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Godfrey's Ghost

From Father to Son

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Extract

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Godfrey's Ghost

From Father to Son

Prologue

Godfrey's Ghost is, at its heart, a book about my father, Arnold Ridley, written for my son.

Although my father died twenty-five years ago, my son, Christopher, who was too young to know him, can see his grandfather whenever he chooses. Chris is, of course, aware that, while his grandfather was Private Godfrey, Private Godfrey was not his grandfather; but a well-drawn television character appears so complete that sometimes, I think, it may be difficult to distinguish the actor from the man. The thought disturbs me.

Yet there are worse ways to be remembered. As a character, Private Godfrey, the oldest member of the Walmington-on-Sea platoon, has always been a *Dad's Army* favourite. Gentle, fumbling, innocently willing, Godfrey was particularly popular among the very old and the very young. 'My sister cried last night when the bank manager was rude to you,' wrote a ten-year-old boy. 'He shouldn't have been because, although you're very stupid, you do try.' It was a part my father loved to play. 'A Bear of Very Little Brain'. But, as a picture of my father, the deferential, weak-bladdered bachelor residing with his sisters Dolly and Cissy in Cherry Tree Cottage will not serve.

Which is why – does this sound absurd? – I felt a need to rescue him. To prise Arnold Ridley from Private Godfrey. To free him from age and frailty. To revive and restore him. I wanted to paint a true portrait of my father for my son. For others, too, including – as I have come to realise – for myself.

I was born when my father was fifty-one. It seemed to me so much of his life had been lived already. His distant childhood in Bath. The horrors of the First World War. The astonishing success of his first play, *The Ghost Train*. The life of a celebrated playwright. Wealth and fame. Rooms at Garlands Hotel, winters in Nice or Juan-les-Pins. After which, an interval of alcoholism, a doomed affair, a first divorce, financial ruin, calamitous and complete. He returned to France to fight in another war. Shell-shock, blackouts, nervous collapse. And then – in some ways worst of all – the writer's block that robbed him of his confidence and his craft. Through most of my childhood he lived the hand-to-mouth existence of an

ageing actor, struggling for small parts, harried by bank managers, bullied by bailiffs, pursued by implacable tax inspectors.

For me and for my mother, my father's triumphs were in the past.

Ours was quite unlike the plush life he had known at the height of his success. As a family, we may sometimes have shared a wistful sense of what had been and was no more, but that was all. Which is why my admiration for my father had – and has – little to do with his public achievements. He was, for me, remarkable because he was my father; and because – faced with more than his fair share of life's vicissitudes – through love, courage and the kind of well-grounded philosophy that doesn't recognise itself as such, he lived his life so valiantly and well.

* * *

Writing about my father has brought him back to me. The loose change jingling in his pocket. His battered brown hats in the hall. I have seen him sitting in his turret at Lord's. I have watched him anxiously waiting by the window. I have heard his voice again as, I hope, one day, my son will want to hear mine.

CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings

I am standing at his bedroom door. Watching.

• one / two / three / four / five / six / seven cards

'What are you doing, Daddy?'

• one / two / three / four / five / six cards

He doesn't look up.

• one / two / three / four / five cards

'Oh,' he says. 'Thinking. Just thinking.'

• one / two / three / four cards

I am three, maybe four years old.

• one / two / three cards

'What are you thinking about, Daddy?' I ask.

• one / two cards

'Oh,' he says. 'Different things.'

• one card

He looks up and smiles.

I am too young to know what I'm seeing.

My father played patience endlessly. Daily, mechanically, joylessly.
It was an inactivity my mother regarded with exasperation. She had no time for patience but – through most of my childhood – time was what my father had. In spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs. Flopping the cards untidily onto the wrinkled counterpane of his bed or our unsteady dining-room table.

‘Thinking,’ he would say. ‘Just thinking.’

• one / two / three / four / five / six / seven cards

* * *

Chiswick, London W4.

Another father. Another son. You and me. Years later, on a half-remembered Sunday afternoon. You are at one end of the living-room, sitting in front of the computer; I’m on the sofa. How old are you? Twelve, thirteen? An unguarded age. You are quiet and content, but I am unsettled, restless, on the edge of irritation. Are you doing homework or playing a game on the computer? I feel the need to know. I want it to be homework but, from the sofa, I can’t see the screen. I could ask you but I don’t. You’re perfectly happy. Why won’t I leave you alone? Why shouldn’t you be playing a computer game? After all, I am doing nothing more serious than reading the newspaper. Or looking over the top of it.

‘Lord Chesterfield,’ I say. I can’t stop myself. ‘Ever heard of him?’

This is apropos of nothing; nothing at all. Although it’s possible I have been thinking about fathers and sons. You don’t reply. You’re looking at the screen; concentrating. I twitch with irritation.

‘Have you ever heard of Lord Chesterfield?’ I am speaking slowly, deliberately. You say nothing. I feel myself tense. I put down the newspaper. At which point you notice that I’ve been speaking to you, and I notice that you’re wearing headphones.

‘Sorry?’ you say, and you take off the headphones.

‘I was just wondering if the name “Lord Chesterfield” meant anything to you.’

‘No,’ you say. ‘Sorry.’

You replace the headphones.

‘What about Lloyd George?’

Why am I doing this?

You lower one headphone.

‘Lord George?’ you ask.

‘Yes. No. Lloyd. Lloyd George. Have you heard of him?’

‘No,’ you say.

And then, an afterthought, being helpful, you say, ‘You could always ask Mum.’

I’m nonplussed.

‘What?’

BEGINNINGS

‘Why don’t you ask Mum? She might know.’

‘I know who Lord Chesterfield is – was,’ I say. ‘And Lloyd George.’

Now you’re nonplussed.

‘I know who Lord Chesterfield and Lloyd George were,’ I explain carefully. ‘I wanted to know if you knew.’

‘No,’ you say. ‘I don’t.’

You lower the other headphone. You’re puzzled but you’re being very patient. You want to know why I want to know. I want to know why – as you don’t know – you don’t ask. We both wait to see what I’m going to say next. Thankfully I find it’s nothing very much.

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘I just wondered.’

You smile. And wait.

‘Best known for writing letters to his son,’ I say. ‘Lord Chesterfield, that is. Lloyd George was – well – someone different. A prime minister.’

There’s a pause.

‘Nothing to do with the sofa then?’ you say.

I regard the sofa with suspicion.

‘What?’

‘The sofa,’ you say. ‘Chesterfield sofa.’

Can you really have said this?

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘No. I don’t think so. Although I could be wrong.’

You wait a little longer but I don’t say anything else. Which is just as well, because I have realised that I know nothing more about Lord Chesterfield and have certainly never read his letters. And Lloyd George? ‘The Welsh wizard’. Or was

that someone else? Did he have a mistress – or several mistresses? I don't know. That's the limit of my knowledge. You have replaced your headphones. Which means you don't hear me humming …

'Lloyd George knew my father,
Father knew Lloyd George.'

Although, in fact, he didn't. In his lifetime my father knew, or came into contact with, an extraordinary range of people. As a successful young playwright between the two world wars, he found himself in the company of celebrated painters, pianists, lawyers, journalists, surgeons, sportsmen. As a child, their names meant little to me. Later, as a teenager, I feigned indifference or contempt whenever they were mentioned. Not that they were brought in gratuitously; they were simply part of the story. My father wasn't greatly impressed by celebrity.

Except, that is, in the case of sportsmen.

* * *

I am six years old. It's Saturday morning and my father and I are in a small sports shop in the Strand. It's early summer. Outside, the noise and confusion of city traffic. Inside – a world apart – two pyramids of shining cricket balls, displayed like exotic fruit, lines of stiff white pads, batting gloves in boxes, an undertone of linseed oil and blanco.

The shop is owned by Sir Jack Hobbs, although I may not have known this at the time. We are there to choose a new cricket bat. My first bat with a splice; a rite of passage. I have in my hands a big bat, much too big, the schoolboy's temptation. My father and I examine it together. I know what he is going to say. It's my decision but the bat will go back in the rack. And then there with us in the shop is Sir Jack himself.

Sir Jack Hobbs, Surrey and England; the most accomplished of English opening batsmen; 'The Master'. This is exceptional good fortune.

My father explains our mission.

'Don't buy a bat that's too big or too heavy,' counsels Sir Jack,
endorsing my father's concern.

He hands me another and I take guard. I lift the bat and it rises, as it should, above the off stump. I can't do otherwise. My father's hours of patient coaching showing to advantage. Sir Jack approves my straight drive. There are kind words. We buy the bat and leave. My father is delighted, not for himself but for me.

As a boy, he had been presented by his own father to Dr WG Grace, the greatest cricket name of all. Then well advanced in years, WG and his brother, EM Grace, were regular visitors to Bath with the Gloucester village team of Thornbury.

'A big man with a squeaky voice,' my father remembered. He was not an uncritical admirer of Dr Grace who had a reputation for gamesmanship and bullying which meant that he would always reside at the outer edges of my father's pantheon of great cricketers.

Whereas Sir Jack was a Gentleman; probably the greatest Gentleman among Players. And I had met him – Sir Jack Hobbs – and would tell the story to my son.

* * *

Time shifts. Scenes change. My father is back in the pavilion and I am alone and musing at the non-striker's end. A Gentleman? A Player?

How would my father judge me, his son, now much the same age as he was himself that Saturday morning in the Strand? I know the answer, of course. He wouldn't need time to consider his decision. As the only child of an elderly father, I always knew how much I was loved. Well beyond my merits.

I fidget and tap my bat in the dust of the failings my father would never see in me. His decision will be generous – too generous – but I am grateful. I look up quickly, my eyes prickling, and see his grandson at the other end. How would he see you? In the same bright light. In an arc of love and affection. Would he see himself in you? Maybe not. But he should. Because there he is and there you are. Grandfather and grandson together.

* * *

A patch of grass on Barnes Common where my father and I play cricket. We use my father's folded tweed jacket to mark the wicket. We don't need stumps. No one is going to be out. I bat while he bowls his 'tweakers'. This is an odd, stabbing, bent-arm technique he has been forced to adopt because he can't bowl over-arm. A wound, an injury, arthritis? I don't know. It's something I simply accept. He walks back to the spot where I have left my school jersey and woollen tie. He tries to disguise his grimace. The first 'tweakers' of the morning cause him a stab of pain which I pretend not to notice. I play the strokes he has taught me; along the ground, not too hard. An elderly father and his young son. I don't want to make him walk too far to retrieve the ball or to have to search for it in the tangled bracken. He stoops to pick it up and, as he straightens, I hear the coins jingle in his

pocket. I take guard, my father bowls again, and so we continue through the pale morning.

A shift. You have joined us. We are here together; my father, you and me. It's you who should be at the crease. We walk towards each other and I hand over the bat. Stepping outside the square, I take up a position at mid-wicket. Fielding becomes my task. I will watch my father bowl his 'tweakers' at you. Or perhaps now his shoulder has recovered and he can bowl as he did in his youth, forty years before he was a father. You lift your bat above the off stump and hit the ball.

A sweet stroke, a fine drive with a full follow through. There's no need to hold back. I run to collect the ball and my father bowls again. I have found my position on the field. This is where I belong. My tension subsides. 'Sir Jack Hobbs. Have you heard of him? Or WG Grace? Do you know the meaning of 'apropos'?' There's no need for questions.

My father bowls again. I must watch and learn patience. I must stifle my appeals. This is my role. To be a connection between you. There are things I believe my father would like me to say to you. And there are things I'd like to say to you myself. I believe you will be happy to listen to us both.

* * *

You're looking at me. I must have said something. What?

'Yes, Lord Chesterfield. He wrote letters to his son. His natural son, I believe. That's what he's known for. I've no idea what the letters said. I've never read them. I suppose his son did. Or perhaps he didn't.
Who knows?'

'Perhaps his son replied,' you say.

'Yes, perhaps he did. I really don't know. I'm not sure why I
mentioned him really.'

You smile and wait. But I say nothing, afraid of saying too little or too much. And so, not trusting myself to speak, I'll write. Not letters exactly. Notes maybe. Musings, memories, meditations. Something
like that anyway. From me to you. From father to son.

* * *

So much of my father's story is so long ago. So far away. Another era. Another world. A grey-and-white photograph of him with my grandfather, walking

together on the Riviera, more like two brothers than a father and son. Another photograph of my father's name in theatre lights in St Martin's Lane. A blaze of fame. Stage photographs, theatre programmes, one or two posters, the annual entries in Who's Who. Thirty plays produced in the West End. More than thirty. Distant history. Grist for an obituary.

But here beside me is the manuscript of The Ghost Train, handwritten in a series of school notebooks.

The Big Value Exercise Book
24 Pages
Ruled Both Sides
Superfine Paper Well Bound
One Penny

On the back of each notebook are the standard multiplication tables and 'Avoirdupois Weights (for all goods except Gold, Silver and Jewels)'. I don't think my father needed to weigh his words very much.

He wrote The Ghost Train in just over a week. The handwriting is fluent, confident, unbroken. Very little has been scratched out or amended. He must have seen the waiting-room at Fal Vale station so clearly, heard his characters speak their lines, watched them make their moves. The dialogue flows from his fountain pen; lines of black handwriting crossing the ruled pages.

In the days of his prolific playwriting he always wrote longhand. The typewriter was for more material matters; proposals, revisions, short stories, agreements, business letters. Until – as he might have written himself – tragedy struck. After years of writing by hand, in the mid-1950s my father developed what was diagnosed as 'writer's cramp'. Two nerves in his right elbow were rubbing together, we were told. This would lead eventually to the complete paralysis of his hand and the withering of his arm. A wretched outcome for a writer; a truly terrifying picture for a child. My imagination played mercilessly with the ghastly image of the withered arm. The only hope was an operation at the Royal Masonic Hospital, Ravenscourt Park, where a pioneering surgeon was perfecting a procedure that involved moving a nerve from the elbow to the wrist. Neither of the first two operations had been successful but – my parents were told – they had been encouraging failures. Quite what this meant they didn't know, but my father had great faith in surgeons and in the Royal Masonic Hospital. It was therefore decided that he should undergo the third pioneering procedure in the hope – although not the expectation – that it might do some good.

Our raw anxiety was increased by the fact that my father's left hand was of very limited use. The wound he had received at the Battle of the Somme meant he could only use the thumb and forefinger. Normally he was able to disguise this quite successfully but the loss of the use of his right hand would cruelly expose the helplessness of the left. Not only would he be unable to write; his career as an actor would also be finished.

In the event the operation went well; or well enough to prevent my father's arm from withering and to give him some use of his fingers.

As his hand recovered, my vision of the withered arm – a nightmare too fearful to be shared with anyone else – slowly receded, and only the memory of the dread remained with me.

In time my father regained much of the use of his right arm.

Eventually, for short periods, he was able to hold a pen again. But something had been lost. He found he was able to use a ballpoint, but not a fountain pen. He needed to feel the nib on the paper, to follow the flow. This he couldn't now do. The faculty had gone and with it the fluency. He bought the first in a long line of typewriters with a lighter touch, a sickly, click-clicking Olivetti to replace the robust clack clacking Remington which he gave to me. From time to time he sat at his new typewriter, but the right words wouldn't come. He entered the long, numb years of his writer's block from which he never fully emerged.

Not that he stopped writing. I have pages and pages of his notes, drafts and treatments. But, without an audience, his became a lonelier and lonelier occupation. *The Ghost Train* apart, little else survives.

His other plays – many of which he thought much better – were either forgotten or ignored. And, by the time that *Dad's Army* had become a success, it wasn't generally remembered that he had written anything at all.

* * *

There is little quite so heart-breaking as seeing someone you love fail.
Not once. Not twice. But daily. Day after day. The elements of tragedy.
Pity and fear. Pity for my father. Fear for myself.

My father's damaged hands meant that he couldn't shuffle a pack of cards in the conventional manner. Instead he dealt them out in groups of five and collected them up again; slowly, methodically. Then he would lay out the cards as before.

• one / two / three / four / five / six / seven cards

Waiting to begin. Waiting for a cue. Waiting to step onto a set that he could recognise. But when the handle turns and the door opens, it's his son standing there.

'What are you doing, Daddy?'

'Oh,' he says. 'Thinking. Just thinking.'

He begins again and I watch him – wordless – flopping down the cards, one after another onto the counterpane.

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