ROBERT GRAVES

'HA, HA!' CHORT-LED NIG-GER

'I'VE GIVEN UP the old rag in utter disgust,' growled Haymon Fugg, Q.C. 'And you, Admiral?'

Admiral of the Fleet Sir St Clair Fopp-Jalopy sighed uncomfortably. 'It's a little difficult for an old salt like myself to break the habit of a lifetime, my dear fellow, and I still hope it may not come to that. After all, they've not gone Walt Disney yet; show no signs of it either, praise be! However, as I was telling you, I did write Fleetway House a couple of stingers, on Club notepaper too, and got two quite civil, though not altogether satisfactory replies. The editor at least did me the courtesy to answer in his own fist -- not one of those jelligraphed form-letters -- to the effect that analysis of the correspondence received (mainly, he admitted, from the Sex) showed 83 per cent in favour of permanent substitution. Last night I wrote to Rupert direct, hadn't done such a thing since the second year of the Peacemaker's reign! Maybe he'll be able to arrange matters for us.'

'Not a hope, I'm afraid, Admiral. In my opinion, Rupert's been quietly dethroned by a palace revolution. Because he made the journal what it is, and named it too, they couldn't decently rob him of that column; but anything he and his friends do is only back-page stuff now.'

'Still in full colour, you must admit.'

'Oh, yes, still in full colour... Clearly, there was no immediate course between that and liquidation. It would have been going a bit too far to print him in red on the middle page, along with Fay and Eddie and similar riff-raff.'

'Fay and Eddie, riff-raff? Choose your words, please, Fugg! I couldn't disagree with you more strongly.'

'Very well, "riff-raff" is unreservedly withdrawn. But I shall, with the very greatest respect, characterize Fay and Eddie as caviare for the Admiral.'

'I gladly accept your rectification. Well, let us agree that Rupert may be slipping, like "Nyet" Molotoff; but surely he still has a deal of pull in the Fleetway House Politburo? Probably owns quite a block of shares, don't you think?'

'I wonder... And I also wonder (forgive me) whether a commendable loyalty to the Senior Service has not perhaps coloured your judgement on the whole shocking

affair... ?'

'A little hard on me, aren't you, Fugg? I confess that it could have been worse if our old Ethiopian friend had elected to become a damned pongo or an Air Force erk, instead of a red-haired matelot; but I am hardly the man to be swayed by sentiment in a case where tradition has been so wilfully flouted.'

'To revert for a moment. You must surely have noticed that pressure has recently been exerted on Rupert to make him omit the hyphens in his two-and three-syllabled words, and change his familiar form of address. "Hullo, boys and girls!" indeed! A disgusting neologism! They'll be changing the name of the paper next.'

'Wouldn't dare. Remember that sensational drop in circulation when the old Nineteenth Century tried to give itself a new look? No, you're a little too young perhaps... But I can still hear the angry sputter of my father's quill pen when he resigned his subscription.'

'Quill pen in 1900?'

'Yes, indeed. My father was one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools under the Board of Education, and every year around April 1st they dealt him out not only sealing wax and red tape but packets of goose-feather quills; and a little black pen-knife, every five years, to trim them with. However, what do you think is at the back of this... this... transmogrification? Colour prejudice?'

'That, I fear, may be the correct diagnosis, Admiral. First, we had the Mau-Mau trouble, then this friction in our ports and industrial centres due to the influx of cheap and unrestricted West Indian labour. And it cannot have escaped your attention that our poor saucer-eyed blackamoor hero is said to have undergone his denigration -- no, that's the wrong word; should I say catamelanesis? -- because of a confessed inferiority complex about his complexion. Yet I cannot quite take that statement au pied de la lettre. He had all our hearts, and knew it.'

'Indeed he had. Personally, I never thought of him as one of what Kipling used undemocratically to call "the lesser breeds within the Law". Golly was Nature's own gentleman, and if he had an ugly mug, why, I'm no beauty myself; and if you'll forgive me...'

'Certainly, Admiral, I too have a face like a clumbungus...'

'Thank you kindly! My point is that Rupert cannot have been consulted in the matter. He would never have let down the journal with such a bump. And the girl's unhappy too -- you can read it in her face... Look here, I believe with the help of fellow-chicks in the Savage and White's and perhaps the Athenaeum, and the Rag of course, we could

put pressure on the top brass at Fleetway House to set that damned spell in reverse, and get the poor fellow back again as he used to be? We might also have a smack at restoring the hyphenization, while we're about it.'

Major Spinks, a garrison gunner, who was acting Club Secretary coughed apologetically from a near-by armchair. 'Don't want to butt in on a private discussion, gentlemen, but the fact is, I felt equally bad about this how-d'ye-do -- at first. Then I had a word with Doubleday Durkins, who keeps his private line to the Street. Apparently, the case is even worse than you suppose. What happened seems to have been that Rupert Chick took Betty out to a night-club, with Nigger, Stripey and the rest of the Soho gang. There she danced with a very personable young member of the Lower Deck and fell for him like a ton of chocolates. Our Golly, of course, felt more than a trifle peeved and, being already a bit high, threw a gin-and-tonic in her face. The sailor then landed him one on the mark. Betty giggled and asked: "What price the Black Hope?" The next thing, the rivals began breaking chairs on each other; but Golly is as tough as they come and the sailor got hospitalized. Betty, just like a woman, announced that she was through with Golly for ever and would rather die than go through the farce of pretending that she wasn't, just to soothe the pie-faced public. Doubleday reports harrowing days at Fleetway House, with even talk about the paper folding up. Betty had meanwhile issued a statement; said she loved the sailor boy heart and soul and would cancel her contract unless their friendship were officially recognized. She also accused Golly of submitting her to forty years of mental cruelty. Rupert Chick got into fearful hot water for first introducing Betty to the other fellow and then not intervening in the rough house. He pleaded bumble-foot, but they nearly threw him out on his ear, all the same. At last, late on Monday evening, only a few hours before Chicks' Own hit the newsstalls, some clever type -- I believe it was Eddie of "Fay and Eddie" -- thought up this ingenious story of a kind fairy waving a wand and changing Golly into Sailor Boy. Fooled me, fooled you, fooled all of us! Meanwhile Golly has turned Trappist monk and can't be reached by phone or letter; he's just trying to forget, Doubleday says. So now we see Betty and the Sailor Boy at their carefree domestic antics, in full colour on the front page. Seems to me the acme of bad taste. Apparently she's bought him out of the Navy.'

No comment came from the Q.C., none from the Admiral. They waited stony-eyed until the Major had cleared his throat three or four times and finally shuffled off with some excuse about seeing a librarian about a book.

The Admiral broke the silence at last. 'I don't know whether an action lies, my learned friend -- that's for you to say. My guess would be a clear case of slander: hatred, ridicule, contempt, and all the trimmings. Moreover, what this insufferable pop-gun-wallah -- calls himself an acting-Secretary -- relays from that thundering ass Fiddlehead Durkin isn't worth a moment's thought; between you and me, both of them are secret Tiger Tim fans!'