ROBERT GRAVES

TREACLE TART

THE NEWS TRAVELLED from group to group along the platform of Victoria Station, impressing our parents and kid-sisters almost as much as ourselves. A lord was coming to our prep-school. A real lord. A new boy, only eight years old. Youngest son of the Duke of Downshire. A new boy, yet a lord. Lord Julius Bloodstock. Some name! Crikey!

Excitement strong enough to check the rebellious tears of home-lovers, and make our last goodbyes all but casual. None of us having had any contact with the peerage, it was argued by some, as we settled in our reserved Pullman carriage, that on the analogy of policemen there couldn't be boy-lords. However, Mr Lees, the Latin Master (declined: Lees, Lees, Lem, Lei, Lei, Lee) confirmed the report. The lord was being driven to school that morning in the ducal Rolls-Royce. Crikey, again! Cricko, Crickere, Crikey, Crictum!

Should we be expected to call him 'your Grace', or 'Sire', or something? Would he keep a coronet in his tuck-box? Would the masters dare cane him if he broke school rules or didn't know his prep?

Billington Secundus told us that his father (the famous Q.C.) had called Thos a 'tuft-hunting toad-eater', as meaning that he was awfully proud of knowing important people, such as bishops and Q.C.s and lords. To this Mr Lees turned a deaf ear, though making ready to crack down on any further disrespectful remarks about the Rev. Thomas Pearce, our Headmaster. None came. Most of us were scared stiff of Thos; besides, everyone but Billington Secundus considered pride in knowing important people an innocent enough emotion.

Presently Mr Lees folded his newspaper and said: 'Bloodstock, as you will learn to call him, is a perfectly normal little chap, though he happens to have been born into the purple -- if anyone present catches the allusion. Accord him neither kisses nor cuffs (nec oscula, nec verbera, both neuter) and all will be well. By the way, this is to be his first experience of school life. The Duke has hitherto kept him at the Castle under private tutors.'

At the Castle, under private tutors! Crikey! Crikey, Crikius, Crikissime!

We arrived at the Cedars just in time for school dinner. Thos, rather self-consciously, led a small, pale, fair-haired boy into the dining-hall, and showed him his seat at the end of the table among the other nine newcomers. 'This is Lord Julius Bloodstock,

boys,' he boomed. 'You will just call him Bloodstock. No titles or other honorifics here.'

'Then I prefer to be called Julius.' His first memorable words.

'We happen to use only surnames at Brown Friars,' chuckled Thos; then he said Grace.

None of Julius's table-mates called him anything at all, to begin with, being either too miserable or too shy even to say 'Pass the salt, please.' But after the soup, and halfway through the shepherd's pie (for once not made of left-overs) Billington Tertius, to win a bet, leant boldly across the table and asked: 'Lord, why didn't you come by train, same as the rest of us?'

Julius did not answer at first, but when his neighbours nudged him, he said: 'The name is Julius, and my father was afraid of finding newspaper photographers on the platform. They can be such a nuisance. Two of them were waiting for us at the school gates, and my father sent the chauffeur to smash both their cameras.'

This information had hardly sunk in before the third course appeared: treacle tart. Today was Monday: onion soup, shepherd's pie and carrots, treacle tart. Always had been. Even when Mr Lees-Lees-Lem had been a boy here and won top scholarship to Winchester. 'Treacle. From the Greek theriace, though the Greeks did not, of course...' With this, Mr Lees, who sat at the very end of the table, religiously eating treacle tart, looked up to see whether anyone were listening; and noticed that Julius had pushed away his plate, leaving the oblong of tough burned pastry untouched.

'Eat it, boy!' said Mr Lees. 'Not allowed to leave anything here for Mr Good Manners. School rule.'

'I never eat treacle tart,' explained Julius with a little sigh.

'You are expected to address me as "sir",' said Mr Lees.

Julius seemed surprised. 'I thought we didn't use titles here, or other honorifics,' he said, 'but only surnames?'

'Call me "sir",' insisted Mr Lees, not quite certain whether this were innocence or impertinence.

'Sir,' said Julius, shrugging faintly.

'Eat your tart,' snapped Mr Lees.

'But I never eat treacle tart -- sir!'

'It's my duty to see that you do so, every Monday.'

Julius smiled. 'What a queer duty!' he said incredulously.

Titters, cranings of necks. Then Thos called jovially down the table: 'Well, Lees, what's the news from your end? Are the summer holidays reported to have been wearisomely long?'

'No, Headmaster. But I cannot persuade an impertinent boy to sample our traditional treacle tart.'

'Send him up here,' said Thos in his most portentous voice. 'Send him up here, plate and all! Oliver Twist asking for less, eh?'

When Thos recognized Julius, his face changed and he swallowed a couple of times, but having apparently lectured the staff on making not the least difference between duke's son and shopkeeper's son, he had to put his foot down. 'My dear boy,' he said, 'let me see you eat that excellent piece of food without further demur; and no nonsense.'

'I never eat treacle tart, Headmaster.'

Thos started as though he had been struck in the face. He said slowly: 'You mean perhaps: "I have lost my appetite, sir." Very well, but your appetite will return at supper time, you mark my words -- and so will the treacle tart.'

The sycophantic laughter which greeted this prime Thossism surprised Julius but did not shake his poise. Walking to the buttery-table, he laid down the plate, turned on his heel, and walked calmly back to his seat.

Thos at once rose and said Grace in a challenging voice.

'Cocky ass, I'd like to punch his lordly head for him,' growled Billington Secundus later that afternoon.

'You'd have to punch mine first,' I said. 'He's a... the thing we did in Gray's Elegy -- a village Hampden. Standing up to Lees and Thos in mute inglorious protest against that foul treacle tart.'

'You're a tuft-hunting toad-eater.'

'I may be. But I'd rather eat toads than Thos's treacle tart.'

A bell rang for supper, or high tea. The rule was that tuck-box cakes were put under

Matron's charge and distributed among all fifty of us while they lasted. 'Democracy', Thos called it (I can't think why); and the Matron, to cheer up the always dismal first evening, had set the largest cake she could find on the table: Julius's. Straight from the ducal kitchens, plastered with crystallized fruit, sugar icing and marzipan, stuffed with raisins, cherries and nuts.

'You will get your slice, my dear, when you have eaten your treacle tart,' Matron gently reminded Julius. 'Noblesse oblige.'

'I never eat treacle tart, Matron.'

It must have been hard for him to see his cake devoured by strangers before his eyes, but he made no protest; just sipped a little tea and went supperless to bed. In the dormitory he told a ghost story, which is still, I hear, current in the school after all these years: about a Mr Gracie (why 'Gracie'?) who heard hollow groans in the night, rose to investigate and was grasped from behind by an invisible hand. He found that his braces had caught on the door knob; and, after other harrowing adventures, traced the groans to the bathroom, where Mrs Gracie...

Lights out! Sleep. Bells for getting up; for prayers; for breakfast.

'I never eat treacle tart.' So Julius had no breakfast, but we pocketed slices of bread and potted meat (Tuesday) to slip him in the playground afterwards. The school porter intervened. His orders were to see that the young gentleman had no food given him.

Bell: Latin. Bell: Maths. Bell: long break. Bell: Scripture. Bell: wash hands for dinner.

'I never eat treacle tart,' said Julius, as a sort of response to Thos's Grace; and this time fainted.

Thos sent a long urgent telegram to the Duke, explaining his predicament: school rule, discipline, couldn't make exceptions, and so forth.

The Duke wired back noncommittally: 'Quite so. Stop. The lad never eats treacle tart. Stop. Regards. Downshire.'

Matron took Julius to the sickroom, where he was allowed milk and soup, but no solid food unless he chose to call for treacle tart. He remained firm and polite until the end, which came two days later, after a further exchange of telegrams.

We were playing kick-about near the Master's Wing, when the Rolls-Royce pulled up. Presently Julius, in overcoat and bowler hat, descended the front steps, followed by the school porter carrying his tuck-box, football boots and handbag. Billington Secundus, now converted to the popular view, led our three cheers, which Julius

acknowledged with a gracious tilt of his bowler. The car purred off; and thereupon, in token of our admiration for Julius, we all swore to strike against treacle tart the very next Monday, and none of us eat a single morsel, even if we liked it, which some of us did!

When it came to the point, of course, the boys sitting close to Thos took fright and ratted, one after the other. Even Billington Secundus and I, not being peers' sons or even village Hampdens, regretfully conformed.