ROBERT GRAVES

HAROLD VESEY AT THE GATES OF HELL

THE DIM OLD 'Pelican' sign had been wittily repainted by a modern poster artist. The once foul stable yard, frequented by hordes of sooty sparrows, had been converted into a car park. White muslin curtains graced the windows. An adjoining network of howling, stinking, typhoidal slum, where in my childhood policemen dared enter only four by four -- truncheons drawn and whistles in their mouths -- had utterly vanished; garaged residences now occupying the site were already well matured, their elms almost overtopping the roofs. The road-crossing which pale-faced street-Arabs with ragged trousers, bare feet and scanty brooms used to sweep clear of mud and horse-dung for us gentry to cross -- 'Don't forget the sweeper, lady!' -- had become a gleaming asphalt roundabout, and the rain-water gurgling down the gutters looked positively potable.

'There are the gates of Hell!', I nevertheless reminded myself, as I pushed open the door marked 'Saloon Bar'. Amelia, my nurse, had told me so when I was four years old, pointing across the road through the bathroom window. 'A man goes in at that door sober, industrious and God-fearing; he comes out a fiend in human guise, whether it's the beer or whether it's the gin.' She then dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. 'I had a good home and husband once,' she said. 'I never thought as I should be forced to earn my living in domestic service at twenty pound a year. And look what's happened to that poor foolish Annie! The Pelican has been her downfall, too.' She was referring to our parlour-maid's fatal love for Harold, the barrel-man, a big red-faced ex-soldier with shoulder-of-mutton fists, green baize apron, and shiny black corduroys. Annie had stolen two of our silver entrée dishes to buy Harold a watch-chain for Christmas; and been dismissed without a character.

Mr Gotobed, Junior, the plump-faced innkeeper -- probably 'Brassy' Gotobed's grandson -- lounged alone behind the bar. He was youngish, with side-burns, Savile Row tailoring and an Old Malthusian tie. I entered hesitantly and earned an easy though enigmatic smile.

On the walls hung three Baxter prints, two matched warming-pans, a cluster of knobkerries, an Indian Mutiny bundook, a dartboard, a large wooden spoon, a pair of indifferent French Impressionist paintings in art-gallery frames, and an iron hoop.

'With what may I have the pleasure of serving you, sir?'

'A double brandy,' I ordered, remembering the beer and the gin.

'Splash?'

'No, thanks; neat.' And I drank it at a blow.

'These were the gates of Hell, Mr Gotobed,' I remarked, putting down two half-crowns.

'Sir?'

'I used to live in that big house opposite.'

'You mean Rosemary Mansions?'

'I mean Rosemary House, before it became immansionized. That was when the Pelican's best beer still sold at twopence a pint; and was strong as the kick of a dray-horse. When tankards and curses flew along this ancient bar like bees on a summer's day. When soused lobsters went tumbling out into the inspissated muck, heels over busby, with almost boring regularity, propelled by the hobnailed boots of courageous Corporal Harold Vesey. These, I repeat, were the gates of Hell.'

'That will have been in what I might call pre-Reformation days, sir,' he said rather crossly. 'My clientele now consists almost entirely of City men. But we have a lot of quiet democratic fun here together. It amused us last year to form a Saloon Bar Darts Club and enter for the South-West London Championship. We won that wooden spoon fair and square; and my team treasure it like the apple of their corporate eye.'

But I refused to be sidetracked. 'It was the time,' I insisted, pointing to a handsome portrait of the Duke of Cornwall suspended behind the bar, 'of that boy's great-great-great-grandmother. I remember the old lady well, driving along High Street in an open barouche with a jingling escort of Lancers.'

He eyed me with awe. 'Three greats?' he inquired, 'are you sure?'

'Rip van Winkle's the name,' I answered. 'I suppose it's no use asking you what happened to Corporal Harold Vesey? I'm sure of the surname because he sent our parlour-maid Annie a lace-Valentine inscribed: "Yours respectably, Harold Vesey, Corporal, 1900"; that was after he came back gloriously wounded from the South African war. Harold was barrel-man; and porter at the Gates of Hell.'

'Rings a bell,' said Mr Gotobed meditatively. 'Hell's bells, if you like, ha, ha! 1900? Time of my grandfather?'

'If your grandfather was the bold hero in the purple waistcoat whom the boys nicknamed "Brassy",' I said, and ordered another brandy.

He waved that one off. 'Funny,' he remarked, 'how we reckon time here in terms of war. South African. First World. Second World.'

'Harold Vesey had served at Tel-el-Kebir in 1882. He was a veteran when I knew him.'

'Indeed? Well, I never saw any service myself, and I'm not ashamed to tell you the story, now it's all over. If it had been a question of volunteering, I dare say I'd have gone along with all the other b. fools. But not under Conscription. We Malthusians have our pride. Between you and me I fooled the Board by a simple and quite ingenious wheeze. A fortnight beforehand I started eating sugar. Gradually worked up to two pounds a day. Ghastly treatment with ghastly symptoms. Ghastly expensive, too, with rationing in full blast. Naturally, just because of the rationing, the medicos never suspected a thing.'

'Naturally,' I agreed. 'Harold once fooled his M.O. too, to avoid being drafted somewhere on garrison duty. He chewed cordite, which sent up his temperature to 106. When duly crimed, he owned up; whereupon the Colonel drafted him to South Africa instead, which was what he wanted. And he subsequently had the pleasure of relieving Ladysmith. But that, of course, took place in the days before Conscription.'

'Good for him!' said Mr Gotobed without conviction and switched the topic again. 'By the way, see that iron hoop over there? It's a curious relic of my grandfather's days. I bought it at an antique shop for our Christmas celebration to use as a frame for the wreath of holly and ivy over the door. The old merchant told me that iron hoops were trundled here in the days of gaseous street-lighting and horse-drawn traffic.'

'Harold Vesey gave me an iron hoop once,' I said, 'but unfortunately I wasn't allowed to use it. I was a little gentleman and little gentlemen were supposed to use only wooden hoops. We were also forbidden to whistle on our fingers or turn cartwheels, because that was what the street-Arabs did. Thus you obscure the relentless evolution of modern society, Mr Gotobed. The street-Arab is forced by industrial progress to become a respectable citizen. His grandsons, if not his sons, are born little gentlemen; and therefore forbidden to whistle on their fingers or turn cartwheels on the bemuddied crossing. And iron hoops, like peg-tops with dangerous spikes (another ancient working-class distinction) are relegated to the antique shops. Harold Vesey would have been surprised.'

I kept on the Harold Vesey tack mercilessly, until the bell rang again in Mr Gotobed's mind.

'Vesey? I've got it now. Yes, my grandfather employed one H. Vesey at the Pelican. Comic story in its weird way. It seems that soon after he sent that Valentine to your parlour-maid, an aunt died and left him an Essex country cottage and a small legacy -- in recognition of his patriotic services. However, just before Hitler's War, when he was

in his late seventies, the County Council condemned the cottage and transplanted him to a brand-new Council-house: modern plumbing, well-equipped kitchen, built-in cupboards, everything laid on. But the obstinate old -- well -- basket didn't take to it. Sulked. Sat out on a bench in the garden, all weathers, "just to spite them," he said -- until he was carried off by pneu-- monia. The joke was that they never got around to pulling down the cottage after all. Its timbers were still sound and the premises served during the War to accommodate evacuees. Recently my father bought the place -- that's how I happen to know the story. He spent four or five thousand pounds on doing it up for a week-end hang-out. But the Council wouldn't let us alter the façade or build another storey, because by then -- this is the real pay-off -- the cottage had been scheduled as an ancient monument. What a country, eh?'

But at that moment jovial members of the City clientele came wandering in, and called for dry Martinis. I managed to retire without comment or attention.