ROBERT GRAVES

MY FIRST AMOROUS ADVENTURE

'MY FIRST AMOROUS adventure?' repeated Lord Godolphin thoughtfully. 'Well, in our family the tradition never varied much. There was always Miss Crewe, who had inducted my father and probably also my younger granduncle, Charles Martello, into the mysteries of sex. She had kept her little figure astonishingly well. That was due to her fruit diet, someone told me. In a sense, the tradition was, I agree, somewhat incestuous.'

'Did Miss Crewe attend to many families?'

'Not more than a dozen or so, and all in this county. Families like ours. Miss Crewe despised the lesser landed gentry to which she belonged.'

'May I ask what was her procedure?'

'It was no secret and, as far as I know, never varied. It began with general theory. The next lesson was sexual anatomy. The third was amatory practice. The fourth was deportment, or bed manners. The fifth, sixth and seventh were variety, based -- I have since discovered -- on Sir Richard Burton's translation of The Perfumed Garden, but omitting the chapter on homosexuality.'

'Did you ever meet Miss Crewe afterward?'

'Of course. She was a frequent guest at the castle, exceedingly witty and with perfect manners.'

'Did she educate the girls, too?'

'Heavens, no! In those remote days a girl had to be virgo intacta and innocent as a mountain primrose. But I gather that, just before the wedding night, the bride would manage to extract at least the general sexual theory from her favourite and least discreet brother. I don't know -- we had only boys in our family. By the way, I have often wondered whether Miss Crewe's name derived from the act, or vice versa?'

'What became of her in the end?'

'She died in harness, so to speak, and -- they say -- with a saintly smile on her face.'

'Tell me, though, Godolphin: What was the tradition among your tenantry?'

'The tradition of first amorous adventure? I found it a trifle ambiguous. I mean that the women were, or pretended to be, not quite so practical as the men. Take Jock Miller, for example; he was our head cowman and a Scot. One Sunday his wife approached him shyly: "Husband, dinna ye conseeder it high time that oor Duncan should be instructed?"

'"What do ye mean by 'instructed', wife?"

'"I mean instructed into God's holy mysteries o' natural reproduction. Hoo bairns are made... Ye maun begin wi' the pollination o' flowers."

'"Och, aye, wife! Mebbe I maun do as ye advise me."

'A week later, she asked him: "Husband, hae ye done as I asked wi' oor Duncan? Or did it slip your memory?"

'"Aye, wife, it did sae. But I'll gae to him the noo wi' the instruction."

'He found Duncan: "Duncan, laddie" he said, "ye mind what we did wi' they twa bonny lassies ahint the kirk wall last Sabbath eve?"

'"Aye, father!"

'"Weel, Duncan, your mither would hae ye ken that that was preecisely what the bees do wi' they bonny primroses on the mountain."'

At this point, everyone in turn began detailing his own first amorous adventure -- some comic, some sad, some horrific, few reprintable in a decent family journal. One poor fellow had found himself in bed with an ancient prostitute -- brought there, while he was drunk and fast asleep, by witty Cambridge friends -- and got a bad dose from her. Another unfortunate, a clergyman's son, had been raped by a little flaxen-haired monster for the bet of a box of chocolates. Another had been lured by nuns into a nunnery, very early one morning, at the back of a famous surfing beach at Sydney: apparently that was common practice.

Then, because I had kept silent and was clearly more than a little embarrassed, they mobbed me: and Lord Godolphin insisted on hearing the very worst.

'Very well, gentlemen,' I said. 'I don't want to be a spoilsport...' And this is what I told them:

'I apologize for being the odd man out, but, as my mother used to say, "Tell the truth and shame the Devil." I was born in July 1895 of what was then called "good family" --

meaning a coat of arms and no recent surrounding scandal. As Godolphin will tell you, before World War One, only cads slept with unmarried girls of good family, and divorces in good families were all but unthinkable. When the war broke out and death was soon heavy in the air, such old-established conventions often broke down. Indeed, the phenomenon of "war babies" engendered by lovers just off the trenches -- with three-to-one odds against their unmaimed survival -- won almost universal sympathy in the not-so-good families.

'One day, when I was a nineteen-year-old lieutenant, at our fusiliers' mess near the ruined village of Laventie in France, our caddish colonel announced that he was ashamed to hear that he still had cock-virgin warts -- warts meant lieutenants -- under his command. All such had to parade under the assistant adjuntant that evening to be duly deflowered at the red-light establishment at Armentières reserved for officers. I did not admit to my cock-virginity. That was because I held a strong superstition that its loss would prejudice the magical power of survival that had so far taken me through five months of trench warfare -- the average life of a wart was six weeks at that time. This parade order had been given shortly before the battle of Loos, where all our four company commanders were killed, with hundreds of other ranks, and the caddish colonel himself got wounded, not to return. I escaped with a slight cut on the hand from a shell splinter and was left to command a much reduced company without even a second lieutenant to help me.

'I remained a resolute C.V. for the next year. In July 1916, at High Wood, I got five wounds from an eight-inch shell, including one through my right lung, half an inch from my heart. I was left bleeding to death but knew I would survive; and did, though officially reported "died of wounds". They patched me up for another return to the trenches in 1917: and, now a captain but still a C.V., I found myself temporarily commanding the battalion, everyone else having been killed or wounded. Then I got bronchitis and pneumonia and was soon reported medically unfit for further service overseas. So I fell in love with an eighteen-year-old girl -- of good family and therefore also a virgin -- and married her. It would be embarrassing to recall our embarrassment and amorous gropings when we found ourselves naked in bed together at Brown's Hotel on January 23, 1918. But at least we were not persuaded by the warning hoots of sirens and the crash of bombs -- during one of the zeppelin raids on London -- to take refuge in the hotel cellars.'

Lord Godolphin cast me a baleful glance in the silence that followed. Then he said slowly: 'In our family, we considered it bad taste to discuss marital intercourse... Still, my dear fellow, I suppose it was my own fault for insisting.'