



THE OLD DEVILS
KINGSLEY AMIS

INTRODUCTION BY
JOHN BANVILLE

KINGSLEY AMIS (1922–1995) was a popular and prolific British novelist, poet, and critic, widely regarded as one of the greatest satirical writers of the twentieth century. Born in suburban South London, the only child of a clerk in the office of the mustard-maker Colman's, he went to the City of London School on the Thames before winning an English scholarship to St. John's College, Oxford, where he began a lifelong friendship with fellow student Philip Larkin. Following service in the British Army's Royal Corps of Signals during World War II, he completed his degree and joined the faculty at the University College of Swansea in Wales. *Lucky Jim*, his first novel, appeared in 1954 to great acclaim and won a Somerset Maugham Award. Amis spent a year as a visiting fellow in the creative writing department of Princeton University and in 1961 became a fellow at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, but resigned the position two years later, lamenting the incompatibility of writing and teaching ("I found myself fit for nothing much more exacting than playing the gramophone after three supervisions a day"). Ultimately he published twenty-four novels, including science fiction and a James Bond sequel; more than a dozen collections of poetry, short stories, and literary criticism; restaurant reviews and three books about drinking; political pamphlets and memoir; and more. Amis received the Booker Prize for his novel *The Old Devils* in 1986 and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1990. He had three children, among them the novelist Martin Amis, with his first wife, Hilary Anne Bardwell, from whom he was divorced in 1965. After his second eighteen-year marriage to the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard ended in 1983, he lived in a London house with his first wife and her third husband.

JOHN BANVILLE was born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. He is the author of many novels, including *The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable*, *Eclipse*, *The Sea* (winner of the Man Booker Prize), and most recently, *Ancient Light*. As Benjamin Black he has written six crime novels, including the recently published *Vengeance*.

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INTRODUCTION

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs ...

—Philip Larkin, “Wants”

The Old Devils is Kingsley Amis’s finest, most rounded, and most moving novel; it is also, not coincidentally, his longest. All the Amis skills are on display here: the bleak honesty, the unflinching insight, the finical prose style, the humor that is at once uproarious and appalling. The book is an intricately woven danse macabre that Strindberg would have recognized and applauded, although the Ogre of the North would probably have wondered what everyone was laughing at.

A single strain runs through the work of all the so-called comic British novelists of the twentieth century, which might best be described as comic despair. It is there in the novels of Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, John Wain, Muriel Spark, and can be detected even in P. G. Wodehouse’s frothy concoctions, which present the spectacle of Bertie Wooster and his silly-ass chums engaged in unflagging japery, like an ice-skater desperately cutting more and more light-footed sweeps and spins because he knows that the ice is thin and when he comes to a stop it will shatter under him. Amis was one of the most daring skaters on that rink.

He was born in 1922 in Clapham, a quintessential lower-middle-class suburb of South London. He attended the City of London School, “where,” as he wrote in his *Memoirs*, “differences of class upbringing, income group and religion counted for so little.” In 1941, in the midst of war, he went to Oxford, although a year later he was summoned to military service, returning in 1945 to take up his studies again. At Oxford he met the poet Philip Larkin, and they became friends and remained close throughout their lives—the correspondence between the two men contains some of the funniest letters ever published. At the beginning of their careers they were friendly rivals, for both wished to be novelists, but the immediate and vast success of Amis’s first novel, *Lucky Jim*, published in 1954, was one of the things that made Larkin decide that poetry was his medium. Lucky Philip, and lucky us.

At first Amis held strongly left-wing views, as did so many young men who had served in the war: in the general election of 1945 the Conservatives suffered a landslide defeat by the Labour Party. Despite general adulation for Churchill, the Tory leader who had steered Britain through the darkest days of the war and on to victory. Although Amis joined the Communist Party in 1946, it is hard to conceive of him ever having been a committed Marxist. As the years went on his political views hardened, until in 1967 he published in the conservative *Sunday Telegraph* his notorious essay “Why Lucky Jim Turned Right,” in which he wrote with scorn of “Lefties” who buy “unexamined the abortion-divorce-homosexuality-censorship-racialism-marijuana package.”

In the same year that he became a communist he met his first wife, Hilary (“Hilly”) Bardwell, whom he married in 1948. The couple had three children, the middle one being Martin Amis. The marriage lasted until 1963, when Hilly discovered that Amis was having an affair with the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard. After his divorce in 1965 Amis married Howard; that marriage lasted until 1983. In his final years Amis went to live with Hilly again and her husband Alastair Boyd, the seventh Baron Kilmarnock, who must have been a jolly forbearing chap.

Through the 1950s Amis had been a lecturer in English at the University of Swansea, and a number of his books are set in Wales, including *The Old Devils*. Although the characters in *The Old Devils* express some harsh opinions on Wales, the overall portrait of the country is surprisingly tolerant and in places downright nostalgic. Indeed, the book in general is surprisingly restrained, certainly so when one considers the savagery on display in its predecessor, *Stanley and the Women* (1984)—in which he visited vengeance upon Howard and the detested women’s movement—and the *Memoirs* that he

published five years later, a book that was almost universally reviled, although many of his old friends sprang to his defense.

Amis was never shy of using his life and the people in it as material for his fiction. This is something that all novelists do, of course, but Amis was as cheerfully straightforward in his writing as he was in his everyday affairs; as one of the characters in *The Old Devils* puts it, “That was the whole point, to stress continuity, to set one’s face against anything that could be called modernism.” Indeed, some latter-day Rip van Winkle waking up after a hundred-year sleep might read this book and have no suspicion that there had ever been such a thing as the modernist movement in literature; not for nothing did Amis consider the mature James Joyce to have been a lunatic.

The Old Devils is, as the title suggests, about old age, or better say it is about the horrors and betrayals that aging inflicts upon us. Peter, one of the main characters, and the one who, on the evidence, most resembles Amis, states what might be the book’s overall motto when he reflects that “from round about seventy, all those years of maturity or the prime of life or whatever you called it looked like an interval between two bouts of vomiting. Approximately.” This is a fine example of the late Amis style, baleful, studiously sour, yet jaunty, too, and lightened by wit—that “Approximately” is beautifully judged.

Amis’s numerous cast of sixty-somethings are still a good way off from being the hapless dotards of Larkin’s terrible poem “The Old Fools”—“*Why aren’t they screaming?*”—but they have begun to suffer in earnest the terrors and torments of life’s last quarter. Malcolm, one of the first of them we meet, is having trouble with his bowels, and also there seems to be something the matter with his “left ball.” His teeth too are a worry: “What with the five crowns in front, of varying manufacture and recency, the ensemble was a bit of a colour atlas, but at least no one was going to mistake it for a snappers top and bottom. They would have to come some day—which meant not now, bless it.”

One of the palliatives, or perhaps the only one, the book offers for the aches of aging is strong drink. Amis was a famous drinker; Hilary Rubinstein, his first editor, did not think it convincing that the protagonist of *Lucky Jim* could drink ten pints of beer in the pub of an evening, but that Rubinstein ruefully observed, was before he had met the author in person. The quantities of alcohol that are consumed in *The Old Devils*, by female and male characters alike, would be literally incredible did we not have well attested accounts of how much booze Amis young and old could put away and still remain more or less upright. Surely one of his wives would have had cause to say to him, as a wife says of her husband in the book, “I never realized how much he drank till the night he came home sober. A revelation, it was.”

The book is set in various small towns and seaside resorts in South Wales. The characters are middle-class retirees, comfortably off but generally discontent, in some cases desperately so—this is especially true of the women, which is hardly surprising given the awfulness of their menfolk. Most days the husbands gather shortly after breakfast in the snug of their local, the gruesome-sounding Bible and Crown, to drink themselves up toward lunchtime, when the real drinking will start. Meanwhile their wives gather for what used to be coffee mornings, although what is mostly sipped nowadays is “Soave Superiore (DOC)” in one-and-a-half-liter bottles that seem to empty themselves with alarming speed. The world this band of old devils inhabits does indeed sound a kind of hell, but it is a mark of Amis’s skill that we never know whether or not he thinks his people are among the damned.

As the book opens the flames are fanned by the news of the imminent return to the area of Alun Weaver, a writer and media figure who has made a large reputation for himself on the coattails of the celebrated dead Welsh poet, referred to throughout as Brydan, who is obviously based on Dylan Thomas. Weaver’s decision to come back to his Welsh roots and settle in the area is greeted with varying degrees of enthusiasm by his old friends, all of whom knew him before he had become

professional Welshman. Accompanying him will be his wife, Rhiannon, a beauty when she was young and beloved of more than one of the habitués of the Bible and Crown. But while Rhiannon may be cat among the pigeons, her husband will turn out to be a rutting if slightly moldering stag among the aging. In this novel, drink, sex, and death dance a merry round.

The relations between the characters are intricate, and Amis manages them with subtlety and sly wit. Charlie, the biggest drinker among them, is also the shrewdest, and, like his creator, can spot fraud a mile off, although this faculty does little for his self-respect, which is so low as to be close to nonexistent. He has, like his friend Peter, run seriously to fat, and like his other friend Malcolm he is in precarious physical shape. He also has mental problems, including a terror of being left alone, and suffers panic attacks for which the only cure is large doses of the antipsychotic drug Largactil. He long ago severed physical relations with his long-suffering wife, Sophie, and seems to have no interests other than drink. Peter, another fatter, and another low achiever, has a monstrous wife, the heartless Muriel, a marvelous and bitter portrait of disappointed womanhood, although even she, in the end, is afforded a modicum of authorial sympathy.

Alun and Rhiannon are the double link between the characters, through love, friendship, and sex. Alun in their young days slept with all the wives except, needless to say, Muriel, and on his return to his old haunts he sets about renewing these connections, accommodatingly regardless of the fact that the women in question have aged and grown, if not wiser, then certainly less gullible, except when they wish to be gulled. There is not much romance here, but as Amis would surely say, there is no much romance in life. Still, at the end, Peter at least achieves a kind of happiness, and even Malcolm, unlucky in love with the longed-for Rhiannon, finds solace in, of all things, poetry.

The Old Devils is as darkly misanthropic as any of Amis's later work, yet it is shot through with flashes of sunlight. In the mid-1980s, at the time when he was writing the book, Amis made frequent public appearances, mainly on television, and he was not a pretty sight—choleric, often tipsy, dismissive of anything that smacked of liberal opinion, and frequently if covertly racist—which makes the tenderness he displays toward his fictional old devils all the more surprising and affecting. It would be an exaggeration to say that he was mellowing toward the end, but there is forgiveness here, however grudging, along with a sort of grim gaiety that lifts the novel not, perhaps, to the level of the sunlit uplands but to a lower plateau where the kindly light of the commonplace day keeps breaking through.

—JOHN BANVILLE

PART ONE

Malcolm, Charlie, Peter and Others

1

‘If you want my opinion,’ said Gwen Cellan-Davies, ‘the old boy’s a terrifically distinguished citizen of Wales. Or at any rate what passes for one these days.’

Her husband was cutting the crusts off a slice of toast. ‘Well, I should say that’s generally accepted.’

‘And Reg Burroughs is another after his thirty years of pen-pushing in first City Hall and later County Hall, for which he was duly honoured.’

‘That’s altogether too dismissive a view. By any reckoning Alun has done some good things. Come on now, fair play.’

‘Good things for himself certainly: *Brydan’s Wales* and that selection, whatever it’s called. Both still selling nicely after all these years. Without Brydan and the Brydan industry, Alun would be nothing. Including especially his own work—those poems are all sub-Brydan.’

‘Following that trail isn’t such a bad—’

‘Goes down a treat with the Americans and the English, you bet. But ...’ Gwen put her head on one side and gave the little frowning smile she used when she was putting something to someone, often a possible negative view of a third party; ‘wouldn’t you have to agree that he follows Brydan at, er, an altogether lower level of imagination and craftsmanship?’

‘I agree that compared with Brydan at his best, he doesn’t—’

‘You know what I mean.’

In this case Malcolm Cellan-Davies did indeed know. He got up and refilled the teapot, then his cup, adding a touch of skimmed milk and one of the new sweeteners that were supposed to leave no aftertaste. Back in his seat at the breakfast-table he placed between his left molars a small prepared triangle of toast and diabetic honey and began crunching it gently but firmly. He had not bitten anything with his front teeth since losing a top middle crown on a slice of liver-sausage six years earlier, and the right-hand side of his mouth was a no-go area, what with a hole in the lower lot where stuff was always apt to stick and a funny piece of gum that seemed to have got detached from something and waved disconcertingly about whenever it saw the chance. As his jaws operated, his eyes slid off to the *Western Mail* and a report of the Neath-Llanelli game.

After lighting a cigarette Gwen went on in the same quirky style as before, ‘I don’t remember you as a great believer in the integrity of Alun Weaver as an embodiment of the Welsh consciousness?’

‘Well, I suppose in some ways, all the television and so on, he is a bit of a charlatan, yes, maybe.’

‘Maybe! Christ Almighty. Of course he’s a charlatan and good luck to him. Who cares? He’s good fun and he’s unstuffy. We could do with a dozen like him in these parts to strike the fear of God into them. We need a few fakes to put a dent in all that bloody authenticity.’

‘Not everybody’s going to be glad to have him around,’ said Malcolm, giving another section of toast the standard treatment.

‘Well, that’s splendid news. Who are you thinking of?’

‘Peter for one. Funnily enough the subject came up yesterday. He was very bitter, I was quite surprised. Very bitter.’

Malcolm spoke not in any regretful way but as if he understood the bitterness, even perhaps felt a touch of it on his own part. Gwen looked at him assessingly through the light-brownish lenses of his square-topped glasses. Then she made a series of small noises and movements of the kind that mea-

it was time to be up and away. But she sat on and, perhaps idly, reached out to the letter that had started their conversation and fingered it as it lay in front of her.

‘It’ll be, er, fun seeing Rhiannon again,’ she said.

‘M’m.’

‘Been a long time, hasn’t it? What, ten years?’

‘At least that. More like fifteen.’

‘She never came down with Alun on any of his trips after whenever it was. Just that once, or twice, was it?’

‘She used to come down to see her mother at Broughton, and then the old girl died about that long ago, so she probably ...’

‘I dare say you’d remember. I just thought it was funny she never really kept up with her college friends or anyone else as far as I know.’

Malcolm said nothing to that. He swayed from side to side in his chair as a way of suggesting that life held many such small puzzles.

‘Well, she’ll have plenty of time from now on, or rather from next month. I hope she doesn’t find it too slow for her in these parts after London.’

‘A lot of the people she knew will still be here.’

‘That’s the whole trouble,’ said Gwen, laughing slightly. She looked at her husband for a moment, smiling and lowering her eyelids, and went on, ‘It must have come as a bit of a shock, the idea of, er, Rhiannon coming and settling down here after everything.’

‘Call it a surprise. I haven’t thought of her since God knows when. It’s a long time ago.’

‘Plenty of that, isn’t there, nowadays? Well, this won’t do. All right if I take first crack at the bathroom?’

‘You go ahead,’ he said, as he said every morning.

He waited till he heard a creak or so from the floor above, then gave a deep sigh with a sniff in the middle. When you thought about it, Gwen had given him an easy ride over Rhiannon, not forgetting naturally that it had been no more than Instalment 1 (a). A bit of luck he had been down first and had had a couple of minutes to recover from some of the shock—rightly so called—of seeing the handwriting on the envelope, unchanged and unmistakable after thirty-five years. Gwen had left the letter on the table. With a brief glance towards the ceiling he picked it up and re-read it, or parts of it. ‘Much love to you both’ seemed not a hell of a lot to brag about in the way of a reference to himself, but there being no other he would have to make the best of it. Perhaps she had simply forgotten. After all, plenty had happened to her in between.

Finishing his tea, he lit his first and only cigarette of the day. He had never greatly enjoyed smoking, and it was well over the five years since he had followed his doctor’s advice and given it up, all but this solitary one after breakfast which could do no measurable harm and which, so he believed, helped to get his insides going. Again as always he filled in time by clearing the table; it was good for him to be on the move. His bran flakes and Gwen’s chunky marmalade enriched with whisky went into the wall-cupboard, the stones of his unsweetened stewed plums and the shells of her two boiled eggs into the black bag inside the bin. He thought briefly of eggs, the soft explosion as spoon penetrated yolk, the way its flavour spread over your mouth in a second. His last egg, certainly his last boiled egg, went back at least as far as his last full smoking day. By common knowledge the things tended to be binding, not very of course, perhaps only a shade, but still enough to steer clear of. Finally the crocks went into the dishwasher and at the touch of a button a red light came on, flickering rather, and a savage humming immediately filled the kitchen.

It was not a very grand or efficient dishwasher and not at all a nice kitchen. At Werneth Avenue, more precisely at the house there that the Cellan-Davieses had lived in until 1978, the kitchen had

been quite splendid, with a long oak table you could get fourteen round with no trouble at all and a fine Welsh dresser hung with colourful mugs and jugs. Here there was nothing that could not have been found in a million cramped little places up and down the country, lino tiles, plastic tops, metal sink and, instead of the massive Rayburn that had warmed the whole ground floor at Werneth Avenue, an oval-shaped two-bar electric fire hanging on the wall. Most mornings at about this time Malcolm wondered if he had not cut down a bit too far by moving out here, but no point in fretting about that now, or later either.

There came a faint stirring in his entrails. He picked up the *Western Mail* and without hurrying—quite important as a matter of fact—made his way to the slant-ceilinged lavatory or cloakroom under the stairs. The old sequence duly extended itself: not trying at all because that was the healthy, natural way, trying a certain amount because that could have no real adverse effect, trying like a lunatic because why?—because that was all there was to do. Success was finally attained, though of a limited degree. No blood to speak of, to be conscientiously classified as between slight and very slight. That was the signal for him to sit to attention and snap a salute.

In the bedroom Gwen was at her dressing-table putting the foundation on her face. Malcolm came round the door in his silent, looming way and caught sight of her in the glass. Something about the angle or the light made him look at her more closely than usual. She had always been a soft, rounded, fluffy sort of creature, not ineffectual but yielding in her appearance and movements. That had not changed; at sixty-one—his age too—her cheeks and jaws held their shape and the skin under her eyes was remarkably supple. But now those deep-set eyes of hers had an expression he thought he had not noticed before, intent, almost hard, and her mouth likewise was firmly set as she smoothed the side of her nose. Probably just the concentration—in a second she saw him and relaxed, a comfortable young-elderly woman with gently-tinted light-brown hair and wearing a blue-and-white check trouser suit you might have expected on someone slightly more juvenile, but not at all ridiculous on her.

To get her voice as much as anything he said, 'More social life? No letting up?'

'Just coffee at Sophie's,' she said in her tone of innocent animation.

'Just coffee, eh? There's a change now. You know it's extraordinary, I've just realised I haven't seen Sophie for almost a year. One just doesn't. Well. You'll be taking the car, will you?'

'If that's okay. You going along to the Bible?'

'I thought I might sort of look in.' He went along to the Bible every day of his life. 'Don't worry. I'll get the bus.'

A pause followed. Gwen spread blusher—called rouge once upon a time—over her cheekbones. After a moment she dropped her hands into her lap and just sat. Then she speeded up. 'Well, and how are you this morning, good boy?'

'Perfectly all right, thank you.' Malcolm spoke more abruptly than he meant. He had prepared himself for a return to the topic of Rhiannon and the query about his bodily functions, though usually and expressed much as usual, caught him off balance. 'Quite all right,' he added on a milder note.

'Nothing ...'

'No. Absolutely not.'

As he had known she would, she shook her head slowly. 'Why you just can't deal with it, an intelligent man like you. The stuff that's on the market nowadays.'

'I don't hold with laxatives. Never have. As you very well know.'

'Laxatives. Christ, I'm not talking about senna pods, California Syrup of Figs. Carefully-prepared formulae, tried and tested. It's not gunpowder drops any more.'

'Anything like that, it interferes with the body's equilibrium. Distorts the existing picture. With chemicals.'

'I thought that was what you were after, Malcolm, honestly, distorting what you've got. And what'

about all those plums you go in for? Aren't they meant to distort you?'

'They're natural. Obviously.'

'How do you think they work? Just chemicals in another form.'

'Natural chemicals. Chemicals naturally occurring.'

'How do you think your guts distinguish between a bit of chemical in a plum and a bit of the same chemical in a pill or a capsule?'

'I don't know, love,' said Malcolm rather helplessly. He thought it was a bit thick for a man not to be able to win an argument about his own insides, even one with his wife. 'But then I haven't got to know.'

'Don't take my word for it—fix up to see Dewi. Yes yes, you don't hold with doctors either, and why do I have to go on at you. Because you're foolish, that's why, you won't help yourself. Unteachable. You know sometimes I'd almost take you for a bloody Welshman?'

'There's nothing to see Dewi about. There's nothing wrong with me. No sign, no sign of anything.'

'Just ask him for a prescription, that's all. Two minutes.'

Malcolm shook his head and there was more silence. In a moment he said, 'Can I go now?'

They embraced lightly and carefully while Gwen made another set of little sounds. This lot meant that although she still thought her husband was silly about himself she would let it go for the time being. There was affection there as well, if not of an over-respectful order.

As often before, Malcolm could see strength in the case against ever having mentioned his defecations in the first place. He had never intended more than an occasional appeal for reassurance and so on. As an apparently irremovable part of the daily agenda the subject had its drawbacks, which remaining streets ahead of his shortcomings as a man, a husband, an understander of women, a provider and other popular items dimly remembered from the past.

In the bathroom across the landing he cleaned his teeth, first the twenty or so surviving in his head in one form or another and then the seven on his upper-jaw partial. This was such a tight fit that putting it back was always a tense moment; bending his knees and moving them in and out seemed to help. What with the five crowns in front, of varying manufacture and recency, the ensemble was a bit of a colour atlas, but at least no one was going to mistake it for snappers top and bottom. They would have to come some day—which meant not now, bless it. The thought of having a tooth extracted, looking as nearly all of his had become, bothered him in a way he thought he had outgrown many years before.

The face surrounding these teeth was in fair trim, considering. In shape it was rather long, especially between the end of the nose and the point of the chin, but the features themselves were good and he was aware without vanity that, with his height and erect bearing and his thatch of what had become reddish-grey hair, people usually found him presentable enough. At the same time he had noticed that now and then a stranger, usually a man, would glance at him in a way that always puzzled him rather, not quite hostile but with something unfavourable about it, something cold.

He had seen a good deal of that sort of glance at school, where he had been bullied more than his fair share for a boy not undersized, foreign or feeble, and he remembered asking Fatty Watkins, one of his leading persecutors, why this was so. Without thinking about it, Fatty had told him that he looked the type, whatever that might have meant. Twice in later life, once down Street's End on a Saturday night and then again on a train coming back from an international at Cardiff Arms Park, just minding his own business both times, he had been picked out of a group of mates and set upon without preamble by an unknown ruffian. Perhaps without intending it he sometimes took on an expression people misinterpreted as snooty or something.

Whatever the ins and outs of his face he was going to have to shave it. He hated the whole caboodle—teeth, shave, bath, hair, clothes—so much that he often felt he was approaching the point of jacking it all in completely and going round in just pyjamas and dressing-gown all day. But for Gwen he

would probably have got there long ago. She kept on at him to play himself through with the portable wireless and he still tried it occasionally, but he cared for chatter about as much as he cared for modern music, and that was about all there seemed to be apart from Radio Cymru, which was obviously just the thing if you were set on improving your Welsh. The trouble was they talked so fast.

Welsh came up again and in a more substantial form when, having heard Gwen drive away, he settled in his study to put in a bit of time there before going along to the Bible. This, the study, was on the first floor, a small, smudgy room where water-pipes clanked. Its dominant feature was a walnut bookcase that had not looked oversized at Werneth Avenue but had needed the window taking out to be installed here. One shelf was all poetry: a fair selection of the English classics, some rather battered, a few Welsh texts, all in excellent condition, and a couple of dozen volumes of English verse by twentieth-century Welshmen. One of these, not painfully slim, had on it Malcolm's name and the imprint of a small press in what was now Upper Glamorgan. On taking early retirement from the Royal Cambrian he had intended to set about a successor, completing poems left half-done for years and years, writing others that had only been in his head or nowhere at all. He ought to have had the sense to know that intentions alone were no good in a case like this. Not a line had turned up in all that time. But some day one might, and meanwhile he must practise, exercise, try to get his hand back in. Hence the Welsh.

Among the books on his table there was a publication of the Early Welsh Text Society—to give it an English designation: the poems and poetical fragments of Llywelyn Bach ab yr Ynad Coch (*fl.* 1310) open at his funeral-song for Cadwaladr, quite a substantial affair, three hundred lines odd. Malcolm's translation of the first two sections was there too, a lightly-corrected manuscript, also a pamphlet containing the only other translation he knew of, done and published by a Carmarthen schoolmaster in the Twenties but in the style of fifty years earlier. Never mind—whatever it lacked as a piece of poetry it came in bloody handy as a crib.

Moving at half speed, Malcolm opened the pamphlet now at the beginning. His glance shifted back and fro between the Welsh original of this passage and the two English versions, picking out words and phrases in either language that he felt he had never seen before: the tomb of the regal chieftain ... red stallions ... ye warriors of Gwynedd ... I the singer, the minstrel ... heaps of Saxon slain ... chaplains ... hart ... buckler ... mead ...

Malcolm jerked upright at the table. A great God-given flood of boredom and hatred went coursing through him. That, that stuff, fiddling about with stuff like that was not living, was not life, was nothing at all. Not after today's news. No indeed, poems were not made out of intentions. But perhaps they could come from hope.

He made to tear up his manuscript, but held his hand at the thought of the hours that had gone in it, and the other thought that he would go back to it another day and transform it, make something wonderful of it. For now, he could not sit still. Yet if he left the house now he would be much too early, or rather a good deal, a certain amount too early. Well, he could get off the bus at Beaufoy and walk the rest of the way. On more of the same reasoning he went and gave his shoes a thorough polish. It was not much point hereabouts, agreed, but virtuous.

When he finally went out it was overcast with a bit of black, damp already, mild though, with a gentle breeze clearing the mist, typical Welsh weather. If you can see Cil Point it means rain later; if not, rain now. As he started down the hill he could see it, just, a dark-grey snout between the ranks of black slate roofs shining with moisture. Soon the bay began to open out below him, the sweep round the west where coal had once been mined on the shore and inland along the coastal plain, and steel and tin-plate were still worked and oil refined, for the moment anyway, and behind all this, indistinct through the murk, the squarish mass of Mynydd Tywyll, second-highest peak in South Wales.

It was mid-morning in the week, and yet the pavements were crowded with people darting in and

out of shops or just strolling along like holiday-makers—here, in February? Children and dogs ran from side to side almost underfoot. Crossing the road was no joke with all the cars and the motorcycles nipping about. There was a queue at the 24 stop but, even so, nothing showed for a long time. Staff shortages, they said, recruitment down since the automatic-payment system had meant good-bye to days of plenty, when the conductor fiddled half the fare-money on the out-of-town part of the route and handed over half of it, or nearly, to the driver when they got to the garage. To save going round the end of the queue, youngsters on their way to the opposite corner kept breaking through it, always as if by pre-arrangement just in front of Malcolm.

The bus came. While he was climbing the litter-strewn steps his left ball gave a sharp twinge, and off like a light-switch, then again after he had sat down. Nothing. Just one of the aches and pains that come and go. No significance. He would not always have taken such a summary line, in fact. One stage cancer of them, or one of them, had been among his leading special dreads, distinguished from the rest by its very personal site and alleged virulence. There had even been the time when, after a day and most of a night of just about unremitting twinges on both sides, he had spent the dawn hours compiling in his head a draft list of books to take into hospital: mainly English poetry with one or two descriptive works about Wales, in English naturally. The following morning, by one of the most rapid and complete recoveries in medical history, the affection had vanished. So far so good, no further. But then he had read in the *Guardian* that recent advances had put the survival rate for testicular tumours up to or above ninety per cent, and for the rest of that day he had felt twenty, thirty years younger, and something of that had never been quite lost.

Reflecting on this and related matters took him past his stop and almost into Dinedor itself. With an air of transparent innocence that luckily escaped remark he got off by Paolo's Trattoria. Just round the corner was the Bible, more fully the Bible and Crown, the only pub of that name in the whole of Wales. According to local antiquarians the reference was to a Cavalier toast, though research has failed to come up with a date earlier than 1920, some time after it had become safe to proclaim loyalty to the King's party in any or all of his dominions, even this one.

On the way in Malcolm's spirits lifted, as they always did at the prospect of an hour or more spent not thinking about being ill and things to do with being ill. It was still early, but not enough to notice

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'But uglier still is the hump that we get from not having enough to do. You know who said that?'

'No.'

'Kipling. Joseph Rudyard Kipling. He was usually right, you know. Had a way of being right. No use sitting about, he said, or frowsting by the fire with a book. Wonderful word, frowst, isn't it? Wonder what it comes from. Well anyway, the thing is, get out in the fresh air and take a bit of exercise. A brisk walk, two miles minimum, three preferable. No need for any of your sleeping pills after that. I haven't taken a sleeping pill since ... Guess when I last took a sleeping pill.'

'No idea.'

'1949. That's when I last took a sleeping pill. 1949. Morning, Malcolm. Another early bird.'

'Morning, Garth. Morning, Charlie. Now what can I get you?'

The two had nearly-full glasses and declined, but the offer was standard arrivals' etiquette. Malcolm went and got himself a half of Troeth bitter at the hatch in the corridor, the nearest place. During his absence, Garth Pumphrey let Charlie Norris know more about the benefits of exercise and the dispensability of sleeping pills. Charlie followed Garth's talk with only half his attention, if that, but he found it comforting. He knew that nothing Garth said would surprise him, and as he felt at the moment, which was very much how he felt every morning of his life at this hour, even a pleasant

surprise, whatever that might be, would have been better postponed. He flinched a little when Malcolm reappeared more abruptly than he had bargained for.

‘Ah, here we are,’ said Garth cordially, holding out an arm by way of showing Malcolm to the chair at his side. ‘There. I’ve been treating young Charlie to a highly authoritative lecture on the subject of health, physical and mental. My number one rule is never sit over a meal. Breakfast least of all.’

It was amazing, thought Malcolm to himself, how invariably and completely he forgot Garth when looking forward to or otherwise weighing up a visit to the Bible. Forgetting things like that was probably one of Nature’s ways of seeing to it that life carried on. Like the maternal instinct.

‘Of course, you know Angharad says I’m turning into a real old health bore—a notorious pitfall at my age, she says.’ In the ensuing silence Garth took a good pull at his drink, which looked like a rather heavy vin rosé but was really gin and Angostura. Then he shaped up to Malcolm in a businesslike way. ‘You were quite a performer in days gone by, Malcolm, weren’t you? Sorry, with the old racquet. Oh, I was saying earlier, I remember the way you used to bash that ball. Give it a devil of a pasting, you would. That serve of yours. Famous. Deservedly so.’

‘Many years ago now, Garth.’

‘Not so many as the world goes in our time. November 1971, that’s when the old place finally closed its doors.’ Garth referred to the Dinedor Squash Racquets Club, of which all three had been members since youth. ‘The end of an era. You know you and I had a game in the last week very nearly. I took a proper clobbering as usual. You were really seeing them that evening. Then we had a drink after with poor Roger Andrews. Do you remember?’

‘Yes,’ said Malcolm, though he had forgotten that part, and Charlie nodded to show that he was still in the conversation.

‘He seemed so full of life that time. And then what could it have been, six weeks after we started coming in here, eight at the outside, off he goes. Like that. Sitting just where you are now, Charlie.’

Malcolm remembered that part all right. So did Charlie. Roger Andrews had been nothing out of the way, a building contractor of no more than average corruption, not even much of a good fellow, but his fatal collapse in the so-called saloon lounge of the Bible had had a durable effect, confirming the tendency of a group of ex-members of the defunct squash club to drop in regularly midday and in the early evening. Over the years the room had become a kind of relic or descendant of that club, its walls hung with inherited photographs of forgotten champions, teams, presentations, dinners, its tables bearing a couple of ugly old ashtrays that had escaped being sold or stolen when the effects of the DSRC were disposed of. The habitués had even acquired something of a prescriptive right to keep out intruders. The landlord of the Bible made no objection, in fact it suited him well enough to have up to a dozen or so comparatively well-behaved drinkers perpetually occupying the least convenient and agreeable corner of his premises. From time to time the old boys complained among themselves about the discomfort, but there they were, the dump was almost next door to the Club building, which was what had drawn them there in the first place, and in winter the genial host actually let them have the benefit of a small electric fire at no extra charge.

After a moment of reverie or premeditation Garth Pumphrey again turned his face on Malcolm, dark serious lined face with a hint of subdued passion, an actor’s face some might have called. ‘What exercise do you take these days, Malcolm?’ he asked.

‘Just about zero, I’m afraid.’

‘Just about zero? A fellow of your physique. A natural athlete like you. Dear, dear.’

‘Ex-natural athlete. I’m not going to start going on cross-country runs at my age.’

‘I should hope not indeed, it’s altogether too late for that.’ Garth whistled breathily to himself and moved his hand crabwise along the table in front of him. Then he said, ‘Do you find you fancy your food all right? I hope you don’t mind me asking, we’re all old friends here.’

Charlie thought a distinction could be drawn between Garth's boasting about his own insides if he had to and his involvement with others', but he was not the man to put it into words. His second large Scotch and dry ginger was beginning to get to him and already he could turn his head without thinking it over first. Soon it might cease to be one of those days that made you sorry to be alive.

'No, that's all right, Garth,' Malcolm was saying gamely. 'No, my trouble's all the other way. Keeping myself down to size.'

'Good, good.' Garth's small figure was huddled up in the cracked rexine chair, turned away from Charlie. He smiled and nodded. 'And, er ...' His eyebrows were raised.

In a flash Malcolm knew or as good as knew that the next second Garth was going to ask him about his bowel movements. He felt he would do, must do, anything at all to prevent that, and mentioned what he had not even considered mentioning, not there, not yet, not until he had hugged it to himself as long as he could. 'Alun and Rhiannon are moving down here in a couple of months,' he said quickly. 'Coming back to Wales to live.'

That did the trick. It took quite some time for Garth's incredulity to be mollified, likewise he was craving for information. When that was done he explained that, what with being stuck out at Cap Mererid and so on, he had not known the couple in early years, but had met Alun many times on trips to these parts and anyway, he finished strongly, 'the bloke is a national figure, let's face it.'

'You face it,' said Charlie, who had reasons of his own to feel less than overjoyed at Malcolm's news. 'I realise he's on television quite a lot, though we don't usually get it in Wales, and whenever anyone wants a colourful kind of stage-Taffy view on this and that then of course they go to him. With a bit of eloquent sob-stuff thrown in at Christmas or when it's dogs or the poor. He's the up-market media Welshman. Fine. I can take him in that role, just about. But as for Alun Weaver the writer, especially the poet ... I'm sorry.'

'Well, I'm no literary critic,' announced Garth. 'I'm just going by the general acclaim. I'm told they think highly of him in America. But we've got a writer here now.'

'Oh, no,' said Malcolm, embarrassed. 'Not in that sense. Well, what can I say? It's true that a lot of his work falls under Brydan's shadow, but I see nothing very shameful in that. And there's more than that in it. I'm not saying he didn't get quite a bit from Brydan, but they were also both drawing on common stock to rather different effect. Something like that.'

Charlie said with a bland look, 'Everything you say may well be true—it cuts no ice with me. Brydan, Alun, you can stick the lot. Take it away. Forget it.'

'Oh, Charlie,' Garth pleaded. 'Not Brydan. Not *Tales from the Undergrowth*. Known and loved all over the world as it is.'

'That in particular. Write about your own people by all means, don't be soft on them, turn them into figures of fun if you must, but don't patronise them, don't sell them short and above all don't lay them out on display like quaint objects in a souvenir shop.'

'I didn't realise you felt that strongly,' said Malcolm after a silence.

'I don't, I don't feel strongly at all. Not my field. But I do think if a chap decides to make a living out of being Welsh he'd better do it in a show on the telly. Which I think Alun realises part of the time.'

'Oh dear.' Malcolm too seemed quite cast down. 'And you see that in the poetry, in Brydan's poetry too, do you?'

'Yes I do. What's that stuff about, er, the man in the mask and the man in the iron street. All he's done was juggle two phrases about and had the Americans going on about childlike Welsh visions. Stark too it was, boyo. It's not serious enough, that kind of thing.'

Malcolm set about considering the justice of parts of this in his conscientious way. Soon Garth, who had been looking anxiously from face to face, made a permission-to-speak noise. Charlie nodded.

encouragingly at him.

~~‘I was just going to say, what about, what about her? I have met her, of course I have, but I think only the once and long ago.’~~

‘Well, what about her?’ said Charlie. ‘Just a very pleasant—’

‘Rhiannon Rhys, as she was when I first met her,’ said Malcolm fluently, raising himself in his seat like a panellist answering a question from the audience, ‘was one of the most stunning-looking girls I’ve ever seen in my life. Tall, fair, graceful, beautiful complexion, grey eyes with just a hint of blue. An English rose, really. And a lovely nature—modest, unassuming. She made no attempt to be the centre of attraction, but she was, in any company. No, I haven’t seen her for a long time either, and she may look a bit different now, but there are some things that don’t change, not in thirty years. I’m glad she’s coming back to Wales.’

Malcolm believed that he had on the whole said this in a conversational, down-to-earth way. Garth paid close attention. Charlie drained his glass for the second time, sucking fiercely to get the last couple of drops.

‘Well, er,’ said Garth, ‘that sounds absolutely marvellous. Thank you, Malcolm. I’ll look forward to renewing my acquaintance with, with Mrs Weaver.’

Before he had finished Charlie was urging Malcolm to have a real drink, assuring him that what he had before him was piss and getting up from the table. This was not as straightforward a procedure as might be thought, in view of the table itself and his chair and their respective legs, and his own buttocks and state. On the way out of the room he gave a muffled cry of shock when the side of his head bumped against the door-frame. By standing quite still for a moment and concentrating, however, he successfully avoided the hazard in the passage floor where for some years most of a tile had been missing. His shoulder grazed but did not dislodge a framed photograph on the wall showing a row of men in hats standing outside a thatched cottage in Ireland or some such place.

As he waited at the hatch for Doris to finish giving change for a couple of twenty-pound notes in the bar, Charlie thought about Malcolm’s speech just now. Almost every phrase in it had been all right in itself, would have been, at least, if said in a different voice or eked out with a few oaths or perhaps seen written. It was the way the silly sod had looked and sounded so pleased with himself for having had no false shame about coming out with it—that was what had called for a frantic personal exit headfirst through the closed window or, more prosaically, overturning the table in his lap. And the clear holy-man’s gaze ...

Doris ambled along and Charlie ordered a large pink gin, mentioning Garth’s name, and three large Scotches and water. Down went one of the Scotches in its entirety while Doris was ringing up and right away the old feather duster twirled at the back of his throat and he was coughing his heart to bits right there at maximum first go, roaring, bellowing like an imitation, in a crouch with his fists shoved into his guts, tears pouring down his face. A silence fell widely round him. When he tried to look back he thought he saw somebody, several people, hobbledehoys, leaning over the bar to peer. Doris gave him a glass of water and he sipped and breathed, then drank. With a great exhalation he straightened up and mopped his eyes, feeling now quite proud of himself, as if his well-known toughness and grit had got him through another testing external assault.

He had not yet touched the tray of drinks when the door banged at the end of the passage and a large lumpish figure creaked towards him through the gloom, recognisable after a moment as Peter Thomas, runner-up in the open tournament of the DSRC a couple of times in the 1940s but more of a golf manager. Neither one nor the other these days, of course.

‘Hallo, Peter. Early for you.’

‘No, not really. Yes, I’ll have a gin and slimline tonic.’

If Charlie Norris had ever been thought of as big and fat and red-faced, and some such descriptive

was hard to avoid, a revision of terminology might have been called for at the sight of his friend Charlie's backside pushed the tail of his tweed jacket into two divergent halves, true, and his paunch forced the waistband of his trousers half-way down to his crotch, but Peter could have given him a couple of stone and still been the heftier, not so obviously from front or back where the cut of his suit tended to camouflage him, but to be seen in anything like profile as even thicker through than wide. And Charlie's cheeks and forehead were no more than ruddy compared with Peter's rich colouring. Their faces in general were different: Charlie's round and pug-nosed, with the look of a battered schoolboy, Peter's fine-featured, almost distinguished between the bulges and pouches. At that moment Charlie was smiling, Peter not.

'Well, how are you today?' asked Charlie. A duff question on second thoughts.

'How do you think? But as you see I can get out of the house. Who's in there?'

'Just Garth and Malcolm.'

Peter nodded and sighed, accepting it. His massive, bottom-heavy head turned sharply at a burst of laughter and jocular shouting from inside the bar. The voices sounded youthful. Frowning, he limped to the hatch and stuck his head round.

'According to Malcolm,' began Charlie, but stopped when the other turned back, speaking as if he had moved.

'I thought we were supposed to be in the middle of a depression. Have you looked in there? Three quarters full, at this hour.' It was all coming out as if freshly minted. 'Most of them in their twenties or younger. Unemployed school-leavers, no doubt. Who'd be anything else these days if he had the chance, eh? What happens if we ever have a boom? They'll be falling down drunk from morning till night, presumably. Like the eighteenth century. You know, Hogarth.'

Charlie wanted to grin when Doris put the slimline on the tray next to the (large) gin. Talk about a drop in the ocean. Like an elephant going short of a banana, he thought. He also thought Peter looked distinctly fatter since he had last seen him, though admittedly this was doubtful after no more than a couple of days. Nor did he appear well. He had been breathing hard when he arrived and seemed to be sweating, though it was far from hot outdoors or in. High blood-pressure. Not good.

Still talking, he preceded Charlie down the passage. 'You should see the old bags coming out of the supermarkets with the goodies piled up on their trolleys like Christmas.' His hip thumped considerably into a table against the wall, agitating the leaves of the flowerless pot-plant that sprawled there. 'And I don't mean in the middle of town, I'm talking about wretched holes like Greenhill and Emanuel.' He opened the door of the lounge. 'And the point is you can't tell anybody. Nobody wants to know.'

Peter Thomas had to hold the door open because an ancient shoddiness of workmanship would have made it swing shut in a few seconds, and Charlie was much occupied with the tray after a pair of speedy over-corrections had nearly sent the stuff piling over opposite edges. At last they were in and settled and Garth had finished welcoming Peter.

A glance at Peter showed there was no more to come from that direction for the moment. Half to provoke him, Charlie said, 'Anybody happened to go by St Paul's recently? They're having fun there.' Malcolm said, 'Are we talking about St Paul's Cathedral in London?'

'No, no, the church off the Strand here. Old what-was-he-called, old Joe Craddock's church.'

'Used to wear a green tweed cap with his dog-collar.'

'That's the fellow. Well, he should see it now. So should you, it seems. Sex cinema is what it is now. You couldn't invent that, could you? You wouldn't dare. Nobody would.'

'Come on, Charlie,' said Garth right on cue, 'you don't mean to sit there and—'

'I bloody do, mate. Adult movies on Screens 1 and 2. In the nave and chancel respectively, I presume. "Come Play with Me" and another witticism.'

'I dare say they exerted themselves to deconsecrate the building,' said Peter.

~~You fat old hypocritical Welsh cunt, thought Charlie. 'It would have appealed to Joe, anyway,' he~~ said, and added for Garth's benefit, 'Used to fuck anything that moved, old Joe did. Bloody marvel, he was. Pulled in an enormous congregation too. Very tough on drink. Of course, I'm talking now about twenty years ago.'

'I didn't know that,' said Malcolm, trying not to sound shocked. 'I mean about his activities.'

'No, well ...' Again Charlie kept to himself what he thought. Still grinning, he met Peter's eye, once for a second, but quite long enough to be sure that Peter was trying not to join in an admiring, partly horrified laugh in reminiscence, something he would certainly have done up until more recently than twenty years ago. 'Amazingly lucky with the horses as well, Joe was. He said he used to count on five to six hundred a year, which in those days was all right. You never ran into anyone who reckoned that was fair.'

Another silence followed. Silences were a great feature of these Bible sessions. Peter sat on with his hands spread on his bulky thighs, sniffing and groaning quietly, perhaps trying to think of something that summed up what he felt about the fate of St Paul's, if so failing. Finally Garth said in his eager quacking voice, 'Malcolm was telling us, Alun and Rhiannon Weaver are coming back down here to live. They—'

Peter swung himself round almost fiercely on Charlie. 'Had you heard this? Well, you didn't mention it to me just now.'

'You didn't give me much of a chance.'

'Down here to live, you say.'

'Apparently. Yes,' said Charlie, signalling with his face to Malcolm to come in, and after no great delay Malcolm started explaining that the Weavers had rented a house in Pedwarsaint to look round from and things like that while Peter stared at him or in his direction through his thick glasses and Garth listened as if every fact were new to him.

Malcolm did not disclose that, while Peter had been a young lecturer at the local university and Rhiannon in her second year as a student, they had had an affair, and she had got pregnant and had had an abortion performed on her at his expense by a doctor in Harriston, a man incidentally struck off the medical register soon afterwards for another of the same and now long dead. This had been a remarkable train of events in the South Wales of 1947–8; more remarkably still, Peter had not been thrown out of his job at the university, in fact nothing official was ever said on the matter. What counted, after all, not only in South Wales, was not what you knew but who could prove you knew it. Quite soon, however, Peter had given up a promising career in academic chemical engineering for a different sort in the real thing not far away, a few miles along the coast to the west in Port Holder. Rhiannon had promptly vanished to London, where after an obscure interval she had got a job as a receptionist at the BBC, where in turn a year or two later she had met Alun Weaver.

That was, of course, not all that had happened. Just about when Rhiannon had become pregnant Peter had shifted his attentions to another female, someone outside the university, and after another few months had turned out to be engaged, presumably to this other. His fiancée was a certain Muriel Smorthwaite, the daughter of one of the managers at the tin-plate mill he now worked at. In those days Peter had been considered rather lucky, given his record, to be engaged to anyone at all west of Offa Dyke, for although the Smorthwaites were from Yorkshire originally, not local, some conscientious neighbour must surely have passed the word. But the two had got married, living in Port Holder for a judicious couple of years before settling in Cwmgwyrdd just on the far side of town.

Charlie had been a student in the same year as Rhiannon, though older than she through war service and acquainted with her and her mates. He had heard as much about all this as most people not directly involved but had learnt no more since. He had not tried to find out and not been told; he had

forgotten about the whole business until that morning. He wondered how well informed the other two here were: Malcolm well enough, as was shown in his every movement and inflection as he spoke, Garth probably not at all.

Malcolm finished his short recital. Evidently Peter, with Garth looking at him in expectation of something or other, could think of nothing to say. His glistening bald head moved from side to side in an agitated fashion.

Charlie gave him an easy one. 'Of course, you were never a great fan of Alun's, were you? As man or writer that I remember.'

Peter turned on him again, but appreciatively this time. 'Bloody Welshman,' he said with relish, doubtless referring to Alun.

'Oh, come on now, Peter,' said Garth, laughing steadily, being very good about not being indignant. 'we're all Welshmen here. Including you as far as I know.'

'More's the pity,' said Peter, draining his glass with a flourish.

On this the door burst open with a suddenness and violence that might well have killed Charlie had an hour earlier, its edge striking the back of his chair, though not hard. Into the sudden hush stepped a man and a woman, both young, both having on knee-boots and other wearables of synthetic material, both carrying crash-helmets. It was at once evident that the tumultuous door-opening had been the result of thoughtlessness rather than any kind of hostility. Unaware both of the hush and of the foreboding looks that went with it, from Peter's glare to Malcolm's mild curiosity, the couple strolled across the room and started looking at some of the DSRC mementos on the wall there and along the mantelpiece above the boarded-up fireplace. When they spoke their accents were not local, perhaps from Liverpool.

'Ladder as at 31st December 1949,' read out the young man and took a pull of what was probably lager. 'What kind of ladder would that be?' He spoke in simple puzzlement.

'Must be all the landlord's stuff,' said the girl. In her hand was an opaque greenish concoction with pieces of ice and fruit floating in it.

'Annual dinner ...'

The girl studied the slightly mildewed photograph. 'Nowhere here is that.'

'Chairman ... committee ... You know, like some sort of club?'

'Served us all right, didn't they?'

The pair had begun to turn shyly towards the group of old men when Garth, having recognised them without any sense of novelty that Peter and Charlie were too fat to be expected to make a move and Malcolm too windy, got up and shut the door as loudly as he could, which was not very loudly because it had already come close to shutting itself.

'Er, excuse me,' began the youth.

Garth stared at him without speaking.

'Er, is this some kind of club?'

'Not exactly a club, no,' said Garth, moving his head about and screwing up his face in a confidential way. 'It's more, well, we had been hoping to hold this private committee meeting in just a few minutes. Personal matters, you'll appreciate, er ...'

'Oh ... well ... sorry ...'

After an exchange of glances and no delay the two invaders set about leaving. The girl, who was rather tall and walked with a firm tread, looked briefly over at the seated three as she passed.

'And *shut* the door,' said Peter with elaborate movements of his mouth.

When the door had shut, almost soundlessly, Garth puffed out his breath, Charlie said, 'Well done Garth, you're a great man,' and Peter gave a short roar like a lion keeping in voice.

Malcolm made no sound. He thought the girl's eye had caught his for an instant, not of course of

of anything but habit or even politeness, and yet it set him thinking. How many years was it since he had noticed a girl? And what exactly had he seen in this one?—she was not all that attractive. She was young, yes indeed, not that he could have said what age, but not so much young either as fresh, new, scarcely out of the wrapping-paper with no time for anything to have got at her and started using her up. It was hard to believe that there had been a time when he had lived his whole life among people like that with occasional unimpressive distractions from an aunt or a teacher or a ticket-collector.

That, that *breed* haven't necessarily been badly brought up, they're gross and boorish by nature.' It seemed that Peter thought the affray of a moment before had been far too lightly passed over.

'On the contrary,' said Malcolm, quite sharply for him. 'They blundered in rather crassly because they knew no better, but as soon as they grasped the situation their decent instincts took over and they were perfectly civil.'

'I'll go and invite them back in if you like,' said Charlie.

'It's my shout,' said Garth.

'No, mine,' said Peter.

But before he had got properly started on rising to his feet the door opened again, nearly as wide as before but smoothly and silently. There followed a frozen pause which a stranger might have found unsettling. Then a man came into the room and shut the door ceremoniously behind him, a man of the same sort of age as the company, a tall broad man, not fat, wearing an unusually thick natural-coloured cardigan with scuffed leather buttons. This was Tarquin Jones, known as Tarc, landlord of the Bible as long as any of the others could remember. On first sight of him standing behind the bar pulls in the main bar, perhaps as far back as 1950, Malcolm had thought that he must have suffered bereavement earlier that morning and had on the instant decided that he, Malcolm, was in some way responsible. But he had stood his ground and quite soon discovered that Tarc always had that expression on, at least in public. Now, grasping the backs of Charlie's and Peter's chairs, he leaned over the table and looked them all in the eye one after the other.

'So you managed to dispose of the intolerable intrusion,' he said in a grave tone, at once diffusing the cloud of the ambiguity that hung about so much of what he said.

'They went like lambs,' said Charlie. 'No trouble at all.'

Tarc nodded impatiently, already done with the matter. 'Last night,' he went on, lowering his voice, 'they were out there for an hour after I'd shut my house, revving up their bikes and the rock blaring out on their radios and yelling their heads off. They—'

'How extraordinary,' said Malcolm—'as Charlie said they couldn't have been more tractable a moment ago. No hint of any ...'

His voice died away as Tarc looked round the circle again, this time with stoical weariness. 'I was thinking in fact,' he began, suddenly affecting a sunny forbearance, 'of a different group of young people altogether. Not the two who went in and out of here just now. No. Others. Who are given to behaving in the way I have tried to describe. As I was saying,' he went on, then said nothing for ten seconds or so before resuming in his original manner, 'They're not from round here, you know, most of 'em. Come batting down the M4 from Cardiff or Bristol like fiends out of hell any time of the day or night, all with a chick behind there. I tell you, the other Sunday I was coming back from seeing my daughter in Penarth and a crowd of 'em caught up with me and started carving me up as I understand it's called, overtaking me and fanning out in front and then staying level three or four abreast and looking at me, staring at me for, I don't know, it seemed like minutes at a time and going at seventy. Seventy. And talking about me, shouting out to each other about me and pointing at me. I don't mind admitting to you,' he lowered his voice further, 'I was scared, honest I was. Scared.'

When he paused, none of his audience showed any sign of responding, then or at any future time.

'Because this isn't just high spirits or youthful exuberance—we're used to that. No no, what we'

faced with is an orchestrated onslaught on our whole culture and way of life. And this concerns you gentlemen particularly. In your position it behoves you to take note and consider what is to be done. The likes of you won't give a lead I don't know what is to become of us.'

'If you ask me,' said Malcolm, 'what could be at work there is an actual enmity towards the very structure of society.'

This observation seemed to take all the fight out of Tarc. He said in a bleating tone and with a slight quaver, 'I'm very glad to find you hold that view, Mr Cellan-Davies, because it's rather the one I was trying to put forward myself.' Then as he gathered up the empty glasses his manner began to rally a little and grew almost friendly for a moment. 'Er, warm enough in here, are you? Miserable old day out. Now remember all of you, you've only to say the word and I'll bring in the fire.' No one said so he withdrew, pausing at the door for his closing line. 'I do beg you to consider seriously the point I've put to you.'

'Dear, dear, there's a character,' said Garth, very much the sort of thing he always said after one of Tarc's visitations.

'I seemed to quieten him down all right,' said Malcolm modestly.

'Yes, you did, didn't you?' said Peter.

'He goes too far sometimes, old Tarc,' said Charlie. 'We know we have to take it and so does he, so he really shouldn't talk about orchestrated onslaughts and behaving, especially behaving. No, that was naughty.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean,' said Malcolm.

'Well, teasing us. Defying us to tell him to come off it.'

'Are you saying it's all an act? I know he exaggerates and all that, but ...'

Peter answered. 'Tarc doesn't know how much of an act it is himself, not any more. He's got so he couldn't tell you whether he means what he says or not. Far from the only one in these parts to have reached that condition.'

'Anyway,' said Garth, 'you and he do seem to see very much eye to eye on the modern world and the youth of today and the rest of it.'

Fortunately, before Peter could answer that one old Owen Thomas (no relation) turned up with a guest of his, a retired chartered accountant from Brecon, and soon after them came old Arnold Spurling and then old Tudor Whittingham, who had beaten the British Empire amateur champion 9–14–12, 9–7 at Wembley in 1953. Arnold had just won a few quid in one of the newspaper bingo competitions and insisted on drinks all round. Charlie started feeling quite good, and even Peter seemed able to put up with the presence of old Arnold and the others.

Owen Thomas went off to the bar for ham rolls and came back with all there was in the eats line, a plate of egg-and-cheese quiches prepared by Tarc's granddaughter, who was doing a course in culinary studies at the university. For different reasons Peter, Charlie and Malcolm turned them down. The three decided to leave after the next drink, or rather Peter, whose car was outside, decided that and the other two went along. They had that next drink, and then another quick one which Malcolm declined and then they left. Garth lived within walking distance, so of course he was going to walk, perhaps as soon as he had finished explaining to Owen Thomas's guest about the importance of not brooding.

3

Peter's car was a Morris Marina of an archaic buff-orange colour relieved here and there by small archipelagoes of rust. With nothing said, Charlie got in beside Peter and Malcolm got in the back. This was not easy for Malcolm with his long legs, because Peter had to keep his seat pushed back as far as possible in order to get his stomach behind the wheel. The other half of the back seat was taken up

with wooden trays spilling earth and small stones and piled with potatoes, leeks, parsnips and perhaps turnips freshly out of the ground, or at any rate untouched since. Empty tissue cartons, very dirty cloths that had wiped the windows, dog-eared technical pamphlets, graphs and thick bundles of duplicated sheets with a forlornly superannuated look, publishers' circulars, an empty tube of children's sweets, a biscuit wrapper and several books and leaflets about dieting lay elsewhere. When Peter set the car in motion a small capless bottle that might once have held slimline tonic can be seen trundling out from under his seat.

Malcolm peeled one of the diet leaflets off the floor at his side and looked through it. He wanted to be covered in some sense against the possibility that the subject of Rhiannon might come up again. Also diets interested him. His own eating and drinking practice was a conflation of several, often irreconcilable with each other. Thus the two halves of beer a day he reckoned he needed to help to keep him regular meant a cutback in calories elsewhere with the risk of a deficit in vital fibre. More generally, you never knew what one programme or another might come up with in the way of a new hankering-reducer or safe volume-limiter. And there was not such a hell of a lot to read anywhere these days.

Soon enough Malcolm was pretty sure that what he had picked up was no good except to get him through the five minutes now in progress. After forbidding all alcohol except a small glass of dry white wine every year or so, it ran through a remarkably full and imaginative list of everything anybody had ever enjoyed eating and forbade the lot, though surely with some risk of infraction. Anyway, your own eyes were enough to tell you that if old Peter, now listening to something Charlie was telling him about the price of a house in Beaufoy, had ever observed these constraints he had forgotten them again after a couple of hours. Then why did he bother to read or at least buy diet literature? To feel virtuous by laying out nothing more than money. To make promises to himself like a man looking at travel brochures of exotic places. No, more a man reading about polar exploration living off snow, moss and boot-leather. About Red Indian tortures.

Malcolm became quite dreamy. As in his boyhood he had deliberately used thoughts of school, of homework to obscure the prospect of a treat or a birthday before wallowing in delighted expectation, so now he let Peter's overweight problem be obliterated by memories of Rhiannon. The only trouble was that they were not as sharp in his mind as *Lettres de mon Moulin* and the South Africans playing at Gloucester. His clergyman uncle had taken him.

'Soft as lights, that fellow,' said Peter when Malcolm had been dropped at his front gate. 'Perfectly pleasant, I agree, but dead soft.'

'Something like that, yes,' said Charlie.

'I bet he fills in the month and year on all his cheque counterfoils.'

'Yeah, and writes out the number of pence in words.'

'And sends in box-tops to save three-fifty on a hand-crafted presentation decanter.'

'Oh really I think that's going a bit far. But I bet he watches documentaries on the telly.'

'In Welsh.' Peter spoke with genuine rancour.

'And I swear he swings his arms when he walks.'

'Do you know they have wrestling in Welsh now on that new channel? Same as in English odd enough except the bugger counts *un—dau—tri* etcetera. Then the idiots can go round saying the viewing figures for Welsh-language programmes have gone up. To four thousand and eleven.'

'The commentary would have to be in Welsh too.'

'Doubtless, doubtless. Did you gather that young Malcolm had, let's say, an attachment to Rhiannon in the long-ago?'

'Something like that,' said Charlie again. 'He wasn't at all specific.'

'I thought he sounded a bit as though he had been attached. But I rather wonder when.'

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