ROBERT GRAVES

CAMBRIDGE UPSTAIRS

AS A CHILD, psychopath R.G. was conditioned to despise the Light Blues. First became aware of the concept 'Cambridge' at the commencement of a long series of Oxford victories on the river. Reveals that no boy either at his dame-school or preparatory school (unless two-fisted and two-booted and having some elder relative closely connected with Cambridge) dared oppose local opinion, which was devoutly Oxonian. Recalls snatches of playground song:

Oxford upstairs, eating cherry pie --

Cambridge downstairs, beginning to cry.

Oxford upstairs, drinking pints of beer --

Cambridge downstairs, feeling very queer.

Oxford upstairs, having lots of fun --

Cambridge downstairs, how their noses run!

Psychopath R.G., reclining on couch, exclaims to his alter ego, Herr Professor Doctor R.G.: 'I tell you, Herr Professor Doctor, that in those days God loved Oxford. And I loved Oxford; moreover, my brother Philip, the left-handed demon bowler, and my brother Dick, the brilliant batsman with his terrible drives to long on, not only loved Oxford, but were actually up there. God loved Oxford, as He once loved and favoured Israel, and the boat race was an annual rite confirming this fact. I even thought it odd that Cambridge still had the nerve to compete in that fatedly unequal struggle.'

Q. 'How long did this delusion persist?'

A. 'My first setback came when once Downing, C., a new boy at Brown Friars, appeared in the playground wearing a Cambridge favour. This, of course, we at once snatched from his lapel and hurried into the blue-black inkwell to turn it Oxford. Tears burst from his eyes, and gazing wildly about him, he shouted in impassioned tones: "Anyhow, I don't care what you stinkers say. The Sky's Cambridge!" I was busily thinking up a crushing come-back to this blasphemy, when the rest of Oxford University set on Downing, C. and manhandled him; but Mr Orrery, the new maths master, rushed up like a thunderstorm, and rescued Downing, C., throwing my companions around like sacks.'

Here psychopath R.G. began to perspire and evince great agitation. Coaxed by Herr Professor Doctor he continued: 'Mr Orrery, who was seen to be wearing a light blue tie, took Downing, C.'s evidence, and awarded us one hundred lines each, to be shown up by teatime: "I must not bully defenceless new boys." Mr Orrery then escorted Downing, C. to the shop at the corner with sixpence to purchase a new Cambridge favour, which he wore undisturbed for the rest of the day. Naturally, we sent Downing, C. to Coventry for sneaking to Mr Orrery.'

Q. 'What effect did the subsequent series of Oxford defeats have on your adolescence?'

A. 'A most disheartening effect. The world was no longer the same. The sun had, as it were, set for ever. By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, while the hosts of Midian prowled and prowled around. Everyone I met seemed to be Cambridge-minded and Cambridge-hearted.'

Q. 'Did you doubt that God still loved Oxford?'

A. 'I knew that "whom He loveth, He chasteneth", Herr Professor Doctor. But Oxford was no longer upstairs, Cambridge was upstairs.'

Q. 'Hold that! Hold it! Your hand is trembling with redoubled violence! We'll unearth that phobia in a jiffy. What do stairs mean to you?'

Herr Professor Doctor Robert Graves, though only a quack psychiatrist, did not need to look up the word Stairs in The Grosser Lexicon of Gross Symbolology. He simply handed psychopath R.G. a nip of centenarian Spanish brandy and out came the whole story.

A. 'I recall reading a novel called Darkness of the Soul at the age of eight or nine, which made a deep impression on me. It told of a country vicar's son who had lost money on horses, taken to drinking in taverns, and forged a cheque for no less than £100. While awaiting arrest, the young rake had a painful interview with the vicar, in the course of which he cried out bitterly: "O Father, if only you had put me into trade, instead of sending me to Cambridge, this shame would never have fallen on our house!" He continued: "There was a little man on my staircase who offered me books to read, wicked books, materialistic books, books that poured scorn on Holy Writ, books that should never have been allowed to exist. And I fell, Father, miserable sinner that I am! I took them, I read them, I absorbed the poison, I lost my faith." Even as he spoke there came a loud rap at the front door... Thereafter, every night when I climbed the stairs to bed, a shadowy figure lurked on the upstairs landing. He had a pedlar's tray full of wicked, wicked books, books that should never have been allowed to exist, books bound in light blue, and he wore Mr Orrery's gown and mortar-board and pepper-and-salt suit and light blue tie -- oh, it was frightful...'

Questioned further, sobbing psychopath R.G. recalled how, while up at Oxford in 1923, he had been persuaded to visit Cambridge (which he then knew jocularly as 'Tabland') for a few hours; and had been scared by all he saw.

Q. 'In what way scared?'

A. 'Everything was so much the same and yet so disturbingly different, Herr Professor. As when I first went to the U.S.A. and visited rural Pennsylvania. The perils of that countryside! I remember sitting down in the corner of a meadow and getting poison ivy on my wrists and jiggers in my toes; and a series of the most extraordinary animals appeared -- a skunk, two snapping turtles, three robins the size of thrushes, and a small, ill-favoured pig which I afterwards identified as a ground-hog and hadn't known existed.'

Q. 'Never mind about North American zoology. What about Cambridge?'

A. 'The College porters all wore top-hats! Imagine! And it seemed that all the oldest colleges were built of brick, instead of the newest ones, as at Oxford; and the pleasure punts were propelled backwards, not forwards -- that is, they were pointed the wrong way round. It was all so Looking-Glassy. The undergraduates treated me well enough, I grant; but each in turn said with a certain icy reserve: "We hear you are from the other place." Since I had hitherto heard the phrase applied only to Hell and the House of Lords, I felt acutely embarrassed.'

Herr Professor Doctor cut short the inquiry at this point and advised the patient, on behalf of them both, to accept the unexpected and generous invitation from the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, which had prompted this successful analysis. Furthermore, to take with him his children, Lucia (aged 11) and Juanito (aged 9) as a prophylaxis against any similar phobia that they might have inherited, their mother too being devotedly Oxonian. This advice he took.

Yes. I had a wonderful time, and came away cured. They had dined and wined me, and listened patiently to my lectures on English Literature which were, I admit, far from urbane. I became a convert to top-hats as the only decent wear for college porters, and to brick as a highly suitable material for ancient colleges. And though, after dinner, at Trinity, the great silver laver was borne in empty, as a mere signal for grace after meat -- its counterpart at Pembroke still brimmed with fair water -- I was invited to dip a fine linen napkin in it and dab myself behind the ear for coolness. And how charming that on a Friday at Trinity, no flesh nor fowl might be served in Hall, but only fish, fish, beautiful fish, even to Protestants! And that a long Latin grace was still declaimed antiphonically in the old pronunciation, with no weeny, weedy, weaky nonsense. I even heard gallant talk, at a high level, of putting the College brew-house, now a lumber-room, back into commission.

Lucia and Juanito had a wonderful time too -- in the Egyptian Room at the Fitzwilliam, and on the swings in the municipal playground -- and admitted that they had never in their lives been in a grander house than the Master's Lodge at Trinity... Yet, as I leaned over the bridge at Clare College, gazing at the pellucid waters of the Backs, and the glowing autumnal flower beds, and the green lawns, and the dignified college architecture, I heard a pleasure punt approaching. The children, in dark-blue jerseys, were punting it right end foremost (or wrong end foremost) and I heard Juanito's embarrassingly loud question: 'When are we going to get somewhere really pretty?' The good people of Clare were not to know that Juanito is accustomed, when he goes boating at home, to cliffs five hundred feet high, rich in sea-eagles' nests, and to rocks green with samphire and wild caper, and violet-tinted backwaters full of striped fish, and pinewood headlands crowned by mediaeval watch-towers of golden limestone.