

PART I — A DIFFERENT MAN

Geoffrey Talbot was supposed to be a linguist, but spent most of his time at university playing games. He appeared twice for the First XI at cricket, but was not selected for the match at Lord's where his place was taken by 'Tiny' Trembath, a slab of a man already on Lancashire's books. At rugby, Geoffrey's headlong tackling in college games had earned him a game for the university itself against Rosslyn Park, but at Twickenham the man chosen at open-side wing forward was a graduate Rhodesian.

It was no surprise to Geoffrey that he fell twice at the last. His Hampshire day-school had told the pupils that their place in life would be the middle rank. Geoffrey's father worked as a jobber on the London Stock Exchange and hoped that Geoffrey, with his knowledge of languages, might one day go into the Diplomatic Service. Geoffrey's mother, who came from Limoges, had no ambition for Geoffrey; her main interest was in dog breeding, and the family house near Twyford Down was home to generations of yapping dachshunds.

After graduation, Geoffrey went to see the university appointments board, where a man with a pipe gave him some brochures from Shell and Imperial Tobacco. 'You're a personable fellow,' he said. 'I should think you'd do well in industry.'

'What about the Diplomatic Service?'

'They won't mind your sportsman's two-two — won't even ask — but their own exam can be tricky.'

In September 1938, after a series of rebuffs, Geoffrey found

himself at a boys' preparatory school in Nottinghamshire, where he was to teach French, Latin and elementary maths. He had been interviewed by the headmaster in London at the offices of an educational agency and hired on the spot.

The taxi from the station drove through the outskirts of a mining town before the road opened up on some hills of oak and beech as they neared the village of Crampton. The school was set on high ground that overlooked a fast-flowing tributary of the Trent; it was a building whose elevated position and solitary brick tower gave it a commanding aspect; the grey stones were covered in creepers and the stone-mullioned windows held leaded lights. The headmaster's wife, Mrs Little, showed him upstairs to his quarters. She was a woman in her sixties who smelled of lavender water and peppermints.

'It's not a large room,' Mrs Little said, 'but bachelors can't be choosers. The boys come back tomorrow, but there'll be tea in the dining hall today at six. You can meet your colleagues. After tea, you have to forage for yourself. We don't allow drink on the premises, though the Head won't mind if you occasionally go down to the Whitby Arms.'

The room had a small sash window, with a view towards a wooded park. There was a chest, a shallow built-in cupboard with a hanging rail, a standing bookcase of four shelves and a single bed. When the house had belonged to a wealthy family, Geoffrey thought, this would have been a maid's bedroom. The shape of it seemed somehow to dictate the sort of life he would lead. The bookcase would need filling and the evening sun would help him read in the armchair with its loose floral cover; he would send for his old books from university and might even get round to the plays of Schiller and Racine; presumably there would also be a lending library in the town. He had never imagined he would be a schoolmaster, but felt the role settle on to his shoulders as easily as the black gown he hung up on the door.

His interview with the headmaster of Crampton Abbey had been brief. Captain Little, a tall, grey-haired man whose horn-rimmed glasses had one blacked-out lens, had made it clear that Geoffrey's principal job was to improve the performance of the sports teams. 'The parents do expect us to win a few matches, you know,' he said. 'It's more than twenty years since we beat Bearwood Hall at anything.'

After Geoffrey had unpacked his single suit and spare tweed jacket, he decided to go for a walk in the grounds. Beneath an oak tree next to the cricket pitch, he came across a wooden bench with the inscription 'J. D. Farmington 1895–1915'. The Battle of Loos, he thought. He wondered if Captain Little's sad demeanour and sightless eye had had anything to do with the war. Geoffrey's father had been in the infantry in France, but never spoke about it except if he had a coughing fit, when he muttered about the gas and made disparaging remarks about his wife's German dogs.

Geoffrey looked to his right, where the ground rose to a wooden pavilion. He pictured the nervous opening batsmen making their way to the middle to be met by a barrage from the opening bowlers of Bearwood Hall. Only a few weeks earlier he had himself gone in on a damp morning at Guildford to face Alf Gover and his brother-in-law Eddie Watts of Surrey; he had made only twelve and had been hit painfully on the forearm. He had no idea whether his knowledge of rugby and cricket would make him a good coach, but it could scarcely be difficult to motivate a group of energetic small boys.

There were wood pigeons and some noisy blackbirds in the trees that fringed a small football pitch behind him. Generations came and went in places like this, Geoffrey thought; they flickered through the huge front door with its iron bolts and bars, each new boy gripped by the conviction that he was alone in such straits — deprived of mother and home, beset by rules he

didn't understand, hoping the next hour might bring relief from new sensations. It must be hard for a child to believe that his experience, far from being unique, would in time dwindle into something no longer even individual, as his tears were taken up into the clouds. Geoffrey liked poetry and had a secret ambition to write verses in the style of Rupert Brooke, but he had never shown his undergraduate efforts to anyone, not even the fellow members of the Marvell, a weekly reading society.

A light wind blew as he set off back to the school to have tea; walking along the crazy-paved path towards the terrace, he felt apprehensive at the thought of meeting experienced members of his new profession. He pushed open the tall double oak doors of the dining hall and saw one of the two long trestles partly laid up with a red gingham cloth. There was no one else there; Geoffrey went in and sat down on an inconspicuous chair. Through swing doors from a kitchen came a woman in blue overalls with wild hair. She carried a plate that she set down in front of him without speaking; it had two warm sardines on a half-slice of toast. She reached over and lifted the teapot to pour him a cupful of deep chestnut brown. Geoffrey, who was hungry after his journey up from Hampshire, disposed of the sardines quickly, wondering if he might need something else to eat later in the evening. As he was preparing to leave, the double doors swung open and a bald man in tweeds and brown brogues with thick rubber welts rolled into the room.

He held out his hand and introduced himself. 'Gerald Baxter. Classics and Under Eleven cricket.'

The maid brought his sardines. 'Thank you, Elsie,' Baxter said. When she had gone back into the kitchen, he lowered his voice. 'They get them from the bin. You probably saw it when you came from the station. The old county asylum. They're all quite harmless. Apart from one who fell in love with the maths

master and tried to stab him with the ceremonial sword above the fireplace. Before my time, though. Do you want to come to the pub?’

‘Is that allowed?’

Baxter smiled. He had yellowing teeth and one gruesome canine, coloured almost black. ‘Old Ma Little warn you off, did she? No, it’s perfectly all right. Just not meant to go to the Hare and Hounds in case we bump into Long John. Doesn’t booze with other ranks.’

‘Long John?’

‘The Head. After Long John Silver.’ Baxter covered one eye piratically.

The Whitby Arms was a fifteen-minute walk downhill. The saloon bar was a large featureless room with a few coloured photographs of vintage cars and a small coke fire; through the servery Geoffrey could glimpse a dim public bar where men in caps were drinking flat, dark beer. He could see why Mr Little might have preferred the Hare and Hounds with its bottle-bottom windows and coloured lights.

‘Done any teaching before?’

‘No, it’s my first job.’

‘It’s not a bad life. Especially if you have a private income.’

‘I’m afraid I haven’t.’

‘Nor have I,’ said Baxter. ‘A word of advice. Don’t try and become head of department or any of that nonsense. Then your life is all timetables and meetings. Stay a foot soldier. Teach the little buggers and knock off promptly when the bell goes. I’ll have the other half if you twist my arm.’

Although Baxter insisted on drinking only half-pints, he managed to dispose of a dozen in two hours, most of which Geoffrey bought for him. ‘Still your round, I think, Talbot. Just a freshener.’

Baxter puffed loudly as they made their way back up the

hill. 'I'd get a car if I could afford it. I don't mind coming down, it's the climb back I can't manage. I was wounded, you know.'

'Where?'

'I was with the Sandpipers.'

'The Sandpipers?'

'The 13th/25th. Won't be called on to fight again, that's for sure. Too bloody old.'

They were walking into the school grounds and the clock was striking nine. 'Are you up by the sick room?' said Baxter.

'Yes.'

'I thought so. My room's at the end, down the half-flight. Breakfast's at seven-thirty. Why not look in afterwards? I generally have a dry martini before Prayers.'

Geoffrey had been a schoolmaster for only a year when war broke out and he went to ask Long John Little's permission to volunteer.

'You could do well at this job, you know,' said Little. 'You're a natural. The boys listen to you.'

'I hope I'll be back soon,' said Geoffrey. He had really no idea how long the war would last. So long as the Russians and Americans were not involved, there would be, he imagined, an intense but brief struggle in Europe. The Scandinavians would offer little resistance, but the French could be relied on to hold out until British reinforcements came to help. Then he could return to coaching the First XI, who had scraped a draw against Bearwood Hall in his first summer in charge, and see if he could get some games for the Nottinghamshire Second XI himself.

'It's going to be a devil of a job getting any young staff at all,' said Little. 'During the last war my father had to dig a lot of old men out of retirement. They were making it up as they went