

OUR MAN IN HAVANA 1959

Carol Reed

OVERVIEW

Set in Havana before the Castro revolution of 1959, this film follows the fortunes of Jim Wormold, an Englishman who makes a living as vacuum cleaner salesman. Through an extraordinary comic series of events, this unassuming man (as far from James Bond as possible) becomes an agent of the British secret service. Motivated by the need to make money in order to satisfy the desires of his teenaged daughter, he allows himself to be recruited. Then he sets about creating a fictional set of agents and a fake missile installation. Fact catches up with fiction, though, and before long he is embroiled in dangerous secrets, murders presented as accidents and a threat against his own life. Rising to the occasion, Wormold, with the help of his secretary Beatrice, manages to escape both the political violence in Havana and the ire of his MI6 bosses in London.

HISTORICAL/LITERARY NOTES

Graham Green wrote the screenplay for this film, which is based on his own novel by the same name (published in 1958). The exterior scenes were shot on location in Havana, only two months before the Castro revolution that overthrew the Batista dictatorship, and it is said that Castro himself visited the film crew during the shooting. The film was the third partnership between Greene and Carol Reed, who had also directed *The Fallen Idol* and *The Third Man*. The plot is based on Greene's experiences with the British intelligence service in west Africa in World War II and on two later visits to Cuba. This clever and prescient satire on the Cold War anticipates Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, which was released five years later.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Wormold	Jim Wormold is a vacuum cleaner salesman in Havana.
Milly	Milly is his teenaged daughter.
Hasselbacher	Hasselbacher is his German friend.
Segura	Capt. Segura is the chief of police and Milly's admirer.
Beatrice	Beatrice is Wormold's secretary, sent to Havana from London.
Hawthorne	Hawthorne is the MI6 man who recruits Wormold.

STORY

Havana The film opens with contrasting shots of Havana. The languid movement of a girl in a swimming pool in a luxury hotel is followed by the bustling city street, where an Englishman, complete with umbrella, walks briskly along. A police car crawls by, and in the back Capt. Segura smokes a big cigar. A man approaches the car and screams insults at the captain; the man is then beaten by police.

Vacuum cleaners The Englishman continues, ignoring street vendors selling everything from shoe shines to 'pretty girls,' and stops at a shop selling vacuum cleaners. He looks at the latest model, the 'Atomic Pile, and comments that 'science is moving fast.' The shop-owner is another Englishman, Jim Wormold, who bids farewell to a friend and greets his customer

Hasselbacher Wormold's friend, Dr Hasselbacher, is stopped by the police and asked about the 'customer' in the shop. The doctor cannot enlighten the captain and he is let go.

Mysterious customer Inside the shop, the customer pretends to be interested in the vacuum cleaners but spends more time asking Wormold about his family and his background. 'You are British, aren't you?' he asks. 'British passport and all that.' When Wormold says yes, the man disappears as mysteriously as he appeared.

Milly Wormold meets Hasselbacher in a bar, and the two old friends chat about Capt. Segura, the 'Red Vulture,' as he is known. Wormold confesses that business isn't good and that he needs money for Milly, his teenaged daughter. 'Couldn't her mother help out?' Hasselbacher asks but Wormold doesn't know where her mother is. Wormold is keen to get Milly out of Cuba, with its political danger and predatory men. At that moment, catcalls are heard on the street, where Milly is passing with packages under her arms.

Gift horse Wormold returns to the shop, where in their flat above, Millie is bustling about. Father and daughter discuss her upcoming seventeenth birthday and what she wants for a present. With some remorse, Millie reveals that she wants a horse. She's already bought the saddle, and Capt. Segura has offered her free stabling at the country club. Hearing that, Wormold is alarmed that she even knows the security chief. It turns out that he gives her a ride home from her convent school, 'but he doesn't touch me,' she adds.

Secret service After taking money out of the bank, Wormold goes to a bar, where he is followed by his mysterious customer. Now, the man tells him to go into the bathroom. 'You go first,' he says, conspiratorially, 'and I'll follow.' Mystified, but still willing, Wormold complies. In the Gents, the man reveals that his name is Hawthorne (better known as 52900) and that he is from the British secret service. 'We need our man in Havana,' he says, 'to keep an eye on things. Submarines and economic things—sugar, coffee.' Wormold is then told to meet the man that evening in his hotel 'to sign the official secrets act and all that rubbish.' Wormold is bemused and reluctant until he's also quoted a nice figure for his salary.

Plans Back in his flat, he talks with Milly, who is still dreaming about her horse. 'Suppose, I made a lot of money,' he says. 'How would you like to go to school in Switzerland.' She replies that 'it's not a good country for riding and horribly expensive.' What she really wants is to join the country club, so she can ride there. They talk about her mother, for whom Milly prays. 'You're not religious, father,' she says, 'because you're invincibly ignorant. Don't worry, I'm not insulting you. It's only theology.'

Tricks of the trade When Wormold goes to Hawthorne's hotel room, he is given a copy of Lamb's Shakespeare and taught how to use it in order to pass coded messages and how to use secret ink for communicating with his agents. 'But I haven't any agents,' Wormold says and is told that his first task is to recruit them. After more details are explained, Wormold is dubious that he can be of any use. He's ready 'to serve his country' but his shop takes up a lot of time. Hawthorne says that vacuum cleaners are a 'natural cover' and subjects him to a tedious lesson in writing code.

London Hawthorne returns to London and reports to his superior at MI6. He confesses he is worried because the new man has yet to send in any reports or recruit any agents. 'Well,' he concedes, 'I have had one communication. Asking me to pay for a membership at the local country club. But it was an extravagant amount and I refused.' The MI6 official sanctions the payment and sends a cable to Wormold demanding that he immediately send a list of agents.

Country club Wormold turns up at the club 'to meet my fellow members,' as he explains to Milly, who is riding her horse on the grounds. Strolling among the well-heeled guests sitting on a shaded veranda, he tries to make 'contacts' but fails miserably. Meanwhile, Capt. Segura watches Milly on horseback.

Imagination Wormold tries to recruit Lopez, his shop assistant, but even that fails. Clueless, he confides in Dr Hasselbacher, who encourages him to use his imagination in finding secrets and inventing agents. 'There's something about a secret that makes people want to believe,' he says with a wink. Wormold has scruples about taking money for invented information, but Hasselbacher assures him that 'as long as you invent, you do no harm.' Later, we learn how wrong he is.

Invention Inspired by his friend, Wormold writes his first report, detailing the agents he has invented, each with a code name, including a pilot, an engineer and a popular actress intimate with government ministers. As the weeks pass, he receives his money and happily deposits it in his bank account.

Rocket installation When he enters his shop one evening, he notices a curiously shaped shadow on the wall made from a vacuum cleaner on display. He sits down and sketches an ominous looking tubular machine, which Milly says looks like a strange weapon. He explains that he is illustrating his own science fiction novel, in which pilot Montez, an agent of the British secret service, looks down from his plane and sees a new rocket installation in the mountains in central Cuba. When put into officialese, that is the story he sends to London.

Ransacked Wormold is called to Hasselbacher's flat and laboratory, which has been ransacked. He says that three days ago he was threatened by the police when he refused to work for them. He is vague but admits that he was not wanted for 'doctor's work.'

London When Wormold's fantastic drawings reach MI6 in London, the security men are impressed and Wormold is granted an increase in salary. Hawthorne is less convinced by the authenticity of the sketches, but he is overruled. 'We may be on to something so big that the H-bomb will become a conventional weapon,' his boss announces. He also sends a secretary to Havana, to help Wormold manage his burgeoning spy network.

Beatrice At a nightclub in Havana, Wormold celebrates Milly's birthday with her and Hasselbacher. Capt. Segura joins the party and embarrasses Milly by trying to take over the role of host. Wormold also meets Beatrice, the young woman who is his new secretary. She introduces him to Rudy, a young man also sent by London to be his radio operator. Beatrice sets out to reorganise his office, which alarms Wormold. When she wants to meet his agents, he tells her they are all either sick in hospital or in hiding.

Pilot Montez She particularly wants to have pilot Montez take photographs of the secret rocket facility in the mountains. Wormold pretends that he has contacted Montez and that he has agreed to make a special fly-over to get the evidence. Wormold sends a cable about Montez to London, but it is intercepted by a government spy working in the telegraph office in Havana.

Wooping Capt. Segura waits at the convent school gates and gives Milly a ride, during which, flanked by outriders, he hints that he wants to marry her.

'Accident' Invited for drinks along with Wormold to Hasselbacher's newly-arranged flat, Beatrice becomes suspicious of the German man. After Hasselbacher takes a telephone call, he emerges ashen-faced and asks his guests to leave. But first he reveals that there has been a car accident, in which a pilot Montez has died. Now, invention has caught up with reality and a Mr Montez is dead.

Other 'agents' Beatrice says they must warn all their other agents because it wasn't an accident. Next, a man whom Wormold had unsuccessfully attempted to recruit is left outside the shop door, tied up with ropes. The man protests to the police that he doesn't know Wormold and is taken away to the station. Beatrice races to a striptease joint to warn Teresa, another one of his fictional agents. The police arrive, and Wormold effects an escape, but lands up in police hands.

Capt. Segura Segura questions Wormold, along with Beatrice, about 'certain circumstances,' including his friendship with Hasselbacher, the death of Montez and the dumping of another man at his shop door. Segura plays a taped recording of a telephone call, which shows that Hasselbacher is in the pay of some unknown person.

'Them' That night, Wormold tries to see Hasselbacher, but finding the front door to his building locked, climbs up to the balcony and sees his friend dressed in a German uniform of the Great War. He wants to know what he is up to, and Hasselbacher admits that he was given copies of Wormold's cables to decode and that he agreed to cooperate with 'them.' In return, he would be allowed to remain in the country. Those same unidentified people also destroyed his laboratory and stole his papers. When 'they' found a pilot named Montez, they demanded photos of the rocket installation. Montez, of course, had no photos and so 'they' killed him in a fake accident. Hasselbacher is burdened with the guilt for his death.

Deportation threat Wormold is summoned to Capt. Segura, who threatens to deport him (and Milly) if he does not agree to work for the police. Wormold says that all his agents are nonsense, but reconsiders when Segura says that he would be paid a nice sum.

Kingston Wormold is called to a meeting with Hawthorne in Kingston, Jamaica. Hawthorne confesses to Wormold that he suspected his drawings of the installation were just sketches of vacuum parts, but now that there is a plan to murder him [Wormold], he's convinced they are genuine. Someone plans to poison Wormold at a business lunch, at which is the key speaker. Wormold is aghast, but Hawthorne tells him just to avoid eating anything and to be wary of everyone. On the flight back to Havana, Wormold meets another vacuum cleaner salesman, named Carter, who will be at the business lunch the following day.

Business lunch Beatrice is concerned for Wormold and warns him not to go. At the gathering, Hasselbacher also warns Wormold that he will be poisoned. When they are served, Wormold

switches his plate with the one next to him, but he does accept whisky from a flask offered him by Carter. Then Wormold notices that Carter speaks with the same stammer heard on the taped telephone call with Hasselbacher. Wormold spills his whisky, which is lapped up by a dog, which soon dies.

Corpse After Wormold agrees to work for Segura, the policeman approaches the shop owner and asks for Milly's hand in marriage. When Wormold refuses to grant his permission, Segura takes him to see Hasselbacher, lying dead on the pavement. Wormold suggests that he was killed by the same people who tried to poison him and that Segura should check on Carter.

Confessions Wormold makes a full confession to Beatrice about the fake agents and invented intelligence, including the infamous rocket installation. He tells her and Rudy to leave on the next plane, but she makes it plain that she is in love with him. She isn't bothered about his disloyalty to Britain and expresses disdain for loyalty to any organisation. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Segura, who sits down to play checkers with Wormold.

Chess game Instead of normal pieces, they play with miniature bottles of scotch and bourbon. When you win a piece, Wormold explains, you drink the bottle. Segura knows that he is the better player and will get drunk. 'I would not want to do that in front of my future father-in-law,' he says but agrees anyway. Sure enough, just as Wormold has planned, Segura wins many pieces, gets so drunk and falls asleep, but not before he tells Wormold where Carter is staying.

Revenge Half-drunk himself, Wormold takes the captain's gun and staggers off to find Carter. Wormold is all smiles, apologises for his earlier hostility and leads Carter out on to the dark streets, where he shoots but only wounds him. But when Carter opens a door, a man steps out and finishes him off.

Deportation Segura meets Wormold at Hasselbacher's funeral and serves him a deportation order. 'You seem to work unofficially,' he explains, 'and I do not feel safe with you around.' The captain sees him and Milly off at the airport and gives them each a present. Wormold's is the pair of bullets that he shot at Carter, evidence that could convict him of murder in a court of law.

Cover up The powers that be in London meet to decide Wormold's future after his full revelation of his fake drawings and agents. Although Beatrice defends him, others recommend a charge of treason with appropriate punishment. Then they all realise that if this farce is made public, they'll look stupid and so they decide to hush it up.

Sir James Wormold arrives and Beatrice greets him with warm words of support. Standing before the committee, he is told that they never received his confession and that the missile installations have been shut down. Wormold is offered a job on the training staff, running courses on how to organise a station abroad. He is also offered a knighthood from the British Crown. Outside, he joins Beatrice and Milly, and all three walk off into a bright future together.

THEMES

Cold war farce The dominant, and delightful, theme of this film is the farcical nature of Cold War politics, especially the British Secret Service, or MI6. Graham Greene has trained his sights on that intelligence agency before (in *The Human Factor*) to illumine its amorality, but in this film, the entire business of espionage is subjected to a comic dressing down. The recruitment scene of unsuspecting Wormold in the Gents is the *piece de resistance*. He is greeted first in a bar by Hawthorne, complete with bowler hat and umbrella, and told to follow him into the lavatory. No explanation, no apology, not even an attempt to deceive. Once inside, Hawthorne turns on the taps and says, 'Just keep the water running. Looks more natural if someone barges in. And it confuses the mike.' Wormold stands bemused and says, 'The mike?' Hawthorne takes this as a reasonable doubt that a microphone would be hidden in the bathroom, 'Good point, but it's the drill that counts.' Hawthorne then introduces himself as '59200'. Someone enters and he shoves the uncomprehending Wormold into a cubicle. As the man washes his hands, Wormold's head peeks up above the swinging door to the cubicle. Hawthorne is about to make his escape, but Wormold is afraid that someone might have recognised his legs under the cubicle half-door. 'Do you think we should change trousers?' he asks, half-seriously. 'Wouldn't look natural, old man,' Hawthorne says. 'Still you're getting the idea.' This scene is later repeated by Wormold in the country club, where it is equally risible. Later, when Wormold is in Hawthorne's hotel room, the MI6 man asks if he has an electric kettle. 'For steaming open letters, of course,' he adds. Wormold is told that he'll also need plastic knitting needles and

secret ink. 'But don't worry, old boy. If you run short of ink, you can always use bird droppings.' The meetings in the London offices of MI6 are scarcely less ridiculous. The chief confesses that he always 'mixes up the west and the east Indies' when he fails to locate Cuba on a huge wall map. And the most hilarious scene is when the security officials crowd around a large table and examine the drawings of the rocket installation in the hills. The serious-minded men comment that a 'devilish imagination' went into designing the dangerous weapons, disguised to look like a vacuum cleaner. By believing that the drawings have been faked to conceal their reality, they dupe themselves and reverse the joke played by Wormold.

Cold War Reality Beneath the comedy of the Cold War, though, the film also presents its hard-nosed realities. The story is set in Cuba during the regime of Batista, who staged a military coup in the early 1950s and ran a brutal dictatorship until he was ousted by Fidel Castro's revolution in 1959. In the film, the face of the dictatorship is Captain Segura, a cigar-smoking, smooth-talking, swaggering chief of police in Havana. He, like the regime, has a sophisticated, Americanised exterior, while operating with impunity, beating up protestors and killing opponents. Segura was known as the 'Red Vulture,' a fitting image for his bloody and predatory instincts. At one point in the story, a crowd of ordinary Cubans cheer Beatrice because she managed to humiliate Segura by spraying him with soda water in a nightclub. Aside from Segura, the film is also good at depicting the febrile Cold War atmosphere in Havana. Cuba was in America's backyard, and Moscow wanted influence, so the island was crawling with both Russian and American spies. The story also, miraculously, anticipates the Cuban Missile Crisis with its episode of the pilot who saw rocket installations in the mountains near Havana. This is precisely what did happen in 1962, when US planes photographed ballistic missile facilities in the hills. President Kennedy blockaded Cuba to prevent Russian ships from delivering the missiles, the Russians refused to back down and only some frantic backchannel negotiations prevented a nuclear war. The film is eerily prescient.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Wormold

Character Jim Wormold is a mild-mannered Englishman, who lives in Havana, where he owns a shop. Separated from his wife (back in London), but doting on his high-maintenance daughter, he has money problems. Seemingly dull and lacking imagination, he finds new layers of courage and cleverness when required.

Illustrative moments

Self-deprecating Wormold (played wonderfully by Alec Guinness) has the quintessential English trait of self-deprecation. He is, in truth, a man of modest means and little ambition, but his unpretentious nature is on full display in one particular scene. He has been summoned to Hawthorne's hotel room, where the MI6 man introduces Wormold to the tricks of the trade, including codes and secret ink. All the while, the vacuum cleaner salesman sits and watches with a wry smile, like a little boy listening to a teacher explain a complex mathematical formula. Hawthorne gets on to the code names—59200, 59200/1, 59200/1/1, and so forth—to be used for his agents. 'But I haven't any agents,' Wormold points out. 'Listen,' he says, 'I really don't see how I can be of any use to you.' Undeterred, Hawthorne presses on with his induction lesson, now turning to the secret ink. Wormold listens but replies with supercilious comments about his inability to do any of this 'spy stuff.' He is an unassuming person, living a humdrum life. That is what makes the film so entertaining: he grabs his opportunity and makes the most of it as 'our man in Havana.'

Decisive As the story unfolds, so does Wormold's character, revealing talents he never knew he possessed. He is clever, imaginative and capable of taking decisive action. The key scene to these traits is the chess-playing with Segura in Wormold's flat. Hasselbacher has been murdered, and Wormold decides to take revenge on the man who killed his friend, and for this he needs a gun. Wormold appeals to Segura's vanity as a chess player and invites him over for a game, in which the pieces are miniature bottles of brandy and bourbon. Each time a man takes a piece, he drinks the bottle. As Segura is the better player, he gets very drunk and falls asleep, allowing Wormold to take the man's gun and set off in pursuit of Carter. In the end, he only wounds Carter, but his planning and his actions belong to a man transformed from the meek vacuum cleaner salesman at the start of the film.

Protective Jim Wormold is separated from his wife but he is a very protective father. Young and spirited Milly would not be easy for any man, let alone a mild-mannered one like Wormold, to rein in.

His parental instincts are well illustrated in an early scene, in a bar talking with Hasselbacher. Wormold is worried. Milly's birthday is coming up and he knows he can't buy her what she wants, not on his poor earnings from the shop. Hasselbacher offers him a loan, but he says, 'No. It's not that.' He gestures to the street outside and says, 'It's just that I don't want Milly to grow up in this atmosphere like this. Civil War, men like Segura. I want to give her a whole different life. A finishing school in Switzerland. A house in Kensington. And an Anglo-Saxon husband with lots of money and no mystery.' From this point onwards, we are able to sympathise with Wormold's predicament and understand his motives. He needs money to make his daughter happy. Nothing else is really important.

Hasselbacher

Character Hasselbacher, a German veteran of the Great War, has a reserved personality and a philosophical outlook. Haunted by the past, he is secretive and cryptic, although this does not prevent him from forming a strong bond of affection with Wormold.

Illustrative moments

Philosophical In contrast to Wormold's worry about the everyday necessities of life, Hasselbacher focuses on the philosophical side. He is German, with an old-world European sense of detachment about him. We hear his world-weary ideas during an early conversation with Wormold. Having spoken of his financial troubles, Wormold says his friend never seems to get worried about anything. 'I am interested in life,' Hasselbacher says. When Wormold says he is, too, Hasselbacher corrects him. 'No,' he says. 'You are interested in the person [like Milly], not in life. People die and leave us. I have an experiment to do with the blue-ness of cheese. It's important. It will never die.' Somewhat later, Wormold asks about that experiment, wondering if the cheese is still blue. 'If the dream goes well, reality in our century is not to be faced,' says Hasselbacher. It is a cryptic remark, perhaps referring to the dangers of the Atomic Age, but it is typically mysterious coming out of the old man's mouth.

Perceptive Not all of Hasselbacher's comments are high-flying philosophy, though. Sometimes he reveals an acute understanding of human nature, as in another barroom conversation with Wormold. This time, the shopkeeper is anxious about whether or not to accept money in exchange for supplying information as a spy. Hasselbacher asks what kind of information and is told 'secret information.' The German smiles and says, 'You are a lucky man. That sort of information is always easy to get.' Wormold looks perplexed, and his friend explains. 'If it is secret enough, everyone will know it. All you need is a little imagination. There's something about a secret that makes people want to believe.' He gives, as an example, an advertisement for a 'hair tonic devised by the chief of an extinct Red Indian tribe.' Hasselbacher's comment on the credulity of ordinary people proves true, especially when the men in London are taken in by Wormold's fanciful drawings.

Beatrice

Character Beatrice is an efficient and loyal secretary. Divorced and attractive, she sets about reorganising Wormold's office and ends up reorganising their lives. Despite her chilly exterior, she is a kind person, who can also share a girly joke with Milly, Wormold's daughter.

Illustrative moments

Efficient Beatrice is sent to Havana to help Wormold manage his ever-increasing list of agents. She is just the kind of secretary that any man would want: pleasant, brisk and super efficient. On this first day in the office, she bustles about and reorganises Wormold's whole operation, unaware, of course, that it is all bogus. She takes down a wall map with the pins identifying the location of his agents. 'Too obvious,' she says. 'You don't have a very good sense of security, you know.' Then she sweeps up his desk and studies the cards for each agent. 'You shouldn't list them by their real names,' she advises. Finally, she tells Wormold what his next task should be: get photographs of those rocket installations. Wormold looks alarmed (since they don't exist). 'Oh, yes,' Beatrice chirps. 'Top priority. The Prime Minister wants to see them.' On the basis of this scene, she is just the kind of secretary that Wormold doesn't want: a busybody, interfering and about to blow the lid on his lucrative scam.

Loyal Slowly, Beatrice grows to admire and to love her hapless boss. She sees that he is kind to his daughter, and everyone else, and that he has a sense of humour (something sorely lacking in her ex-husband, who thought UNESCO was more important than his wife). Her affection develops scene by

scene, but the first true indication of her feelings comes after Wormold confesses that his operation is entirely fictional. Rather than becoming angry, Beatrice seems impressed. 'I wonder if my marriage would have broken up if he could have laughed just once at UNESCO,' she wonders. She also says that she won't desert Wormold and go back to London. 'You shouldn't share my disloyalty,' he says. 'You're loyal to Milly,' she counters. 'Some men are loyal only to the organisations that pay them. We wouldn't be in the mess we're in if we were loyal to love and not to countries.' They then talk about where they will go next. 'Probably the Persian Gulf,' Beatrice sighs. When Wormold asks why, she answers: 'For redemption, perhaps, through sweat and tears.' She breaks down and cries. It is an unintended display of her love.



(Wormold, Milly and Capt. Segura)



(Wormold and Beatrice)