

LE JOHN CARRÉ

**TINKER, TAILOR,
SOLDIER, SPY**



PENGUIN BOOKS

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JOHN LE CARRÉ, the pseudonym for David Cornwell, was a member of the British Foreign Service from 1959 to 1964. His third novel, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, became a worldwide bestseller. He has written twenty-one novels, which have been published in thirty-six languages. Many of his books have been made into films, including *The Constant Gardener*; *The Russia House*; *The Little Drummer Girl*; and *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

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For James Bennett and Dusty Rhodes, in memory

TINKER,
TAILOR,
SOLDIER,
SAILOR,
RICH MAN,
POOR MAN,
BEGGARMAN,
THIEF.

Small children's fortune-telling rhyme used when counting cherry stones, waistcoat buttons, daisy petals, or the seeds of the Timothy grass.

—from the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*

INTRODUCTION

I have always wanted to set a novel in Cornwall, and to this day *Tinker Tailor* is as near as I ever came to doing so. The unfinished version that had lain in my desk drawer for years before I started writing the story in earnest did not contain George Smiley at all, but opened instead with a solitary and embittered man living alone on a Cornish cliff, staring up at a single black car as it wove down the hillside towards him. I had chosen in my imagination a spot not unlike the little harbour of Porthgwarra in West Cornwall, where the cottages lie low on the sea's edge, and the hills behind seem to be pressing them into the sea. My man was holding a bucket in his hand, on his way to feeding his chickens. He had a limp, as Jim Prideaux has a limp in the version you are about to read, and like Jim he was a former British agent who had walked into a trap set for him by a traitor inside his own service, called "The Circus."

My original plan was for the Circus investigators to put this figure back into harness, in a way that would provoke the unknown traitor to try his hand again, and thus reveal himself. I wanted the entire story to play in contemporary time and not in the flashbacks I later resorted to. But when I got down to writing the book for real, I discovered that I was painting myself into a corner. I could think of no plausible way to pursue a linear path forward while at the same time peering back down the path that had brought my man to the point where the story began. So one day, after months of frustration, I took the whole manuscript into the garden and burned it, and began again.

I had also saddled myself with another headache. I was determined to describe something that in those days was still new to my readers and perhaps, despite all the press revelations about the penetration of our secret services, still is even now: namely, the inside-out logic of a double-agent operation, and the sheer scale of the mayhem that can be visited on an enemy service when its intelligence-gathering efforts fall under the control of its opponent.

Oh, we knew vaguely that Kim Philby had once been head of the counter-intelligence section of the British secret service and privy to American efforts to penetrate the KGB. We knew that at one time he was in line to become chief of the entire British service. Perhaps we even knew that he had personally advised the CIA's foremost Moscow Centre watcher, James Jesus Angleton, on double-agent cases, in which Philby was held to possess exceptional expertise. We had read perhaps that George Blake, another KGB traitor inside SIS, had betrayed a number of British agents to his Soviet masters—he now claims hundreds, and who is to deny the wretched man his boast? His cause, like his victims, is dead. But what very few people managed to understand was the pushme-pullyou nature of the double-agent's trade.

For while on one side the secret traitor will be doing his damndest to frustrate the efforts of his own service, on the other he will be building himself a successful career in it, providing it with the coups and grace-notes that it needs to justify its existence, and generally passing himself off as a capable and trustworthy fellow, a good man on a dark night. The art of the game—best described in J. C. Masterman's account of the British double-cross system operated against Germany in wartime—is therefore a balancing act between what is good for the double agent in his role as loyal member of his service, and what is good for your own side in its unrelenting efforts to pervert that service to the point where it is doing more harm to the country that employs it than good; or, as Smiley has it, when it has been pulled inside out.

Such an abject state of affairs was certainly reached by SIS in the high days of Blake and Philby, just as it was self-inflicted on the CIA by the paranoid influence of Angleton himself, who, in the aftermath of discovering that he had been eating out of the hand of the KGB's most successful double agent, spent the rest of his life trying to prove that the Agency, like SIS, was being controlled by Moscow; and that its occasional successes were consequently no more than sweeteners tossed to it by the fiendish manipulators of the KGB. Angleton was wrong, but his effect on the CIA was as disastrous as if he had been right. Both services would have done much less damage to their countries, moral and financial, if they had simply been disbanded.

I never knew either Blake or Philby, but I always had a quite particular dislike for Philby, and an unnatural sympathy for Blake. The reasons, I fear, have much to do with the inverted snobbery of my class and generation. I disliked Philby because he had so many of my attributes. He was public-school educated, the son of a wayward and dictatorial father—the explorer and adventurer, St. John Philby—he drew people easily to him and he was adept at hiding his feelings, in particular, his seething distaste for the bigotries and prejudices of the English ruling classes. I'm afraid that all of these characteristics have at one time or another been mine. I felt I understood him too well, and in some odd way he seems to have sensed this, for in his last interview before he died he told his interviewer, Phil Knightley, that he had the feeling I knew something discreditable about him. And in a way, he was right: I knew what it was like, as he did, to be brought up by a man so oversized that your only resort as his child was to subterfuge and deceit. And I knew, or thought I knew, how easily the anger and inwardness thus born could turn themselves into a love-hate relationship with the father images of society, and finally with society itself, so that the childish avenger becomes the adult predator, a thing I touched upon in my most autobiographical novel, *A Perfect Spy*. I knew, if you like, that Philby had taken a road that was dangerously open to myself, though I had resisted it. I knew that he represented one of the—thank God, unrealised—possibilities of my nature.

I warmed to Blake, on the other hand, because he was half a Dutchman and half a Jew, and in both capacities a most unlikely recruit to the secret ranks of the British Establishment. Where Philby had been born inside the fortress and spent his life borrowing beneath its ramparts, Blake had been born in the wastes of foreign and ethnic disadvantage, and had gone to great lengths to gain acceptance by those who secretly despised him: his employers. So that when I started putting together my little bestiary of suspects, I made sure that there were at least two of them—Bland and Esterhase and perhaps Jim Prideaux also—who were alienated by birth from the class structure that they served.

So much for the documentary background. The rest is an informed fantasy. The origin of my use of the word “mole” to describe a long-term penetration agent is a small mystery to me, as it was to the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, who wrote to me asking whether I had invented it. I could not say for certain. I had a memory that it was current KGB jargon in the days when I was briefly an intelligence officer. I even thought I had seen it written down, in an annexe to the Royal Commission report on the Petrovs, who defected to the Australians in Canberra some time in the Fifties. But the OED couldn't find the trace and neither could I, so for a long time, I thought perhaps I had. Then one day, I received a letter from a reader, referring me to page 240 of Francis Bacon's *Historie of the Reigne of King Henry the Seventh*, published in 1641:

As for his secret Spialls, which he did imploy both at home and abroad, by them to discover what Practices and Conspiracies were against him, surely his Case required it: Hee had such Moles perpetually working and casting to undermine him.

Well, I certainly hadn't read Francis Bacon on moles. Where did he have them from? Or was he ju

having fun with an apt metaphor?

The other bits of jargon—~~lamplighter, scalp-hunter, baby-sitter, honey trap and the rest~~—were all invented, but they too, I am told, have at least in part since been adopted by the professionals. I made no particular cult of them as I wrote: I wished merely to underline the fact that spying for those who do it is a trade like any other, and that, like other trades, it has its little bits of language. The Russians were always more imaginative in this respect, living in daily contact with shoemakers (forgers), neighbours (members of a sister service), pianists (radio operators) and the like. My clandestine vocabulary was therefore a small conceit, but when the BBC's television version reached the screen, became for a while a national amusement, for which I was duly grateful.

How do I remember the book now, sixteen years on? Partly, I suppose, for the luck that followed it—the exposure of Blunt, the TV series, Alec Guinness triumphant as George Smiley, not to mention the marvellous direction and casting. And partly, because it restored my spirits after the miserable critical reception given to its predecessor, *The Naive and Sentimental Lover*. But mostly I remember for the little boy Bill Roach, who had his counterpart in my own days as a schoolmaster, and later in *Perfect Spy* as poor Pym's son. Roach was not his name, of course, and he did not, so far as I know, spy on members of the staff. But I remember his watchfulness as if it had been my own, and I remember how deeply he got under my skin, perhaps because I could not help thinking of him as myself, when I was fifteen years younger.

And I remember Connie Sachs, too, my Circus researcher, an archetype for the last generation of secret service vestals—clever, unhappy ladies of the English upper classes, who, having joined the service in the war, stayed on to fight the peace, making a kind of granary of their extraordinary memories for us young turks to plunder.

It is odd, in these altered days, to discover that *Tinker Tailor* is already an historical novel, but I don't think that makes it irrelevant, and I hope you have as much pleasure with it as I do myself, when I dip into it.

JOHN LE CARRÉ

July 1999

PART I

The truth is, if old Major Dover hadn't dropped dead at Taunton races Jim would never have come to Thursgood's at all. He came in mid-term without an interview—late May, it was, though no one would have thought it from the weather—employed through one of the shiftier agencies specialising in supply teachers for prep schools, to hold down old Dover's teaching till someone suitable could be found. "A linguist," Thursgood told the common-room, "a temporary measure," and brushed away his forelock in self-defence. "Priddo." He gave the spelling, "P-r-i-d"—French was not Thursgood's subject so he consulted the slip of paper—"e-a-u-x, first name James. I think he'll do us very well till July." The staff had no difficulty in reading the signals. Jim Prideaux was a poor white of the teaching community. He belonged to the same sad bunch as the late Mrs. Loveday, who had a Persian-lamb coat and stood in for junior divinity until her cheques bounced, or the late Mr. Maltby, the pianist who had been called from choir practice to help the police with their enquiries, and as far as anyone knew was helping them to this day, for Maltby's trunk still lay in the cellar awaiting instructions. Several of the staff, but chiefly Marjoribanks, were in favour of opening that trunk. They said it contained notorious missing treasures: Aprahamian's silver-framed picture of his Lebanese mother, for instance, Best-Ingram's Swiss army penknife and Matron's watch. But Thursgood set his creaseless face resolutely against their entreaties. Only five years had passed since he had inherited the school from his father, but they had taught him already that some things are best locked away.

Jim Prideaux arrived on a Friday in a rainstorm. The rain rolled like gun-smoke down the brown combs of the Quantocks, then raced across the empty cricket fields into the sandstone of the crumbling façades. He arrived just after lunch, driving an old red Alvis and towing a second-hand trailer that had once been blue. Early afternoons at Thursgood's are tranquil, a brief truce in the running fight of each school day. The boys are sent to rest in their dormitories, the staff sit in the common-room over coffee reading newspapers or correcting boys' work. Thursgood reads a novel to his mother. Of the whole school, therefore, only little Bill Roach actually saw Jim arrive, saw the steam belching from the Alvis's bonnet as it wheezed its way down the pitted drive, windscreen wipers going full pelt and the trailer shuddering through the puddles in pursuit.

Roach was a new boy in those days and graded dull, if not actually deficient. Thursgood's was his second prep school in two terms. He was a fat round child with asthma, and he spent large parts of his rest kneeling on the end of his bed, gazing through the window. His mother lived grandly in Bath; his father was agreed to be the richest in the school, a distinction which cost the son dear. Coming from a broken home, Roach was also a natural watcher. In Roach's observation Jim did not stop at the school buildings but continued across the sweep to the stable yard. He knew the layout of the place already. Roach decided later that he must have made a reconnaissance or studied maps. Even when he reached the yard, he didn't stop but drove straight onto the wet grass, travelling at speed to keep the momentum. Then over the hummock into the Dip, head-first and out of sight. Roach half expected the trailer to jackknife on the brink, Jim took it over so fast, but instead it just lifted its tail and disappeared like a giant rabbit into its hole.

The Dip is a piece of Thursgood folklore. It lies in a patch of wasteland between the orchard, the fruit house, and the stable yard. To look at, it is no more than a depression in the ground, grass covered, with hummocks on the northern side, each about boy height and covered in tufted thickets

which in summer grow spongy. It is these hummocks that give the Dip its special virtue as a playground and also its reputation, which varies with the fantasy of each new generation of boys. There are the traces of an open-cast silver mine, says one year, and digs enthusiastically for wealth. They are the traces of a Romano-British fort, says another, and stages battles with sticks and clay missiles. To others the Dip is a bomb-crater from the war and the hummocks are seated bodies buried in the blast. The truth is more prosaic. Six years ago, and not long before his abrupt elopement with a receptionist from the Castle Hotel, Thursgood's father had launched an appeal for a swimming pool and persuaded the boys to dig a large hole with a deep and a shallow end. But the money that came in was never quite enough to finance the ambition, so it was frittered away on other schemes, such as a new projector for the art school, and a plan to grow mushrooms in the school cellars. And even, said the cruel ones, to feather a nest for certain illicit lovers when they eventually took flight to Germany, the lady's native home.

Jim was unaware of these associations. The fact remains that by sheer luck he had chosen the one corner of Thursgood's academy which, as far as Roach was concerned, was endowed with supernatural properties.

Roach waited at the window but saw nothing more. Both the Alvis and the trailer were in dead ground, and if it hadn't been for the wet red tracks across the grass he might have wondered whether he had dreamed the whole thing. But the tracks were real, so when the bell went for the end of rest he put on his rubber boots and trudged through the rain to the top of the Dip and peered down, and there was Jim dressed in an army raincoat and a quite extraordinary hat, broadbrimmed like a safari hat but hairy, with one side pinned up in a rakish piratical curl and the water running off it like a gutter.

The Alvis was in the stable yard; Roach never knew how Jim spirited it out of the Dip, but the trailer was right down there, at what should have been the deep end, bedded on platforms of weathered brick, and Jim was sitting on the step drinking from a green plastic beaker, and rubbing his right shoulder as if he had banged it on something, while the rain poured off his hat. Then the hat lifted and Roach found himself staring at an extremely fierce red face, made still fiercer by the shadow of the brim and by a brown moustache washed into fangs by the rain. The rest of the face was criss-crossed with jagged cracks, so deep and crooked that Roach concluded in another of his flashes of imaginative genius that Jim had once been very hungry in a tropical place and filled up again since. The left arm still lay across his chest, the right shoulder was still drawn high against his neck. But the whole tangled shape of him was stock-still, he was like an animal frozen against its background: a stag, thought Roach, on a hopeful impulse; something noble.

"Who the hell are you?" asked a very military voice.

"Sir, Roach, sir. I'm a new boy."

For a moment longer, the brick face surveyed Roach from the shadow of the hat. Then, to his intense relief, its features relaxed into a wolfish grin, the left hand, still clapped over the right shoulder, resumed its slow massage while at the same time he managed a long pull from the plastic beaker.

"New boy, eh?" Jim repeated into the beaker, still grinning. "Well, that's a lucky break, I will say."

Rising now, and turning his crooked back on Roach, Jim set to work on what appeared to be a detailed study of the trailer's four legs, a very critical study that involved much rocking of the suspension, and much tilting of the strangely garbed head, and the emplacement of several bricks at different angles and points. Meanwhile the spring rain was clattering down on everything: his coat, his hat, and the roof of the old trailer. And Roach noticed that throughout these manoeuvres Jim's right shoulder had not budged at all but stayed wedged high against his neck like a rock under the mackintosh. Therefore he wondered whether Jim was a sort of giant hunchback and whether all hunch-

backs hurt as Jim's did. And he noticed as a generality, a thing to store away, that people with bad backs take long strides; it was something to do with balance.

"New boy, eh? Well, *I'm* not a new boy," Jim went on, in altogether a much more friendly tone, as he pulled at a leg of the trailer. "I'm an old boy. Old as Rip van Winkle, if you want to know. Older. Got any friends?"

"No, sir," said Roach simply, in the listless tone that schoolboys always use for saying "no," leaving all positive response to their interrogators. Jim, however, made no response at all, so that Roach felt an odd stirring of kinship suddenly, and of hope.

"My other name's Bill," he said. "I was christened Bill but Mr. Thursgood calls me William."

"Bill, eh. The unpaid Bill. Anyone ever call you that?"

"No, sir."

"Good name, anyway."

"Yes, sir."

"Known a lot of Bills. They've all been good'uns."

With that, in a manner of speaking, the introduction was made. Jim did not tell Roach to go away, so Roach stayed on the brow peering downward through his rain-smearred spectacles. The bricks, he noticed with awe, were pinched from the cucumber frame. Several had been loose already and Jim must have loosened them a bit more. It seemed a wonderful thing to Roach that anyone just arrived at Thursgood's should be so self-possessed as to pinch the actual fabric of the school for his own purposes, and doubly wonderful that Jim had run a lead off the hydrant for his water, for that hydrant was the subject of a special school rule: to touch it at all was a beatable offence.

"Hey, you, Bill. You wouldn't have such a thing as a marble on you, by any chance?"

"A, sir, what, sir?" Roach asked, patting his pockets in a dazed way.

"Marble, old boy. Round glass marble, little ball. Don't boys play marbles any more? We did when I was at school."

Roach had no marble, but Aprahamian had had a whole collection flown in from Beirut. It took Roach about fifty seconds to race back to the school, secure one against the wildest undertakings, and return panting to the Dip. There he hesitated, for in his mind the Dip was already Jim's and Roach required leave to descend it. But Jim had disappeared into the trailer, so, having waited a moment, Roach stepped gingerly down the bank and offered the marble through the doorway. Jim didn't spot him at once. He was sipping from the beaker and staring out the window at the black clouds as they tore this way and that over the Quantocks. This sipping movement, Roach noticed, was actually quite difficult, for Jim could not easily swallow standing up straight; he had to tilt his whole twisted trunk backward to achieve the angle. Meanwhile the rain came on really hard again, rattling against the trailer like gravel.

"Sir," said Roach, but Jim made no move.

"Trouble with an Alvis is, no damn springs," said Jim at last, more to the window than to his visitor. "You drive along with your rump on the white line, eh? Cripple anybody." And, tilting his trunk again, he drank.

"Yes, sir," said Roach, much surprised that Jim should assume he was a driver.

Jim had taken off his hat. His sandy hair was close-cropped; there were patches where someone had gone too low with the scissors. These patches were mainly on one side, so that Roach guessed that Jim had cut the hair himself with his good arm, which made him even more lopsided.

"I brought you a marble," said Roach.

"Very good of you. Thanks, old boy." Taking the marble, he slowly rolled it round his hand,

powdery palm, and Roach knew at once that he was very skillful at all sorts of things; that he was the kind of man who lived on terms with tools and objects generally. “Not level, you see, Bill,” he confided, still intent upon the marble. “Skewy. Like me. Watch,” and turned purposefully to the large window. A strip of aluminium beading ran along the bottom, put there to catch the condensation. Laying the marble in it, Jim watched it roll to the end and fall on the floor.

“Skewy,” he repeated. “Listing in the stern. Can’t have that, can we? Hey, hey, where d’you get to, you little brute?”

The trailer was not a homey place, Roach noticed, stooping to retrieve the marble. It might have belonged to anyone, though it was scrupulously clean. A bunk, a kitchen chair, a ship’s stove, a calor gas cylinder. Not even a picture of his wife, thought Roach, who had not yet met a bachelor, with the exception of Mr. Thursgood. The only personal things he could find were a webbing kit-bag hanging from the door, a set of sewing things stored beside the bunk, and a homemade shower made from a perforated biscuit tin and neatly welded to the roof. And on the table one bottle of colourless drink, gin or vodka, because that was what his father drank when Roach went to his flat for weekends in the holidays.

“East-west looks okay, but north-south is undoubtedly skewy,” Jim declared, testing the other window ledge. “What are you good at, Bill?”

“I don’t know, sir,” said Roach woodenly.

“Got to be good at something, surely; everyone is. How about football? Are you good at football, Bill?”

“No, sir,” said Roach.

“Are you a grind, then?” Jim asked carelessly, as he lowered himself with a short grunt onto the bunk and took a pull from the beaker. “You don’t look a grind, I must say,” he added politely. “Although you’re a loner.”

“I don’t know,” Roach repeated, and moved half a pace towards the open door.

“What’s your best thing, then?” He took another long sip. “Must be good at something, Bill; everyone is. My best thing was ducks and drakes. Cheers.”

Now this was an unfortunate question to ask of Roach just then, for it occupied most of his waking hours. Indeed he had recently come to doubt whether he had any purpose on earth at all. In work and play he considered himself seriously inadequate; even the daily routine of the school, such as making his bed and tidying his clothes, seemed to be beyond his reach. Also he lacked piety: old Mrs. Thursgood had told him so; he screwed up his face too much at chapel. He blamed himself very much for these shortcomings, but most of all he blamed himself for the break-up of his parents’ marriage, which he should have seen coming and taken steps to prevent. He even wondered whether he was more directly responsible; whether, for instance, he was abnormally wicked or divisive or slothful, and that his bad character had wrought the rift. At his last school he had tried to explain this by screaming, and feigning fits of cerebral palsy, which his aunt had. His parents conferred, as they frequently did in their reasonable way, and changed his school. Therefore this chance question, levelled at him in the cramped trailer by a creature at least halfway to divinity—a fellow solitary, at that—brought him suddenly very near disaster. He felt the heat charging to his face; he watched his spectacles mist over and the trailer begin to dissolve into a sea of grief. Whether Jim noticed this, Roach never knew, for suddenly he had turned his crooked back on him, moved away to the table, and was helping himself from the plastic beaker while he threw out saving phrases.

“You’re a good watcher, anyway, I’ll tell you that for nothing, old boy. Us singles always are—no one to rely on, what? Nobody else spotted me. Gave me a real turn up there, parked on the horizon.

Thought you were a juju man. Best watcher in the unit, Bill Roach is, I'll bet. Long as he's got his specs on. What?"

"Yes," Roach agreed gratefully, "I am."

"Well, you stay here and watch, then," Jim commanded, clapping the safari hat back on his head, "and I'll slip outside and trim the legs. Do that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where's damn marble?"

"Here, sir."

"Call out when she moves, right? North, south, whichever way she rolls. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Know which way's north?"

"That way," said Roach promptly, and struck out his arm at random.

"Right. Well, you call when she rolls," Jim repeated, and disappeared into the rain. A moment later Roach felt the ground swaying under his feet and heard another roar either of pain or anger, as Jim wrestled with a recalcitrant leg.

In the course of that same summer term, the boys paid Jim the compliment of a nickname. They had several shots before they were happy. They tried "Trooper," which caught the bit of military in him, his occasional, quite harmless cursing, and his solitary rambles in the Quantocks. All the same, "Trooper" didn't stick, so they tried "Pirate" and for a while "Goulash." "Goulash" because of his taste for hot food, the smell of curries and onions and paprika that greeted them in warm puffs as they filed past the Dip on their way to evensong. "Goulash" for his perfect French, which was held to have a slushy quality. Spikely, of Five B, could imitate it to a hair: "You heard the question, Berger. What is Emile looking at?"—a convulsive jerk of the right hand—"Don't gawp at me, old boy, I'm not a juju man. *Qu'est-ce qu'il regarde, Emile dans le tableau que tu as sous le nez? Mon cher Berger*, if you do not very soon summon one lucid sentence of French, *je te mettrai tout de suite à la porte, tu comprends*, you beastly toad?"

But these terrible threats were never carried out, either in French or in English. In a quaint way, they actually added to the aura of gentleness which quickly surrounded him, a gentleness only possible in big men seen through the eyes of boys.

Yet "Goulash" did not satisfy them, either. It lacked the hint of strength contained. It took no account of Jim's passionate Englishness, which was the only subject where he could be relied on to waste time. Toad Spikely had only to venture one disparaging comment on the monarchy, extol the joys of some foreign country, preferably a hot one, for Jim to colour sharply and snap out a good three minutes' worth on the privilege of being born an Englishman. He knew they were teasing him but he was unable not to rise. Often he ended his homily with a rueful grin, and muttered references to red herrings, and red faces too, when certain people would have to come in for extra work and miss their football. But England was his love; when it came down to it, no one suffered for her.

"Best place in the whole damn world!" he bellowed once. "Know why? Know why, toad?"

Spikely did not, so Jim seized a crayon and drew a globe. To the west, America, he said, full of greedy fools fouling up their inheritance. To the east, China-Russia; he drew no distinction: boiler suits, prison camps, and a damn long march to nowhere. In the middle . . .

Finally they hit on "Rhino."

Partly this was a play on "Prideaux," partly a reference to his taste for living off the land and his

appetite for physical exercise, which they noted constantly. Shivering in the shower queue first thing in the morning, they would see the Rhino pounding down Combe Lane with a rucksack on his crooked back as he returned from his morning march. Going to bed, they could glimpse his lonely shadow through the plastic roof of the fives court as the Rhino tirelessly attacked the concrete wall. And sometimes, on warm evenings, from their dormitory windows they would covertly watch him at golf, which he played with a dreadful old iron, zigzagging across the playing fields, often after reading to them from an extremely English adventure book: Biggles, Percy Westerman, or Jeffrey Farnol, grabbed haphazard from the dingy library. At each stroke they waited for the grunt as he started his backswing, and they were seldom disappointed. They kept a meticulous score. At the staff cricket match he made twenty-five before dismissing himself with a ball deliberately lofted to Spikely at square leg. "Catch, toad, catch it—go on. Well done, Spikely, good lad—that's what you're there for."

He was also credited, despite his taste for tolerance, with a sound understanding of the criminal mind. There were several examples of this, but the most telling occurred a few days before the end of term, when Spikely discovered in Jim's waste-basket a draft of the next day's examination paper, and rented it to candidates at five new pence a time. Several boys paid their shilling and spent an agonised night memorising answers by torchlight in their dormitories. But when the exam came round Jim presented a quite different paper.

"You can look at this one for nothing," he bellowed as he sat down. And, having hauled open his *Daily Telegraph*, he calmly gave himself over to the latest counsels of the juju men, which they understood to mean almost anyone with intellectual pretension, even if he wrote in the Queen's cause.

There was lastly the incident of the owl, which had a separate place in their opinion of him, since it involved death, a phenomenon to which children react variously. The weather continuing cold, Jim brought a bucket of coal to his classroom and one Wednesday lit it in the grate, and sat there with his back to the warmth, reading a *dictée*. First some soot fell, which he ignored; then the owl came down—a full-sized barn owl which had nested up there, no doubt, through many unswept winters and summers of Dover's rule, and was now smoked out, dazed and black from beating itself to exhaustion in the flue. It fell over the coals and collapsed in a heap on the wooden floorboard with a clatter and a scuffle, then lay like an emissary of the devil, hunched but breathing, wings stretched, staring straight out at the boys through the soot that caked its eyes. There was no one who was not frightened; even Spikely, a hero, was frightened. Except for Jim, who had in a second folded the beast together and taken it out the door without a word. They heard nothing, though they listened like stowaways, till the sound of running water from down the corridor as Jim evidently washed his hands. "He's having a pee," said Spikely, which earned a nervous laugh. But as they filed out of the classroom they discovered the owl still folded, neatly dead and awaiting burial, on top of the compost heap beside the Dip. Its neck, as the braver ones established, was snapped. Only a gamekeeper, declared Sudeley, who had one, would know how to kill an owl so well.

Among the rest of the Thursgood community, opinion regarding Jim was less unanimous. The ghost of Mr. Maltby, the pianist, died hard. Matron, siding with Bill Roach, pronounced him heroic and in need of care: it was a miracle he managed with that back. Marjoribanks said he had been run over by a bus when he was drunk. It was Marjoribanks also, at the staff match where Jim so excelled, who pointed out the sweater. Marjoribanks was not a cricketer but he had strolled down to watch with Thursgood.

"Do you think that sweater's kosher," he asked in a high, jokey voice, "or do you think he pinched it?"

“Leonard, that’s very unfair,” Thursgood scolded, hammering at the flanks of his Labrador. “Bite him, Ginny, bite the bad man.”

By the time he reached his study, however, Thursgood’s laughter had quite worn off and he became extremely nervous. Bogus Oxford men he could deal with, just as in his time he had known classics masters who had no Greek and parsons who had no divinity. Such men, confronted with proof of their deception, broke down and wept and left, or stayed on half-pay. But men who withheld genuine accomplishment—these were a breed he had not met but he knew already that he did not like them. Having consulted the university calendar, he telephoned the agency—a Mr. Stroll, of the house of Stroll & Medley.

“What precisely do you want to know?” Mr. Stroll asked with a dreadful sigh.

“Well, nothing *precisely*.” Thursgood’s mother was sewing at a sampler and seemed not to hear. “Merely that if one asks for a written *curriculum vitae* one likes it to be complete. One doesn’t like gaps. Not if one pays one’s fee.”

At this point Thursgood found himself wondering rather wildly whether he had woken Mr. Stroll from a deep sleep to which he had now returned.

“Very patriotic bloke,” Mr. Stroll observed finally.

“I did not employ him for his patriotism.”

“He’s been in dock,” Mr. Stroll whispered on, as if through frightful draughts of cigarette smoke. “Laid up. Spinal.”

“Quite so. But I assume he has not been in hospital for the whole of the last twenty-five years. *Touché*,” he murmured to his mother, his hand over the mouthpiece, and once more it crossed his mind that Mr. Stroll had dropped off to sleep.

“You’ve only got him till the end of term,” Mr. Stroll breathed. “If you don’t fancy him, chuck him out. You asked for temporary, temporary’s what you’ve got. You said cheap, you’ve got cheap.”

“That’s as may be,” Thursgood retorted gamely. “But I’ve paid you a twenty-guinea fee; my father dealt with you for many years and I’m entitled to certain assurances. You’ve put here—may I read it to you?—you’ve put here: ‘Before his injury, various overseas appointments of a commercial and prospecting nature.’ Now that is hardly an enlightening description of a lifetime’s employment, is it?”

At her sewing his mother nodded her agreement. “It is *not*,” she echoed aloud.

“That’s my first point. Let me go on a little.”

“Not too much, darling,” warned his mother.

“I happen to know he was up at Oxford in 1938. Why didn’t he finish? What went wrong?”

“I seem to recall there was an interlude round about then,” said Mr. Stroll after another age. “But I expect you’re too young to remember it.”

“He can’t have been in prison *all* the time,” said his mother after a very long silence, still without looking up from her sewing.

“He’s been somewhere,” said Thursgood morosely, staring across the windswept gardens towards the Dip.

All through the summer holidays, as he moved uncomfortably between one household and another, embracing and rejecting, Bill Roach fretted about Jim: whether his back was hurting; what he was doing for money now that he had no one to teach and only half a term’s pay to live on; worst of all, whether he would be there when the new term began, for Bill had a feeling he could not describe that Jim lived so precariously on the world’s surface that he might at any time fall off it into a void; he

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