ROBERT GRAVES

AVOCADO PEARS

TOM'S FATHER WAS a respectable chemist in Birmingham, an old-style Christian Socialist, and Tom, who went as day-boy to a local grammar-school and did brilliantly and came up to Oxford with a scholarship and had no friends there except among the serious Labour crowd at Ruskin College, was surprisingly ignorant of certain perverse but familiar facts of life. One day he came to borrow my French dictionary. I asked him what he wanted to look up. 'Just the name of a fruit,' he said carelessly. But someone else had borrowed the dictionary. 'It doesn't matter,' he said. Then he told me the story.

'A month ago I was in Paris for a week-end, and I was wandering about vaguely looking at things the evening I arrived -- I had never been in Paris before. I walked steadily in one direction until I came to a very poor quarter -- I don't know where, but it was somewhere in the northern part. The streets were narrow and full of garbage. After a time I came on two policemen: they were busy kicking a man who was lying in the gutter. He had a pretty long wound in his scalp and looked bad; certainly he hadn't any fight left in him. I ran up and took a flying kick at the bigger of the policemen, from behind, and sent him sprawling, and then I took a standing kick at the other and sent him sprawling, too. They were lovely kicks; modelled on those long shots at goal by Dorrell of "The Villa". The policemen saw I was angry so they ran away.

'I wasn't wearing a hat -- I never do -- and wore a muffler round my neck so the man's friends came up from where they had been hiding in a doorway -- they were Communists -- and began embracing me and slapping me on the back. When I answered in English they were surprised at first, but said: "Vous êtes bon camarade, tout de même." They explained that they hadn't attacked the policemen, because they carried revolvers and generally weren't afraid to use them. This was all right for me. So we went to a pub and they gave me coffee -- I don't drink, as you know. The brother of the man whom I had rescued came up later. He was a printer's foreman, he told me, and could talk a little English. He said how grateful he was and offered to show me the sights of Paris. First he took me round the slum parts -- my God ! it was a filthy place. It even beat what I saw while I was helping with that survey of housing conditions in Glasgow for the Labour Research Bureau. "Well, now let's look at the prettier part," I said. "I'll find the money." The printer laughed and said that we must disguise ourselves first as good bourgeois. So I went back to my hotel and changed and met him later over at Montmartre. He was a big hefty fellow and looked magnificent; he had borrowed a dinner jacket from another brother who was a waiter; and for a joke he had put a ribbon of the Legion of Honour in his buttonhole to make it look more realistic.

'We went to a show called La Revue Ultra-Nue, and it was; I don't care for that sort of thing so we didn't stay there long. Then he took me to see a fashionable brothel. His sister was the concierge there, so there was no gate-money to pay and we had some champagne with the women who happened to be disengaged; the printer explained that I was not a customer but a serious young man studying social conditions. The women were all Communists, so we got on well together; they were quite simple about their profession: "Il faut vivre," they said, shrugging, and one of them who was an Italian -- I talk a little Italian, you know -- told me what their ambitions were. They would save up for five or six years until they had put by quite a decent sum and could retire. It was a house frequented by Americans, and Madame la Propriétaire, though a Royalist, was a decent sort, and didn't take too high a percentage of their earnings. So when they had put by so-and-so many francs -- It came to about £500 I reckoned -- they would advertise for a husband in the matrimonial papers: "Jeune Fille Avec Tâche Désire Mari Affectueux," and be sure to find a good one. "Avec Tâche" means "slightly soiled". "And after all," said the Italian girl, "this is the best possible school to learn 'comment plaire à son mari.' Men are all the same."

'Then we went to a wrestling match, and there were two enormously fat practically naked men rolling about on the floor. They were carefully greased, so that they couldn't get a decent hold on each other, but at last one did and began slowly breaking the other fellow's arm. I couldn't bear to wait for the crack! so we went out. The filthy look on the faces of the young bloods who were watching !

'After that we watched the crowd coming out of the Opéra, and the printer spat and muttered Assassins! There was one absolute caricature-group of four men with opera-hats, monocles and canes and I said: "Let's follow them." So we followed them to a swell restaurant; it was a dreadful place, all plush and mirrors and salon pictures of nymphs and satyrs. We sat in a corner and the printer ordered oysters and said something to the waiter: it was a Communist password or something because when I paid for the oysters with a twenty-franc note, I got twenty francs change.

'Well, we sat there and I watched the four comics out of the corner of my eye while the printer told me all the ins and outs of Communism. Apparently he was an important official of the Party; I had noticed that his friends, though they called him Comrade, made it a sort of title. I wish I could have understood it all. He got excited and talked too fast. He told me he had been foreman of a munitions works during the war and sabotaged output for two or three years until he had been caught; then he had to disappear quickly into one of the Apache quarters of Paris where army-deserters lived in a sort of fortress, and the police didn't dare round them up because they knew that they had bombs and rifles and even machine-guns. At least, that's what I made out of the story.

'While we were talking I saw a chap about my own age -- no, he was a bit younger, say

about nineteen -- looking in at the food in the window. He was a good-looking kid, but he seemed hungry. I was listening to the printer who had his back to the window, and waiting for him to finish the story: then I thought I'd invite the kid in to give him a meal. Well, I was surprised. The oldest-looking of the four comics, a fattish fellow with a falsetto voice, saw the kid, dashed out of the door and came back, pulling him in. He made him sit down at their table and called to the waiter to lay a place for him. The waiter laid a place, trying not to look furious, but I could see that he was: he was digging the fingers of his disengaged hand into the palm. The kid looked embarrassed but happy at the idea of something to eat. So this fattish fellow put him at his ease by introducing him. It was about an hour after the opera and these comics were half-tight. As he called their names in turn they pulled themselves up unsteadily, and said in a nasty sneering sort of voice: "À votre service, monsieur." One was the Count of something and another the Marquis of something else, and the third was the nephew of the Minister of War. The fat fellow was the editor of one of the chief Royalist papers.

'He ordered oysters for the kid, and the kid obviously didn't want oysters: he wanted a big lump of meat and potatoes and cabbage and things. He ate the oysters in an awkward sort of way, trying not to look hungry: but first he ate the little bits of brown bread and butter that they serve with them. Then he wiped his mouth and thanked them. The fat fellow and the nephew of the War Minister were talking in Italian about the kid; I couldn't make it out at all. It seemed quite mad to me. They got all soppy and talked about his beautiful eyes, and how strong his body was; they might have been a couple of grandmothers discussing their soldier grandson just going off with the draft for his military service. The Marquis and the Count were not interested in the kid. They were talking about women's breasts, very seriously and intensely, as though they were in the corset business. They were making drawings on the table-cloth with the Count's gold pencil; they had tried the Marquis's fountain-pen first, but the ink ran too much.

'The waiter passed and slipped a piece of paper into the printer's hand. He read it, crumpled it up and stuffed it into his shoe. Then he stopped his story about that morning's fight -- I didn't tell you that this was the first of May -- in which he had half-killed one Royalist by hitting him on the head with another Royalist, because the Royalists had tried to spoil their parade, and began to pay attention to the other table.

'The kid, having had his oysters, wanted to excuse himself, say goodnight and go off -- probably to sleep in the Bois. He looked as though he needed sleep. But the fat fellow whom they called "Mon cher Grégoire" wouldn't let him. He said that the little angel, meaning the kid, must have some dessert. I ought to have mentioned that they had already given him two or three glasses of old brandy and the kid was feeling a bit dizzy, by the look of him. The way he had eaten the brown bread and butter, he can't have had much in his stomach to begin with. Mon cher Grégoire and the nephew of the War Minister had now changed places with the other two and were sitting next to the

kid and gently detaining him, holding his arms in a sickly affectionate sort of way.

'Grégoire called the waiter; the waiter looked angrier than ever, but obviously didn't want to lose his job by refusing to do what he was told. Grégoire asked him what fruit he had, and he said: "Every sort, sir." "Good," said Grégoire, "and now what angel's food would my little Cupid like to eat?" (The printer translated this for me; I didn't recognize the word cupidon.) Would he have Guava or Persimmon or Pampelmousse? The kid shook his head.

'"Alors une pêche?"

'"Merci, monsieur!"

'"Alors, ananas?"

'"Merci, merci, monsieur!"

'"Alors, une poire d'Avocado?"

'"Merci, merci, monsieur."

'The kid was almost in tears with embarrassment, gratitude mixed with a rising shame, even fear. The nephew of the War Minister had laid his sleek yellow head on the kid's shoulder, and was quoting a bit of Racine or something. Grégoire filled the kid's glass again, and said with some impatience that Monsieur Pierre -- Pierre was the kid's name -- was remarkably fastidious about his dessert. He went on with the list of fruits -- mandarins and medlars and mangoes and God knows what. Then the nephew got hold of Pierre's hand and began admiring it, what strong, firm fingers, what a slender wrist and actually picked it up and began kissing it. It was the funniest thing you ever saw. He was probably the drunkest of the four. The Count and the Marquis were still discussing breasts, but in a very inconsequential way. Grégoire wasn't so drunk, though.

'Well, at last the kid shouted out in a hysterical but somehow proud way: "JE SUIS OUVRIER! AU DIABLE AVEC VOS POIRES D'AVOCADO!" He tried to get up, but couldn't, because the nephew was clawing on to him and kissing his neck. But Grégoire did not seem in the least put out; he turned to the waiter and said: "Alors, garçon. De la merde pour ce monsieur." Well, at that the printer picked up a carafe of water, and, walking over to Grégoire, broke it over his head. Then he detached the nephew, and jerked him backward on the floor, and grabbing the kid, pulled him out. He got him into a taxi that happened to pass, and off they went at full speed. The waiter had pretended to stop us, but had allowed me to push him over with a bang against a door. As soon as he saw the kid and the printer safe in the taxi he began to blow a police whistle. But, of course, the taxi got away. I had thrown a loaf of bread at

the Marquis, which hit him on the cheek, and that made me feel good. As it happened, I had only a few hundred yards to walk to my hotel, so I escaped all right.

'I never saw the printer again, or the kid. I was thinking of them just now and wondering what sort of a fruit merde was.'