

Thomas Hinde: The Day The Call Came



Corgi Modern Reading

A new series of paperback editions of books by authors of the highest international reputation. Included among them are:

James Baldwin,
Brigid Brophy,
I. Compton-Burnett,
L. P. Hartley,
John Hersey,
Thomas Hinde,
Vladimir Nabokov,
Philip Roth,
John Steinbeck.

The Day The Call Came

Thomas Hinde's brilliant study of a mind near breaking point.

"The cleverest book I have read this year . . . a macabre high comedy by an author whose lynx-eyed social observation is matched by his power to bring forth nightmares in broad daylight, and who cuts corners and performs figures of eight over territory that slows other writers down to a walking pace."

Irving Wardle,
The Observer



Corgi Books
A Division of Transworld
Publishers

Thomas Hinde: The Day The Call Came

The Day The Call Came

A Corgi Book

Originally published in Great Britain
by Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.

Printing History

Hodder & Stoughton Edition published 1964
Hodder & Stoughton Second impression 1964
Corgi Modern Reading Edition published 1966

Copyright © 1964 by Thomas Hinde

Condition of sale – this book is sold
*subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
re-sold, hired out or otherwise
circulated without the publisher's prior
consent in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is
published and without a similar
condition including this condition being
imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

This book is set in
11 on 13 pt. Linotype Pilgrim

Cover illustration by Ken Sequin

Corgi Books are published by
Transworld Publishers Ltd.,
Bashley Road, London, N.W.10.

Made and printed in Great Britain
by C. Nicholls & Company Ltd.

Also by
Thomas Hinde

A Place Like Home
and Ninety Double
Martinis
Mr. Nicholas.

and published in
Corgi Books

For Andrew and Cordelia

The Day The Call Came

Part One

That was the day the call came. It came without warning. For years I'd known it would come, sooner or later. I'd got used to knowing it would come. I'd stopped expecting it.

There'd been nights when I'd woken and gone into a sweat at the thought that at any moment the telephone by my bed might ring. They'd got fewer.

It might not come by telephone, of course. They'd never told me that. But I thought it would. The radio transmitter-receiver which I kept in my attic, hidden below three loose floorboards – somehow I'd never quite taken that seriously. Even the two-monthly checks . . .

There'd be no danger. I'd only have to lift the receiver and say yes and yes. There'd be no confusion or doubt. I'd lie there propped on my elbow, listening and saying yes, wide awake as I always could be the instant after sleep, my mind racing ahead, calculating the problems. I wouldn't have to ask questions. They'd never give orders which needed amplifying or could be misunderstood. And afterwards I'd invent some story about a wrong number or a madman to tell Molly – if she'd woken. That was how I'd imagined it coming.

It didn't come like that.

It came in the evening. I'll tell you what I'd been doing that day.

It was the first day of my children's holidays. I

was glad it was going to be fine for them. On and off it had been fine for a week but that was the first day I felt certain. At dawn it had that stillness, bright but not too bright, which you get when an English summer suddenly arrives. It was in no hurry. It was going to be fine not just today but for many days.

I stood on my back drive, sometimes watching for the sun to rise over the hills, sometimes looking down at the mist which still hid my orchards in the low lands. For a long time nothing changed, then it was quickly getting brighter, as if someone was making a dim-up on a stage machine. Several inches above the hills where I hadn't expected it the sun came through the mist, round and yellow. At the same moment I saw that the mist was thinning below me and row after row my trees were coming into view. Beyond them I could see the common and the golf course.

My orchards were out of place in that part of the country. I suppose they used to be a paddock and a couple of meadows belonging to some farmhouse which had disappeared, land where the farmer could bring his cattle in winter or when the lord of the manor was stag-hunting on the common. They stuck out into the common like a promontory. From here above them I could see clearly the neat green rectangle made by my leafy trees. The sun was lighting their tops. Beyond and to their right I saw the bracken and broken silver birches of the common. The sun was lighting these too. To their left I saw the sandy bunkers and yel-

low gorse of the golf course. The sun wasn't lighting these yet.

The rest of the morning is less clear, but I must have gone to my attic to work till breakfast. After breakfast I must have sat in the farm office, as I usually did at that time of day. No doubt I paid some bills and read some catalogues. Probably I went over the argument again about how I was going to handle the crops that year – though I think even then I'd decided.

Perhaps it was the weather, or perhaps I'm casting back the flavour of what happened later on to what went before, but I seem to remember feeling restless that morning. I needed to go out more often than usual and walk about the sunlit lawn before I could clear my thoughts and make decisions.

Something worried me, but when I tried to trace it I couldn't. It was less a feeling of worry than a feeling that I ought to be worried.

One small incident stands out. I was half way across the lawn to the azaleas on the descending bank where it ends. I was watching a grey squirrel which had clamped itself to a pine trunk, perfectly still, thinking I couldn't see it as I certainly shouldn't have done if I hadn't noticed it scurry there, when something made me turn and look at the house. I saw Molly passing a window. A fraction of a second later, before she had fully passed it, she saw me and turned rather suddenly and opened the window to lean out.

She smiled. "Isn't it lovely!"

“Isn't it !”

Now at the second before she'd seen me and turned I'd noticed that she was climbing past the window and deduced that she was going up stairs. And it wasn't till we'd spoken like this and I'd turned to stare with her away across the low lands to the distant hills of heather and blue sky that I recovered from the shock of what I'd thought at that second: that the stairs she was going up were not those from ground to first floor but those from first floor to my attic.

It only lasted that long, and the actual moment of doubt a shorter time. Yet it should at once have been clear to me that she was on the lower stairs. True the windows were in the same vertical line but as well as being at different heights they were of totally different shape. The only explanation, and it wasn't satisfactory, was that some dazzling effect of the sunlight on the glass had prevented me from seeing the other window, ten feet above the one she was passing.

It wasn't satisfactory because I was less concerned about how I had made the mistake than why.

My attic was private and Molly never went there.

“This should worry them,” she said. She referred to a joke of ours that most of English industry and commerce was geared to cold damp weather so there was tremendous pressure against letting us have anything else. It may not be a joke. “Don't forget the train.”

“Twelve-forty ?”

“I’m not sure,” she said and shut the window.

My attic was private because it had always been agreed between us that she mustn’t disturb or – till it was ready – try to see my work.

It was because of my work that Molly never expected me to show much ambition about the farm. My farm was too small to be very profitable unless I’d done something intensive like chickens. One day I was going to be successful but it would be no thanks to my thirty-three peaty acres of English soil.

It was also perfectly understood between us that Molly asked no questions about my work. The times I had been nearest to telling her, the times I had felt my love for her persuading me that this was more important than anything else, had been when I had come down from my work and seen how badly she wanted to ask about it, but wouldn’t let herself. I’d seen anxiety in her eyes.

More often, because it had become habit, she hadn’t wanted to ask.

I don’t remember whether the idea of my work was my own or whether they suggested it. It has been convenient. In the early mornings and again in the long winter evenings I would go to my attic. Molly expected it and would have been uneasy if I hadn’t. It gave me all the time I wanted for my training. Sometimes I had bought materials for my work and, once or twice though not too often, I’d left the bills for these lying where she would see them.

Though it was perfectly understood that Molly should never go to my attic workroom, and though I trusted her completely, I kept the door locked when I was elsewhere, and locked it when I was inside.

I met the twelve-forty. This year the breaking-up day of each of my children's schools was the same and I'd arranged for them to meet in London and catch a down train together. Molly stayed at home to cook lunch.

She was boiling a pudding. She made good puddings, in an old-fashioned way in a cloth, which we called "giants heads", because the position of two raisins had once looked like two eyes. It was the sort of inspiration Molly had and as soon as she'd said it I'd seen that it did look exactly like the round pop-eyed head I'd always imagined on the pot-bellied giant who smells Jack hiding in the copper. Sometimes I thought that the shout her children gave to hear that it was giant's head for pudding was the most concrete moment she looked forward to in their holidays. I don't much like puddings.

They were hopelessly excited. Though they had been together for an hour in the train they both talked without stopping or listening. They seemed pleased to see me but only as an extra, sometimes forgotten, audience.

It was funny to hear them. Although Dan, who was eleven, snubbed everything Peggy, who was nine, was saying. I felt he only did it to make space to tell his own things. And though Peggy was being

snubbed she hurried on to the next, hardly bothering to defend the last. It was the sort of exchange I'd heard end with her suddenly saying, "Oh you're horrid," and bursting into tears, though this time she didn't. They'd not yet learned to be ashamed of their excitement and hide it. I thought they were backward, but I was pleased. Perhaps they hid it at school but could not stop it breaking out when they saw each other.

I remember how the sun shone that afternoon, making me narrow my eyes and glance for shade when I came out to see what they were doing. They couldn't decide.

They couldn't decide if they wanted to be in their rooms or in the garden. Or whether they wanted to be together or apart. Or which of the things they'd thought of doing in the months they'd been away was the thing they most wanted to do. It made me remember how I'd felt on the first day of my own holidays.

I remembered how I'd known that to go on hesitating would destroy the happiness I'd hoped for and that I must decide to what to devote these holidays – sticking in all my stamps, making a *Beau Geste* boat with gun-powder guns – because there had been holidays when I'd put off this decision and realized too late that too many days had already been wasted.

Seeing their uncertainty made me sorry that I had to send them away to school, which must be a bad place if it prevented them doing so many things to which they could have brought hope and

enthusiasm. Molly had hated their going. There'd been no argument. I couldn't remember ever having to explain to her how they would disturb me if they were always at home. But I'd seen how she wished they could stay.

Peggy wanted to make a garden. Dan wanted to build a house in a tree. Dan wanted his house to be finished and belong to him. He wanted practical help which he could then forget. The achievement was the object. Peggy wanted to watch me digging and then to be watched while she dug and then for us to dig together. It was the doing she cared about.

I helped them. And I persuaded them to try to learn tennis. We had a rough grass court with some rougher netting to stop the balls. It suited Peggy better than Dan. Peggy wanted to be able to tell people about how she was learning and I was teaching her. Dan wanted to start the game and win.

As the afternoon grew hotter I became more anxious to sit and rest. I envied our cat which I could see lying under a rhododendron bush in the black cavity between the bottom leaves and the ground – and then couldn't see because it had taken the chance while I was looking away to slip into a safer place. Dan and Peggy didn't notice the heat.

After tea I went down the hillside path to the orchards. I liked to go down there at least once a day, even when there was little to do.

That was why I'd chosen fruit farming – again I'm not sure if it was my idea or theirs – though