter of millionaire industrialist Doctor Fischer – a man who is detested by both his daughter and her husband. Fischer has earned his fortune by inventing and marketing Dentophil Bouquet, a perfumed toothpaste, and has gathered around himself a coterie of toadies (his daughter calls them Toads), including Richard Deane, an alcoholic actor, “General” Krueger, a Divisionnaire in the Swiss army, a lawyer named Kips, Henri Belmont, a tax adviser, and Mrs. Montgomery, a wealthy American widow. They feel privileged to be part of his inner circle, and he enjoys pouring out his contempt for them by humiliating them at his lavish parties.

Jones met his wife by chance in a cafeteria when the two inadvertently found themselves at the same table. He had lost his left hand and his parents in the bombing of London in 1940 and had settled in Switzerland after the war. By the time of the story he is in his fifties. Despite the disparity of their social position and the fact that Anna-Luise is only twenty, the two quickly form a bond that includes a shared loathing of her hateful father. A month after their first meeting they sleep together, then enter a common-law marriage without benefit of clergy.

Alfred decides that he needs to inform Anna-Luise’s father of their new living arrangement so he won’t send the police after her, despite the fact that she assures him that her father won’t care. Fischer refuses to see him, merely granting him an appointment for the following Thursday, but while at the house he meets two of the Toads, Mrs. Montgomery and Kips, the lawyer.

Anna-Luise tries to keep Alfred from keeping the appointment with her father, but he is determined to do what he believes is the right thing. She warns him not to bring up the subject of teeth because Doctor Fischer resents being reminded of the source of his fortune. Alfred fortifies himself with two stiff whiskies and heads for the imposing Fischer residence, where he is treated rudely by the doorman and with total indifference by the doctor himself. Fischer is not concerned about his daughter’s living arrangements or possible marriage and can’t imagine why Alfred would take the trouble to travel into Geneva when he could have simply communicated his information by letter. When he returns home, Anna-Luise is relieved to find that her father didn’t invite Alfred to one of his dinners. Alfred, meanwhile, is mildly surprised that someone to whom everyone seems to ascribe such godlike powers should be so unprepossessing in person.

Shortly after the visit, Alfred and Anna-Luise get married in a brief civil ceremony before one lone witness. Her father, though invited, declines to put in an appearance, but he does send one of the Toads, Henri Belmont, who stands silently in the back of the room during the ceremony. Afterwards, Belmont comes forward and gives Alfred an envelope from Doctor Fischer. Inside is an invitation to one of his parties – for him alone, not for Anna-Luise. She begs him not to go, but he argues that he has nothing against her father or the Toads personally and that he would be rude to refuse this gesture on the part of his father-in-law. Thus Doctor Fischer introduces the first rift into the relationship of the newly-married couple. After intermittent arguments on the subject, Anna-Luise gives in, reasoning that Alfred won’t know whether or not he is a Toad until he is tested in their environment, and he thereupon accepts the invitation. For the next ten days, the party is never mentioned and the newlyweds enjoy their newfound bliss uninterrupted. The only reminder of the cloud hanging over them occurs one day when Mrs. Montgomery stops Alfred in the street and asks his advice about the purchase of expensive gifts. He rightly surmises that she is shopping for gifts for Fischer to give his guests and provides no help for her at all other than absurdly inappropriate suggestions.

When Alfred gets home he tells Anna-Luise about the events of the day and asks her why she hates her father. Her answer is that he made her mother miserable because of his abominable pride. Her mother had loved music, but her father hated it. She went to concerts by herself, and at one she met a man who shared her love of music. For some time afterward, she would meet him secretly and the two would listen to records. When her husband found out, he “forgave” her despite the fact that nothing untoward had been happening. He not only treated her as if she had betrayed him and made her life miserable, but he also had the man fired from his job as a clerk. The man soon disappeared, and so did Anna-Luise’s mother. After that, her father basically ignored her, but began to gather around him the acolytes whom she came to call the Toads. Kips was the first, and Fischer humiliated him by commissioning a children’s book cruelly picturing him as a deformed penny-pincher.

As the day of the party approaches, things become increasingly uncomfortable at home and Alfred seems more and more preoccupied and absent-minded. Finally he sets out for Geneva. He arrives at the mansion and is again treated with disdain by the manservant, who admits him only reluctantly. The Toads clearly resent his lower-class presence. Fischer soon begins a round of casual insults directed toward his guests, who meekly submit to him because they value the status conferred by his invitations and covet the presents he gives at each gathering. Whenever any guest attempts to counter the Doctor’s insults, he is warned that any contradiction of the host will cause the speaker to forfeit his prize. Before dinner, the guests toast two members who had died two years before, one by suicide and one of cancer; the toast consists of snide comments about the character of each person. When dinner is served, the guests are appalled to find that it amounts to nothing more than cold porridge. Told that they will not get their presents if they refuse the porridge, they all reluctantly dig in, with the exception of Alfred, who cares nothing for the Doctor’s presents, and Fischer himself, who is calmly eating caviar. When Alfred asks Fischer why he does this, the Doctor answers that he is doing research, seeking to discover if the greed of the rich has any limits – if there is anything they will not do in order to obtain their presents. So far, he has found nothing; no humiliation is too great to overcome the greed of the Toads.

When he gets home, Alfred describes the evening to Anna-Luise and she makes him promise that he will never go to one of her father’s dinners again. He receives no more invitations that winter, and the two lovers are permitted to live together in peace. One day they go to a music store because Anna-Luise wants a particular Mozart symphony. The clerk in the store, a man named Steiner, stares at her, and when Alfred tells him who she is, he has a heart attack. Later, in the hospital, Alfred learns what he had already suspected – that Steiner was the music lover of Anna-Luise’s mother’s past, the man ruined by Doctor Fischer. He admits that the two had made love on one occasion, but insists that they intended to break off the relationship even if Fischer had not found out. Steiner’s life was ruined by the Doctor, and Anna Fischer died of a broken heart. Steiner went secretly to the funeral, and he reveals to Alfred something of a surprise – the Doctor had actually cried at his wife’s interment.

As Christmas approaches, Kips pays a visit to Alfred’s office and asks him to translate a letter into Turkish; Alfred is surprised to find that it involves some sort of armaments deal. Kips asks Alfred to keep the letter secret from Doctor Fischer, and he agrees to do so. When Alfred and Anna-Luise go to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, they encounter the other Toads, who assure him that another party is soon to come and look forward to seeing him there. When the couple returns home, they get involved in a discussion of the existence of the soul, and in

particular whether the Toads have souls. They debate the issue, but are both convinced that Doctor Fischer has a soul that is surely damned.

Alfred and Anna-Luise plan to go skiing on New Year's Eve. When they arrive, Anna-Luise heads for the intermediate slope while Alfred settles down with his book. As he waits for her to finish her run, commotion breaks out on the slope. A woman has been seriously injured and Alfred soon realizes that it is his beloved wife, who, in attempting to avoid a boy who had fallen on the slope, swerved and crashed headlong into a tree. She is rushed to the hospital, but nothing can be done and she dies before nightfall. When Alfred tries to call her father, he refuses to speak to him because he is busy preparing for a party.

Alfred is alone at Anna-Luise's burial despite the fact that he had notified her father of the details. Afterward, he returns to the apartment determined to take his own life by drinking a large quantity of whisky spiked with twenty aspirin tablets. Before he can quaff the draft Mrs. Montgomery calls to express her condolences and tell him that Doctor Fischer would like him to visit the following day to discuss Anna-Luise's trust. Alfred promptly downs the toxic mixture he has prepared, but is disappointed to find that it has little effect on him. In any case, he has no intention of answering the Doctor's summons. Soon he falls into a deep sleep and wakes up eighteen hours later.

When he wakes, Alfred decides to visit Doctor Fischer in order to revenge himself on the bitter old man. Anna-Luise's father tells her husband that his wife's trust had been left to her daughter for her lifetime only, but if she died childless, it would revert to Doctor Fischer. Fischer says he doesn't want it, however, and tells Alfred that it belongs to him. Alfred, too, tries to turn it down. Fischer tells him that he intends to host one final party, and wants Alfred to be there because of the way he had stood up to the Toads the first time. Against his better judgment he decides to go, intending to kill himself the day after.

When Alfred arrives at the final party of Doctor Fischer he finds that the meal is being served outside despite the fact that the temperature is below zero. The huge lawn is lit by four enormous bonfires, which provide sufficient warmth despite the freezing temperatures. He is welcomed by Mrs. Montgomery and sees that the other Toads are also in attendance. Off in the distance, Fischer has his hands deep in a barrel of bran. Mrs. Montgomery explains that he is hiding "crackers" – firecracker-like poppers – that contain their presents in the bran. Each is to choose a cracker blindfolded in order to receive his present. The dinner is sumptuous and delicious, though Alfred has no appetite for the food; he simply drinks the rare wine in order to hasten his journey to oblivion. After dinner, the Doctor announces that the bran barrel contains six crackers, five of which contain checks for two million francs. The sixth contains a bomb, probably lethal. How many will allow their greed to overcome their fear? Kips exclaims that he will not participate in the game of Russian roulette and promptly leaves the party. Calculating that the odds will never better, Mrs. Montgomery rushes to the barrel, pulls out a cracker and opens it. It emits a small pop and a check falls out; she is overjoyed. Belmont and Richard Deane go next with the same result, leaving only the Divisionnaire and Alfred Jones. The latter, who wants to die, urges the old military man to take his turn, but he hesitates, so Alfred approaches the barrel and chooses a cracker. The fearful Divisionnaire also chooses one, but Alfred insists that he should open his first. To his everlasting disappointment, his cracker contains a check. While the now-terrified Divisionnaire hesitates, Alfred rushes to the barrel, pulls out the last cracker, and opens it; it, too, contains a check, which he promptly returns to Fischer as representing Kips' share. The Doctor urges Alfred to deposit the check, then tells him that he will start a new round

of parties simply so he can watch his son-in-law's greed grow and blossom. Alfred then offers to buy the Divisionnaire's cracker for two million francs and the old man cannot summon up the courage to resist. He then walks toward the lake to greet the death he so much desires, and thus be reunited with his beloved Anna-Luise. Sadly, the final cracker also contains a check; Doctor Fischer has produced his final humiliation. Soon Alfred hears a voice behind him; it is Steiner, the clerk who had shared a love of music with Anna Fischer, who has come with the intention of spitting in Doctor Fischer's face. When the Doctor comes down to the shore, he doesn't even know who Steiner is. After a brief conversation, Fischer walks along the shore of the lake, and soon a shot rings out; the Doctor has killed himself. Alfred and Steiner find the body and Steiner admits that he couldn't spit in his face because he pitied the man. The two realize that Fischer despised no one more than he despised himself. Alfred returns home with no hope of ever seeing Anna-Luise again, left with nothing but memories of her.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Alfred Jones – The narrator, he lost both his parents and his hand in the London blitz, then settled down in Switzerland after the war. There he met his second wife (his first having died in childbirth along with the baby), thirty years his junior, and the two soon fell in love.
- Doctor Fischer – A millionaire and the father-in-law of the narrator who enjoys using his wealth to manipulate and humiliate those around him. He conducts a scientific experiment intended to measure the depth of human greed.
- Anna-Luise Fischer – The wife of the narrator and Doctor Fischer's daughter, she is only twenty when she meets and begins living with Alfred. She dies in a skiing accident shortly after their marriage.
- Richard Deane – An alcoholic movie actor, he is one of Doctor Fisher's "Toads."
- "General" Krueger – Another Toad, he is a Divisionnaire in the Swiss army.
- Kips – Another Toad, he is an international lawyer.
- Henri Belmont – A tax advisor, he, too, is a Toad.
- Mrs. Montgomery – A blue-haired American widow, she is the only woman among Dr. Fischer's Toads.
- Albert – Doctor Fischer's rude and snobby manservant.
- Steiner – A clerk at Kips' law firm who befriends Doctor Fischer's wife Anna because of a common love of music; Fischer finds out about their friendship and sees that Steiner loses his job and is impoverished thereafter.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“I think that I used to detest Doctor Fischer more than any other man I have known just as I loved his daughter more than any other woman.” (Alfred, ch.1, p.9)

“He mocks others, but no one mocks him. He has a monopoly in mockery.” (Anna-Luise, ch.4, p.25)

“A man can only be corrupted if he’s corruptible.” (Alfred, ch.5, p.33)

“He would certainly have despised Christ for being the son of a carpenter, if the New Testament had not proved in time to be such a howling commercial success.” (Anna-Luise, ch.7, p.41)

“All my friends are rich, and the rich are the greediest. The rich have no pride except in their possessions. You only have to be careful with the poor.” (Fischer, ch.7, p.44)

“The believers and the sentimentalists say that [God] is greedy for our love. I prefer to think that, judging from the world he is supposed to have made, he can only be greedy for our humiliation, and *that* greed how could he ever exhaust? It’s bottomless. The world grows more and more miserable while he twists the endless screw, though he gives us presents – for a universal suicide would defeat his purpose – to alleviate the humiliations we suffer. A cancer of the rectum, a streaming cold, incontinence. For example, you are a poor man, so he gives you a small present, my daughter, to keep you satisfied a little longer.” (Fischer, ch.9, p.62-63)

“If it had been in my power I would have revenged myself for what had happened on all the world – like Doctor Fischer, I thought, just like Doctor Fischer.” (Alfred, ch.13, p.93)

“Perhaps, if I believed in God, I would want to take my revenge on him for having made me capable of disappointment.” (Fischer, ch.15, p.106)

“Anna-Luise was dead. She could only continue to exist somewhere if God existed.” (Alfred, ch.16, p.130)

“Mrs. Montgomery, Belmont, Kips, Deane, they were much like they are now when I first knew them. But I shall have created you. Just as much as God created Adam.” (Fischer, ch.16, p.132)

“How you must despise yourself.” (Alfred, ch.16, p.132)

“It’s never too late to spit at God Almighty. He lasts forever and ever, amen. And he made us what we are.” (Steiner, ch.16, p.135)

“I looked at the body and it had no more significance than a dead dog. This, I thought, was the bit of rubbish I had once compared in my mind with Jehovah and Satan.” (Alfred, ch.16, p.139)

“It was as though my half-belief had somehow shriveled with the sight of Doctor Fischer’s body. Evil was dead as a dog, and why should goodness have more immortality than evil?” (Alfred, ch.17, p.141)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Graham Greene’s *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, the title character claims to be conducting an experiment to determine the depths to which the wealthy would stoop to satisfy their greed. Is the author’s critique restricted to the greed of the wealthy, or is he instead making a broader commentary on human nature in general? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
2. In Graham Greene’s *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, the narrator, Alfred Jones, successfully resists the temptations Doctor Fischer presents to him. Why is he able to succeed when all around him fail? Is the difference between him and the “Toads” simply that he is poor while they are rich, or does it lie deeper, within his character? Support your argument with specifics from the novel.
3. In Graham Greene’s *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, the title character is often compared to God. What is Graham’s purpose in doing so? Are these references intended to imply criticisms of Doctor Fischer or God or both? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specific quotations from the book.
4. Discuss the view of human love portrayed in Graham Greene’s *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*. Focus particularly on the relationship between Alfred and Anna-Luise in doing so. Is the view of love presented in the novel biblical one? Why or why not? Be sure to use specifics, both from the novel and from Scripture, to support your answer.
5. Discuss the role played by the death of Anna-Luise Fischer in the plot of Graham Greene’s *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*. How does the death of his wife affect the protagonist? Does his character change, or do we simply come to understand him more fully? How do these consequences help to communicate the major themes of the novel?
6. Discuss the use of foreshadowing in Graham Greene’s *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*. Choose three examples of the author’s use of the tactic and explain why he wants the reader to know what will happen later in the novel. How does foreshadowing assist the author in communicating the major themes he wishes the reader to consider?
7. In Graham Greene’s *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, what do the Toads have in common? Are they connected by anything other than wealth? Do they share any traits that make them particularly susceptible to Doctor Fischer’s blandishments?

8. Graham Greene was known to have leftist political leanings, and some critics have read his novel *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party* as a Marxist tract ridiculing capitalism. To what extent is this a valid interpretation? What aspects of the story might lead someone to read it this way? Do you see anything in the novel that would contradict such an interpretation?
9. After Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler, He startled His disciples by saying, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25). To what extent may Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party* be seen as a commentary on this verse? Does the author's critique of wealth and its effects on people correspond to the teaching of Scripture? Why or why not? Be sure to cite quotations from both the novel and the Bible in formulating your arguments.
10. Critic David Pryce-Jones argued that Graham Greene was an author overwhelmed by his "obsession with man's burden of sin." Evaluate this statement using *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*. To what extent does the novel exemplify this obsession? How does it do so? Does the author see any way of shedding this intolerable burden? Why or why not?
11. Discuss the ending of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, especially the short final chapter. Is it redemptive in any way? Does the narrator find any relief after the experiences that brought him close to suicide? Why or why not?
12. In Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, how does the title character control his sycophants? What does their relationship say about the extent to which covetousness leads to slavery?
13. Near the end of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, the title character attempts to distinguish between hating and despising another person. Evaluate the distinction he makes. Consider also the narrator's conclusion that Fischer despised no one so much as he despised himself.
14. In Proverbs 30:15-16, Agur says, "There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!': the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, 'Enough!'" In Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, has the author found a fifth insatiable figure to add to those enumerated by Agur – human greed? Does the title character ever find a limit beyond which greed is not willing to go? Does such a limit exist? Why or why not? Use specifics from the novel along with biblical principles to answer the question.
15. Why does the title character commit suicide at the end of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*? To what extent does your answer to this question shape your understanding of the basic message of the novel?

16. In chapter five of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, Alfred tries to comfort Anna-Luise when she tries to dissuade him from going to her father's party by saying, "A man can only be corrupted if he's corruptible." Analyze this statement, both from the perspective of the novel and from Scripture. Was Alfred right in believing that he was incorruptible? Answer the question using both the later events in the novel and Scripture's teaching on the subject.
17. In chapter nine of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, the title character uses the problem of evil to heap abuse on God, arguing that he is no more cruel than the Almighty Himself: "The believers and the sentimentalists say that [God] is greedy for our love. I prefer to think that, judging from the world he is supposed to have made, he can only be greedy for our humiliation, and *that* greed how could he ever exhaust? It's bottomless. The world grows more and more miserable while he twists the endless screw, though he gives us presents – for a universal suicide would defeat his purpose – to alleviate the humiliations we suffer. A cancer of the rectum, a streaming cold, incontinence. For example, you are a poor man, so he gives you a small present, my daughter, to keep you satisfied a little longer." How would you respond to the view of God represented by this quotation?
18. In chapter sixteen of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, Steiner says, "It's never too late to spit at God Almighty. He lasts forever and ever, amen. And he made us what we are." How is his act of blaming God different from that of Doctor Fischer? How would you respond to such a statement from a man who has undergone much unjust suffering in his life?
19. In Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, why is the title character so cruel and cynical? The novel never answers the question, though the author does drop a few hints. Defend your answer by citing specific quotations and incidents from the novel.
20. Greed and humiliation are major themes of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*. The author suggests that the first is more powerful than the second, and that especially the rich are willing to suffer the latter in order to satisfy the former. Analyze that assertion from a biblical perspective. Is Greene's assessment of human nature an accurate one? What, if anything, justifies deliberately choosing to suffer humiliation?
21. In chapter sixteen of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*, Alfred says, "Anna-Luise was dead. She could only continue to exist somewhere if God existed." To what extent is the protagonist's hope tied to the existence of God? From a biblical perspective, is he right in implying that without God, no hope exists for life after death? At the end of the novel, does the protagonist act on this conviction?