

## ***Our Man in Havana*** 1958 Graham Greene

### OVERVIEW

Having skewered American foreign policy in his previous novel (*The Quiet American*), Greene trained his satirical sights on the British secret service in this one. Set in Cuba in the 1950s during the Batista regime, and crucially before the Castro-led revolution, *Our Man in Havana* is a dark comedy describing the adventures of a British vacuum cleaner salesman named Wormold, who is recruited to spy for his country. In a plot that appears more science fiction than spy thriller, Wormold manages to fool everyone, including himself, in his intelligence reports sent back to London. There is plenty of incident, including an attempted poisoning, two killings and one or two deaths that may or may not be intentional. Romance also plays a role as Wormold's daughter Milly is wooed by Segura, the local security chief, and Wormold himself ends up with a happy relationship.

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Graham Greene's first visit to Cuba was not his own idea. Passing through the US Immigration system in 1955, he was asked if he had ever been a member of the Communist Party, to which he flippantly answered yes (for a few months as an undergraduate at Oxford in the 1930s). For his honesty, Greene was deported to Haiti and eventually to Havana, where he stayed for several months and gathered material used in the novel three years later. The actual idea of a spy creating fake agents and collecting their salaries had already been suggested to Greene by the well-known story of a Spanish double-agent named Garbo, who worked for both the Nazis and the British in WWII. As with *The Quiet American*, Greene's plot proved historically prescient. In this case, the novel foreshadowed the missiles installed in Cuba, which triggered the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and almost resulted in a nuclear war. The novel was made into a film, with same title, in 1959, with Wormold played by Alec Guinness.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Wormold	Jim Wormold is a British vacuum salesman.
Milly	Milly is his teenage daughter.
Hasselbacher	Dr Hasselbacher is a German doctor and a friend of Wormold.
Hawthorne	Hawthorne is the MI6 agent who recruits Wormold.
Beatrice	Beatrice is Wormold's secretary.
Segura	Capt. Segura is the police chief in Havana.

### STORY

[Note: As this is essentially a comedy, the following summary cannot capture the full story, which is often dramatised through dialogue.]

*Setting* The action takes place in Cuba, in the late 1950s, during the time of the Batista regime and before the Castro-led revolution of 1959. Jim Wormold, a British vacuum cleaner salesman, lives in Havana with his daughter, Milly. His ex-wife is back in England.

*Hasselbacher* The story opens with Wormold talking to his old friend, Hasselbacher, a German medical doctor, in a bar. Wormold is worried that he is unable to buy expensive gifts for his daughter Milly, who is about to celebrate her seventeenth birthday. The vacuum cleaner business is flagging and the firm in London have sent him a new model called the Atomic Pile Cleaner. Wormold fears that it won't sell.

*Hawthorne* One day, a British man wanders into Wormold's shop and enquires if Wormold is 'British, really British. I mean, passport and all.' A few days later, the same man, whose name is

Hawthorne, arranges to meet Wormold in the Gents at the back of his favourite bar. There, in a farcical scene, Hawthorne reveals that he works for the British Secret Service. Hawthorne invites, or rather commands, Wormold to meet him in his hotel room the following day.

*Recruited* When Hasselbacher notices that Wormold is nervous, he insists on accompanying him to his 'private' meeting, which he assumes is with a mistress. Wormold manages to shake him off and enters the room, where Hawthorne recruits the reluctant vacuum salesman to 'serve his country.' Wormold is not at all interested until the realisation clicks that, with this extra salary, he can afford to pay for Milly's riding lessons and stabling costs at the Country Club. Returning home, he warns Milly to be wary of Capt. Segura, the local chief of police, who has been paying attention to her.

*London* Back at MI6 headquarters in London, Hawthorne reports to his superiors. Going over the details of Wormold's personal life—decent, fair-minded, good father, moderate drinker—they decide he is the right person to be 'our man in Havana.' The clinching argument is that his vacuum cleaner business is the perfect cover for espionage.

*Fake spies* Wormold is told that he must recruit local spies and send regular reports to London detailing the information they collect. Bemused but conscientious, Wormold fabricates his network of non-existent spies, using names taken from a list of members at the local Country Club. He then ghost writes their reports (mostly cobbled together from details in the local papers) and happily collects their salaries. Exercising a heretofore underutilised imagination, Wormold becomes more and more bold in fabricating intelligence, and London becomes more and more impressed with their new man's skills.

*Fake weapons* Enjoying his role as the secret non-spy, Wormold invents a story about a large military installation being built in the mountains outside Havana. When London wants more details of the weapons to be fired from this secret facility, he sends them sketches that are nothing more than scaled-up drawings of vacuum cleaner parts. London, unbelievably, is convinced.

*Beatrice* Excited and anxious, London thinks Wormold needs more staff and sends him a well-trained secretary name Beatrice and a radio operator named Rudy. Once on the scene, the serious and observant Beatrice scrutinises Wormold's paperwork and notices certain discrepancies, especially those relating to the salaries of his fake spies. Wormold, meanwhile, has confided in Hasselbacher about his deception, but he has not told Milly, who is being wooed by Capt. Segura.

*Real threat* Wormold works hard to stay one step ahead of Beatrice's examination of his operation, and things reach a head when she wants to meet one of his key agents, a pilot named Raul. Wormold just manages to convince her that Raul really exists when, inexplicably, a real person named Raul is killed in a car accident. In a second incident, a local engineer is shot and killed, and it turns out that a man with the same name was listed in Wormold's bogus spy network. From this point forward, Wormold's fictitious world begins to merge with reality. When threats are made to his fake agents from an unknown source, he and Beatrice work together to protect the real people who share those names.

*Intrigue* Wormold suspects that some mysterious 'foreign power', possibly the Russians, is trying to eliminate his spy network, one by one. These shadowy figures also begin to threaten Dr Hasselbacher, and Capt. Segura suggests that Hasselbacher might be a cryptologist because he is skilled at solving crossword puzzles. All this intrigue convinces the spymasters back in London that Wormold is doing excellent intelligence work.

*Poisoning* The danger level rises when London informs Beatrice that an unnamed enemy is planning to poison Wormold at a trade association meeting where he is the keynote speaker. The suggestion is that the enemy (possibly the Soviet Union) thinks that superspy Wormold has uncovered sensitive information and must be eliminated. Brave and proud Wormold decides to go to the lunch and give his speech, although Hasselbacher warns him against the danger. Sitting down at the head table, he sees a Mr Carter, another vacuum cleaner salesman whom he met recently. Carter offers him a glass of whisky, but Wormold deliberately knocks it over. A dog licks up the spilt liquid and dies. Angry and frustrated, Carter later kills Dr Hasselbacher, whom he blames for warning

Wormold of the poisoning.

*Proposal* Capt. Segura goes to Wormold and formally asks for permission to marry Milly. Segura shows him a long list of foreign spies that he has compiled and is willing to hand over to Wormold. Wormold suggests that they discuss this offer at Segura's house. Once there, Wormold proposes a game of chess using miniature bottles of Scotch as the game pieces. Each time a player takes a piece, he must drink the bottle. Since Segura is a skilled player, he takes many pieces, gets drunk and falls asleep. Wormold then steals his pistol and uses a special microdot camera, brought from London by Beatrice, to photograph his valuable list of spies.

*Revenge* Next, Wormold persuades the suspicious Carter to take a drive to a local brothel. Once there, Wormold shoots him in revenge for his killing of Hasselbacher. He sends the photographed list of agents to London as an image on a postage stamp, but when processed it is blank.

*Recalled to London* Tired of his subterfuge and afraid of the increasing dangers, Wormold confesses everything to Beatrice, who promptly informs their bosses in London. Both are recalled to headquarters, where MI6 officials have decided to avoid embarrassment and sweep the whole debacle under the carpet. Beatrice is reassigned to Jakarta and Wormold is offered an OBE, a medal to be awarded by the Queen. Rather than be parted, Beatrice and Wormold decide to get married and to send Milly to a finishing school in Switzerland, funded by the high salary Wormold has been paid for his dubious activities.

## THEMES

*Fabrication and farce* The main theme of this thriller-cum-comedy is the potential for farce in the deadly serious business of international espionage. Wormold's adventures are farcical precisely because fabrication is the first rule of MI6 and other secret services. Spies invent stories and people; they conceal and they reveal, like a conjuror. In that clandestine world, where truth is the first casualty, it is easy to slide from tragedy into comedy. The most extraordinary example in the book is Wormold's stroke of genius in using sketches of vacuum cleaner parts to represent dangerous new weapons to be installed in Cuba. When the military and intelligence chiefs in London examine the drawings, the absurdity is exquisite. The officials are particularly anxious when one of the experts says that 'the drawings remind him of a giant vacuum cleaner.' 'A vacuum cleaner!' the others exclaim in horror and bend down to look more closely. 'Fiendish, isn't it?' the intelligence chief says. 'The ingenuity, the simplicity, the devilish imagination of the thing...see here, this one is six times the height of a man. Like a gigantic spray. And this one—what does it remind you of?' The other man gulps and says, 'A two-way nozzle.' The chief claps his hands in triumph. 'Yes, the vacuum cleaner, again. I believe we may be on to something so big that the H-bomb will become a conventional weapon.' The credulity of the intelligence men is staggering yet believable because of the Cold War hysteria at the time. Wielding Wormold's vacuum cleaner, Greene parodied a spy service with a wit that was only surpassed by Kubrick's masterful film 'Dr Strangelove' in 1964. Timid James Wormold would not stand a chance if pitted against James Bond, but our man in Havana reveals aspects of international espionage that even the film hero could not imagine.

*Loyalty* The other theme explored in the novel is loyalty. Again, this is an issue intrinsic to any good story of espionage, where spies are meant to 'serve their country.' Indeed, this is the pitch that Hawthorne first uses to recruit a reluctant Wormold into the British secret service. Throughout the story, however, loyalty to one's country is seen as inferior to loyalty to a person. Wormold himself articulates this idea when he is preparing to avenge Hasselbacher's death: 'I wouldn't kill for my country. I wouldn't kill for capitalism or for Communism or for the Welfare-state...I would kill Carter because he killed Hasselbacher...If I love or if I hate, let me love and hate for an individual.' Later, Beatrice, Wormold's secretary and then wife, says something similar when she decides to give up her job with MI6 and marry Wormold: 'I don't care a damn about men who are loyal to the people who pay them, to organizations...I don't think even my country means all that much. There are many countries in our blood, aren't there, but only one person. Would the world be in the mess it is if we were loyal to love and not to countries?' Toward the end of the story, Beatrice makes an even more passionate speech to her superiors when she says, 'What do you mean by "country" [i.e. the UK]? A flag someone invented two hundred years ago? A bunch of Bishops arguing about divorce and the House of Commons shouting "Ya" at each other?...A country is more a family than a Parliament.' Despite the

cynicism of this story, in this novel, as in most of Greene's stories, there is also an endorsement of the value of human friendship and loyalty.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Wormold** Wormold is a man beset by worries. He is divorced, runs a failing business and has trouble providing for his young daughter's many desires. But he is not without talents and, when an opportunity presents itself, he seizes it with both hands and makes good. He is mild-mannered and self-deprecating, a good father and a loyal friend. In the end, he becomes something close to a hero.

*Failure* Jim Wormold, vacuum cleaner salesman in Cuba, is not a successful man. In a word, he is a loser. Failed marriage, failing business and failing to understand his daughter. We are given a sense of Wormold's worries in the opening paragraphs, as he and Hasselbacher sip their drinks in a bar and look out at the street. Hasselbacher sees a local black man who, he says, reminds him of Wormold. Joe, the local man, is blind and walks with a limp. Instinctively, Wormold looks at himself in the mirror and sees a face 'discoloured by the dust...anxious, criss-crossed.' He thinks he looks younger than his friend but recognises that 'the shadow is already there, the anxieties which are beyond the reach of a tranquiliser.' This is Wormold on the first page, broken, worried and inert. It is an important scene because it enables us to understand why he does not hesitate to grasp the unusual and dangerous opportunity he is offered to change his fortunes.

*Loving* Wormold the failure is also Wormold the father, and in that role he excels. Not at first in monetary terms—he cannot meet Milly's desire to own a horse—but always in emotional terms. From the very beginning of the novel, we see that Milly is his whole world. In the second chapter, we are told how he carefully observes her, her subtle changes of mind and habit. Then, he puts his foot down when Milly reveals that Capt. Segura is taking her for rides in his car. He tells her, with uncharacteristic firmness, that she must stop seeing Segura. 'I won't have it, Milly,' he says. 'I'll speak to the Reverend Mother. You've got to promise...' He breaks off because he sees tears forming in his daughter's eyes. 'You're not in love with him, are you?' he asks. She says no and explains that all she wants is to buy a horse, which is very expensive. Wormold, who has no money and no prospect of getting any, surrenders nonetheless. He cannot bear to see his daughter unhappy.

*Clever* Wormold grows into his assumed role as a secret agent, running 'joes' and outwitting the foreign powers aligned against him. Before long, he shows inventiveness in setting up a fake list of agents and in detailing their activities. But his supreme achievement is the 'vacuum cleaner as weapon' ruse, which fools the chiefs back in London and earns him increased respect and extra cash. He is sitting in his office one day, wondering what bogus information to send to London, when he thinks about Milly's credulity in believing biblical stories. And that reminds him of MI6 'wanting to swallow nightmares and grotesque stories out of science fiction.' He decides to 'give them something they would enjoy...something better than an economic report.' Inspired, Wormold writes about 'secret installations in the deep mountain forests' and 'peasants transporting large stones for construction.' Warming to his task, he then carefully traces the outlines of the vacuum cleaner parts on his desk. He adds the scale, one inch representing three feet, and then a sketch of a little man, two inches high, wearing a bowler hat and carrying an umbrella, as a caricature of Hawthorne. It is absurd, but it is also brilliant.

**Hasselbacher** Hasselbacher is a German man, who served and suffered in World War I and became a medical doctor. Older and wiser than Wormold, he plays the role of his advisor, but we feel that there are unexplained forces at work in his character. Insecure in his immigration status in Cuba, he is vulnerable to pressure from the authorities.

*Thoughtful* Dr Hasselbacher has seen a lot in his life, including the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s. He has acquired something of a philosophical outlook on life, which is displayed in an early scene when he is talking with Wormold in a bar. Wormold is worried that the 'Atomic Pile Cleaner' machine, which his firm has sent him, won't sell in Cuba where priests are preaching against the evils of science. Hasselbacher listens, whisky in hand, and says, 'Don't worry. Change the name.' Wormold responds by wondering if his friend worries about anything, and Hasselbacher says, 'I have a secret defence...I am interested in life.' Wormold protests that he, too, has that interest, but Hasselbacher cuts him short: 'No, you are interested in persons, not in life. People die...but if you are

interested in life, it never lets you down. I am interested in the blueness of 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 concerning the blueness of cheese that will never come to a conclusion.' Here, Hasselbacher speaks with the wisdom of old Europe, a philosophical outlook deeper than the evanescent politics of the time. The experiment with blue cheese adds the necessary comic element to the scene.

**War weary** Hasselbacher was a soldier before he became a doctor. We hear about his experiences one night when Wormold finds him dressed in his World War I uniform. 'It was all so peaceful, then, in 1913, before the war,' he says ruefully. 'I became a doctor after the war. After I killed a man.' He goes on to describe the way his sword penetrated the Russian soldier's rib cage, scraping the bone. 'I hate war, Mr Wormold,' he says. 'It's easy to kill a man. Takes no skill. But to save a man—that takes six years of training, and still you cannot know for sure if it was you who saved hm.' As the conversation unfolds, we understand why Hasselbacher has dressed up in his old uniform. Raul, one of Wormold's bogus but real-life spies, has been killed in a car accident, and Hasselbacher has also played some mysterious role in his death. That man's death triggered his memory of killing the Russian soldier. All of it makes him sad and provides us with an insight into the complexity of his character.

**Segura** Segura is the head of police in Havana, a powerful but sophisticated man. He has moments of romantic tenderness, coupled with hints of extreme brutality, suggested by his nickname of 'Red Vulture.' He is honourable, within the remit of his profession, and he also treats Milly and Wormold with respect.

**Well-mannered** Captain Segura is a feared man in Havana, but he is also a polite and well-mannered man. He has been attracted to Milly at the Country Club and later goes to Wormold's house to ask him about two things. 'One is important, one is routine,' he says. 'Let me begin with what is important.' When Wormold agrees, Segura says that he wants to marry Milly. He has not spoken to Milly because his first duty is to ask permission from her father. Wormold is not ready to grant permission and complains that Milly is very young. 'That is why I come to you,' Segura says, 'although she is old enough to bear a child. Do I have your permission to offer her my hand?' Wormold comments that he is being very Victorian, and Segura says that he prefers it that way. Charmed by his manners, Wormold tells him to go ahead and ask Milly to marry him but warns that she has good sense and won't be impressed. 'In that case,' Segura adds, 'may I ask you, as her father, to influence her thinking?' It all resembles a formal drawing-room scene from a pre-war European stage play, and we cannot help but be impressed by Segura's impeccable manners.

**Cruel** Polite though he is, Segura is also capable of cruelty, especially to his political enemies, of which, we imagine, he has many. This quality is displayed in a conversation with Wormold, who asks him if he tortured one of his 'agents' when he questioned him. 'No,' Segura says coolly, 'because he is not of the torturable class.' When Wormold replies that he was unaware of such distinctions, Segura explains: 'Surely you realise there are people who expect to be tortured and others who would be outraged by the idea. One never tortures except by a kind of mutual agreement.' Wormold asks who is torturable and Segura tells him: 'The poor in my own country, in any Latin American country. The poor of Central Europe and the Orient. Of course, in your welfare states you have no poor, so you are untorturable. In Cuba, the police can deal as harshly as they like with emigres from Latin America and the Baltic States, but not with visitors from your country or Scandinavia.' Segura always talks with confidence, but here we see one reason why he is called the 'Red Vulture' by his fellow Cubans.

**Milly** Milly is a precocious and wilful teenage girl. She is fastidious in following the conventions of the Catholic church but seems more interested in its imagery and myths than its theological concepts. She loves horses and horse riding, and is not immune to the attentions of the much-older Capt. Segura.

**Pious** Like her mother, from whom Wormold is divorced, Milly is a pious Catholic. She seems to exist in her own world of saints and sinners, and she is meticulous in observing the conventions of her faith. This much is obvious in her first appearance in the book, when she sits quietly in a church, with 'a lace mantilla covering part of her face, her back straight, the sign of the cross correctly performed.' She eats only fish on Friday and fasts not only on Sundays and the special feasts of the Church but also on her saint's day. She never forgets her night-prayers and keeps a light burning outside her door next to an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Even when she was thirteen years old, Milly was

naughty and set a little boy on fire. She did that, she says, because she 'was tempted by the devil.' Hearing that, Wormold is exasperated and cries, 'Milly! Be sensible.' To which, she says, 'Saints have been tempted by the devil.' And when her father says that she's not a saint, she agrees: 'Exactly. That's why I fell.' This scene is important in revealing that Milly is not only impressionable but also serious-minded in her piety.

*Womanly* Although still a teenager at the end of the story, pious Milly is a young woman in her views about men. This aspect of her character is illustrated in a scene in which she talks with Beatrice, who is now planning to marry her father. The two 'women' are applying their make-up before an outing to the Country Club. When Beatrice advises Milly not to use a 'passionate' carnation colour for lipstick, Milly says, 'But you must give a man encouragement.' Beatrice suggests that it's enough to look at a man, and Milly says, 'Like this? Did I show languish?' 'More like smoulder,' says Beatrice. Then the talk moves on to marriage, and Milly announces that she is not happy at having 'to marry for keeps' [as a Catholic]. 'I'd be much better off as a mistress.' Beatrice admonishes her for saying such a thing, but then Milly counters by asking if she loves her father. 'Why do you ask that?' Beatrice asks. 'Because of the way you looked at him,' is Milly's cool reply. The teenager learns fast.

