ROBERT GRAVES

EVER HAD A GUINEA WORM?

HE SWUNG HIMSELF into the carriage just as we pulled out of Paddington, and sat down opposite me. 'Who says that losing your temper won't get you anywhere?' he asked bellicosely. He must have had an argument on the subject with the station staff, because loud shouts came from the platform. A porter was running alongside the train, shaking his fist and, behind, I could see another porter sprawled on the platform, bleeding violently from the nose. But the train was well under way and the next stop would be Rugby.

'There are occasions,' he went on, 'when not to lose your temper would be morally wrong. What did God give us tempers for, unless to lose them? Tell me that!'

We were four in the compartment, but none of us answered. Even if we had liked the look of him, it was far too early in the journey to get involved in a theological discussion. But I was the only one without a morning paper, so he tapped me on the knee.

'Take travelling in Egypt,' he persisted. 'Ever been in Egypt, by the way? Those Cairo guides cling to you like leeches. You're sunk if you don't lose your temper with them. Shifty-looking fellow comes up to you and says: "I show you tombs of all 'Gyptian kings, large and small, for tidy fee, fifty piastres." "No thanks," you answer politely. "I just want to see the Museum." "I take you to Sadoum, in desert," he says. "I know cheap taxi, take us for very little. Him English. Me English. We see long line ancient ministers and kings, now dead." "No," you say, weakening, "I only want to visit the Museum, really." "Museum bad: 'Gyptian," he says. "Me English. In my house Sadoum are many women: 'Talian, Grik, English. Also Book of Dead. Real ole Book of Dead given me Churchill. In 1920 Egypt ruled with good old stern English. Me: trusted servant Lawrence 'Rabia, also Churchill. Here is cutting: Lawrence say me the limit. Here, see, personal letter Churchill. Him, my brother. Me English. Me: good sport!" "No," you say, "it's very kind of you, but, please, I just want to see the Museum. And I can't afford fifty piastres." Then he fixes you with his beady black eye and grabs you by the sleeve: "I say, I take you to Sadoum, my private house? English! All 'Gyptians bad men. Me, English: good! My name Brown. In London, me big Hotel. In my house I have Book of Dead. You give me fifty piastres now, we go fetch Book of Dead -- after, we go Museum..."'

I glanced appealingly round the carriage, but nobody would meet my eye.

'I'm right, eh? Show them a spot of weakness and they'll burrow under your skin like

guinea-worms. Any of you fellows ever had a guinea-worm, by the way? They're the plague of the Gold Coast. Get into your system via the toe -- if you choose the wrong pool to bathe in -- and wriggle merrily up your leg, growing bigger and bigger, battening on your bloodstream. The blighters insist on doing a complete tour of your body. They reach the thigh, ascend the hip, twine round your middle -- then up the shoulders and neck, across the back of your eye-balls, that's the trickiest passage, pretty painful too, then down and round once more, and out by the same toe. When they begin to emerge, you wind them carefully round a match-stick, a little each day, until they're free. By that time they're a good yard long. If you pull too hard, they break in two, and then of course, you're in serious trouble. Have to rush along to the tropical medicine wallahs for treatment. But if you lose your temper, you're all right, they respect that, the blighters, and scamper off over the desert.'

I was puzzled for a moment; but probably he had reverted from guinea-worms and tropical medicine wallahs to the Cairo guides.

'And not only people, but things,' he went on. 'Things respect it too. Suppose you try to open a screw-top jar that's stuck, and can't manage it, not even with a damp cloth, because you can't get enough purchase. What do you do? Lose your temper, drop the cloth, and go homicidal. You seize the damned bottle and wring its ruddy neck. Off the screw-top comes, sweet as oil! But you feel like hell afterwards. Takes it out of you, that sort of thing.'

He stopped to gaze with surprise at his umbrella; he had just wrenched the plastic handle clean off. Stuffing it morosely into his overcoat pocket, he went on: 'Same with rugger. Ever play rugger, by the way? You're in the scrum now, and the enemy scrum is heavier and better trained and pushing you all over the place... Back into your own twenty-five you go, foot by foot, and there's no heart left in any of you -- the side's as good as beaten. And then one of the enemy picks up the ball and starts running. You tackle him half-heartedly; he gets between you and the referee and fists you off, and catches you where it hurts.'

Here he dealt himself a vicious crack on the cheek-bone in illustration. 'Happened to me once, at Murrayfield in '37. What did I do? Lost my temper, what else? -- turned and flung myself on him and brought him down with a diving tackle --'

'Steady on!' I said coldly, disengaging his huge hands from my ankles.

'-- and a second later I had the leather under my arm and was running upfield like stink. Burst through a group of forwards, leaped clean over the head of a half, swerved and zigzagged at right angles, skittled down another row of forwards, handed off a wing-three, and was away down the middle of the field with nothing but the back between me and the try-line!'

We were now alone in the compartment. The stolid, red-faced ex-R.A.F. type, the correct bank-manager and the worthy headmaster in the clerical collar -- all of whom had been involved, somewhat freely, in that Murrayfield run -- were not, it seemed, rugger players, nor even anxious to learn the game. But, being English, they had made no protest. They merely folded their morning papers and trooped out into the corridor.

The tale crashed on: 'The back was a tall, vicious fellow fourteen stone if an ounce, J.J. Hamilton-Dewar, capped for Scotland that season. His speciality was a smothering tackle: he'd leap on you like a lion on a sheep, bear you down by sheer brute avoirdupois and rub your nose in the mud. So J.J. Hamilton-Dewar came charging up like an express-train, from just inside his twenty-five line and smother-tack...'

An express-train flashed past the open window with a sensationally dramatic roar, drowning the rest of the sentence.

'But believe it or not,' he shouted above the racket, 'I charged on, full butt, with the blighter twined around my neck, and touched down between the posts! Never so much as faltered. But I felt like hell when the whistle blew and I'd cooled down. Takes it out of you, that sort of thing.'

He sighed and mopped his face with a fold of his ruined umbrella.

'Ever been in action, by the way?' he resumed after a pause. 'Astonishing what one does in action. "Going berserk," the old Vikings called it. A man would take a spear right through his body, break off the haft because it got in his way, and lay out a dozen or so of the enemy with whatever weapon came handy, until he sobered up and suddenly realized that he was a goner. Chap I knew in Korea went berserk -- scared the life out of the Chinks because he should have been dead ten minutes before. Half his head had gone, and one of his hands, but he just went on batting them over the heads with an entrenching tool. Killed a whole machine-gun section of 'em before he conked out.'

'Put that umbrella down, sir!' I said, controlling myself with difficulty.

He reluctantly lowered the weapon.

It was in a gentle, almost cooing voice, that he began again: 'Ever been stranded in Los Angeles, by the way? Happened to me once. Because of a girl called Louella. A lovely girl, a girl in a thousand; her one fault was an obsession about wanting to be dominated, and I didn't meet the bill. She kept on at me to lose my temper; but it's always been my trouble that I can't lose my temper with a woman. With a man, there's no trouble of course; but if ever a woman is unkind to me, I just want to sit down in a corner and cry. Curious, don't you agree? It seems that what Louella needed was some great, ill-tempered, husky pug, to take her by the hair, swing her around the

apartment, and then make love to her among the smashed crockery and broken chairs. But I couldn't even begin to play that sort of game with her. I could only sit on the bed and cry. So one fine evening she scratched my face, grabbed my wallet, and kicked me out. I went off like a lost lamb.'

Would it never stop? Rugby was still a thousand miles off.

'A couple of days later,' he continued, with a catch in his voice, 'I found myself, hungry and red-eyed in the sun, sitting on the kerb of the Le Moyne sidewalk. Opposite was a big, pink building, something between a pagoda and a county-jail, with a notice-board over the portal: "All, All Are Welcome!" -- but welcome to what it didn't say, and I didn't much care. I only needed some place to sit down and do a bit more crying. I crossed the street, went into the lobby, and listened. It sounded like a lecture. I'm good at sitting through lectures, looking interested and thinking my own thoughts. To have someone else talking and the audience listening helps in a way to isolate my mind... Ever go to lectures to think your own thoughts?'

'No,' I said, 'I prefer railway trains. But you don't give me a chance.'

He waved the interruption aside. 'I took a seat at the back and had a look around me. An enormous cool Gothic hall with great banks of flowers and coloured lanterns, and a smell of too much incense, and a screwy congregation -- screwy even for California. I learned later that it was the temple of Simon Magus Redivivus. Ever read the Acts of the Apostles, by the way? Tells you a lot about Simon Magus. Well, on the side of the chancel there was a choir of women, dressed to look like doves, in white feather costumes -- and a battery of African drums was being beaten to a tricky rhythm where the altar should have been. That was all right, but what I didn't like was the stained-glass windows with wide-open pairs of yellow eyes glaring at me, and the creepy-looking mosaics in blue, black and white on the walls. The boss of the show was a short, square, swarthy fellow, in evening dress and a gold crown, who stood bang upright on a low throne. And a bevy of chorus-girls, dressed in nylon and tinsel, squatted around him on little stools.

'Well, I had a good cry, and blew my nose and began thinking about whom to touch for money; I felt sure I must know someone in the city besides Louella. I was racking my brains for the name of the fellow with whom I'd been working when I was in the Security Police at Brussels. Nice city, Brussels. Ever been there, by the way? Said he was a Los Angeles garage proprietor. Irving Something-or-other -- and it began with a Sch -- big fellow with rimless glasses. I couldn't get it, but went on trying hard until, suddenly, I was aware of a great booming noise from the chancel. It sounded like the fellow in evening dress being angry with someone; but I didn't know him and he couldn't have known me, so I didn't take it personally. I went on thinking: "Wasn't it Schellingman or Schellinger or Schlaffinger, or something of the sort...? I must have a search through the phone-book." The voice grew angrier and angrier, until I realized

at last that I was the goat. I looked up, and he accused me of being a hostile influence. Shouted that I was breaking the sacred communion of gnosis -- he used that word, I remember -- and I had better scram because he was the Standing One, immortal and invincible and unassailable...

'So I rose to my feet, feeling a little less like a lost lamb, and pointed out that the notice-board said "All, All are Welcome!" and that I wasn't used to being bawled out -- and, what was more, I didn't believe he was any less mortal or vincible than the next man. This put my lord Simon on his mettle, and he roared again into the microphone: "I am the Standing One! He who stood, stands, and will ever stand! Step up here, worm, and make obeisance at my throne!" When I told him that I'd come up the aisle and punch his nose for him if he liked, he laughed in a god-like way and informed me that nobody could strike the Standing One. "You cannot reach me," he boomed, "your feet will stick to the floor."

'I didn't like this. I marched boldly up the aisle towards that ugly face at the other end, but each step was more difficult to take than the last. The congregation were silently and solidly behind him, willing me to get back to my seat. I felt as if I were lugging my legs through liquid clay. I struggled another inch or so, and then stuck dead. And I hadn't even got halfway.

'Simon Magus sneered at me: "You see, you are helpless! Come now, I make you free to move. Step up and make obeisance!" I could feel the united congregation willing me: "Make obeisance, make obeisance to the Standing One!" And I had to lean back and dig in my heels to stop being propelled forward.

'I still meant to punch his nose, mind you, but my fists hung down at my sides like hundred-pound weights at the end of strings. And then -- then I happened to look at one of the chorus-girls -- Simon's gnostic wives they were, I learned afterwards: and, lo and behold, there sat Louella, peering down at me pityingly, as much as to say: "Domination, what do you know about that, you sap? The Standing One, he certainly understands domination." And she got up and whispered in Simon Magus's ear.

'"I'm coming to hit you!" I shouted at Simon. This confused the congregation. Most of them were still trying to push me ahead. A few were doing their damnedest to hold me back. I know that, because I felt their wills like spiders' webs snapping across my face as I rushed forward and mounted the chancel steps. I was within two yards of the throne before the going got sticky again. Simon Magus had regained control of the situation -- called up his spiritual reserves and was hitting at me with all the voodoo in his vocabulary. I was stuck again: stuck, bogged and pinioned.

'He said: "You see, helpless as an infant! Come now, make obeisance, you big blubbering Limey! Make obeisance to the Standing One." Blubbering Limey! -- that saved me! It was an insult Louella had put into his mouth. I recognized it. Then I lost

my temper as I'd never lost it before. I drew both feet from the gnostic bog. I hauled up both my fists. The congregation began to get scared, I could feel it -- even the spiritual wives and the doves in the choir, even the Standing One himself...'

He slowly discarded his overcoat and jacket, and slowly rolled up his shirt-sleeves. 'A red fire of anger swept over me,' he said earnestly. 'I took a step forward, I braced my right arm; I measured the distance... Ever boxed, by the way?'

That was a question I was not sorry to answer.

'Yes!' I yelled, as I delivered a furious right hook to his jaw.

He slumped back in his seat and passed out.

Presently, the stolid, red-faced ex-R.A.F. type, the correct bank-manager and the worthy headmaster in the clerical collar trooped in again and resumed their seats as if nothing had happened, each with only a casual glance at the inert body, and not a word of thanks to me.

'Who says that losing your temper won't get you anywhere?' I shouted at them bellicosely. 'Ever been in Egypt? Ever had a guinea-worm? EVER GONE BERSERK?'

But I felt like hell afterwards. Takes it out of you, that sort of thing.