ROBERT GRAVES

AN APPOINTMENT FOR CANDLEMAS

HAVE ITHE honour of addressing Mrs Hipkinson?

That's me! And what can I do for you, young man?

I have a verbal introduction from -- from an officer of your organization. Robin of Barking Creek was the name he gave.

If that isn't just like Robin's cheek! The old buck hasn't even dropped me a Christmas card since the year sweets came off the ration, and now he sends me trouble.

Trouble, Mrs Hipkinson?

Trouble, I said. You're not one of us. Don't need to do no crystal gazing to see that. What's the game?

Robin of Barking Creek has been kind enough to suggest that you would be kind enough to...

Cut it out. Got my shopping to finish.

If I might perhaps be allowed to carry your basket? It looks as if it were rather heavy.

O.K., you win. Take the damn thing. My corns are giving me gyp. Well, now, out with it!

The fact is, madam, I'm engaged in writing a D. Phil. thesis on Contemporary Magology...

Eh? What's that? Talk straight, if you please!

Excuse me. I mean I'm a University graduate studying present-day witchcraft; as a means of taking my degree in Philosophy.

Now, that makes a bit more sense. If Robin answers for you, I don't see why we couldn't help -- same as I got our Deanna up into O level with a bit of a spell I cast on the Modern School examiners. But don't trouble to speak in whispers. Them eighteenth-century Witchcraft Acts is obsolescent now, except as regards fortune-tellers; and we don't touch that lay, not professionally we don't. Course, I

admit, we keep ourselves to ourselves, but so do the Masons and the Foresters and the Buffs, not to mention the Commies. And all are welcome to our little do's, what consent to be duly pricked in their finger-tips and take the oath and give that there comical kiss. The police don't interfere. Got their work cut out to keep up with motoring offences and juvenile crime, and cetera. Nor they don't believe in witches, they say; only in fairies. They're real down on the poor fairies, these days.

Do you mean to say the police wouldn't break up one of your Grand Sabbaths, if...

Half a mo'! Got to pop into the Home and Commercial for a dozen rashers and a couple of hen-fruit. Bring the basket along, ducks, if you please...

As you were saying, Mrs Hipkinson?

Ah yes, about them Sabbaths... Well, see, so's to keep on the right side of the Law, on account we all have to appear starko, naturally we hire the Nudists' Hall. Main festivals are quarter-days and cross quarter-days; them's the obligatory ones, same as in Lancashire and the Highlands and everywhere else. Can't often spare the time in between. We run two covens here, used to be three -- mixed sexes, but us girls are in the big majority. I'm Pucelle of Coven No. 1, and my boy-friend Arthur o'Bower (radio-mechanic in private life), he's Chief Devil of both. My husband plays the tabor and jew's-trump in Coven No. 2. Not very well up in the book of words, but a willing performer, that's Mr H.

I hope I'm not being indiscreet, but how do you name your God of the Witches?

Well, we used different names in the old days, before this village became what's called a dormitory suburb. He was Mahew, or Lug, or Herne, I seem to remember, according to the time of year. But the Rev. Jones, our last Chief Devil but two, he was a bit of a scholar: always called the god 'Faunus', which is Greek or Hebrew, I understand.

But Faunus was a patron of flocks and forests. There aren't many flocks or forests in North-Eastern London, surely?

Too true, there aren't; but we perform our fertility rites in aid of the allotments. We all feel that the allotments is a good cause to be encouraged, remembering how short of food we went in the War. Reminds me, got to stop at that fruit stall: horse-radish and a cabbage lettuce and a few nice carrots. The horse-radish is for my little old familiar; too strong for my own taste... Shopping's a lot easier since Arthur and me got rid of that there Hitler...

Please continue, Mrs Hipkinson.

Well, as I was saying, that Hitler caused us a lot of trouble. We don't hold with politics

as a rule, but them Natsies was just too bad with their incendiaries and buzz-bombs. So Arthur and I worked on him at a distance, using all the strongest enchantments in the Book of Moons and out of it, not to mention a couple of new ones I got out of them Free French Breton sailors. But Mr Hitler was a difficult nut to crack. He was protected, see? But Mr Hitler had given us fire, and fire we would give Mr Hitler. First time, unfortunately, we got a couple o' words wrong in the formula, and only blew his pants off him. Next time, we didn't slip up; and we burned the little basket to a cinder... Reminds me of my great-grandmother, old Mrs Lou Simmons of Wanstead. She got mad with the Emperor Napoleon Bonapart, and caused 'im a horrid belly-ache on the Field of Waterloo. Done, at a distance again, with toad's venom -- you got to get a toad scared sick before he'll secrete the right stuff. But old Lou, she scared her toad good and proper: showed him a distorting looking-glass -- clever act, eh? So Boney couldn't keep his mind on the battle; it was those awful gripings in his stomjack what gave the Duke of Wellington his opportunity. Must cross over to the chemist, if you don't mind...

For flying ointment, by any chance?

Don't be potty! Think I'd ask that Mr Cadman for soot and baby's fat and bat's blood and aconite and water-parsnip? The old carcase would think I was pulling his leg. No, Long Jack of Coven No. 2 makes up our flying ointment -- Jack's assistant-dispenser at the Children's Hospital down New Cut. Oh, but look at that queue! I don't think I'll trouble this morning. An aspirin will do me just as well as the panel medicine.

Do you still use the old-style besom at your merrymakings, Mrs Hipkinson?

There's another difficulty you laid your finger on. Can't get a decent besom hereabouts, not for love nor money. Painted white wood and artificial bristles, that's what they offer you. We got to send all the way to a bloke at Taunton for the real thing -- ash and birch with osier for the binding -- and last time, believe it or don't, the damned fool sent me a consignment bound in nylon tape! Nylon tape, I ask you!

Yes, I fear that modern technological conditions are not favourable to a spread of the Old Religion.

Can't grumble. We're up to strength at present, until one or two of the older boys and girls drop off the hook. But TV isn't doing us no good. Sometimes I got to do a bit of magic-making before I can drag my coven away from that Children's Hour.

Could you tell me what sort of magic?

Oh, nothing much; just done with tallow dolls and a bit of itching powder. I raise shingles on their sit-upons, that's the principle. Main trouble is, there's not been a girl of school-age joined us since my Deanna, which is quite a time. It's hell beating up

recruits. Why, I know families where there's three generations of witches behind the kids, and can you guess what they all say?

I should not like to venture a guess, Mrs Hipkinson.

They say it's rude. Rude! That's a good one, eh? Well now, what about Candlemas? Falls on a Saturday this year. Come along at dusk. Nudists' Hall, remember -- first big building to the left past the traffic lights. Just knock. And don't you worry about the finger-pricking. I'll bring iodine and lint.

This is very kind of you indeed, Mrs Hipkinson. I'll phone Barking Creek tonight and tell Robin how helpful you have been.

Don't mention it, young man. Well, here's my dump. Can't ask you in, I'm afraid, on account of my little old familiar wouldn't probably take to you. But it's been a nice chat. O.K., then. On Candlemas Eve, look out for three green frogs in your shaving mug; I'll send them as a reminder... And mind, no funny business, Mister Clever! We welcome good sports, specially the College type like yourself; but nosy-parkers has got to watch their step, see? Last Lammas, Arthur and me caught a reporter from the North-Eastern Examiner concealed about the premises. Hey presto! and we transformed him into one of them Australian yellow dog dingoes. Took him down to Regent's Park in Arthur's van, we did, and let him loose on the grass. Made out he'd escaped from the Zoological Gardens; the keepers soon copped him. He's the only dingo in the pen with a kink in his tail; but you'd pick him out even without that, I dare say, by his hang-dog look. Yes, you can watch the dingoes free from the 'Scotsman's Zoo', meaning that nice walk along the Park railings. Well, cheerio for the present!

Goodbye, Mrs Hipkinson.