ROBERT GRAVES

OLD PAPA JOHNSON

IN JULY 1916 I was in hospital with one Captain H.H. Johnson of the Army Service Corps, who had a habit of referring to himself in the third person as 'Old Papa Johnson'. I was in with a lung wound, and he with a badly fractured pelvis. 'Of all the inappropriate happenings!' he said. 'Imagine, Old Papa Johnson, of all people, being laid out by the kick of an Army mule in the middle of a European war!' He added, to remove any misunderstanding: 'No, the A.S.C. isn't my corps, except just now for convenience. I'm cavalry, really -- did fifteen years off and on in the Lancers. I was with them at Le Cateau and got wounded. And then rejoined them at Ypres and got it again. This time it was shell, not bullet, and the medical board gave me "Permanently unfit for Combatant Service". So I transferred to the A.S.C. -- yes, I know you fire-eating young infantry officers look down on that worthy corps -- and I hadn't any great passion for acting as baker's boy and butcher's delivery man myself. Still, it was better than being in England. But now that ridiculous mule...'

Papa Johnson was about forty-five years old; very broad shoulders, medium height, I judged (but it is difficult to judge the vertical height of a man whom one sees only in a horizontal position), and a comedian's face. I only once saw it as anything but a comedian's face, and that was when a hospital orderly was impertinent. Then it set hard as stone, and his voice, which was ordinarily a comedian's voice, too, rasped like a drill instructor's; the orderly was terrified. Papa Johnson talked the most idiotic patter half the time and kept the nurses in hysterics. I had to ask him once to stop it, because it was bad for my wound to laugh like that; it might start a haemorrhage again. He had a small make-up box with a mirror and grease paints, and an assortment of beards and moustaches. While Sister Morgan was taking his temperature he would get under the blankets with a pocket torch -- the thermometer in his mouth -- and when the two minutes were up he would emerge in some new, startling character. A handkerchief and a towel were his only other stage properties. Sister Morgan would take the thermometer from him gravely, and he would say: 'Hello, boys and girls, I'm Queen Victoria as a young wife and mother!' or 'Beware, you wicked old men, I'm the Widow Twankey,' or 'Give ear, O Benjamin, I am Saul the son of Kish in search of his father's asses,' and she couldn't help laughing. And he would insist on talking in character until breakfast came up. Biblical parts were his speciality.

One day I was watching him at work on a complicated paper-cutting trick. He folded a sheet of newspaper this way and that, snipping it carefully here and there with a pair of nail scissors; he had told me that when it opened out it was going to be what he called 'Bogey-Bogey Ceremony in Sumatra'. He was full of tricks of this sort. I quoted a verse of the Psalms at him about it -- I forget which it was -- and he said, shaking his

head at me sorrowfully: 'No, no, little Gravey-spoons, you've got that all awry. Never misquote the Psalms of David to Old Papa Johnson, because he knows them all off by heart.' And so he did, as I found when I challenged him, and Proverbs, too, and St Mark's Gospel ('It's the one that reads truest to me,' he said, 'the others seem to me to have been played about with by someone who wanted to prove something'), and most of Isaiah and the whole of Job. Also Shakespeare's Sonnets. I was astonished. 'Where on earth did you come to learn all that?' I asked. 'At a Jesuit College as a punishment for independence of character?'

'No, no, no; bethink yourself, child! Do Jesuits use the Sonnets as a textbook? I learned most of my stuff in the Antarctic -- I was on two expeditions there -- while we were snowed up. Some of it in the Arctic. But I learned most when I was Crown Agent on Desolation Island.'

'Where's that? Is that one of the Fiji group?'

'No, no, no, child. That's in the Antarctic, too. It's the most southerly land under the British flag. The appointment is made yearly -- it's well paid, you would say -- but others wouldn't agree -- £1,000 a year and everything found. Usually a Scot takes it on. The Scots don't mind living entirely alone in a howling wilderness as much as we English do; they are a very, very sane people. But my Scottish predecessor stuck it only for nine months, and I stuck it for two years: you see Old Papa Johnson is just a little bit insane. Always was so from a child. So he didn't come to any harm there. Besides, he had company for the last ten months.'

'If the island's a wilderness, what's the sense of keeping an agent there and wasting all that money on him? Is it just to keep the British claim from lapsing? Mineral deposits waiting for development?'

Johnson carefully laid down his 'Bogey-Bogey' business before answering. It was, by the way, a birthday present for Sister Morgan. Johnson went out of his way to be friendly with Sister Morgan, though I couldn't understand why. She was a V.A.D. nurse, middle-aged, incompetent, and always trying to play the great lady among the other nurses; they detested her. But with Johnson she behaved very well after a time and I came to like her, though when I was in another ward I had thought her impossible.

'As Crown Agent, I would have you understand, Captain Graves, I had to supervise His Majesty's customs, and keep a record of imports and exports, and act as Postmaster-General and Clerk of Works, and be solely responsible for maintaining the Pax Britannica in Antarctic regions -- if necessary with a rope or a revolver.'

I never knew when Papa Johnson was joking, so I said: 'Yes, your Excellency, and I suppose the penguins and reindeer needed a lot of looking after; and what with their

sending each other so many picture postcards and all, you must have had your hands full at the office.'

'Hignorance!' snapped Papa Johnson, in the idiotic tones that he used for the Widow Twankey, 'Reindeers hindeed! Hain't no sich hanimals hin hall Hant-harctica. Them dratted reindeers honly hinhabitates Harctic hareas. Which there wasn't no penguins neither, not a penguin hon hall that hisland. There was prions, and seahawks, and sea helephants come a-visiting; but they wasn't no trouble, not they.' Then he continued in his usual voice: 'The gross value of imports and exports in the two years I was there amounted to... guess, child!' I refused to guess, so he told me that the correct answer was something over one million seven hundred thousand pounds sterling.

'For I should have told you, little Gravey-spoons, that Desolation island has a harbour which is more or less ice-free for a month or two round Christmas every year. The whalers put in there then. It isn't every ship that can deal, like the Larssen can, with an unlimited quantity of whale; so when the smaller ships have more oil than they can manage comfortably and don't want to go back to Norway yet -- half the world away -- they dump it in barrels on Desolation Island, in care of the Crown Agent, and get a chit from him for it. There are big store caves blasted out of the rock. The oil tankers come to collect the stuff. Also, a Norwegian company had put a blubber-boiling plant on the island for the convenience of its smaller boats -- three great metal cauldrons, each about twice the size of this room, and weighing I don't know how many hundred tons. They must have been landed in sections and welded together on the spot; but that was before my time.

'When those fellows came ashore to boil down their blubber, I always had a busy time. I had to watch that they didn't pinch Government property or the oil belonging to other ships that I had in bond, or raid my house when my back was turned. I carried my revolver loose and loaded and hardly had time to sleep. But I was the sole representative of His Majesty, and he had given me unlimited power to make laws for the entire period of my stay, and to see that they were kept. After my first experience with a blubber party, which ended in a death and a fire, I issued an edict that henceforth Desolation Island was to be the driest as well as the coldest of His Majesty's possessions. I couldn't stop the brutes from boozing themselves silly aboard their own vessels in the harbour, but I saw to it that not a drop was landed on British soil. (Tough! you wouldn't believe how tough these Norwegian whalingmen were. But their ships' officers were tougher still and kept them under.)

'One day a tanker put in and two unexpected visitors came off her. One of them, a tall fellow with a Guards' Brigade moustache (here Papa Johnson made one up to show me, from his make-up box) and a quarrelsome sort of face (here Papa Johnson made the sort of face he meant) came up to me and said in superior tones (here Papa Johnson imitated them): "Mr Henry Johnson, the British Crown Agent, I believe? My name's Morgan, Major Anthony Morgan of the Indian Army. I have come to live here with you.

This is Professor Durnsford, who is on the staff of the New York Museum of Natural History," and he pulled forward a harmless-looking little fellow with a snubnose and the expression of a Pekinese. "We intend to do research work here." He handed me an introductory letter from the Government of New Zealand. I was too busy with customs business to read it, so I put it into my pocket -- you see I disliked the man at first sight and didn't like having his company forced on me without a please or thank you -- and I said: "Well, I can't refuse you, I suppose, if you have decided to dwell among me. There's my house; it's the only one on the island. Make yourselves at home while I attend to these papers. I'll send your stuff ashore when I've examined it."

'Morgan flared up. "You will certainly do no such thing as to tamper with my personal luggage."

'I shrugged my shoulders and said: "It's my job; I'm Customs here. Give me your keys."

'He saw that I was serious, and realized that the tanker was still in the harbour and able to take him off; I could refuse to put him up at my house and so he would have to go back in her. He threw me the keys with very bad grace, and Durnsford politely handed me his. They were numbered keys, so I had no trouble finding the right boxes for them.

'That evening I cooked the supper and Morgan got a mess kit out of his tin trunk to eat it in. The man Morgan actually tried to old-soldier Papa Johnson with his row of ribbons. And do you know what they were? Child, one was the Coronation ribbon and one was the Durbar ribbon and one was the Osmanieh, which one gets almost as a matter of routine if one is seconded to the Egyptian Army, and the fourth and last was the M.V.O. of the Third Class. So, pretending to be dazzled, I went off with the frying pan in my hand and changed into my old campaigning tunic, which sported Ashanti, Egypt, China, King's and Queen's medals South Africa, and North-West Frontier. Not a routine ribbon among them; they made his display look pretty sick. But I had only two stars up, so he tried to high-hat me with his crown.

'Believe me, child, there was the devil to pay about my embargo on wines and spirits; he had brought out twenty cases of Scotch. At first he didn't realize that Scotch was not drunk on Desolation Island. He said that in his opinion it would have been courteous of me, perhaps, to have put a bottle of my own stuff on the table, since I had not taken off any of his with the first boatload. But when I explained how it was, he went up in the air and bellowed at me as though he was in his Orderly Room and I was a poor devil of a Sudanese recruit. I won't repeat what he said, child, because a nurse might come in and catch a word or two and misunderstand. I was pleasant but firm; reminding him that I was Lord Chief Justice and Lord High Executioner and everything else on the island and that what I said went. Professor Durnsford had been a witness to his threats, I said, and I would subpoena him, if necessary, for the trial. And I quoted Alice in Wonderland: "I'll be judge, I'll be jury," said cunning old Fury, "I'll try

the whole cause and condemn you to death."

'"You can't prevent me bringing it ashore," he said at last.

'"Can't I?" I said, in nasty tones, showing my Colt.

'He broke into worse language than ever and the only true things he said about me were that I must be a little insane and that I had a face like Dan Leno on one of his off-nights. He ended: "Remember these words, for they are the last I shall address to you while I remain on this island." I answered, improving on poor Dan Leno: "Ha, Comma, Ha, among the trumpets. I'm Job's war horse, and I scent the battle from afar."

'Morgan kept it up throughout the meal. If he wanted the salt or beans or mustard when they happened to be right close to my plate, he would ask Durnsford, who sat between us, to pass them to him. I had decided to ship Morgan back home with his whisky the very next day, but when he started this baby game of sending me to Coventry, I was so pleased that I decided to keep him with me. As you know, child, I love baby games. It was a nice game, because Morgan and I held the cards and Durnsford was pool for the winner to take. Not that I cared much about Durnsford then, but he seemed a decent little Pekinese of a man, too good to go coupled with an ill-tempered great mastiff like Morgan. They had arranged to come on this expedition together, by letter, before actually meeting. Morgan had written that he could get permission from the New Zealand Government for them both to put up at my house; and Pekey Durnsford was glad of a companion. Neither of them had been in the Antarctic before.

'Durnsford was the best possible "kitty" for our game of nap; he tried to be so neutral. Of course, I didn't go out of my way to make myself pleasant to him; that would have been no sort of game -- an auction with the bidding in sugar plums and the prize to go to the men who bid highest. No, no, no! I answered his questions civilly, though not always pertinently, I supplied him with necessaries, and saw that he didn't run into danger: but I allowed him no loose conversation. Little Pekey Durnsford felt ever so uncomfortable (and even, I believe, went so far as to ask Morgan to apologize to me), but I felt perfectly happy. You see, child, having got accustomed to the deathly silence of Desolation Island when I was by myself for months at a time, I thoroughly enjoyed the very lively silence of the man Morgan. Often he was on the point of asking me something important about the island which only I could tell him, but then his haughty pride choked back the question. And so next day the question would come innocently enough through Durnsford. I would put on my "Schoolgirls we" voice and say: "Darling, that's a great secret. But if you promise on your honour never to tell anyone else in the world about it, I'll whisper it to you." Durnsford would smile unhappily, and Morgan would scowl.

'There were several rooms in my shack, but mostly storerooms, and only one big stove. Morgan made a show of moving his belongings into another room; but he got too cold and had to sneak back. It was a log-built shack, by the way, with steel doors and steel window shutters. It had an airtight lining and it was anchored to the rock with four great steel cables that went right across the roof. Understand, child, that in the Antarctic we keep a special and unique sort of blizzard, so these were necessary precautions.

'Well! The oil tanker had steamed off and the whalers had come and dumped their barrels and had their blubber parties and said goodbye; so unless there came a chance call from a vessel that was built pretty sturdy against the ice, like the one my predecessor went away in -- he'd been killing himself with Scotch and couldn't lay off it because nobody was at hand to tell him not to make a beast of himself -- unless a chance vessel called, you see, there we were together for another nine or ten solid months. I had a wireless apparatus, but it hadn't much of a range, and it was rarely I picked up a passing ship except in the season.

'For five solid months the man Morgan kept it up' (here Papa Johnson resumed the moustache, which had fallen off). '"Durnsford, old fellow, do you think that you could prevail on that comedian friend of yours to disencumber the case he's sitting on? It happens to contain the photographic plates. He has apparently taken a three-year lease on it, with the option of renewal. Haw! Haw! Haw!" Durnsford looked at me apologetically. I didn't get off the packing case, of course... I never asked Durnsford to relay a message to Morgan. I pretended he didn't exist, and if he had been sitting on the packing case and I had wanted anything inside it, I should simply have opened it with him on it. He was afraid of me and careful not to start a roughhouse.

'They didn't get on too well with their natural-history studies, because they didn't know where to look. I knew my island well and there's a surprising amount of life on it, if you look in the right places, besides the prions and the other creatures I mentioned before, which don't take much finding, and a few ratlike animals that spend most of their life hibernating, and even a few honest-to-God birds. In the interior are freshwater pools with all sorts of little bugs living in the ice. Heaven knows how they keep alive, but when you thaw them out they wriggle nicely. Durnsford didn't know that I knew and I didn't let on; his big friend took him round to see the sights, but he wasn't by any means so good a guide as Old Papa Johnson would have been.

'One day, it was twelve noon on Midsummer Eve with the thermometer forty-five below and the stars shining very prettily -- you have heard of our beautiful long Polar night, I expect, that goes on month after month without a spot of daylight to help it out? Well, one day -- or one night, if you prefer -- after breakfast -- or after supper if you like -- the man Morgan puts on his snowshoes and says to Durnsford: "Coming out for a shuffle, professor?" "All right, major," Durnsford answers, putting down his book and reaching for his snowshoes.

'"Durnsford," I said, "don't go out!" He asked: "Why?" in a surprised voice, so I said: "Look at the barometer!" Morgan interrupted, saying to Durnsford: "Your imbecile acquaintance has no understanding of barometers. This one has been rock-steady for the last twenty-four hours."

'"Durnsford," I said again, "don't go out!"

'Morgan haw-hawed: "Oh, don't listen to it; come along for a bit of exercise. Leave old Red Nose with his string of sausages and his red-hot poker; he's not in his best vein these days."

'Durnsford hesitated, with one snowshoe already on. He hesitated quite a long time. Finally he took it off again. "Thank you, Mr Johnson," he said. "I'll take your advice. I don't know what you mean about the barometer, but you must certainly understand conditions here better than Major Morgan."

'That was good to hear; I had won my game of nap with the man Morgan at last and scooped the kitty. And it wasn't bluff: the unnatural steadiness of the barometer meant trouble. I had made sure that the shutters were fast some hours before.

'So Morgan went alone, whistling "Oh, it's my delight on a starry night in the season of the year," and two minutes later a creaking and groaning and humming began. Durnsford looked puzzled and thought I was playing a trick. "No," I said, "it's only the house moving about a little and the cables taking the strain. A capful of wind. But have a look at that rock-steady barometer."

'He went over to it, and behold! the creature had gone quite off its chump and was hopping about like a pea in a saucepan. Durnsford was silent for a minute or two and then he said: "Johnson, I know that the major has behaved abominably to you. But don't you think -- ?"

'"No, dearie," I said, "your poor old granny is very, very sleepy at the moment, and simply hasn't got it in her to think thoughts about troublesome majors and the likes of them."

'"Oh, stop your jokes, for once!" he shouted, "I'm going out to look for him."

'He grabbed his shoes again. So I spoke to him severely and showed him my gun. I said that I didn't mind his slaying himself if he felt so inclined, but that I drew the line at his killing Old Papa Johnson too. They were double doors; the outer one was steel and the inner one solid two-inch oak planking, with an airlock between them. The moment he unbolted the outer door the wind would get into the airlock and blow the inner one in and then tear the shack to pieces in three seconds.

'"But the major?" he gasped. "Won't he get frozen to death?"

'"Your intelligent friend was killed by the first gust of wind a few seconds after leaving the shack," I said.

'That blizzard blew without stopping for seventy-two hours; any moment I expected the cables to go. I set myself to learn the Book of Ruth to keep my mind from dwelling on our imminent fate. Then it stopped as suddenly as it began. We found the body only fifty yards from the shack, wedged between two rocks. And you wouldn't believe it, but that blizzard had got inside one of those big metal cauldrons -- twice the size of this room, I'm telling you -- and blown it clean into the harbour! As local registrar of births, deaths, and marriages I reported all these occurrences to a distant whaler, a month or two later, and when the tanker eventually turned up, it came with a letter from the man Morgan's sister, asking me to put her brother's remains in the lead coffin which she enclosed. So I had to dig them up again, though I had said the burial service over them and left nothing out.

'As for Pekey Durnsford, he was so full of gratitude to me for saving his life that he slobbered all over me. And soon I found that he liked silly games, just like I did. It was he who first taught Old Papa Johnson how to do this paper-folding business, though Papa's improved on Pekey's methods a lot since. And in return Papa showed him where to scare up all the living creatures in our kingdom. Pekey found one quite new species of freshwater cheese mite which he called Something-or-other Papa-john-sonensis. And you should have seen the letter of thanks that I got from the New York Museum of Natural History!

'Morgan's sister -- now child, for goodness' sake don't remind her who H.H. Johnson is -- I recognized her handwriting when she put my name on the fever chart -- is not a bad woman in spite of her airs, though it's taken me three weeks and a lot of patience to coax her to be my playmate. And do you know, little Gravey-spoons? if it hadn't been for that whisky business I verily believe that Old Papa Johnson could even in time have made a playmate of her ill-tempered brother.'