

A Meeting with Robert Graves ©

Although I had from a very early age been a reader and admirer of Robert Graves—my senior by more than twenty years—I was not to meet him in the flesh until comparatively recently, and it came about, circuitously, like this.

In 1940, the Welsh poet and anthologist, Keidrych Rhys, wrote to me as a young poet of the period urging me to send some of my work to R.G., who wanted to know what the younger men were up to. The opportunity was too good to miss. I took it, and received a kindly, encouraging and distinctly shrewd appraisal of the poems. When a book of my verse came out, Graves took the trouble to write me several letters on poetry and allied matters—which, unfortunately, I seem to have lost. Our correspondence then lapsed for some years, and I will gloss over the circumstances that led to its resumption and pass straight to the day in August 1951 when I found myself, as they say, walking up the stone stairway of the block of flats in Hampstead where Graves and his family were spending a few weeks away from their Mediterranean home.

I so looked forward to this meeting that, out of sheer nervousness probably, I mistimed my arrival and turned up much too early, but I did not realize this until the next day. I had given some thought to what gift I could appropriately bring to the elder poet, and I had settled on a first edition of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, which I had found in a second-hand bookshop; and at the last moment, I had dashed into a Hampstead greengrocers and bought a pineapple for five shillings. For twice that sum I could have got a really magnificent pineapple, but five shillings was my limit, and the fruit I did get was rather an undernourished specimen, though still, I hoped, quite juicy.

So here I was, hours too early, knocking on Graves' door, and holding the Ettrick Shepherd and the pineapple where I hoped they were not too conspicuous.

The door opened, and a man who looked like an old sailor, wearing dungarees and with carpet-slippers over bare feet, let me in. He had the broken nose of a prizefighter and a shock of grizzled hair over prominent grey-blue eyes. He was packing books into a trunk which lay with its lid gaping in the dark passage. So this was Robert Graves. In contrast to his dishevelled, proletarian appearance, his voice was cultivated, melodious and precise, though jerky in enunciation. His handshake was beefy and amiable. We stood contemplating each other, breathing heavily, for a few moments, and then Robert said, "Well, come on in," and guided me into a front room full of ugly, bulky, comfortable furniture. He took the Ettrick Shepherd with interest and some amusement, and ruffled quickly through the pages. The pineapple, which now seemed a sorer specimen than I had thought, was left to wilt unregarded on a sideboard. Then when I had been introduced to the clear-cut and

decisive personality of Beryl Graves and had accepted a bottle of beer, an opener, and a glass, we began talking about a recent book on mythology and psychology which my host was about to review for the BBC's Third Programme. R.G. had a poor opinion of the book, and declared solemnly that he was going to arrange for quotations to be read over the microphone in a heavy, guttural German voice befitting the pomposity of the continental author's thought and style. He walked up and down the narrow room with his glass and cigarette, clowning drolly as a fuddled Germanic Herr Professor. Just then some new visitors came in—a fair-haired poetess whom I had met at a party with Keidrych before the war, and a dark, quiet young man who had just published a travel book about Burma. I was trespassing on their session, really, but no one seemed to mind.

As we sat and talked—about Burma, and about Herr Professors, and Shakespeare and psychoanalysis—and as Robert's bare toes fiddled in and out of his slippers, while he sat with hands clasping his blue-trousered knees, I corrected my first impression and compared him mentally to those wood-engraved, laurel-crowned portraits of Ben Jonson. Then again I thought he himself would make an excellent portrait of a Roman Emperor, given the appropriate costume. This historical novelist seemed very much a man of the ancient world.

You will have gathered that there was nothing "refined" about R.G. externally, although of his inward delicacy and sensitiveness I was to have much proof. Outwardly, he was clumsy and rugged—in fact, if the pun be allowed, there was an earthy rather than an airy or fiery quality about him; but it was a genial, humorous, quick-witted earthiness. His style of life seemed to follow suit. If you ate with the Graves's, they gave you a large, nourishing *chunk* of something. It was, to be fanciful, like eating in the hall of Odysseus in Ithaca, and if you had half an ear, you could indeed hear "the surge and thunder of the Odyssey" in R.G.'s table talk. When, on this occasion—or it might have been on my second visit, I cannot be sure—we did sit down to a meal there was, in spite of rationing, a really huge joint of meat on the table that might have come from the Cyclops' cavern; and I involuntarily recalled a poem of my host's called "Ogres and Pygmies" which begins "Those famous men of old, the Ogres" and goes on to inform us that these giants, though "...not of taller stature, Sirs, than you," lived

...on Ogre-Strand, which was no place
But the churl's terror of their proud extent,

Where every foot was three-and-thirty inches
And every penny bought a whole sheep.

I can only hope that this reflection does not qualify me for Pygmy status, and maybe here I had better quickly tell a story against myself.

When Graves and I, later on, were talking alone together, he asked me whether I didn't realize that the sort of hard-hitting literary criticism I practised, and of which he wholly approved, was bound to make me disliked in many quarters. I replied, as far as I can remember, that that was unfortunate, but that all writers must learn to take critical assault in good part. Upon which he looked at me very quizzically and said, "Ah, you're like me: you've got a *superiority complex!*" However, what I was getting at with my quotation from "Ogres and Pygmies" was Graves's really admirable human quality of being all in one piece, cut out of the same solid material throughout. I won't dilate on this, but it's a sort of integralness which is very unusual, at least among writers, and which extends to whatever R.G. says and does, whether in public or in private.

As to our conversation, I recall particularly Robert's asking me at one point if I thought a good writer must be a good man, or if he need not be; to which I said, decidedly a good man. He thought so too. On the ethics of publication, he posed a controversial question. Suppose it were to be discovered that a packet of letters written by Keats to Fanny Brawne had been buried with the latter: would one be justified in the interests of literature and scholarship in having the body exhumed and the private and personal letters recovered? "What would you do, Derek: recover the letters or not? Don't hedge, just give me your completely spontaneous answer." I said, impulsively, "No; leave the letters there," and with an approving look he said, "I should feel the same."

We talked about poetry and the profession of letters. R.G. said he wrote poetry to please himself and his novels to please the public—they were his bread and butter. However, he'd never written a real best-seller, nothing in the class of *Gone with the Wind*, for instance. *I, Claudius* was his most popular book, and publishers were always begging him to write a similar novel about Nero; but he wrote a novel only to clear up some historical problem that had been puzzling him, and there was no problem in Nero. Still, it was nonsense to say, like a certain poet who positively made an income by writing articles on the theme, that poetry doesn't pay. It certainly paid *him*, R.G., rather well, and he gave me some details. Then he explained his attitude to money. He believed in what he called "luck." He never looked far ahead, and never invested money because he felt that then his "luck" would, most probably, and quite rightly, cease. If he prospered, he believed in sharing his luck with others—and here I can personally testify that he practiced what he preached.

Regarding his contemporaries, he said he had always held somewhat aloof from literary society, and he made it a rule not to be on terms of friendship with persons he couldn't respect. People had wanted him to meet Yeats when Yeats

was staying in Majorca before the war, but he had rejected the advances. He thought Yeats a phony. Yet, he spoke with unexpected tolerance of a fame-hungry contemporary, and when I demurred, he said: "Oh, So-and-So's all right if you treat him the right way. I always treat him like the lift-boy." And he quoted a couplet from one of his earlier poems:

Let me tell you the story of how I went on:

I began as the lift-boy and ended as the lift-man...

and I took his point, especially in the lines which went

I found it very easy to whistle and play

With nothing in my head or my pockets all day.

There was nothing catty in this. It was a perfectly just evaluation, erring if at all on the side of charity.

An undergraduate friend of mine who met R.G. recently at Cambridge while he was delivering the Clark Lectures there, noted his tall figure which leans backwards from the waist upwards, and his habit of looking at you with his eyes without moving his head, so that you may be to the right of him, but he will be looking straight ahead. That is well observed. He noticed then that Graves was obviously unused to wearing the blue suit he had on, which was far too tight and looked as if it were only brought out for state occasions. I'm sure it was; R.G.'s sartorial negligence is proverbial. There is an apocryphal story, which may well be true, that he appeared once at the dinner-table wearing a pajama-jacket with a baby's sock tucked into the pocket for a handkerchief; and another, better authenticated (I had it from Edmund Crispin, the crime-writer) of a sudden street encounter with Agatha Christie, who exclaimed in shocked tones, "Why, Robert, you're wearing a new suit!" "Yes, Agatha ... (defiantly) but I haven't shaved today."

Siegfried Sassoon, you may recollect, draws an amusing portrait of the young R.G. in his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* under the name of "David Cromlech," and it is really astonishing how little he would seem to have altered in his essential characteristics. It is plain, for instance, from his account, that *Homer's Daughter* and *The Nazarene Gospel* were already embryonic in the mind of the twenty-year-old subaltern of the First World War. My young friend's general impression was of a man it would be very difficult to dislike—*impossible* to dislike, I would say, if you were genuinely a man of good will. There was a heart-warming quality about this famous writer who was so utterly without a *façade*, who treated his much younger contemporaries as his equals, was at home to every caller, and sent his wife away to rest while he washed up the greasy dinner-dishes in his shirtsleeves, slowly rotating the mop in the soapy water while he gave his considered opinion on *Time* magazine and the theories of Jung.

