

the hand of hiraeth



peter owain wyn

CHAPTER TWO

Morgan's pace slowed, and the incidents of yesterday settled with a degree of comfort. The fragment of bone might be from a different source to

the skeletons. The fracas of last night a simple matter of high spirits. His friend may well have left the box of matches on the table. In spite of the humour, Buck Rees' pronouncements as to the reasons for the skeletons being on the Estate carried a sensible ring, while Tal's dire warnings, though dramatic were not without precedent.

Bill 'Bungalow' came into sight, his appearance sufficient to cast once more the problems yesterday to the fore. For the tenth time he altered his opinion; the brawl was engineered, there was a sinister side to it: would Bill remember the fragment of bone?

"Bore da, Mr de Guy."

"Morning, Bill."

"I'm going to walk down through the woods and along the pebble beach, see if the water is in."

"High tide is not due for another hour."

"I will collect the black pebbles then."

Morgan dallied on the threshold of a quick-step, Bill's memory might this once play true, a hurried departure seemed a good idea.

"Have a good time."

"Thank you, Mr de Guy." He looked at Morgan, his expression suggested a search amongst the corners of his mind. "I wanted to say something, but I forgot!"

"Another time."

Sunday mornings, he volunteered to take the silver collection to chapel. His Great-Aunts no longer attended the services, but continued their donations on a regular and handsome basis. The Morning Service started at ten-thirty. It was his custom to arrive between half-past nine and a quarter-to-ten. Such time and tactic provided tender souls an escape from hard pews or an hour of rebuke disguised as a sermon.

The chapel entrance was an affair of no consequence. It lacked delicate archway, cobbled path and well-kept verge. The path to the entrance was sombre and sudden,. A twelve foot length of waist high brick wall on each side bridged the pavement to the door, once committed second thought lacked means. From path to chapel entrance there was one step. The double door, lacked wrought iron except for a small handle which served to support those who feared the worst. Above the door the date of birth was inscribed with deliberate simplicity, numerals followed by the name of the chapel.

Inside stood two small tables, stacked with hymn books, and collection boxes. To the left, a well sprung door led inside and to the right its mirror image, both of grand oak in a high state of varnish. On this side and that, stairs beckoned, three steps visible which twisted out of sight, each with

open doors at the bottom, less varnished, but of similar thickness to those which led into the sanctum. From ceiling to half-way mark, the walls were painted a high-gloss cream which gave way to vertical stripes of oak.

Morgan placed the three envelopes one at a time into the box then as was his custom climbed the stairs to the gallery above. It was a matter of routine, he could consider the rest of the day in a subdued atmosphere. There was a resonance in the silence, little had changed. Throughout a summer's Sunday, beams of light created a range of anti-colours, from charcoal grey to a cherub cream. In contrast to most religious institutions, sacredness took second place, unreality in the shape of a strange, distorted atmosphere intimidated. Floor space consisted of three levels, rows of pews gave way to an elevated platform which semi-circled the pulpit, behind the pulpit and on the same level stood the small organ and the spirit of non-conformism.

Morgan was about to return downstairs when a click of irreverent shoes delayed his departure. Mrs. Stevens appeared in the aisle, two large bunches of chrysanthemums in each arm. The flowers were placed aside, two large vases filled with water were brought in, then each stem from the two bunches placed one at a time inside.

The decision whether to remain and hide his presence was made for him. Another set of footsteps, this time tempered by respect, made their way. Miss Brenda Davies appeared with two modest bunches of flowers.

"Bore da, Mrs Stevens."

The older woman acknowledged the other, who returned the greeting in English. The second arrival stopped halfway up the aisle, a look of puzzlement on her face. She spoke again.

"I think there's some mistake."

"Mistake, Miss Davies?"

"The flowers for the pulpit are mine this week, and you are to decorate the vestibule."

Without a glance in her direction, Mrs Stevens continued to fill the vases.

"Oh, my dear, are you sure?"

Miss Davies disappeared into the side room and returned.

"I have just looked at the list and it clearly says 'Miss Davies, pulpit, Mrs Stevens

The vestibule.' Next month your name is down for the pulpit with Annie Roberts

Doing the flowers in the porch."

"I'll remove the blooms then. You can put those delicate little things here!"

There was a pause. "Pity! A bit overpowering for the vestibule, don't you think?"

Mrs Stevens indicated the chrysanthemums with a careless nod. The other woman appeared to ignore the comment and with patience waited for Mrs Stevens to transfer the flowers.

“Miss Davies, I wonder if you would be a good girl, could you fetch the vase from the vestibule?”

Neither through gesture or word did Miss Davies take offence. She laid her flowers down then walked back beneath the balcony.

Mrs Stevens though tall stature, carried herself well. She beckoned everywhere, a straight back and a strong bosom. A vanguard which signalled strong needs.

Miss Davies returned, the quiet dignity of her labour unprepared for the sarcasm which followed.

“These vases are rather large for your flowers, don’t you think, Miss Davies?”

“I shall use some wire netting.”

Miss Davies was in her mid-sixties, light of stature, small in size, the distribution of weight imprisoned around the posterior. She dressed in grey or black, the sombre shade exaggerated snow-white hair brushed into a tight bun. Below and out of sight Mrs Stevens finished her work, a public display of noise which did little credit to the craft of floral arrangement. Miss Davies having finished her task joined her in the vestibule. In a moment they would both be gone and with their departure the unease which accompanied his presence as an interloper.

“There! I think that will do.” The voice was clear. “I hope, Miss Davies, you won’t take offence, but since I first met you at Bryn’s house I was puzzled.” She paused, then changed her approach. “I do think a gentleman needs a Housekeeper, don’t you? I will have to insist that if anything happens to me the professor will advertise for someone to do those little chores around the house - here I am, off the subject again!”

To Morgan the diversion was deliberate, it carried bite and a foretaste of bile to come.

“You were saying...?”

“Ah yes! The third time I met you I knew when I had seen you before. Funny thing is, it was a long time ago: and for a short time at that. Normally I would have forgotten since faces change with age, but you are a remarkable exception. I hope you will accept the compliment: your face has flouted time.”

“That’s very kind of you.” The compliment masked the sarcasm. For the moment it left the plot hang in the air. In exchange, Miss Davies offered an

apology for something that was not of her making. "I hope you will forgive the confusion regarding the flowers."

Mrs Stevens dismissed the reference to the flowers, the pitch of her voice carried a rough tide, the driftwood would not be abandoned.

"Yes, it came to me after our third meeting. I couldn't have been more than seventeen, just started to train as a nurse, when a woman of about twenty-five years of age came up to a hospital in London to have a baby. She pleaded with the doctor not to press her as to the baby's father."

"I'm sure that was an experience for a young girl just starting on a nursing career."

The reply was hollow, too obvious for a passive listener to ignore.

"Do you remember that Miss Davies?"

"That seems a strange thing to say!"

"I don't think so, Miss Davies. I took the clerical file back to medical records. On the way a piece of paper fell out. I picked it up." There was a pause, then the voice continued. "Is not your middle name Ann, did you not at the time live in Builth Wells?"

The reply was faint, both women moved outside the entrance. He could hear the sound of the door as it closed. He rose, then paused at the top of the stairs. Alternate phrases floated up, wrapped in balls of cotton wool, the remainder distinct enough to fuel dark threats from a mouth ready seasoned.

"Let me refresh your memory. The doctor kept his promise. "Father unknown on the official file, but scribbled on a piece of paper, a name, a certain person." What followed was the sound of a barking dog and a voice intent on a whisper. He was certain the name passed between the women.

"The child must be, let me see: thirty-five."

"What are you after? What concern is it of yours?"

"I feel a problem shared is a problem halved, Miss Davies! I have no proof, I shall be honest with you, but I suspect this child of yours happens to be living here as well!"

"Why bring this up today, in the house of God? It's not right Mrs Stevens, on the Sabbath."

The day of the week doesn't concern me my dear, or the place. It's a little late in the day to be religious, but then it's not uncommon for people with your past to be more enthusiastic than the rest of us!"

"I knew when I first set eyes on you," Miss Davies drew upon an inner strength, "I knew then there was something wicked about you. No trace of humanity in you."

The other woman broke in with a laugh. Her laugh bore witness to the presence of things beyond mortal affairs.

“That is not surprising!” she answered.

Four words which slipped of the tongue yet tethered themselves in Morgan’s thoughts.

“God-fearing is something you are not! What kind of woman are you?”

There was pathos in her voice. She turned to Welsh. “Arglwdd!” The plea to the almighty seemed to calm her. The retreat of footsteps signalled an end to the affair. As soon as judgement dictated, Morgan opened the door and left the chapel.

Twenty yards away, Miss Davies stopped. She, in turn, had seen a member of the congregation further on. She turned, an unexpected movement, her face towards the ground as if to hide her anguish, to regain her composure. Morgan reached the pavement, he would turn in her direction, to give the impression of someone who passed the chapel without entering. She looked up, their eyes met. Did she suspect his presence there this morning?”

Not even the visit to nurse Knight’s residence could replace the strange conversation, not even business favourable to his friend’s future home could dispel the unhappy dialogue. He forced his mind to address the matter of the lodging house, which now came into sight.

Nurse Knight would like to see his friend today if possible. There was a married woman with an invalid husband due to see the place tomorrow. Could he phone his friend from her house? Alun was out, but due back any moment. Alun would have the number to phone back. Could he not wait there for the return call?

It was an hour before Alun phoned. Meanwhile Morgan was able to talk to Harold Pritchard, a lodger, Dr Bryn Michael, a regular visitor and Mrs Roote, a tenant who shared the third floor apartment with Garfield, her brother. Francoise Roche, completed the list. Bryn Michael was an acquaintance of many years standing, a man of great charm; a classics man by education, obsessed with Shakespeare, keen on his daily walk - the longer the better - and a veteran of the Somme. Pritchard was a man of serious and hidden ways. Mrs Roote, in contrast, was an open book. As for Francoise, her position was as well known to him as it was obscure to everyone else.

He and Alun arranged to meet that same evening outside the Chapel at a quarter to six. The choice of meeting place proof of his pre-occupation with the early morning conversation in the chapel. It was a stupid place to meet, outmatched only by the time. He would take Alun to see Nurse Knight

and the lodging house, not seven o'clock in case the Landlady decided to go to the evening service, a decision she would leave until the afternoon, this in spite of the hour interval between the time he arranged to meet his friend and the end of the service.

The next stop after the lodging house was the Commodore Hotel. Tradition and his own convenience dictated that payment of his Aunt's accounts should follow a day later than the delivery of the spirits. It was one o'clock before he left Buck's place.

The entrance to the Estate lay fifty yards to the back of him, in front the trim figure of Françoise appeared. She walked in the manner of a trained model, her hair blonde and long over the back and shoulders, was as neat as the simple dress she wore, a dress which billowed out from the waist to exaggerate slim ankles.

"Bon jour!"

Her voice high pitched, possessed of citrus fruits and ripe grapes, her smile from eyes, French and flushed. He returned her greeting. She sat next to him, the ease of acquaintance clear to an independent eye, the closeness a cause for chatter amongst those so inclined to perceive an affair. There was such an intimacy. To know her was to recall memories of his family and of the Legion. French, for that is what they spoke, made no allowance for half-cast souls like himself. Aid from her through pause, pace and repetition was not expected. The words displayed a banquet for the original native; his interest was held on sound, hunger for food of a different language planted in a foreign field. His was the eternal gratitude for another being from a land whose language was part of his childhood. In return, he offered as much as his expertise allowed-help in the written word. She confided to him that in her own language she showed a poor grasp of the written word, it had always been so since formal education began. At first, he put it down to a modest intellectual level or even less, until outstanding use and grasp of number and mathematical concept proved otherwise. With his agreement, help in the written word from whatever source was kept a secret. The cover, an agreeable one, was the use of Françoise's skill with hot pot and pan down at Glascwm House, a once a week treat for his Great Aunts.

"I am thinking we should speak English now."

"Just as I was warming up!"

"I have made some lamb cutlets for your Great-Aunts, a favourite dish, they say. Your mother made it in the French style years ago. They have memories of that."

"They like their food, that's for sure. You haven't made anything for me, have you?"

“I should have, but I obeyed your wishes, against my - how do you say...?”

“Better judgement.”

“Better judgement, oui. Look at you, all skin and bone!” She laid her palms against his stomach, then in a playful manner slid her hand around his waist, held it there for a moment then continued in a downward direction and squeezed. “Ah, there’s still a..” she stopped in search once again of a word, “ample, oui, oui, ample backside. All is not, as you say, lost!”

“I could grow to like this.”

“Monsieur, we shall see.”

Has anything been mentioned at the Post Office about a new lodger?”

“Ah!” She nodded, a vigorous shake of her head. “Nurse Knight said something about a teacher coming to stay, someone to teach at the school.”

Morgan looked away, stared into the distance, then spoke again.

“It’s a girl I know. She was at university with me.”

“Ah!”

He felt her hand take hold of his wrist; she kept it there.

“Someone you know well?”

“Yes, we were friends. Still are.”

“lovers, perhaps?”

“Then, just friends now.”

“That is good news, as you say, for me.”

It was different, his relationship with Françoise was based on a need to retrace his steps through his own childhood and youth. He would not, could not, deny the physical attraction for this French woman. The relationship with the teacher was another matter, one founded on a common purpose, through matters universal.

“That’s not the only new face going to be around. Another friend of mine may move in with Nurse Knight.”

“Another woman friend?”

“No, a friend from schooldays.” Morgan paused and pulled a piece of bark from the bare edge of the stump. “I want you to do me a favour: don’t let on to him, Alun Thomas is the name, that you come down here.”

“Why should I?”

“You might think that since he’s a friend of mine, it’s all right to tell him.”

“I see.”

“I want to keep it a secret, he’ll soon begin to wonder! Out of devilment really. Make’s life a bit more interesting.”

“Intrigue, we say, non?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“And the woman, what about her?”

“The same,” then he added, “ they are sure to get to know one another fairly soon, but I shall leave that up to you.”

“Not to fear, I shall join in the spirit of the thing.”

“That’s settled then. Do you still help in the post office?”

“On the weekends, not the Post Office part, the shop oui, why?”

“I think additional help is needed to come to grips with this reading, writing business. There’s a lecturer in the university I know who might be able to spend some time with you. A Friday night was suggested, would that be convenient?”

“I do sometimes work in the post office on that day, not often. It’s my day to finish early. When would this be?”

“After Christmas at the earliest, bags of time.”

“The time! I must be gone, at half-past one we sit for dinner!” She stood, bent and kissed him, a flutter of the lips against the cheek, and hurried towards the gate. He watched her disappear, then rose from the stump of timber. He left the road and headed towards the west side of the estate, a return to Glascwm House was not on the schedule for this time of day.

The path was narrow, the ground at this point a mixture of pine needles, grey earth and fine sand. His conversation with Francoise raised his spirits, memory of Algeria flooded back and he began to sing. He moved in a manner fashioned by foreign discipline and African sand: step and music tuned to the haunting marching song of the Legion. The path passed through the middle of a ridge, then worked an upward passage. Bank and incline continued for a hundred yards, vegetation much in evidence; patches of gorse and clusters of blackberry bush held the eye, a secluded slope eager to share itself with no-one.

Miss Davies, one-time patient at a London maternity hospital and a very private mother was no longer an island unto herself. The identity of the father and child was lost to Morgan, and the whereabouts of both remained a mystery. The other woman knew the identity of the father, but not of the child, her disclosure to Miss Davies seemed to him unnecessary. In this small act was a complete theatre of the bizarre. It left his own relationship with Francoise an intrigue of no consequence.

The path curved to the left then settled straight along a plateau bounded by silver birch. The wind until then made no impact on his senses, now he felt it ruffle hair and chin, and turn the lowest branches of the trees. It interfered with the privacy of the place, alien and unwelcome.

The Cottage appeared. To the side where the vegetable plot lay, a figure came into sight, the bent form of a man. Morgan quickened his pace, the other stopped his toil in the garden, then spoke.

“A cold day.”

“Yes, colder weather is forecast later today.”

“The plants are preparing for it, the older man answered.”

Morgan seemed to have known Tal all his life. Little had changed in his countenance; it was difficult to set an age to his face, he spent much of his time out of doors. The skin was rustic and weather beaten. How silly, he used to say, for the rich and idle to spend so much time and money in pursuit of sun and sea. “Carrot, plenty of carrots and work out of doors, the answer is simple,” then dismiss it all as a circus.

Not a strand of grey or white on his head, it was as the corn just harvested. He was not a ‘cochyn’, no-one could mistake it for red or ginger, it was the colour of gold. It seemed to change with the passage of day then reform with the morning light. Tal wore a smock closed in front with string, left free to hang outside cord trousers. On his feet a pair of clogs. Morgan entered the Cottage, and without hesitation strode to a corner where the crossbow swung by a strap fastened around a six-inch nail. He picked up a wallet of bolts and returned outside, his steps directed to a derelict wall - the remains of an outhouse. A circular straw stuffed target hung on a two-foot rope suspended from a short, stout horizontal post cemented into the wall eight feet from the ground. Bolt in place and safety catch on, he suspended the crossbow between two upright posts so that the bolt faced the ground. Safety precautions taken, Morgan moved over to the target and pushed it sideways to mimic the pendulum of a clock.

Bolt after bolt sped from the crossbow. Practice intensified into serious absorption, eye and hand better acquainted, to turn the game into a deadly art.

“Keep the point down, you will have to compensate for the weight.”

Tal appeared, ever ready to instruct; a brown cardigan covered his shirt, clogs replaced by laced-up boots.

“The aluminium makes a difference, and I find the nylon takes some getting used to after the catgut.”

“I’ve tried it,” the older man replied, “The loss in weight does not compensate for the spring of the trigger and the nylon has an unreliable pull about it.”

Morgan agreed. There was much to be said for the earlier trigger mechanism.

“When you’re ready, I want to show you an interesting piece of equipment.”

Morgan replaced the bolts inside the wallet and followed his mentor into the room which adjoined the cottage. Morgan noticed the small round eye-glass on the table, not its normal abode since Tal carried it about his person.

The room contained a number of wide wooden shelves, most of the space taken up with herbs in various forms of preparation, miniature trees no more than four inches high stood upon a large clay tray. The remainder of shelf space was crowded with demi-jars, powders, dried leaves, liquids and gels of various colours, helped in their composition by pestles and mortars of different sizes. Leather-bound books in groups of two and three acted as commas and stops between soft and wood bark specimens.

One side of the room was a renaissance scene, the ghost of Galileo ready to appear: pulleys and levers, assorted metals, strips of wood and glass prisms, small rock samples and animal bones. The presence of a microscope gave lie to Tal's step upon the lower rung of science. Yet all appeared mere servants to the formidable and mysterious hand-glass known to Morgan as the 'Optic Thunder'. Morgan was handed a rather pregnant telescope, sophisticated enough to warrant surprise, since Tal scorned weapons advanced in technology. Materials which demanded high temperatures for extraction, which involved elaborate presses and moulds, the application of chemicals and a reliance on the expertise of others, received short measure. What counted when all else failed was Natural Resources Limited, near to hand with no management problems, a ready supply of spares and geared to a one-man labour force.

"I'm going to close the curtains and extinguish all possible sources of light." It was a thorough piece of work, even to the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor.

"Can you see any points of light at all?"

"The keyhole."

Towards the end of his task, Tal lit a candle, and with this to guide him, he placed a plug of paper against the source of light.

"How's that?"

"I can't see anything else."

"I shall extinguish the light, then you listen to my instructions. I'm going to move. You count out loud to twenty, look through the telescope and describe where I am." the sound of Morgan's voice neutralised the use of ear to track Tal's movements, and the velvet blackness of such intensity as to make it impossible to see his new position without some aid.

"You're sitting on a bench next to a large glass container, and you have your right hand resting on your left shoulder."

Apart from a reddish tinge, the figure of Tal was remarkable in its clarity. He peered through the telescope with the other eye. Tal moved towards a window and pulled the sheet away.

“Contrary to what I said earlier, it’s very difficult to block out all light, and this telescope takes advantage of that. It concentrates all available light into the smallest possible area, a thousand different strands from the four corners of the room and beyond collected in the area which you happen to be looking at.”

By now Morgan was sure of its use.

“The weight is going to be a problem on the crossbow unless one gets used to it by leaving it on permanently.”

“My thoughts exactly, but the combined weight still does not add up to these self-loading rifles on the market.”

To enquire as to Tal’s information on the technical developments of the armouries of the world would be an insult, since it represented a mere morsel of what he knew. It was a strange business to handle modern weapons as he had done in the Legion after being taught the use of the crossbow. Since the age of twelve practice with the crossbow was second nature, and the craft involved—from rough timber to finished product - a close third. As a youth, it was cause for excitement, later he questioned the reason: why take up arms for the Middle Ages?

The next remark was made with caution.

“The crossbow, sling and throwing knife - they’re no real competition against gunpowder and shot.”

“When you have, as you say, gunpowder and shot, use them by all means. It will be of no use against the real enemies, I’m afraid.”

Tal stopped, his reply seemed to carry with it a mystery available to him and no-one else. He stared out of the window, a harsh profile towards the light of the autumn sun.

“But they will be available.”

“Think that, Morgan, and you may as well surrender to the doctrine of Mammon! Remember, who holds the advantage when there is no gun to replace gun, no factory at hand to produce bullets, no moulds to shape metal and no tools to make a fine bore? Come on! Let’s see if you’ve improved with the sling. You’ll understand someday.”

The catapult was as simple in design relative to the crossbow as the latter was to a machine gun. Five of the six shots peppered the paper target, the sixth glanced the wrong side of the wooden frame. To make things interesting, the right hand was used. Ever since April when Tall suggested

he should practise with his non-dominant hand, he set to the business with a vengeance.

The afternoon's proceedings ended with a round of magazines fired from a self-loading rifle, standard British Army issue. Tal showed scant interest in such high velocity weapons, 'personal weapons' they were called by the military.

"Impersonal would be more appropriate" he would say. "When you fire a crossbow or use a throwing knife, it's close order work. You see the pain on your opponent's face and suffer the contortion of his body, you will feel the anguish yourself. If you have humanity, you will use such weapons with all possible reluctance."

Morgan held the rifle in his hands. Tal took it from him, and seemed to read his thoughts, for he said, "This rifle can be fired so far away, there's no involvement in the act. It's so easy to pull the trigger."

"Modern war demands it."

The older man ignored the statement. An enemy of a different kind made its position clear.

"It's time to eat. There's cawl bubbling on the fire and cakes to follow."

"Great!" I haven't eaten anything apart from a small bowl of bran."

"Good for the bowels, I'll say that, but not enough. This fad for diets is no good for man or beast. Exercise, that's the answer. Makes you feel good as well."

"Are you saying we should eat everything?"

"Not at all. The secret is the rate of metabolism. It's slow with some, quick with others. If you burn up food quickly you need to think about food which releases energy slowly, and vice versa. Activity and an absorption with life - that's the answer. You'll never want too much then when it comes to food, listen to your body, not your imagination. That's what children do. Learn from them."

As far as Tal was concerned, children in their behaviour demonstrated the way much of life should be undertaken. "Watch the youngsters." He would say. "Learn from them the secrets of a long and healthy life."

They entered the Cottage, a two-room affair, bed, kitchen and sitting-area all together. The second room contained little more than a toilet and a zinc bath hanging on the wall. The clay floor tiles were covered mostly by rush and coconut matting. The fireplace was an agreeable sight, wide and fuelled in the main by logs at weekends, coal for the rest of the week. On each side two large coal scuttles served to give proportion and hold the precious pieces of coal. The stew pot rested on the logs towards one side of

the fire. In the centre, a griddle was placed, covered with round flat cakes, heated by anthracite, ruby rare and devil red.

Morgan seated himself on one of four chairs. As was his custom, the older man sat in a window chair. The table was covered with a starched tablecloth, in the centre a bowl of roses stood on a willow mat. There followed a period of silence, a ritual in which Morgan played no part. As always, Tal looked down at the table, then towards the ceiling, equal time given to both. It appeared to Morgan more a gesture of reflection than an offering of thanks, a fleeting respite rather than awesome wonder for the provision of nature. Tal rose, ladled stew into enamel bowls, set them on the table, and pointed to the oblong brown loaf. They ate in silence. Table cleared, chairs set on each side of the fireplace, the older man bent and placed a piece of coal on the fire, stacked it and placed the poker across the hearth.

“What news in the Village?”

He never ventured far nowadays. The stack of scientific journals in the corner grew from Morgan’s visits to town, a once a week chore. On rare occasions he would shop for offal - stuffed hearts were a favourite of Tal’s. On festive occasions he would be asked to bring certain seafood.

“The cricket team finished second in the league. They’ve fallen out with the rugby club again.”

“It would be unusual if they didn’t, ever since I can remember they’ve bickered.”

Tal sucked on his briar pipe, a faint smile across his face.

“The majority of the members on the rugby committee are the very same people who serve on the cricket committee! Criticism of one to the other body are written down in the minutes. I’ve actually seen the name of one man who asked for his criticism to be recorded in one set of cricket minutes, and noted by the same man on another set of rugby minutes!”

The very lack of consistency makes such people difficult to govern, no fear of enslavement when people like that exist.”

“That’s all very well, but you have to make sense of it.”

“Maybe.”

“I went along to Nurse Knight’s place this morning. She wants to see Alun this evening: someone else is after her room, but I think she prefers a single person.”

This news brought a look of pleasure to Tal’s face’

“Ruth’s got accommodation with Mary Bland at the Post Office. You know, I can’t imagine how she found out about that post in the school; after all, it

was sudden. I mean, the man was to all intents and purposes O.K. one day and then ill the next.”

“Sometimes, Morgan, you should accept things, not understand them. Still, I blame myself for that.”

The way Tal looked suggested a degree of insight into that business.

“I fancy the Village will have plenty to talk about.”

“And how is Headmaster Stevens today?”

“Becoming a bit of a celebrity. He had a tremendous reception last Friday. He made a speech to an eminent gathering. It will probably appear in the journal.”

The older man remained unimpressed.

“You know my thoughts on energy. I’m not happy with the Stevens’ of the world. They worry me. Oh, I know they appear as Messiahs, I’ve had experience.” He stopped. “Figuratively speaking that is.” The question is: does the provision of resources free them, do they think better of one another? History so far seems to have proved differently. Take the full stomach and medicine business: we’ve only replaced physical health by social disease and mental stress. The more one diminishes the more the other seems to grow.”

Little was said of the two skeletons and less of his three Great-Aunts. He would not raise their state of health, Tal would not ask. There was a chill in the air. Morgan was about to make his departure when Tal placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Could you check the clay pipes in the outhouse, see if they are dry yet?”

The request served to increase Morgan’s concern. It was unknown for Tal to ask for help in labour large or small. This, together with disjointed thoughts and a memory given to wandering, bode ill for the man.

Tal stood up and walked across the room. He took a book from a shelf and began to browse, his back towards Morgan. The fuel from the fire flickered in anticipation of support; the warm air was sudden, it wrapped itself round Morgan as he covered the open ground between the cottage and door of the outhouse. The clay pipes were in a pile, they lay stacked against the wall which divided the outhouse from the living quarters. Each pipe was closed by a plug of wool, then a piece of leather tied by a string.

Morgan set to work. The room was warm, a dry heat. He emptied the first one, a piece of leather fell out. He picked it up: it was a wallet. He undid the leather lace and drew out a roll of parchment. As he did so, the room transmitted a yellow glow. He spread the paper in front of him. The words though small and cramped were clear. At that moment he became aware of a melodic sound. At the top of the document there were

instructions,”.....having read this you will replace it in the wallet and the wallet in the container then return it to that place in which it was found. Speak of this document to none except that you shall know these other servants.....the fears which maketh man rage against his own body are forever gone, the Great Servant will be at hand.....”

Never had he experienced such awareness, never had concentration been so effortless.

“.....having read you will know this to be the ‘Longing’. You are amongst the chosen of the ninth house. You are esteemed among servants. You shall be known as the High Servant of the Rearguard. Those that you read before you, all seeds of the twentieth century, are link servants for the High Servant.....”

“.....the High Servant shall labour with the link servants and give of their fruits unto the first servant of the next House - the Tenth House. He with his link servants shall with your support go forth and stem the tide - they shall be known as the Vanguard of the Tenth House.....”

The words jumped out at him. The very walls throbbed, the ground seemed to float and the air vibrate with the heat.

“.....the seed from the Great Servant shall be fresh unto the First Servant and straight to the.....generation of the High Servant.....there are some servants who do not know their service, who pass from birth to death without being called upon. The seed of such servants unto the.....generation shall remain unto the Tones. If such generations are left each to slumber unto the.....generation, they shall be cast out without rebuke so that their seed of the next generation shall be lost to the Tones.In his almighty wisdom the Prime Mover shall take unto the Tones any servant awakened from slumber up unto the.....generation of each Tone.....The servants of the Tones from the beginning unto the very end are harvested as the grass from the four ends of the world. They shall have many signs about their bodies, from the humblest there shall be few, through to the Great Servant who will show upon his body many such signs.....The signs about the bodies of the Servants shall be as nothing compared with the signs from heavenly bodies under which they were born....the signs from the heavenly bodies shall be as grains in the sands to the right actions and high thoughts of the Servants of the ‘Longing’.”

The words came and went as the warmth and colour within the room increased. He could feel the muscles of his body contract and the bones tremble. Once more he looked at the list of names. The one above he recognised, the one below grew faint before his eyes, he could not read

anymore, the language made no sense to him, the veil was closed on the knowledge he held in his hand.

The heat in the room subsided. He shook himself, it was not a trance, the document was real enough, though without sense. Inside the cottage the fire burnt low in the cradle. He placed a log upon the charred wood and turned towards the bed. Tal lay asleep, Morgan covered him with a blanket then closed the cottage door behind him. The cool wind of early autumn offered relief. He lifted his head, gulped the fresh air, then turned to Glascwm House.

The move towards the door signalled the end, the game was over.

“That’s enough. Off you go!”

Morgan accompanied his command with a stern gesture towards the open door.

The Great Danes bounded out of the house, away towards the sand dunes. He closed the door and stood on the bottom step, aware of other eyes upon him.

“Did you see our donation safe this morning?”

The voice came from the right, the question covered both chapel and spirit. He looked across, the bay window was open, all three Great-Aunts were present; there would be order to the rounds of questions, age would determine the exchanges.

“Yes, Aunt Hannah.”

“who gave the flowers this morning?”

“Miss Brenda Davies and the Headmasters wife, Aunt Maggie.”

“What are they?”

“Chrysanthus and miniature roses, Aunt Megan.”

He couldn’t be certain of the latter species.

“Is Nurse Knight sympathetic?”

“I think so.”

“She should think herself lucky.”

“Yes.”

“As good as anyone.”

Most conversations occurred either on Saturday at lunchtime, after the visit of Buck Rees, or as now, on a Sunday around tea-time.

Regal nod, broad smile and a wave ensured a smooth departure from happy company to splendid isolation.

He walked beyond the hedge of rhododendrons then turned to face the House. The roof was still visible; he scanned the ridge and the channels, slate and lead set. Sound and sensible, it sprawled low against the dunes beyond, respect for the sea-wind its sole concern. A mere child compared with the age of the Estate, there had never been a house of great pretensions at any period. Conceived in Eighteen Sixty Five, a union between a row of cottages and a large barn, the former vacated by tenants who took the industrial shilling and joined the revolution. Abandoned for a time, it grew piecemeal along a length of cobbled stone, a low profile hidden from the gates and gusty ocean, an epitaph to moderation and simple taste.

It was ten to six when he reached the car. It was parked opposite the chapel.

“What’s the plan then, butty?”

“I thought you would like to see Nurse Knight. If you didn’t like the look of her, then you needn’t bother to go over to the house and introduce yourself later.”

“What’s her looks got to do with it?”

“It all helps to make for a comfortable stay.”

There was no sign of Nurse Knight amongst the early arrivals, among whom one was of particular interest in her wide-brimmed hat. Morgan could not deny a certain elegance to her, Joyce Stevens carried middle age with much regard for position and the second chance.” You mentioned you would like to spend a couple of sessions teaching locally.”

“Sure, my contract allows me to work outside the university. Why do you ask?”

“Why not approach the local school?”

“Our old school?”

“Yes.”

“Hm.”

A face appeared at the passenger window, followed by an index finger amputated at the second joint. Morgan opened the window.

“How lovely to see you!” The minister spoke in the Sabbath style, the smile beckoned.

“This is my friend, you may remember him. Alun Thomas, this is Reverend Obadiah Bennett.”

“How nice to see you both attending our little service. I’m sure you would like me to call on you to take the collection at the interval.”

The remark was aimed at Morgan. To those familiar with the ways of God’s servant no reply was adequate, protest to no avail.

The Reverend Obodiah Bennett, Bachelor of Divinity, Bachelor of Theology, accompanied by rimless glasses and butterfly collar, moved off in

the direction of the side entrance. Morgan nodded, more a reflex than a response. The request carried the same impact as a knee jerk from a physician's rubber mallet.

Alun turned to his friend, a large grin on his face, aware of his friend's disbelief.

"I don't mind going in, it's better than sitting here to be stared at! Anyway I've never seen this denomination in action. What is it against?"

Morgan mumbled a reply, aware that Alun's acceptance carried a genuine wish to observe the ritual and rites of passage. His friend sampled most religions. Of a very liberal; Jewish background, he had no reservations as to monopolies. To sit in on other people's insurance policies and listen to alternative forms of retirement from the world was an education too valuable to be missed.

"oh well, if Nurse Knight went in early or arrives late we shall at least see her. Follow me upstairs."

"O.K."

In his enthusiasm to reach the comparative safety of the gallery he just avoided Miss Davies. She looked pale, and the sight of Morgan did nothing to help. The two men sat in the back pew, behind the left hand stairs. Youth dominated the seats, except for one or two persons whose preoccupation for the next hour was to see rather than be seen, a question of duty rather than commitment.

Morgan scanned the congregation. Familiar figures in family pews, varnished seats studded with red hymn books and knee cushions. Griffith Evans, a chapel Deacon in the big pew, his good wife, Mrs 'back and collar Evans', judge of dandruff and general aid for the removal of stray hair, middle pew next to the right aisle. Second pew, right side, Mrs 'Super' Samuels in salmon-pink coat and tyrolean hat. Councillor Tom Griffiths and Mrs Griffiths, third row back on the right of the right-hand aisle. Thrice-married Mrs Jones and husband, grey skin and meatless, fourth row back. First row centre, the minister's wife and daughter, fraught and neurotic. Behind them the teaching professions: spinsters Miss Haskett M.A. and Miss Glynn, headmistresses senior and junior, earnest and eager.

"It seems to do without the ritual of other churches."

"That's the general idea."

"Who are those people on the raised platform?"

"The Deacon's, the elders of the chapel."

Whispered questions were exchanged.

“This Landlady of mine, can you see her?”

“No, She might be out of sight beneath the gallery.”

Situated on each side of the pulpit were three rows at right angles to the rest of the congregation. By tradition, the Meredith family dominated the left side, all seventeen when present. As far as he knew, the right side was without claim. The sole occupant that evening, all virtue and innocence: Mrs Stevens, the Headmasters wife.

Morgan bent forward and tapped the shoulder of the man in front of him. As far as he remembered the man still organised the collection team.

“The Reverend has asked me to take the box around this evening.”

“Do the downstairs, right side.”

The end of the hymn signalled the collection. Long-handed box in hand, he descended the stairs. The practice was to start at the back. A quick glance showed Nurse Knight absent. The collection box passed along the back pew. Miss Davies sat in the end seat. She placed her envelope, her head bent, oblivious to his presence. He exchanged smile with smile from back to front until he arrived at the place where Mrs Stevens sat. He leaned towards her.

“Which flowers did you like Mr de Guy?” She spoke in a whisper, and smiled beyond him. Her voice metallic, her pallor white.

Collection box deposited at the top of the short flight of steps, he returned to his seat in the gallery, uncomfortable and stirred.

While Miss Davies suspected, Mrs Stevens knew of his presence that morning.

Morgan felt uncomfortable. The sermon did nothing for his frame of mind. Full of hellfire and damnation, it lacked profound theology, each indictment followed by “Yes!” and double “Amens”, each judgement encouraged by the chapel elders. He looked at Alun, he could see he was intrigued. It was standard practice to alternate Welsh with English, to repeat the punch-line in the other language.

For a time he watched the minister, then by degrees his eyes turned down and to the right, a force compelled his gaze there. As far as he knew - his Great-Aunts being the source of the information - Mrs Stevens was not a regular chapel goer. From her behaviour this morning and her early arrival this evening he could imagine her making adjustments to stem and leaf as members of the congregation entered the chapel. Someone was sure to comment on the floral arrangement, everyone would be aware of their origin.

Joyce Stevens sat so as to face the front row of the pew, the top of her head in line with a stone pillar, the overall effect resembled the traditional

headwear of the Welsh costume. Her coat, in fine red and black, visible from her elbow upwards, gave substance to the effect. Aware of his gaze, she looked towards the gallery: their eyes met. The transfiguration complete. A tremble stole through his body, uninvited, unexpected; he shook, unable to conceal the movement.

“What’s the matter?” Alun whispered.

“Something I ate, could be food-poisoning.”

“Your face is as white as your shirt. Get outside, get some air!”

“I’ll be O.K.”

Morgan forced himself to look once more. The appearance, the illusion gone. The woman’s gaze, now fixed on someone beneath the gallery. He became aware of movements, whispers and shuffling feet; a door opened, the footsteps trailed outside, the sounds died away.

Alun aware of the disturbance, spoke.

“This sermon isn’t going down well.”

“Too much damnation and not enough salvation.”

By the time the service ended Morgan was a better shade of pink. On the pavement an elder of the congregation exchanged words with him. A member had been overcome, heat or a slight heart attack suggested, seemed alright, had gone home unaided.

“That’s another religious experience under by belt!”

“Some experience, believe me.”

“You are not making exaggerated claims for monopoly.”

“Let me put it like this: it was a service with a difference. If you ever get a chance, keep an eye out for a certain painting, public buildings, houses. You might find hanging on a wall a well-known painting of a woman about to enter or leave the chapel, anyway, that doesn’t matter. The point is, she’s dressed in a traditional Welsh costume, the artist was a man called S Curzon Vosper, try to have a look at it.”

If he was perplexed by a line of conversation which bore no relevance to past, present or future, Alun showed a remarkable amount of tolerance.

“What’s so special about it?”

“I’ll tell you. The painting is called ‘Salem’. Legend has it that the woman, a dear old soul, was consumed with vanity at being chosen as the central figure for the painting. It was the colourful shawl that drew the artist’s attention. Have a close look at the shawl, the left shoulder.”

Alun listened, the puzzle insufficient to dominate other concerns.

“Did you see this woman Knight?”

“She wasn’t there, we shall have to go over to her place.”

The lodging house was less than a quarter of a mile from the chapel. The car had no excuse to move into top gear. They stopped close to the wall of the house. There was no pavement to line the car against, a fact which might bear on his friend's decision to accept, if offered, the available accommodation.

"Is there a garage at the back?"

"I don't know."

"Could be a bit awkward, parking."

"There's a lane at the back, opens out to the shops and the Post Office. You should be able to park there."

The Landlady herself opened the door, glasses to hand, keen eyes sharp and perceptive.

"Good evening! This is the prospective lodger."

Introductions exchanged, they were invited inside.

"If you don't mind, I won't stay. I've got work to finish."

Morgan walked down the road, the movement of the curtain a signal that his presence outside the house was noted. He came in sight of Glascwm and the ocean beyond. Few in number, the clouds crawled free of wind, wide apart and alone. Within the trees the lowest leaves moved footloose upon a breeze which hugged the ground. On a still sea, waves closest to the shore hummed their presence. Miss Davies' health was his concern, he was certain her affairs whispered matters universal. At least she managed to leave the chapel.