ROBERT GRAVES

NO, MAC, IT JUST WOULDN'T WORK

A WILD CHARACTER, obviously high and wearing a Mexican hat, though he wasn't Mexican but, in fact, Boston Irish (which can be just as wild), edged up to me at the Green Hornet the other night and said abruptly:

'Speaking out, I mean, Professor... it's quite simple really... millions of poor devils starving in India and Africa and China and such places. Millions of them! Grant me that for the sake of the argument.'

'Granted, Mex. What's your problem?'

'And all the thousands of gangsters and delinquents and violent no-gooders in our big cities, grant me them?'

'Granted, Mex, for the sake of your argument. Go ahead!'

'And hundreds of Federal ships tied up empty in the Hudson, waiting for God only knows what. Grant me --'

'I'm a stranger here,' I said cautiously. 'English. But you may be right. There's always marginal tonnage lying around the ports, except in wartime. When freight rates rise, it can amount to a lot.'

'And all the farm surplus that we either hoard or destroy because nobody here can eat it all, and because the poor starving devils abroad can't pay for it! And all the criminal waste here in New York and the other big cities -- enough to feed and clothe millions!'

'I've read of that, Mex. Speak on!'

'And all those philanthropic Christian and Jewish do-gooders and Peace Corps characters who want to prevent crime, starvation, idleness -- the lot?'

'I seem to have met most of them,' I agreed.

The barman said: 'All granted, mac, but what the hell? All this don't hurt you none, surely?'

Mex said: 'Sure, it hurts me as a human being. I've got a Mexican conscience or something and I ask myself: Why can't we put the Christian and Jewish do-gooders in

charge of the delinquent no-gooders? Why not give the no-gooders a grand job, which would be to load those idle boats -- or marginal tonnage, as the Prof calls them -- with surplus food and clothing and city waste, and make men of the no-gooders and send them sailing over the wide ocean with gifts for the poor starving devils abroad? Sure, then everyone would feel good? What's amiss with that for a solution?'

'No, mac,' said the barman. 'It just wouldn't work. The Long-shoremen's union and the Seafarers' union and the Teamsters' union would raise hell. And you've got to respect big business. Big business wouldn't stand for any of that, even to save the world from communism -- no more than the unions wouldn't. Free gifts destroy markets, don't you see?'

'But there's no market there, anyway. Those poor devils have no cash, so they have to starve. Only pump them up and they'll start producing again and have money to throw around.'

'And put us Americans out of jobs by undercutting prices?' sneered the barman. 'No, mac, it just wouldn't work. Forget it! What do you think, Professor?'

'I'm with you,' I said. 'Nothing sensible and simple ever works: because nobody thinks sensibly or simply. In the end, of course, something snaps and then you have a recession or a war, which changes the problem.'

Mex grinned: 'Then, Prof, why can't you university guys teach our Government and big business how to think that way?'

That was easy to answer. 'Because the university guys here, and everywhere else, depend for their easy life on money grants from the Government and big business. So they teach students not to think out of the ordinary rut. Any teacher who gets out of step has to think stupid or be fired.'

'You, too, Prof?'

I changed the subject. 'What's your job these days, Mex?'

'Selling encyclopedias. But I don't wear this hat on duty.'

'Good encyclopedias?'

'I wouldn't call them good, Prof. Every time I look up a subject I know something about -- haven't we all our own little private pools of knowledge? -- by God, it's always wrong. Like news reports about suicides in your own street: all slanted.'

'How do you account for that, Mex?'

'I guess the editors don't pay the writers enough.'

'Might be. I don't know about the States, but nowadays in England the editors expect learned men to feel honoured by contributing, and offer them around five dollars a thousand words. That was all right fifty years ago, but now learned men are too busy teaching or researching or advising the government to accept the honour. So the editors hire hacks for the job, and the encyclopedias go downhill, and the honour is every year less of an honour.'

'Why don't they raise their fees?'

'That would make the encyclopedia too expensive.'

'Too bad,' said the barman frowning.

'Well,' I said grimly, ordering three whisky sours -- the third one for an old Negro with a flattened nose and cauliflower ears, an ex-fighter who had joined us. 'Speaking out, it's quite simple, really. There's thousands of clever, industrious graduate students at hundreds of universities, all in need of doctorates in history or philosophy or literature or medicine or something -- to give them a higher academic grade and raise their income level. Grant me them for the sake of my argument.'

'Granted, Prof. What's your problem?'

'Well, they have to choose theses for their doctorates and usually publish them. Offbeat theses: "Outbreaks of Thrush in Kansas State During the Late 19th Century"; "Walt Whitman's Use of the Past Indefinite Tense"; "Flaws in the Maternal Genealogy of Christian Seltzer". Or more complicated still: "Outbreaks of Indefinite Thrush in Walt Seltzer's Kansas Genealogy". Granted?'

'Granted, Prof, for the sake of your argument,' said Mex. 'My poor nephew Terence did one last year on that very subject -- in law school.'

'And he got no pay for his job, now, did he, Mex?'

'Not a cent. And nobody alive or out of the funny farm wanted to read it afterward.'

'Exactly. And he'd worked like hell getting his facts together?'

'He sure had.'

'Well, now. About those encyclopedias getting their stuff wrong. You've already granted me that --'

'All right, Prof,' said the barman. 'What the hell? It don't hurt you none, surely? You can go back to the college library and get all the information from the real books.'

'Sure, but others can't. Why not collect the supervisors of these doctorates and make them draw lots for encyclopedia subjects -- each college to get its fair share. Make the candidates mug up their facts and, if they do the job well, give them their doctorates and the honour of contributing to the Intercollegiate Encyclopedia, and everyone is happy.'

'No, Prof, it just wouldn't work,' said the barman. 'I'm not saying a word against Senator Benton's encyclopedia. It's said to be unique and marvellous -- and for all I know he pays his contributors a dollar a word. But how could the universities compete with a man that big? Or with any other publishers of dictionaries and encyclopedias? There'd be a great howl against blackleg labour and robbing graduates of their copyrights. And Mex here would be out of a job. That Intercollegiate Encyclopedia wouldn't need to be bummed around from door to door. You'd find it on sale everywhere at a quarter the price -- the doctorate guys would pay for the printing, same as for their theses.'

A pause.

'To get back to those delinquents,' said the barman doggedly. 'Even if the unions and big business allowed the do-gooders to load up those ships and dump free food among starving aliens, suppose the no-gooders refused to play -- suppose they preferred to stick around and be violent?'

The old ex-fighter came to life. 'Speaking out,' he said, 'it's quite simple, really. Just let 'em be violent. If they have a yen for switchblade knives and loaded stockings and James Bond steel-toed shoes, just let 'em! In public, with a big crowd to watch. They'd not chicken out, those boys wouldn't, grant me that!'

We nodded, for the sake of the argument.

'No threat to business. You could make a crazy big gladiatorial show of it, like in the movies about ancient Rome. Stage a twice-weekly gang fight; sell the TV rights for millions. Those kids would soon become high society. And, man, that show would be better to watch than any ball game. Or any fist fight -- where the damage don't show so much, but goes deeper. Grant me that!'

We granted it.

'And once you give the gladiators a good social rating, they themselves is going to clean up all the no-good amateur gang warfare, because that's just delinquency --

gives their profession a bad name. OK, so the football and baseball and boxing interests might squeal? But they'd come over in the end. Blood sports are the best draw.'

'And the Churches?' I asked.

'The preachers'd have something to preach against. Maybe they'd win another martyr like who was it, long ago, rushed out into the arena and held out his arms and got clobbered. Anyhow, nowadays preachers can't even stop wars, if big business needs a hot or cold war to jack up economy.'

The barman said: 'No, fella, it just wouldn't work. There's Federal laws against duelling, and your gladiators might lobby like hell, but they would never get them repealed -- not with the whole Middle West solid against bloodshed. You can't even stage a Spanish bullfight around here.'

Mex said: 'Guess not, as yet. But it's bound to come, someday. Like the licensed sale of pornography, and a lot of other things. Because of the shorter week, and what to do with your leisure time. TV isn't the answer, nor window-shopping isn't, nor raising bigger families for the population explosion. Nor a hot war, neither, even if it sends the no-gooders and the do-gooders into the Armed Forces and cuts down waste and sends up the value of marginal tonnage.'

'Speaking freely,' I said, 'it's quite simple, really. Another round of whisky sours and we'll soon make it work.'