ROBERT GRAVES

THE ABOMINABLE MR GUNN

ONE MONDAY MORNING in September 1910, the abominable Mr J.O.G. Gunn, master of the Third Form at Brown Friars, trod liverishly down the aisle between two rows of pitch-pine desks and grasped the short hairs just above my right ear. Mr Gunn, pale, muscular and broad-faced, kept his black hair plastered close to the scalp with a honey-scented oil. He announced to the form, as he lifted me up a few inches: 'And now Professor Graves will display his wondrous erudition by discoursing on the first Missionary Journey of St Paul.' (Laughter.)

I discoursed haltingly, my mind being as usual a couple of stages ahead of my tongue, so that my tongue said 'Peter' when I meant 'Paul', and 'B.C.' when I meant 'A.D.', and 'Crete' when I meant 'Cyprus'. It still plays this sort of trick, which often makes my conversation difficult to follow and is now read as a sign of incipient senility. In those days it did not endear me to Mr Gunn...

After the disaster at Syracuse, one Athenian would often ask another: 'Tell me, friend, what has become of old So-and-so?' and the invariable answer came: 'If he is not dead, he is schoolmastering.' I can wish no worse fate to Mr J.O.G. Gunn -- father of all the numerous sons-of-guns who have since sneered at my 'erudition' and cruelly caught at my short hairs -- than that he is still exercising his profession at the age of eighty-plus; and that each new Monday morning has found him a little uglier and a little more liverish than before.

Me erudite? I am not even decently well read. What reading I have done from time to time was never a passive and promiscuous self-exposure to the stream of literature, but always a search for particular facts to nourish, or to scotch, some obsessive maggot that had gained a lodgement in my skull. And now I shall reveal an embarrassing secret which I have kept from the world since those nightmare days.

One fine summer evening as I sat alone on the roller behind the cricket pavilion, with nothing much in my head, I received a sudden celestial illumination: it occurred to me that I knew everything. I remember letting my mind range rapidly over all its familiar subjects of knowledge; only to find that this was no foolish fancy. I did know everything. To be plain: though conscious of having come less than a third of the way along the path of formal education, and being weak in mathematics, shaky in Greek grammar, and hazy about English history, I nevertheless held the key of truth in my hand, and could use it to open any lock of any door. Mine was no religious or philosophical theory, but a simple method of looking sideways at disorderly facts so as to make perfect sense of them.

I slid down from the roller, wondering what to do with my embarrassing gift. Whom could I take into my confidence? Nobody. Even my best friends would say 'You're mad!' and either send me to Coventry or organize my general scragging, or both; and soon some favour-currier would sneak to Mr Gunn, which would be the end of everything. It occurred to me that perhaps I had better embody the formula in a brief world-message, circulated anonymously to the leading newspapers. In that case I should have to work under the bedclothes after dark, by the light of a flash-lamp, and use the cypher I had recently perfected. But I remembered my broken torch-light bulb, and the difficulty of replacing it until the next day. No: there was no immediate hurry. I had everything securely in my head. Again I experimented, trying the key on various obstinate locks; they all clicked and the doors opened smoothly. Then the school-bell rang from a distance, calling me to preparation and prayers.

Early the next day I awoke to find that I still had a fairly tight grasp of my secret; but a morning's lessons intervened, and when I then locked myself into the privy, and tried to record it on the back of an old exercise-book, my mind went too fast for my pen, and I began to cross out -- a fatal mistake -- and presently crumpled up the page and pulled the chain on it. That night I tried again under the bedclothes, but the magic had evaporated and I could get no further than the introductory sentence.

My vision of truth did not recur, though I went back a couple of times to sit hopefully on the roller; and before long, doubts tormented me, gloomy doubts about a great many hitherto stable concepts: such as the authenticity of the Gospels, the perfectibility of man and the absoluteness of the Protestant moral code. All that survived was an after-glow of the bright light in my head, and the certainty that it had been no delusion. This is still with me, for I now realize that what overcame me that evening was a sudden infantile awareness of the power of intuition, the supralogic that cuts out all routine processes of thought and leaps straight from problem to answer.

How easily this power is blunted by hostile circumstances Mr Gunn demonstrated by his treatment of one F.F. Smilley, a new boy, who seems, coincidentally, to have had a vision analogous to mine, though of a more specialized sort. Smilley came late to Brown Friars; he had been educated at home until the age of eleven because of some illness or other. It happened on his first entry into the Third Form that Mr Gunn set us a problem from Hilderbrand's Arithmetic for Preparatory Schools, which was to find the square root of the sum of two long decimals, divided (just for cussedness) by the sum of two complicated vulgar fractions. Soon everyone was scribbling away except F.F. Smilley, who sat there abstractedly polishing his glasses and gazing out of the window.

Mr Gunn looked up for a moment from a letter he was writing, and asked nastily: 'Seeking inspiration from the distant church spire, Smilley?'

'No, sir. Polishing my glasses.'

'And why, pray?'

'They had marmalade on them, sir.'

'Don't answer me back, boy! Why aren't you working out that sum?'

'I have already written down the answer, sir.'

'Bring your exercise-book here!... Ah, yes, here is the answer, my very learned and ingenious friend Sir Isaac Newton' -- tweaking the short hairs -- 'but where is it worked out?'

'Nowhere, sir; it just came to me.'

'Came to you, F.F. Smilley, my boy? You mean you hazarded a wild guess?'

'No, sir, I just looked at the problem and saw what the answer must be.'

'Ha! A strange psychical phenomenon! But I must demand proof that you did not simply turn to the answer at the end of the book.'

'Well, I did do that afterwards, sir.'

'The truth now slowly leaks out.'

'But it was wrong, sir. The last two figures should be 35, not 53.'

'Curiouser and curiouser! Here's a Brown Friars' boy in the Third Form who knows better than Professor Hilderbrand, Cambridge's leading mathematician.'

'No, sir, I think it must be a misprint.'

'So you and Professor Hilderbrand are old friends? You seem very active in his defence.'

'No, sir, I have met him, but I didn't like him very much.'

F.F. Smilley was sent at once to the Headmaster with a note: 'Please cane bearer for idleness, lying, cheating and gross impertinence' -- which the Headmaster, who had certain flaws in his character, was delighted to do. I cannot tell the rest of the story with much confidence, but my impression is that Mr Gunn won, as he had already won in his battle against J.X. Bestard-Montéry, whose Parisian accent when he was called

upon to read 'Maître Corbeau, sur un arbre perché' earned him the name of 'frog-eating mountebank', and a severe knuckling on the side of the head. Bestard was forced to put a hard Midland polish on his French.

Mr Gunn, in fact, gradually beat down F.F. Smilley's resistance by assiduous hair-tweakings, knucklings and impositions; and compelled him to record all mathematic argument in the laborious way laid down by Professor Hilderbrand. No more looking out of the window, no more guessing at the answer.

Whether the cure was permanent I cannot say, because shortly before the end of that school-year the Chief of County Police gave the Headmaster twenty-four hours to leave the country (the police were more gentlemanly in those Edwardian days), and Brown Friars broke up in confusion. I have never since heard of F.F. Smilley. Either he was killed in World War I, or else he is schoolmastering somewhere. Had he made his mark in higher mathematics, we should surely have heard of it. Unless, perhaps, he is so much of a back-room boy, so much the arch-wizard of the mathematical-formula department on which Her Majesty's nuclear physicists depend for their bombs and piles, that the Security men have changed his name, disguised his features by plastic surgery, speech-trained him into alien immigrance, and suppressed his civic identity. I would not put it past them. But the mathematical probability is, as I say, that Gunn won.