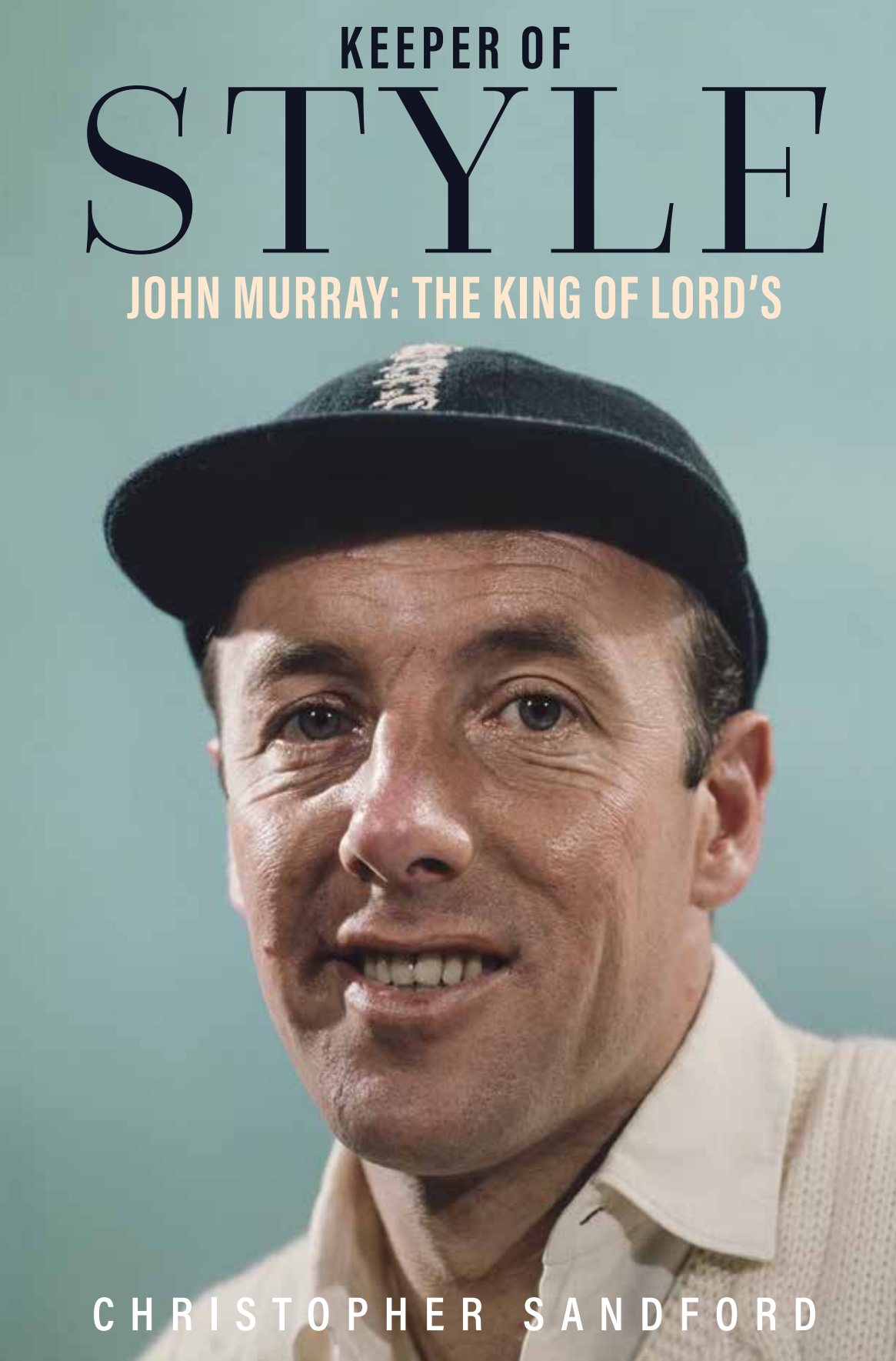
KEEPER OF STYLE

JOHN MURRAY: THE KING OF LORD'S



CHRISTOPHER SANDFORD

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1.

SUMMER OF LOVE

THE year 1967 was my own private summer of love, but not for any reasons connected with the world of herbally tinged joss sticks or bare-thighed young women swaggering around Carnaby Street in Courrèges miniskirts. You probably know the sort of retrospective that takes the Swinging Sixties, and more particularly Swinging London, on their own terms. 'Society was shaken to its foundations!' a recent BBC documentary on the subject shouted. 'All the rules came off, all the brakes came off … the floodgates were unlocked … A youthquake hit the UK', and so on.

For at least most young Britons, of whom I was one, what this mainly seems to have meant was some very silly shirts, marginally better food (thanks to new European trading laws) and, so one gathers, a slight increase in the use of soft drugs. By a lucky bit of timing, the introduction and rapid availability of

the female contraceptive pill also happened to coincide with the arrival of that other defining symbol of swinging etiquette, the duvet. Exact statistics are elusive, but as a result of these twin developments it's likely that a few more single young women bunked up with their boyfriends, a societal trend celebrated in the Rolling Stones' seminal 1967 single 'Let's Spend the Night Together', one of several public effusions proposing nocturnal activity at around that time.

But in truth, that was about it for the youthquake. For millions of adolescent Britons, it seems fair to say that sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll took their place against a normal existence of knitting or cricket, with a probationary glass or two of Babycham, and worrying about one's school exams. A night out at *The Sound of Music*, followed by the Berni Inn Family Platter, remained the height of most young teenagers' aspirations. When *Time* magazine came to dub London the 'Style Capital of Europe', it focused on a few photogenic locations and eye-catching developments such as the pervasive rise of hemlines and Mick Jagger and Keith Richards appearing before magistrates on drug charges. Despite the subsequent claims of the BBC, these were not events that appeared to be part of any broader revolution under way against the Britain of *Hancock's Half Hour*, with its grinding conformity and identical, red-brick semi-detached houses furnished just like your granny's.

Certainly there was little evidence of anyone conspicuously seeking to move the guardrails defining the limits of acceptable behaviour to be seen at St Aubyns prep school in Rottingdean, East Sussex, where I found myself detained for much of 1967. Social ferment was slow to disturb that part of the world. The

school itself was a combination of distressed seaside hotel and Victorian fortress, with innumerable outbuildings and corridors, all smelling obscurely of boiled cabbage, grouped around the central block, and a sturdy flint wall separating the whole place from a large, sloping playing field which sometimes made it feel like you were being pushed downhill when you were batting there. There was a road at the south end of the field, and beyond the road was the English Channel. In general it seems fair to say that St Aubyns wasn't known for its spirit of freewheeling social adventure. There was an elaborate system of rules, rewards and punishments, and the seven- to 13-year-old boys wore a year-round uniform of grey shirts and sweaters, and grey shorts, with an itchy grey suit by way of variety on Sundays and other special occasions. There were no girls. An etiquette of finely tuned call and response ruled between the students and the staff, the former known by our surnames, the latter answering to 'Sir'. There was something of a generation gap apparent in this relationship, and I suppose it could hardly have been otherwise in light of the fact that roughly half the dozen full-time masters had taught my father at the same institution 30 years earlier – 'and they seemed pretty ancient even then', he once told me.

As I say, though, there was love in the air during that summer of 1967, and in my case this meant cricket in general and more particularly the incumbent England wicketkeeper John 'JT' Murray. Murray was exquisite. The sheer class of the man communicated itself even on the boxy, black-and-white Baird TV set perched in a dim corner of the St Aubyns schoolroom where I principally watched him. He seemed to me to be much like Cary Grant with gauntlets. Always immaculately turned

out in creamy white flannels and a blue cap, Murray would go through a little routine before each ball was bowled, circling his arms, the tips of the gloves touched together, patting the peak of the cap, and then dropping smoothly down to settle on his haunches behind the stumps. There was something both athletic and sedate about his posture. Murray's balance and coordination were such that he was hardly ever seen sprawled on the turf, though he could dive full length, making impossible catches seem simple, with the best of them. As *Wisden* wrote when honouring him as one of its Five Cricketers of the Year in 1967:

> 'Murray's reputation is built on polished orthodoxy and eschewing the spectacular for its own sake. He denies the need for flashiness … The sheer professionalism of his wicket-keeping has made an essential and vital difference to England's out-cricket.'

Murray could bat a bit, too. The sometime England captain Tony Lewis once wrote of him that he was the only player who could make hooking the West Indies fast bowlers of the 1960s (in the days before helmets) look positively graceful. At his best he was a glorious strokeplayer, as anyone who saw him take 112 off the likes of Wes Hall and Charlie Griffith in the fifth Test at the Oval in 1966 will confirm. Garry Sobers, who was there, told me: 'It was the rhythm and control John had that generated his power. When he got in a groove he was a bloody hard man to set a field to. "Just try and keep him up your end and bowl

to the other bugger", I told Wes at one point, [but] that didn't work either – even the last-wicket pair, inspired by Murray, got runs that day.'

As the St Aubyns second eleven wicketkeeper, I sadly lacked these highly desirable attributes, and indeed brought only one recognisable quality to bear behind the stumps: being fat, I at least provided a generous target for the bowler to aim at. Murray was my idol, but he was in every sense an unapproachable one. I read the match reports in the newspaper every morning from cover to cover, entering JT's catches and other data for the season in a large blue-covered exercise book until the annual was concluded, at which point I started another one. This sometimes drew the scorn of those who didn't have cricket in the blood, but it's something any true lover of the game surely knows in their bones.

Looking back on it, there were two primary reasons for my hero-worship of the peerless Middlesex and England stumper. One of them was pleasure, and the other was escape. About 40 years later I found myself sitting at home in Seattle one morning watching a local news report about how 'ordinary Britons' were coping in the immediate wake of the 7/7 terrorist attacks, many of them apparently absorbed less by the television images of the outrages in London than by the progress of the one-day international being played between England and Australia at Leeds, and I see that I jotted in my diary: 'Cricket can be better than life.' Although I wrote this in 2005 I was only enshrining in print a slogan that had first dawned on me while watching John Murray go through his uniquely smooth and feline pre-delivery routine back on the communal TV set at St Aubyns.

In retrospect, I actually came pretty late to the table as a Murray devotee. Although the light of idolatry first flickered on for me around mid-1965, it was another two years before it attained its full voltage. It seemed to do so overnight. One aspect of our repressed national character, at least in my case, expresses itself in a tendency to go from relative indifference on a subject to one of total mania for it with no apparent transitional phase. Little did he or I know it, but by that heady summer of 1967 Murray was already embarking on his last season as England's first-choice wicketkeeper. In June he took six catches in a Test innings while playing against India at Lord's, thus equalling the world record set by Australia's Wally Grout ten years earlier. Yet just over a month later he was gone, axed in favour of the hyperactive if undeniably talented young Kent stumper, and affectionately known 'performing flea', Alan Knott. Anyone familiar with Jerry Lewis in his classic *The Nutty Professor* era need only think of that same character switching abruptly from the film's cool and composed Buddy Love to the twitchy and somewhat exhausting Julius Kelp, though without the prominent buck teeth, to get some of the flavour. That indignity stung a certain combative streak in Murray (not to mention a distinct pang in his admirers), and he spent the next year patiently scoring runs and bringing off dozens of impeccable catches and stumpings for Middlesex. It was one of the many ironies of his career that he hit some of the best form of his life immediately after the England selectors had dispensed with his services. Without descending too far into the briar-patch of individual playing records, it's perhaps worth noting that in the 1968 home season Murray and Knott each averaged around 25

with the bat and took 70 dismissals; in 1969 Murray averaged 30 to Knott's 21, while they managed 69 and 55 dismissals respectively. In this same period JT consistently stumped 15 or 20 batsmen a year, while Knott's tally was just nine or ten. But so much for statistics.

It wasn't until 1968/69 that Murray again caught the Test selectors' attention, and it was somehow in keeping with the roller-coaster trajectory of his international career as a whole that this was the occasion of the cancelled MCC tour of South Africa which fell victim of the host government's refusal to accept a multi-racial team chosen by what their state president characterised as 'troublemakers' in the anti-apartheid movement. In the event Knott kept in all three of the hurriedly-arranged replacement Tests in Pakistan, the last of which ended in some disarray when a crowd of some 4,000 disaffected students broke down the main gate of the National Stadium in Karachi, forcing play to be abandoned as riot police liberally doused the area with tear gas. Murray never represented England again. He had appeared in 21 Tests (the same total as Harold Larwood, and, for that matter, only one fewer than W.G. Grace, but still 112 less than Alec Stewart later managed) over the course of six years, and John Arlott spoke for many when he said that one way or another the selectors had treated him pretty shabbily, JT being the sort of keeper who was not only textbook-correct but also likely to do something truly brilliant at least once an innings. 'An occasional choice over the years looks odd because all the facts have not been broadcast or the particular needs of the Test fully aired,' Arlott acknowledged. 'But this was just bloody silly.'

Murray himself accepted triumph and adversity with the same stoic good cheer, apparently regarding it all as part and parcel of the professional sportsman's life. He continued to play for his native Middlesex until 1975, the year he turned 40, and it was another of the peculiar twists to his career that he subsequently, and unhappily, went on to serve as an England Test selector.

There were plenty of other admirable cricketers of Murray's vintage, of course, and several of them were more immediately recognisable household names even from behind the stone walls of St Aubyns. It wasn't that I was starved of possible alternative heroes. At the age of nine I could tell you the previous day's county championship bowling figures for Ken Higgs or John Snow, and describe in detail the all-round splendours irradiating from that exotic newcomer in our midst Basil D'Oliveira, or go on at some length about the distinct batting styles of Geoff Boycott, Colin Milburn or Tom Graveney, the last of whom later became a friend and in time the subject of a small book; but somehow there was no electrifying sense of personal identification with any of them, however grimly efficient or gaily inconsistent their individual merits. Graveney was the man I patronised. Murray was the man I worshipped. It was a great day for me when they both went out and flogged the West Indies bowling around the park on that sunny afternoon at the Oval in 1966.

In thinking over the part Murray has played in my life, I find myself dividing it into three phases. In the first phase it was a grand passion. In the second, the passion became a fondness in which, while still bulking large in my affections, Murray increasingly took his place among a backdrop of mullet-haired footballers and pop stars. In the third the grand passion

stirred again, perhaps with a more nostalgic tone than before, and also tinged with a certain middle-aged perspective on the whole knotty business of fan worship. Because while Murray was undoubtedly my hero, he was also one of those engagingly flawed, or ill-starred, heroes whom the British seem to take to themselves. As Arlott again said, there was 'never the stamp of omnipotence or infallibility about his career', and here I think we come to the nub. Murray was what the author Christian Wolmar calls 'a nearly man', who should have played many more Tests than he did in the course of his 23-year professional career. Early on he had the misfortune to overlap with the inimitable Godfrey Evans, who was about as close as you could get to an automatic choice for the England Test side of the 1950s. In the middle years Murray came up against the new fad for picking wicketkeepers who could bat a bit rather than being the best specialist player in their position (and I might add in this context that Jim Parks himself once genially told me, 'John was a far better natural keeper than me'). And then just as Murray finally seemed to be getting the hang of it for England in the later 1960s the selectors traded him in for a new model, consigning him to the international junkyard at the age of 32. Which is all to say that a vein of disappointment appeared to run through JT's superficially glittering career, or even that, having arrived among us on April Fool's Day, he sometimes seemed to be the butt of some long-running cosmic joke.

As *Wisden* wrote about him in 1967:

> 'Long before the fates made atonement on late summer days at The Oval, 1966, there must

> have been times when John Thomas Murray was left with nothing more than a cricketer's natural philosophy as balm for his wounds. His career as England's wicket-keeper began on the highest note of promise with five Tests and five impeccable performances against Australia in 1961.
>
> 'None could have suspected his position would soon be assailed. Yet the first of his disappointments was round the corner. In the following winter of 1961/62 he had to return prematurely from MCC's tour of India and Pakistan to undergo an operation for varicose veins.'

After reviewing Murray's somewhat fitful Test career to date, *Wisden* added:

> 'The years of frustration did not leave a trace of bitterness. Nor was a word of complaint uttered. As No. 1 or No. 2 wicket-keeper in any touring side he pulled his weight cheerfully. He is immaculate in his turnout, and the key to his character is to be found in his own words: you have to try and do what is in the best interests of your side. That, in a nutshell, is JT Murray.'

* * *

The Cricketer's letters page is an arena where the price of a plastic cup of beer at Lord's, the legal proceedings against certain England Test players and the suitability for office of Pakistan's

current prime minister can all rub shoulders, so it's no surprise that not too long ago the magazine hosted a fascinating mini-debate on the perennial question: are all wicketkeepers mad? Most of the correspondents seemed to agree that they are. Leaving aside the claims of that irrepressible force of nature Godfrey Evans, who once worked off a hangover by taking a taxi direct from what he called a place of 'low entertainment' in London's West End to the England dressing-room at Lord's, enjoying a hurried breakfast of aspirin and a fat cigar, and then walking out to belt an unbeaten even-time 98 off a strong Indian attack, before somehow managing to set fire to his cricket coffin and much of the surrounding area during the lunch interval, but returning to the middle to polish off his century with a hooked four into the grandstand, and to concentrate instead on the modern breed: There was Knott himself, who perhaps set the bar with a range of idiosyncratic trademarks that included always keeping his shirt collar turned up to 'protect me from the sun', even on the most overcast days; his England successor Jack Russell, whose much-repaired floppy hat and wraparound shades were said to make him resemble a somewhat uneasy cross between the Terminator and Worzel Gummidge, with dietary fads that included the use of a stopwatch to time the soaking of his morning Weetabix, and who once seriously insisted that the builders coming to work on his home be blindfolded before they arrived and left so that they wouldn't know where he lived; and Russell's protégé Paul Nixon, whose sledging of the opposition wasn't so much limited to an occasional strategic barb as it was a non-stop running commentary touching on everything from the state of the weather to the batsman's parentage.

A few years earlier there was also Evans's contemporary at Kent, Hopper Levett, who after a heavy night once went out to take his place behind the wicket and never even blinked as the first ball sailed past the off stump for four byes.

The batsman had then glanced the second delivery down the leg side, where Levett took off to dive and take a spectacular catch, before turning to remark to the slip cordon: 'Not bad, eh, for the first ball of the day?'

These are very far from the only examples of the strange role the wicketkeeper often seems to perform as a sort of combined acrobat, custodian, *provocateur* and court jester in the typical cricket side. There's something indefinably but distinctly odd about the job. Suppose, for instance, the batsman pushes the ball towards point, and suppose there is no point, and suppose the keeper, being the nearest available first responder, hares off after the ball. What happens? Someone in the crowd will nudge someone else and start laughing. There's no logical reason why this should be so. The batsmen are also burdened with pads, gloves and helmets as they speed across the turf. No one laughs at them, unless of course they both happen to end up stranded at the same end. It's something about wicketkeepers. As a race they're not known for being shy, retiring types. It seems they're never short of a choice word or two, both on and off the field. It's said that at one time the Lancashire stumper George Duckworth had the loudest voice in England. They're just different. Aside from the levels of skill, athleticism and dedication that it takes to be a really top-flight keeper, it begins to look like a peculiarly masochistic if not suicidal position to want to occupy. Godfrey Evans once told me: 'You're squatting there with your view

obscured as a guy runs in and bowls a bloody hard leather ball towards you, knowing there's a good chance you'll be smacked about a second later somewhere in your head, body or privates. If you relax for even an instant you're finished. In my first season I was playing twelfth man for Kent when Hopper Levett was keeper and I'd just put my feet up for a second when I heard the shout, "You're on, mate. They're bringing Hopper in on a stretcher." I went out and there were bits of teeth stuck in the grass behind the stumps.' I asked Evans why, under the circumstances, anyone would ever want to be a wicketkeeper. 'It's never boring,' he replied.

The strange thing about John Murray is that for much of the 1960s he managed to be both the world's greatest keeper and also, as his first Test captain Colin Cowdrey put it, 'the world's nicest man … There were quite a few high-maintenance characters in the England team in those days. You went out into the field and it was sometimes as though you were surrounded by a ring of children who all wanted your constant attention and got huffy if you saw more of one than the other … And John himself was the calm centre of this storm. I played with him on and off for about 20 years, home and away, and I remember him as always being cool and collected and agreeable, with a dry sense of humour, no matter what anyone else said or did. "You got money and your name put down for the MCC at birth from your parents," he told me one hot night in Lahore. "I got varicose veins."'

This was the superbly self-contained (as opposed to unambitious) and affable professional sportsman whom I worshipped as a boy and befriended as a man. Murray's basic

social technique never varied in the 30 years or so of our adult meetings. As you got off the train at his home station he'd be standing by his car, whatever the weather, waiting for you with a broad grin on his face. You got a hearty, protracted handshake. He seemed to exude authority, not just power. He always enquired at length about you and your family before he talked about himself. I don't necessarily want to claim Murray was a father figure, but he certainly would have qualified as one of those friendly uncles who turned up from time to time to take you out to Sunday tea at St Aubyns and perhaps slip you a postal order as they were handing you back. He invariably seemed to know what you were up to. 'You're writing about Kurt Cobain, then, are you?' he asked out of the blue when he, Murray, was in his mid-sixties. 'Yes,' I said. 'Well, hope you go on with that,' he said, in a tone of warm encouragement I still remember.

About ten years later he sent me an email one morning: 'I read you today in the *Daily Mail*. Have told all the neighbours I know you. Could you autograph my book when you next come over?' From the very earliest days when I first saw him up close, a gawky schoolboy hanging around the pavilion door at Lord's, he displayed a remarkable gift for forging an instant connection with people he'd never met before. He was good company, a great listener, keenly attuned to the other party. In turn, you noticed Murray's rich baritone voice, his trim figure, sharp eyes, and slightly over-prominent teeth, like those of the Alec Guinness character in *The Ladykillers*. He was fundamentally light-hearted, given to bursts of excitement and deep enthusiasms which he communicated with a boyish passion. He laughed loudly and often.

In the sweltering summer of 1989 I was newly separated and living in a small flat in west London. The place had come furnished. It had little claim to elegance. The chairs and sofa were dipped in synthetic stain repellent. The rental agency supplied cooking utensils and bedding, which I thought it best to have industrially laundered on first taking possession. The previous tenant left me some Pam oven spray and Brut cologne.

One muggy night in late May there was a star-studded benefit dinner at the Grosvenor House Hotel for the great Lancashire and England bowler Brian Statham. We'll return to it in a later chapter, but suffice it to say they were all there that evening, from the papal figure of Jim Swanton with Gubby Allen on his arm down to the irrepressible Fred Trueman and my new friend Tom Graveney, then about 60, a deep-chested man of slightly less than average height with a jowly yet handsome face which had a built-in mischievous expression. You could see how he might once have fallen foul of the austere Len Hutton. Hutton was also there that night. He asked me for a cigarette just as we were sitting down to eat, a query followed by 'Then I'll smoke one of my own', and I remember him dragging away though much of the meal.

At the time I was writing a book about Godfrey Evans, who was then about to turn 70 but thanks to a pair of Dickensian mutton chop whiskers looked about ten years older. The great England stumper lived in somewhat makeshift circumstances in a friend's house in Northamptonshire, and as a result I sometimes put him up for the night when he was in town. (I got a rude shock when a boy hanging around my street in Hammersmith saw England's 1950s keeper come out of the front door with

me one day, and later asked me with a straight face if we were perhaps brothers.) Anyway, I was sitting there opposite Hutton and between Evans and a nearly spherical Tony Lock, quite a lively spot, both of these last two cricketers increasingly making their points in a bellow and Lock, in particular, quite often punctuating his speech by swinging an arm – or two – high above his head or as an alternative pushing his hands up behind his ears and vigorously rubbing them there like a television commercial on headache misery. It was a long evening and, as I say, we'll return to it later. There was a table way back in the shadows of the ballroom, and as Evans and I later passed by it on our way out I noticed a slim, sparse-haired man in a dinner jacket sitting there with a mild, unassuming expression on his face that somehow contrasted with that of my recent companions. There was a moment of shocked recognition on my part, and then I remember asking Evans, in a strangulated voice, to introduce us. As he did so, he surprised me by giving one of those deep and I might add wholly unironic I'm-not-worthy bows before thrusting out a menu with the request, 'Can you sign this for my daughter, master?'

So there it was. Even to Evans, John Murray was the great wicketkeeper.

* * *

Murray himself did not particularly want to see this book in print. By that I don't for a moment mean that he actively opposed my plan to write it. No author has ever had a more sympathetic or genial subject than I did, and I speak from the wizened perspective of one with certain prior adventures in the

field, including a brief but memorable rendezvous in the High Court over a libel writ, involving various brand-name rock and film stars. Writing about Murray after doing biographies of the likes of Cobain or Roman Polanski was refreshing; nobody threatened me with violence, or promised that I'd never work again, although I did once receive an enigmatic late-night phone message supposedly from a well-known former England all-rounder advising me never to contact him again, either on John Murray or any other possible subject, or else face the consequences. Perhaps it was all a joke.

So while Murray's initial response to my book proposal was unenthusiastic, his reservations didn't stem from him thinking himself too busy, or too grand, to help with the project. Just the opposite. The specific subject matter (as opposed to its wider cricket context) simply didn't appeal to him that much. Murray was the most genuinely modest and unaffected of all professional sportsmen. Literally scores of those I interviewed remarked on his simplicity and good manners, and said that whether on or off the field they'd enjoyed being around him – 'John had the priceless knack of always making you feel good,' Tom Graveney once told me.

Another colleague who also knew him socially added:

> 'John wasn't a monument to himself. He was a human being. He collected *Wisden*s. He went down the shops and did the gardening. He liked roast beef and a glass of plonk. I remember once he came home after taking a ton of catches for England, the hero of the hour, and at about nine o'clock that

> night I saw him coming out of the back of his place in north Wembley to put the rubbish bins out and line them up there in a neat row. *That* was JT.'

When the time came Murray was always the first man to congratulate a team-mate or to console an opponent. He invariably found the right words for the occasion. But people also noticed that he rarely seemed to speak about himself, and he kept his emotional distance – 'I don't know if he was really offering you friendship as much as friendliness,' a long-time Middlesex colleague told me, before adding: 'Nice as he was, he always kept things light. He once told me that I had a sensitive soul, and it was as if he was complimenting me on my golf swing.' Another team-mate who went into long-term therapy after he retired later came to believe that 'John had a permanent apparatus of self-containment' about him. 'There always seemed to be this slight reticence behind the supremely chummy façade.' Murray was shy about his achievements, much happier to share the credit for them with others, and laughed until he shook if reminded of some small technical lapse on his part of the sort other players might have preferred to forget or overlook. So it naturally took him a while to warm to the whole concept of someone writing a book about him – a project no one had seriously suggested during the previous 40 years – and, equally characteristically, when the time came no one could have ended up being more open and generous to me than he was. John gave me dozens of informal interviews, often conducted late at night around his dining room table, and always cheerfully answered every question I asked him. On the last occasion we met, he handed

me a box containing several bundles of old contracts, letters and other mementoes of his playing days, saying only of this precious cargo, 'I don't know if this lot would be any use to you?' There was just one exception to this otherwise free-spirited and unstinting gift of his time and treasure, and that came when I once asked him if by any chance he happened to have a childhood photograph he might be willing to lend to the cause, and he replied evenly, 'Sorry. We were too poor ever to own a camera.'[1]

Somehow that seemed only fitting in prefiguring the life of a world-class sportsman who preferred to shun the personal limelight to a degree unusual in our self-obsessed age. John Murray was a great wicketkeeper. He was also 'a wonderfully sane, down-to-earth bloke, who kept smiling even when the selectors buggered him about', said Tom Graveney, who added: 'Every team-mate liked him and every opponent respected him.'

Who could ask for a better epitaph than that?

1 One boyhood picture finally came to light, and is included in the book.