

GRAHAM GREENE

OUR MAN IN HAVANA

AN ENTERTAINMENT

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

1

'THAT nigger going down the street,' said Dr Hasselbacher standing in the Wonder Bar, 'he reminds me of you, Mr Wormold.' It was typical of Dr Hasselbacher that after fifteen years of friendship he still used the prefix Mr - friendship proceeded with the slowness and assurance of a careful diagnosis. On Wormold's death-bed, when Dr Hasselbacher came to feel his failing pulse, he would perhaps become Jim.

The Negro was blind in one eye and one leg was shorter than the other; he wore an ancient felt hat and his ribs showed through his torn shirt like a ship's under demolition. He walked at the edge of the pavement, beyond the yellow and pink pillars of a colonnade, in the hot January sun, and he counted every step as he went. As he passed the Wonder Bar, going up Virdules, he had reached '1,369'. He had to move slowly to give time for so long a numeral. 'One thousand three hundred and seventy.' He was a familiar figure near the National Square, where he would sometimes linger and stop his counting long enough to sell a packet of pornographic photographs to a tourist. Then he would take up his count where he had left it. At the end of the day, like an energetic passenger on a trans-Atlantic liner, he must have known to a yard how far he had walked.

'Joe?' Wormold asked. 'I don't see any resemblance. Except the limp, of course,' but instinctively he took a quick look at himself in the mirror marked Cerveza Tropical, as though he might really have been so broken down and darkened during his walk from the store in the old town. But the face which looked back at him was only a little discoloured by the dust from the harbour-works; it was still the same, anxious and criss-crossed and fortyish: much younger than Dr Hasselbacher's,

yet a stranger might have felt certain it would be extinguished sooner – the shadow was there already, the anxieties which are beyond the reach of a tranquillizer. The Negro limped out of sight, round the corner of the Paseo. The day was full of boot-blacks.

‘I didn’t mean the limp. You don’t see the likeness?’

‘No.’

‘He’s got two ideas in his head,’ Dr Hasselbacher explained, ‘to do his job and to keep count. And, of course, he’s British.’

‘I still don’t see . . .’ Wormold cooled his mouth with his morning daiquiri. Seven minutes to get to the Wonder Bar: seven minutes back to the store: six minutes for companionship. He looked at his watch. He remembered that it was one minute slow.

‘He’s reliable, you can depend on him, that’s all I meant,’ said Dr Hasselbacher with impatience. ‘How’s Milly?’

‘Wonderful,’ Wormold said. It was his invariable answer, but he meant it.

‘Seventeen on the seventeenth, eh?’

‘That’s right.’ He looked quickly over his shoulder as though somebody were hunting him and then at his watch again. ‘You’ll be coming to split a bottle with us?’

‘I’ve never failed yet, Mr Wormold. Who else will be there?’

‘Well, I thought just the three of us. You see, Cooper’s gone home, and poor Marlowe’s in hospital still, and Milly doesn’t seem to care for any of this new crowd at the Consulate. So I thought we’d keep it quiet, in the family.’

‘I’m honoured to be one of the family, Mr Wormold.’

‘Perhaps a table at the Nacional – or would you say that wasn’t quite – well, suitable?’

‘This isn’t England or Germany, Mr Wormold. Girls grow up quickly in the tropics.’

A shutter across the way creaked open and then regularly blew to in the slight breeze from the sea, click clack like an ancient clock. Wormold said, ‘I must be off.’

‘Phastkleaners will get on without you, Mr Wormold.’ It was a day of uncomfortable truths. ‘Like my patients,’ Dr Hasselbacher added with kindness.

'People have to get ill, they don't have to buy vacuum cleaners.'

'But you charge them more.'

'And get only twenty per cent for myself. One can't save much on twenty per cent.'

'This is not an age for saving, Mr Wormold.'

'I must – for Milly. If something happened to me . . .'

'We none of us have a great expectation of life nowadays, so why worry?'

'All these disturbances are very bad for trade. What's the good of a vacuum cleaner if the power's cut off?'

'I could manage a small loan, Mr Wormold.'

'No, no. It's not like that. My worry isn't this year's or even next year's, it's a long-term worry.'

'Then it's not worth calling a worry. We live in an atomic age, Mr Wormold. Push a button – piff bang – where are we? Another Scotch, please.'

'And that's another thing. You know what the firm has done now? They've sent me an Atomic Pile Cleaner.'

'Really? I didn't know science had got that far.'

'Oh, of course, there's nothing atomic about it – it's only a name. Last year there was the Turbo Jet; this year it's the Atomic. It works off the light-plug just the same as the other.'

'Then why worry?' Dr Hasselbacher repeated like a theme tune, leaning into his whisky.

'They don't realize that sort of name may go down in the States, but not here, where the clergy are preaching all the time against the misuse of science. Milly and I went to the Cathedral last Sunday – you know how she is about Mass, thinks she'll convert me, I wouldn't wonder. Well, Father Mendez spent half an hour describing the effect of a hydrogen bomb. Those who believe in heaven-on earth, he said, are creating a hell – he made it sound that way too – it was very lucid. How do you think I liked it on Monday morning when I had to make a window display of the new Atomic Pile Suction Cleaner? It wouldn't have surprised me if one of the wild boys around here had broken the window. Catholic Action, Christ the King, all that stuff. I don't know what to do about it, Hasselbacher.'

‘Sell one to Father Mendez for the Bishop’s palace.’

‘But he’s satisfied with the Turbo. It was a good machine. Of course this one is too. Improved suction for bookcases. You know I wouldn’t sell anyone a machine that wasn’t good.’

‘I know, Mr Wormold. Can’t you just change the name?’

‘They won’t let me. They are proud of it. They think it’s the best phrase anyone has thought up since “It beats as it sweeps as it cleans.” You know they had something called a purifying pad with the Turbo. Nobody minded – it was a good gadget, but yesterday a woman came in and looked at the Atomic Pile and she asked whether a pad that size could really absorb all the radio-activity. And what about Strontium 90? she asked.’

‘I could give you a medical certificate,’ said Dr Hasselbacher.

‘Do you never worry about anything?’

‘I have a secret defence, Mr Wormold. I am interested in life.’

‘So am I, but . . .’

‘You are interested in a person, not in life, and people die or leave us – I’m sorry; I wasn’t referring to your wife. But if you are interested in life it never lets you down. I am interested in the blueness of the cheese. You don’t do crosswords, do you, Mr Wormold? I do, and they are like people: one reaches an end. I can finish any crossword within an hour, but I have a discovery concerned with the blueness of cheese that will never come to a conclusion – although of course one dreams that perhaps a time might come . . . One day I must show you my laboratory.’

‘I must be going, Hasselbacher.’

‘You should dream more, Mr Wormold. Reality in our century is not something to be faced.’

2

When Wormold arrived at his store in Lamparilla Street, Milly had not yet returned from her American convent school, and in spite of the two figures he could see through the door, the

shop seemed to him empty. How empty! And so it would remain until Milly came back. He was aware whenever he entered the shop of a vacuum that had nothing to do with his cleaners. No customer could fill it, particularly not the one who stood there now looking too spruce for Havana and reading a leaflet in English on the Atomic Pile, pointedly neglecting Wormold's assistant. Lopez was an impatient man who did not like to waste his time away from the Spanish edition of *Confidential*. He was glaring at the stranger and making no attempt to win him over.

'Buenos días,' Wormold said. He looked at all strangers in the shop with an habitual suspicion. Ten years ago a man had entered the shop, posing as a customer, and he had guilelessly sold him a sheep's wool for the high-gloss finishing on his car. He had been a plausible impostor, but no one could be a less likely purchaser of a vacuum cleaner than this man. Tall and elegant, in his stone-coloured tropical suit, and wearing an exclusive tie, he carried with him the breath of beaches and the leathery smell of a good club: you expected him to say, 'The Ambassador will see you in a minute.' His cleaning would always be arranged for him - by an ocean or a valet.

'Don't speak the lingo, I'm afraid,' the stranger answered. The slang word was a blemish on his suit, like an egg-stain after breakfast. 'You are British, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'I mean - really British. British passport and all that.'

'Yes. Why?'

'One likes to do business with a British firm. One knows where one is, if you see what I mean.'

'What can I do for you?'

'Well, first, I just wanted to look around.' He spoke as though he were in a bookshop. 'I couldn't make your chap understand that.'

'You are looking for a vacuum cleaner?'

'Well, not exactly looking.'

'I mean, you are thinking of buying one?'

'That's it, old man, you've hit it on the nail.' Wormold had the impression that the man had chosen his tone because he felt

it matched the store – a protective colouring in Lamparilla Street; the breeziness certainly didn't match his clothes. One can't successfully follow St Paul's technique of being all things to all men without a change of suit.

Wormold said briskly, 'You couldn't do better than the Atomic Pile.'

'I notice one here called the Turbo.'

'That too is a very good cleaner. Have you a big apartment?'

'Well, not exactly big.'

'Here, you see, you get two sets of brushes – this one for waxing and this for polishing – oh no, I think it's the other way round. The Turbo is air-powered.'

'What does that mean?'

'Well, of course, it's . . . well, it's what it says, air-powered.'

'This funny little bit here – what's that for?'

'That's a two-way carpet nozzle.'

'You don't say so? Isn't that interesting? Why two-way?'

'You push and you pull.'

'The things they think up,' the stranger said. 'I suppose you sell a lot of these?'

'I'm the only agent here.'

'All the important people, I suppose, have to have an Atomic Pile?'

'Or a Turbo Jet.'

'Government offices?'

'Of course. Why?'

'What's good enough for a government office should be good enough for me.'

'You might prefer our Midget Make-Easy.'

'Make what easy?'

'The full title is Midget Make-Easy Air-Powered Suction Small Home Cleaner.'

'That word air-powered again.'

'I'm not responsible for it.'

'Don't get riled, old man.'

'Personally I hate the words Atomic Pile,' Wormold said with sudden passion. He was deeply disturbed. It occurred to

him that this stranger might be an inspector sent from the head office in London or New York. In that case they should hear nothing but the truth.

'I see what you mean. It's not a happy choice. Tell me, do you service these things?'

'Quarterly. Free of charge during the period of guarantee.'

'I meant yourself.'

'I send Lopez.'

'The sullen chap?'

'I'm not much of a mechanic. When I touch one of these things it somehow seems to give up working.'

'Don't you drive a car?'

'Yes, but if there's anything wrong, my daughter sees to it.'

'Oh yes, your daughter, Where's she?'

'At school. Now let me show you this snap-action coupling,' but of course, when he tried to demonstrate, it wouldn't couple. He pushed and screwed. 'Faulty part,' he said desperately.

'Let me try,' the stranger said, and in the coupling went as smooth as you could wish.

'How old is your daughter?'

'Sixteen,' he said and was angry with himself for answering.

'Well,' the stranger said, 'I must be getting along. Enjoyed our chat.'

'Wouldn't you like to watch a cleaner at work? Lopez here would give you a demonstration.'

'Not at the moment. I'll be seeing you again - here or there,' the man said with a vague and insolent confidence and was gone out of the door before Wormold thought to give him a trade-card. In the square at the top of Lamparilla Street he was swallowed up among the pimps and lottery sellers of the Havana noon.

Lopez said, 'He never intended to buy.'

'What did he want then?'

'Who knows? He looked a long time through the window at me. I think perhaps if you had not come in, he would have asked me to find him a girl.'

'A girl?'

He thought of the day ten years ago and then with uneasiness of Milly, and he wished he had not answered so many questions. He also wished that the snap-action coupling had coupled for once with a snap.

Chapter 2

HE could distinguish the approach of Milly like that of a police-car from a long way off. Whistles instead of sirens warned him of her coming. She was accustomed to walk from the bus stop in the Avenida de Belgica, but today the wolves seemed to be operating from the direction of Compostella. They were not dangerous wolves, he had reluctantly to admit that. The salute which had begun about her thirteenth birthday was really one of respect, for even by the high Havana standard Milly was beautiful. She had hair the colour of pale honey, dark eyebrows, and her pony-trim was shaped by the best barber in town. She paid no open attention to the whistles, they only made her step the higher – seeing her walk, you could almost believe in levitation. Silence would have seemed like an insult to her now.

Unlike Wormold, who believed in nothing, Milly was a Catholic: he had been made to promise her mother that before they married. Now her mother, he supposed, was of no faith at all, but she had left a Catholic on his hands. It brought Milly closer to Cuba than he could come himself. He believed that in the rich families the custom of keeping a duenna lingered still, and sometimes it seemed to him that Milly too carried a duenna about with her, invisible to all eyes but her own. In church, where she looked more lovely than in any other place, wearing her feather-weight mantilla embroidered with leaves transparent as winter, the duenna was always seated by her side, to observe that her back was straight, her face covered at the suitable moment, the sign of the cross correctly performed. Small boys might suck sweets with impunity around her or giggle from behind the pillars, she sat with the rigidity of a nun, following the Mass in a small gilt-edged missal bound in a morocco the colour of her hair (she had chosen it herself). The same invisible duenna saw to it that she ate fish on Friday, fasted on Ember Days and attended Mass not only on Sundays and the special feasts of the church, but also on her saint's day. Milly was her home-name: her given name was Seraphina – in

Cuba 'a double of the second class', a mysterious phrase which reminded Wormold of the race-track.

It had been long before Wormold realized that the duenna was not always by her side. Milly was meticulous in her behaviour at meals and had never neglected her night-prayers, as he had good reason to know since, even as a child, she had kept him waiting, to mark him out as the non-Catholic he was, before her bedroom door until she had finished. A light burnt continually in front of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. He remembered how he had overheard her at the age of four praying, 'Hail Mary, quite contrary.'

One day however, when Milly was thirteen, he had been summoned to the convent school of the American Sisters of Clare in the white rich suburb of Vedado. There he learnt for the first time how the duenna left Milly under the religious plaque by the grilled gateway of the school. The complaint was of a serious nature: she had set fire to a small boy called Thomas Earl Parkman, junior. It was true, the Reverend Mother admitted, that Earl, as he was known in the school, had pulled Milly's hair first, but this she considered in no way justified Milly's action which might well have had serious results if another girl had not pushed Earl into a fountain. Milly's only defence of her conduct had been that Earl was a Protestant and if there was going to be a persecution Catholics could always beat Protestants at that game.

'But how did she set Earl on fire?'

'She put petrol on the tail of his shirt.'

'Petrol!'

'Lighter-fluid, and then she struck a match. We think she must have been smoking in secret.'

'It's a most extraordinary story.'

'I guess you don't know Milly then. I must tell you, Mr Wormold, our patience has been sadly strained.'

Apparently, six months before setting fire to Earl, Milly had circulated round her art-class a set of postcards of the world's great pictures.

'I don't see what's wrong in that.'

'At the age of twelve, Mr Wormold, a child shouldn't confine