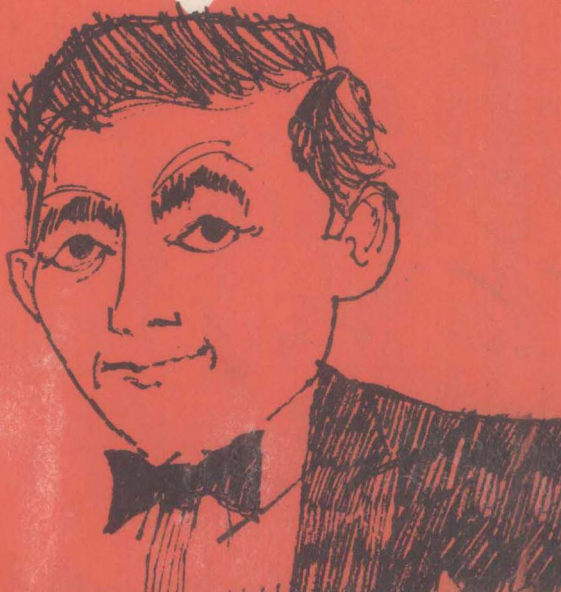
Lucky Jim

Kingsley Amis



The Bridge Series

LUCKY JIM

by

KINGSLEY AMIS

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THE BRIDGE SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

KINGSLEY AMIS, the author of *Lucky Jim*, was born in the south of London in 1922. His first interest in literature was in the field of poetry. At the age of eleven he was writing verse, at the university he was one of the editors of *Oxford Poetry 1949*, and his own poetry has been published in two books: *A Frame of Mind* and *A Case of Samples*. His name is often to be seen in British newspapers and magazines as the writer of articles and reviews.

Lucky Jim, published in 1954, was Amis's first novel. It was something so different, so fresh and so brilliantly clever that the critics welcomed it with excitement.

Kingsley Amis is a university lecturer[1] in English. In *Lucky Jim* he takes us into a world he knows well; it is set in a university college 'somewhere in England', but you need not have seen a British university to enjoy this book.

I suppose you could call *Lucky Jim* an adventure story. There is a love interest, so in a way it is a love story. In fact, in some ways this book is like other novels we have read. It is very, very funny—but other writers have made us laugh. It gives us a remarkably good picture of a certain section of society—but it is not just a social novel. In what way is it different from the novels which were written before it?

Let us ask ourselves another question. What used we to expect when we read a novel? We expected to identify ourselves with one of the characters; that is to say, to live through the happenings of the story—adventure, travel,

[1] See Glossary.

love, mystery, sorrow, happiness—with the hero or the heroine, or at least with the person supposed to be telling the story. In our imagination we *were* that person. And the hero or heroine was braver, or more noble, or in some way better than most of us are in real life.

In *Lucky Jim* we identify ourselves with Dixon, but he can hardly be called a hero—if there were such a word, we might call him an 'un-hero'. He knows he is not brave or noble, or even very good—and we know that he is very much like most of us. He is certainly real.

CHAPTER 1

DIXON had found his professor in the College Library and they were now moving across a small lawn towards the front of the main building of the College. They looked, but only looked, like some kind of funny stage act: Welch tall and weedy, with limp whitening hair, Dixon rather short, fair and round-faced, with an unusual breadth of shoulder that had never been matched by any special physical strength or skill. In spite of this over-evident contrast between them, Dixon realised that their progress, steady and by appearance thoughtful, must seem rather donnish to passing students. He and Welch might well be talking about history, and in the way history might be talked about on Oxford and Cambridge college lawns.

In fact Welch was talking rather childishly about music. How had he become Professor of History, even at a place like this? By published work? No. By extra good teaching? No underlined. Then how? As usual Dixon left this question aside, telling himself that what mattered was that this man had decisive power over his future, at least until the next four or five weeks were passed. Until then he must try to make Welch like him, and one way of doing this was, he supposed, to be present and conscious while Welch talked about music. But did Welch notice who else was there while he talked, and if he noticed did he remember, and if he remembered would it affect such thoughts as he had already? Then suddenly, with no warning, the second of Dixon's two worries snapped into consciousness. Fight-

ing desperately against a yawn of nervousness, he asked in his flat northern voice: 'How's Margaret these days?'

The other's face showed a very gradual change of expression as his attention began to swing round to this new situation, and in a moment or two he was able to say: 'Margaret?'

'Yes; I've not seen her for a week or two.' Or three, Dixon added uneasily to himself.

'Oh. She's recovering very quickly, I think, all things considered. She took a very hard knock, of course, over that Catchpole fellow. It's her mind that's suffering now, you see, not her body; physically she's absolutely fit again, I should say. In fact, the sooner she can get back to some sort of work the better. It would help to take her mind off . . . off . . .'

Dixon knew all this, and very much better than Welch could hope to, but he felt obliged to say: 'Yes, I see. I think living with you, Professor, and Mrs. Welch, must have helped her a lot.'

'Yes, I think there must be something about the atmosphere of the place, you know, that has some sort of healing effect.' And the healing atmosphere led him back once more to the subject of music.

Dixon considered how, without causing Welch to turn on him a long-lived puzzled frown, he could remind him of his invitation to come to tea at the Welches' house outside the city. They'd arranged to leave at four o'clock in Welch's car, and it was now ten past. Dixon felt nervousness hitting out at his stomach as he thought of seeing Margaret, whom he was to take out that evening for the first time since she'd broken down. He forced his attention away on to Welch's habits as a car-driver, and began trying to feed his anger to cover his nervousness. It worked for five seconds or less.

How would she behave when they were alone together? Would she be gay, pretending she'd forgotten, or had never noticed, the length of time since he last saw her, gaining height before she dipped to the attack? Or would she be silent and dull, apparently quite inattentive, forcing him to drag painfully from small-talk through expression of anxiety to defeat in humble promises and excuses? However it began, it would go on in the same way: with one of those questions which could be neither answered nor avoided, with some frightening confession, some statement about herself which, whether 'said for effect' or not, got its effect just the same. He'd been drawn into the Margaret business by a combination of virtues he hadn't known he possessed: politeness, friendly interest, a good-natured willingness to be taken advantage of, a desire for simple friendship. It had seemed natural for a female lecturer to invite a junior, though older, newcomer to the staff to coffee, and no more than polite to accept. Then suddenly he'd become the man who was 'going round' with Margaret, and somehow competing with this Catchpole, a background figure of varying importance. He'd thought a couple of months earlier that Catchpole was progressing nicely, taking the strain off him. And then Catchpole had thrown her over and left Dixon to receive alone the full attack of those terrible questions and confessions.

Those questions. . . . Although he wasn't allowed to smoke another cigarette until five o'clock, Dixon lit one now as he remembered the earliest of them, six months or more ago; about the beginning of last December it had been, seven or eight weeks after he took up his appointment. 'Do you like coming to see me?' was the first he could remember, and it had been easy as well as truthful

to answer 'Yes'. Then there'd been ones like 'Do you think we get along well together?' and 'Am I the only girl you know in this place?' and once, when he'd asked her out for the third evening running, 'Are we going to go on seeing so much of each other?' His first fears had attacked him then, but before that and for some time after he'd thought how much simpler this kind of honesty made the awful business of dealing with women. And the same had seemed true of the confessions: 'I do enjoy being with you', 'I don't get along well with men as a rule', 'Don't laugh at me if I say I think the Board did a better job than they knew when they appointed you'. He hadn't wanted to laugh then, nor did he want to now. What would she be wearing this evening? He thought he would just be able to praise anything except the green Paisley dress in combination with the low-heeled velvet shoes.

Where was Welch? Dixon found him in one of the passages.

'Thought you'd gone without me, Professor,' he said.

The other turned, his face twisted with wonder. 'Gone?' he asked. 'You're . . .'

'You're taking me home for tea,' Dixon informed him. 'We arranged it on Monday, at coffee-time, in the Common Room.'

'Coffee-time?'

'Yes, on Monday,' Dixon answered him, putting his hands into his pockets and tightening them as fists.

'Oh,' Welch said. 'Oh. Did we say this afternoon?'

'That's right, Professor. Hope it's still convenient.'

Welch was recovering quickly. He managed to put his fishing-hat on his head. 'We'll go down in my car,' he offered.

'That'll be nice.'

Outside the building they walked to the car where it stood with a few others. Dixon stared around him while Welch looked thoroughly for his keys.

A minute later he was sitting listening to a sound like the ringing of a cracked door-bell as Welch pulled at the starter. This died away into a high-pitched humming that seemed to involve every part of the car. Welch tried again; this time the effect was of beer-bottles being struck unevenly. Before Dixon could do more than close his eyes he was pressed firmly back against the seat, and with a tearing sound from underneath the wheels the car burst forward towards the grass, which Welch ran over briefly before turning into the road.

They climbed College Road, keeping to the middle of the highway. The despairing horn of a lorry behind them made Dixon take a secret look at Welch, whose face, he saw with passion, held an expression of calm assurance like an old seaman's in rough weather. Dixon shut his eyes again. He was hoping that when Welch had reached the top of the hill the conversation would turn in some other direction than History Department matters. He even thought he'd rather hear some more about music or about Welch's sons, the unmanly writing Michel and the bearded pacifist painting Bertrand whom Margaret had described to him. But whatever the subject for discussion might be, Dixon knew that before the journey ended he'd find his face becoming shapeless, like an old bag, with the strain of making it smile and show interest and speak its few permitted words, of steering it between breaking down in utter weariness and tightening with murderous rage.

At last Welch said in a far-away half-shout, 'Oh, by the way, Dixon.'

'Yes, Professor?'

'I've been wondering if you'd care to come over next week-end for the . . . week-end. I think it should be quite good fun. We're having a few people from London, you know, friends of ours and of my son Bertrand's. Bertrand's going to try and come himself, of course, but he doesn't know yet if he can get away. I expect we shall put on one or two little shows, little bits of music and so on. We'll probably ask you to join in something.'

The car was running along a clear road. 'Thank you very much, I should love to come,' Dixon said, thinking he must get Margaret to do some spying to find out what he'd probably be asked to join in.

Welch seemed quite glad at this ready acceptance. 'That's fine,' he said, apparently with feeling. 'Now there's a Department matter I'd like to discuss with you. I've been talking to the Principal about the College Open Week at the end of term. He wants the History Department to contribute something, you see, and I've been wondering about you. I thought you might like to give the evening lecture the Department is to provide, if you could.'

'Well, I would rather like to have a go at a public lecture, if you think I'm capable of it,' Dixon managed to say.

'I thought something like "Merrie England" might do as a subject. Not too donnish, and not too . . . not too . . . Do you think you could prepare something of that sort?'

CHAPTER 2

And then, just before I became unconscious, I suddenly stopped caring. I'd been desperately holding on to the empty bottle, I remember, as if I were holding on to life, in a way. But quite soon I didn't in the least mind going: I felt too tired somehow. And yet if someone had shaken me and said, "Come on, you're not going, you're coming back," I really believe I should have started trying to make the effort, trying to get back. But nobody did and so I just thought, Oh well, here we go, it doesn't matter so very much. A curious sensation.' Margaret Peel, small, thin, wearing glasses and bright make-up, glanced at Dixon with a half-smile. Around them was the low noise of half a dozen conversations.

'It's a good sign that you're able to talk about it like this,' he said. She made no reply, so he went on: 'What happened afterwards, or can't you remember? Don't tell me if you'd rather not, of course.'

She pulled her cardigan up over the shoulders of the green Paisley dress and told him.

There was a last question which Dixon knew he was compelled to ask. He said in a low voice, having first drunk freely from his glass: 'You needn't say anything if you don't want to, but . . . you are over this business, aren't you? You wouldn't think of trying again, I mean?'

She glanced up quickly as if she'd been expecting to be asked this, but he couldn't be sure whether she was glad or sorry when it came. Then she turned her head away and he could see how thin the flesh was over her jawbone. 'No, I wouldn't try again,' she said. 'I don't care about him any more; I don't feel anything at all about him. In

fact I feel now it was rather silly to have tried at all.'

This made Dixon decide that his fears about this evening had been foolish. 'Good,' he said cheerfully. 'Has he tried to get in touch with you or anything?'

'Nothing, not even so much as a telephone message. Vanished without a trace. He might never have existed—as far as we are concerned. I suppose he's too busy with his popsy these days, as he said he'd be.'

'Oh, he said that, did he?'

'Oh yes, our Mr Catchpole never made any secret about things. What were his words? "I'm taking her away to North Wales with me for a couple of weeks. I thought I ought to tell you before I went off." Oh, he was charmingly frank about it, James; quite charming in every way.'

Again she turned away from him, and this time he found himself noticing the thinness of her neck. He felt for his cigarettes, but before he could offer them to her, she turned back with a little smile which he recognised, with self-dislike, as consciously brave.

She emptied her glass with a quick gay movement. 'Beer,' she said. 'Bring me beer. The night is young.'

While he was getting the drinks, Dixon wondered first how many more he might be expected to pay for, and then why Margaret, with her full lecturer's salary uninterrupted by her absence from work, so seldom offered to buy him a drink. Finally, though this was no more welcome, he thought of the morning before Margaret had taken a whole bottleful of sleeping-pills. He'd had nothing to do at College that day before a lecture in the afternoon, and she'd been free after seeing some students at ten. After coffee at sevenpence a cup in a recently-opened restaurant, they'd gone to a chemist's where she'd wanted to buy a few things. One of the things had been a new bottle of the

sleeping-pills. He could remember exactly how she'd looked dropping the bottle, in its white paper wrapping, into her handbag and glancing up to say: 'If you've nothing better to do tonight I'll be making tea about ten. What about dropping in for an hour?' He'd said he would, meaning to go, but he hadn't been able to get his next day's lecture written up in time, nor, he realised, had the prospect of another conference about Catchpole seemed inviting when ten o'clock came. In the early evening Catchpole had called on Margaret to tell her that he was finished with her, and at about ten she'd taken the whole bottleful of pills. If he'd been there himself, Dixon thought now for the thousandth time, he'd have been able to prevent her, or, if too late for that, to get her to the hospital a good hour and a half earlier.

'By the way, James,' Margaret said, taking her glass, 'I want to say how grateful I am to you for your understanding during the last couple of weeks. It has been good of you.'

Dixon made himself ready for anything. Puzzle remarks that sounded harmless or even pleasant were the surest sign of a coming attack—the mysterious horseman riding towards the gold-carrying coach. 'I didn't know I'd been so understanding as that,' he said in an uncoloured tone.

'Oh, just the way you've been keeping in the background. You were the only one who took the trouble to think it out, that I might prefer not to be showered with kind inquiries, "and how are you feeling, my dear, after your unpleasant experience" and so on. Do you know, old Mother Welch had people from the village who'd never even heard of me before, dropping in to ask how I was. You know, James, they couldn't have been kinder, but I'll be very glad indeed to get out of that place.'

It seemed genuine. She had sometimes in the past taken some of his laziest or most hurtful actions or inactions in this way, though not, of course, as often as she'd taken as lazy or hurtful some action intended to help. Perhaps he could now begin to head the talk somewhere else.

'How much longer are you thinking of staying with the Neddies?'

'Oh, not more than a couple of weeks, I hope. I want to get out before the summer vacation in any case. It all depends on how soon I can find somewhere to live.'

'That's good,' Dixon said, his spirits rising as opportunity for greater honesty seemed to be approaching. 'You'll be there next week-end, then.'

'What, for Neddy's arty get-together? Yes, of course. Why, you don't mean you're coming, do you?'

'Yes, that's just what I do mean. The question was put to me on the way down in the car. Why, what's so funny?'

Margaret was laughing in the way Dixon had named to himself 'the tinkle of tiny silver bells'. He sometimes thought that the whole of her behaviour came from translating such phrases into action, but before he could feel much annoyance with himself or her, she said: 'You know what your week-end will be, do you?'

'Well, fine talk mostly, I hoped. I can talk away with anybody. What's the plan, then?'

She counted on her fingers: 'Part-songs. A play-reading. Poetry. Music for five instruments. There are several more things, too, but I've forgotten them. I'll remember in a minute.' She went on laughing.

'Don't bother, that's enough to be going on with. This is really serious. Neddy must be going quite mad at last. It's absolutely crazy. Nobody'll come.'