ROBERT GRAVES

KILL THEM! KILL THEM!

THE POTTERIES WERE by this time a distant smudge on the horizon behind us and the map showed us close to the Welsh border. Jenny drove.

Wales reminded us both of David, who had done his battle training in this region. So presently I said, knowing that this must be Jenny's line of thought too: 'They would have given him the award posthumously, of course, if the ground he won had been held. Not that it would have meant much to anyone, except the Regimental historian. Anyhow, the Japs infiltrated, the Indian battalions on the flanks rectified their line (as the saying is), and the Regiment had to fight its way back. It's a rule that a reverse cancels all citations.'

'An R.A.F. man who was giving the Brigade air-support -- I met him last year in Trans-Jordania -- says the attack was suicidal and criminal.'

'It wasn't the C.-in-C.'s fault. He had orders from London to secure a tactical success in that area before the monsoon broke. And felt awful about it.'

'How do you know that, Father?'

'Warell wrote to me as soon as the War ended and brought up the subject himself. His G.H.Q. was a thousand miles away, and though, when he'd seen the plan of attack submitted, he felt strongly tempted to fly up and run the show in person, a C.-in-C. couldn't very well take over from a brigade commander. It just wasn't done. Or so he said in his letter. I've kept it for you.'

'According to my R.A.F. man, everyone was hopping mad at having to assault a scientifically entrenched position without proper artillery support -- and just before the rain bogged everything down for the season. That sense of victimization must have been what sent David berserk. As you know, he was a confirmed pacifist, and had nothing against the Japs.'

We kept silent for a mile or two. Then I said: 'One thing that he did has always puzzled me. At Oxford, when he was four years old, we were driving up the High and a great pack of black-coated, dog-collared parsons debouched from Queen's College and swarmed across the street, making for Oriel. An Ecclesiastical Congress was on. David shouted excitedly: "Kill them! Kill them!" Did he hate the colour of their clothes, do you think? Or was he simply anticlerical?'

'Neither,' Jenny answered. 'I should say that it was the unnaturalness of the sight. Probably he always thought of clergymen in the singular, as I do. The vicar on the altar steps: singular. Like the mother beside the cradle: singular. Or the headmistress in her study: singular. Each aloof, self-sufficient, all-powerful and, in fact, singular. Don't all Mothers' Meetings, Ecclesiastical Congresses, and Headmistresses' or Headmasters' Conferences seem terribly artificial and awkward and dismal to you -- I mean because of the loss of singularity? Whereas soldiers or sailors, or undergraduates, or schoolchildren, who go naturally into the plural...'

'Clergymen do behave very awkwardly in a bunch, I agree, and David may have wanted to put them out of their misery by a sudden massacre. He had a kind heart.'

'Also,' said Jenny, 'Mothers' Meetings and Headmistresses' Conferences go with seed-cake. When David was twelve and I was thirteen and we got invited to parties, he used to wander round and inspect the food supply as soon as we arrived. If it passed muster, we stayed. Otherwise he'd nudge me and whisper: "Seed-cake, Jenny." And then we always sneaked out. He hated seed-cake. Seed-cake's impersonal, and David was a real person.'

Green Welsh hills and wild-eyed Welsh sheep and the syllable Llan appearing on every second fingerpost. Hereabouts David had commanded his platoon in aggressive tactical schemes; perhaps had sten-gunned the imaginary garrison of that farmhouse at the top of the slope. It was a splendid eighteenth-century building with a broad whitewashed front, generous windows and an irregular slate roof yellow with lichen; also a large midden, cocks and hens of an old-fashioned, handsome, uneconomical breed, black cows, and bracken litter at the entrance to the byres. A sign read: TEAS.

As we rounded a sharp corner we came on a glossy charabanc, which had just disgorged its load of excursionists by the farmhouse gate. They were all earnest, black-coated, dog-collared clergymen, and seemed profoundly ill at ease. Forty or fifty at least, and -- this is a true story, not a joke, for neither Jenny nor I felt prepared for a joke -- every one of them had a slice of impersonal seed-cake in his hand, out of which he had taken a single thoughtful bite.

I had a vision of a serious apple-cheeked little boy, sitting between Jenny and me and shaking his fist in a fury.

'Kill them, kill them!' I shouted involuntarily; but Jenny, scared as she was, had the presence of mind to swerve and drive on.