ROBERT GRAVES

THE FRENCH THING

'WHO THE DEUCE put this foul French thing on my surgery table?'

Bella Nightingale took the crumpled magazine from him and studied the photographs over her breakfast plate. 'Oh, Lord,' she giggled, delightedly. 'Aren't they horrors?'

'I didn't ask for your aesthetic criticism,' Dr Nightingale snapped. 'I just wanted to know how that foul thing got on my surgery table. It certainly wasn't there last night, and Nurse Parker hasn't arrived yet.'

'Even if Nurse Parker had arrived, darling, you surely don't think she'd have given you so highly unsuitable a present? I know she adores you, but I can't see her risking her professional reputation by trying to get your mind working along lines like these... Oh, Harry, do look at this anatomical monstrosity of a female -- and taken from such a queer angle, too!'

Dr Nightingale snatched the magazine back. 'For Heaven's sake, Bella, get a grip on yourself and answer my question!'

'Mrs Jelkes came early today -- I don't suppose you noticed -- because she's got a funeral at eleven o'clock. She dusted your surgery after first doing out the spare room. That oafish nephew of yours left it in a fearful mess the other morning when he scrambled back to Camp. My theory is that Mrs Jelkes found the passion parade under his pillow and thought she ought to warn you what sort of a lad he really is.'

Dr Nightingale's anger passed. 'Oh, well,' he sighed, 'I suppose that must be the explanation. It's her way of saying: "Don't invite Master Nicholas here again, or I'll get another job and tell the neighbours why." A pity! I hate sacrificing Nicholas to Mrs Jelkes's non-conformist conscience; but she's irreplaceable, I'm afraid. Or, at least, she's in a position to make herself so by blackmailing us. It'll be a bit awkward when Nicholas comes for another flying visit; I'll have to send him off and explain why he's no longer persona grata.'

'It's his own stupid fault. I'm sorry for young soldiers as a rule, but your Nicholas is a lazy, careless young dog, and you know it.'

'Do I? I'm relieved, at any rate, to know that he's a healthy heterosexual -- one never can tell these days, especially when they write verse. Now, please burn it in the stove.'

'Can't. Mrs Jelkes is in the kitchen, and I don't want to give her the satisfaction of sniffing contempt at me.'

'Well, then hide it somewhere until she goes.'

The door-bell rang loudly and insistently.

'Road accident, by the noise,' said Dr Nightingale.

He was right. A lorry-driver with a gashed head and a dangling arm stood on the porch, supported by his mate.

As Dr Nightingale beckoned the pair in, the lorry-driver's mate fainted dead away across the threshold. 'He could never stand the sight of blood,' said the lorry-driver scornfully, 'this silly mucker couldn't!'

Nurse Parker had not yet appeared, so Bella Nightingale gulped down her coffee, shoved the magazine among a pile of weeklies stacked on the radio, and hurried into action by her husband's side.

In the middle of the confusion Nurse Parker's aunt rang up. She was grieved to say that Nurse Parker couldn't come that morning. Her bus had been run smack into by a lorry, and she was back in bed. 'No, no bones broken, praise the Lord! Only shock.'

It was lunch-time before the air cleared. Bella had taken Nurse Parker's place and, besides the familiar Saturday patients, a stream of walking wounded came in from the Summer Camp -- sardine-tin cuts, infected midge-bites, and badly grazed knees.

'Where's that French thing, Bella?'

'I shoved it in among the magazines.'

'Oh, you did, did you?... Well, now we're in the soup right up to our necks!'

'Oh Lord, you don't mean that the Reverend Mrs Vicar... ?'

'I darned well do mean it. I happened to see her through my window, tripping down the garden path with the whole stack of magazines under her arm. Had you forgotten Mrs Jelkes's orders to hand them over to her on the last Saturday of every month?'

Bella laughed hysterically and then began to cry. 'Darling, we're socially ruined, and it's all my stupid fault! Mrs Vicar can't fail to go through the pile and when she comes across Nicholas's Parisian popsies, God, how the teacups will rattle and the kettle hiss in this frightful village! Mrs Jelkes has a far stricter code of honour than Mrs Vicar.

She won't breathe a word unless Nicholas comes to stay here again. But Mrs Vicar...'

'You must rush across and get the thing back. Explain that an important paper got mixed up with the magazines.'

'She'd insist on finding it for me. No, our only hope is that she'll bang the whole lot along to the Cottage Hospital unread. Let's cross our fingers... Once it gets to the Hospital, we're safe. The Lady Almoner will find it and carry it home as a cosy reminder of her dead past. According to Dr MacGillicuddy, she was a photographer's model herself once, and not for face and ankles only.'

'That old hag? It must have been a long time ago; and I wouldn't trust her an inch, anyhow.'

'Harry... about your French thing...'

'Don't call it my French thing! Any new developments?'

'None. I've met Mrs Vicar several times since Saturday, and her manner is absolutely unchanged...'

'That's really very odd. You see... Well, I knew MacGillicuddy was a sportsman; so I rang him up at once at the Hospital, told him the story in confidence, and asked would he please see that the magazines got sent to his office, unsorted, the moment they arrived -- not to the Lady Almoner. And it wasn't there, he swears.'

'Maybe the Vicar...'

'The Vicar was away last week-end.'

'Maybe his locum, the sandy-haired youth with pince-nez...'

'Maybe. He certainly preached a very odd sermon the next day on Jezebel and the dogs...'

'Maybe Dr MacGillicuddy himself...'

'Maybe. He's a bachelor. Anyhow, let's forget the unpleasant subject.'

'Bella... talking of that French thing. It occurs to me that possibly...'

'And to me! You mean what Mrs Vicar was telling us about the sudden gratifying increase in Sunday School attendance?'

'Exactly. Not girls, only boys. Four in all, including Harold Jelkes -- and our little Robin Lostwithiel, of all children. She said that the dear laddies are so keen on Sunday School that they turn up half-an-hour early and play with her lonely little Evangeline.'

'Never underestimate the power of a woman, even at six years old.'

'This is worse than ever. If we're right, Evangeline is sure to be caught with the foul thing before long, and then it'll be traced to us. She'll open her baby-blue eyes wide and say: "Oh, I didn't think there was any harm in it, Mummy! Mrs Nightingale sent it us with the Picture Posts and things." We simply must get it back somehow, by fair means or foul. It'll be somewhere hidden among her toys.'

'Harry, how on earth do you expect me to burgle Evangeline's playroom?'

'I don't know. But it was you who got us into this mess. So you'd better get us out again pretty quick. Or else...'

Barbie Lostwithiel, extravagantly dressed and perfumed as usual, strolled in unannounced through the french-windows and kissed both the Nightingales on either cheek, Continental fashion. Dr Nightingale rather liked this unconventional salute, especially as Bella didn't grudge it him.

'Chums,' Barbie said in a husky whisper, 'I do want your advice so badly. You know how I am with Robin, ever since I got sole custody. No lies, no secrets, no half-truths, all absolutely above-board between us twain. I know you don't approve altogether, but there it is! Well, a tiny little rift in the lute occurred last Sunday after lunch, when Robin cancelled our old-time ceremonial game of draughts and wanted to hurry off early to the Rectory. Of course, I had thought it a bit odd when he said the week before that he wanted to try Sunday School; but I didn't care to oppose him if that was his idea of fun. So this time I asked: "Bobbie, are you in love with Evangeline by any chance?" "No, Barbie, of course not," he said with that engaging blush of his, "but she has some very interesting photographs of ladies in a magazine from Paris. Ladies don't wear any clothes in Paris, you see, and I feel sort of happy looking at them just as they really are underneath. But I'm not to tell anyone, not a soul -- of course you don't count, Barbie darling -- in case Evangeline gets in a row with the Vicar. She stole it from the Hospital magazine collection."'

The Nightingales said nothing, but their fingers clenched and unclenched nervously.

Barbie Lostwithiel went on: 'I've been wondering what to do about it all the week. I don't in the least mind Bobbie's admiring the undraped female figure, so long as it's not misbehaving itself too shockingly -- as I gather it isn't in this case, apart from a bit of candid acrobatic posturing. But I do mind his getting involved in a dirty little, sniggering, hole-and-corner Rectory peep-show -- that Turn of the Screw Evangeline's

clever contribution to the Church's standing problem of how to fill empty pews. Unfortunately, I can't confide in Mrs Vicar. She hates my guts as it is, because I'm a divorcée -- even if I'm billed as the innocent party. I mean: I couldn't tell her what's in the air without breaking Robin's confidence and spoiling his faith in my absolute discretion. Besides, I'd be getting him in bad with the Sunday School gang. Harry, can't you, as the local physician, have a man-to-man talk with the Vicar? Say that a boy's father has been complaining; which would let Robin out nicely. Please!'

'Barbie, dearly as I may be supposed to love you and yours, I can't and won't do anything of the kind! The Vicar would toss me through his study window if I accused his innocent little daughter of keeping a... a salon des voyeurs, I suppose the official phrase would be. The Vicar played "lock" in the English Rugger pack only six years ago.'

So Bella Nightingale and Barbie Lostwithiel put their heads together. Their main problem was how to administer the doped chocolate without suspicion. Barbie solved that one easily. She borrowed the Church key from the sexton, on the pretext of putting two vasefuls of Madonna lilies from her garden on the Communion table; and, as she went out, paused briefly at the Rectory pew. There she hid the chocolate under Evangeline's prayer book -- wrapped in a small piece of grimy exercise paper marked: 'Love from Harold Jelkes XXX.'

Bella, a certified dispenser before she married, had calculated the dose nicely. Soon after Sunday lunch, Mrs Vicar rang up to say that Evangeline was down with a violent tummy-ache and would Dr Nightingale be good enough to come at once?

Dr Nightingale answered that surely a simple stomachache... ? He was just off with his wife for a picnic on the Downs. Still, since poor wee Evangeline...

'Now's your heaven-sent chance, Bella,' he said, when Mrs Vicar had rung off.

'Oh, very well, if I must, I must,' said Bella. She had carefully not told him about the chocolate, because such a bad actor as he would be sure to give the game away. Besides, it was notoriously unethical for a doctor to charge fees for curing an ailment in the causing of which he had connived. Harry would certainly prefer not to know of her device.

They collected the picnic things and drove to the Rectory. Bella went into the house, too, to express sympathy, but waited outside in the playroom, while Mrs Vicar was closeted with Dr Nightingale in Evangeline's bedroom.

Bella unearthed the magazine, after a rapid search, from under the snakes-and-ladders board, which lay under an illustrated Child's Wonders of Nature, which lay under a row of Teddy Bears. She shoved it down the neck of her blouse, buttoned her coat,

replaced the Teddy Bears, and sat down placidly to read Sunday at Home.

Meanwhile, Dr Nightingale was puzzled. As Bella had foreseen, Evangeline did not own up to eating sweets in Church, especially love gifts from vulgar little boys.

'Odd,' he told Bella as they drove off. 'I don't think that stomachache is due to a bug. The action is far more like colocynth or some other vegetable alkaloid of the sort; yet she seems to have eaten her usual breakfast and lunch, with nothing in between but a glass of milk. Anyhow, I put her on a starvation diet for a day or two, the little basket! Did you find the French thing?'

'I did.'

'Good girl! Burn it!'

Bella showed the magazine to Barbie, as she had promised. Barbie gave a little yelp. 'Oh, my poor darling Robin!' she said, tragically throwing up her hands and eyes. 'To think that his first introduction to the female form divine should have been a set of five-franc cats like these!'

'Really, Barbie! Your language!'

'It's enough to upset his psychic balance for all time. I could slap your Mrs Jelkes for starting this lark.'

'She's already suffered quite a lot, I'm glad to report,' said Bella. 'Her poor Harold passed a terrible night with so-called "hives" -- tossing, turning, screaming, scratching, and keeping the whole household awake until the small hours. Not a wink of sleep, did Mrs Jelkes get. When Harry called in the morning, he found nothing wrong with the brat -- except itching-powder in his pyjamas. Evangeline's hit back for the stomachache, I suppose. I wonder how she worked it? Thank Goodness, she doesn't suspect us!'

Barbie was left to burn the French thing in her garden incinerator. When she got around to doing so, a week later, Robin strolled up unexpectedly and asked what the funny smell was.

Barbie got flustered, and told him her first lie. 'I'm just burning a few bills, darling. So much easier than paying them, as you'll find when you grow up.'

'I see... But, Barbie darling!'

'Yes, my love?'

'We met Evangeline in the wood. She says the Vicar found that Paris magazine and snatched it away from her. He was awfully cross, she says, and gave her a terrible beating with a knobbed stick -- so bad that she had to be put to bed and Dr Nightingale was sent for, to cure her with bandages and iodine. And after that the Vicar nearly starved her to death. And she told us that our fathers will give us all terrible whippings, too, and starve us nearly to death, if they hear we've looked at the undressed Paris ladies. (Lucky I haven't a father now, isn't it?) But she's promised to watch for someone to send another copy. She doesn't know whose pile the first one came from. She thinks it was the Nightingales'. But there's sure to be another, she says. And she'll find a safer hiding place next time.'