VINTAGE

THE OLD DEVILS

KINGSLEY AMIS

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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About the Book

Malcolm, Peter and Charlie and their Soave-sodden wives have one main ambition left in life: to drink Wales dry. But their routine is both shaken and stirred when they are joined by professional Welshman Alun Weaver (CBE) and his wife, Rhiannon.

About the Author

Kingsley Amis was born in South London in 1922 and was educated at the City of London School and St John's College, Oxford. After the publication of *Lucky Jim* in 1954, Kingsley Amis wrote over twenty novels, including *The Alteration*, winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, *The Old Devils*, winner of the Booker Prize in 1986, and *The Biographer's Moustache*, which was to be his last book. He also wrote on politics, education, language, films, television, restaurants and drink. Kingsley Amis was awarded the CBE in 1981 and received a knighthood in 1990. He died in October 1995.

ALSO BY KINGSLEY AMIS

Fiction

Lucky Jim
That Uncertain Feeling
I Like It Here
Take a Girl Like You
One Fat Englishman
The Anti-Death League
I Want It Now
The Green Man
Girl, 20
The Riverside Villas Murder
Ending Up
The Crime of the Century
The Alteration
Jake's Thing
Collected Short Stories
Russian Hide-and-Seek
Stanley and the Women
Difficulties with Girls
The Folks that Live on the Hill
The Russian Girl
Mr Barrett's Secret and Other Stories
You Can't Do Both
The Biographer's Moustache

Verse

A Case of Samples
A Look Round the Estate
Collected Poems 1944–79
The New Oxford Book of Light Verse (editor)
The Faber Popular Reciter (editor)

The Amis Anthology (editor)

Non-Fiction

New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction
The Golden Age of Science Fiction (editor)
The James Bond Dossier
What Became of Jane Austen?

On Drink

Rudyard Kipling and his World
Harold's Years (editor)
Every Day Drinking
How's Your Glass?
The Amis Collection: Selected Non-Fiction 1954–1990

Memoirs

With Robert Conquest
Spectrum I, II, III, IV, V (editor)
The Egyptologists

To Louis and Jacob

The Old Devils

Kingsley Amis

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Many real places are referred to in this novel (Carmarthen, Cowbridge) and many fictitious ones too (Birdarthur, Caerhays). Lower Glamorgan corresponds to no county division. The fictitious places are not real ones in disguise or under pseudonyms: anybody trying to go from the coast of South Wales to Courcey Island, for instance, would soon find himself in the Bristol Channel. Courcey and the others have no more actual existence than any of the characters here portrayed.

K.A.
Swansea: London

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 her square-topped glasses. Then she made a series of small noises and movements of the kind that meant 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 that 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 reread 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. This 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 sides 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 realized 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 usual 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 nowdays.’

‘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, while 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, loose 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 its 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 to 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 . . . chaplet . . . 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 into 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; 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 to 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 motor-cycles 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, on 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 at one stage cancer of them, or one of them, had been among his leading special dreads, distinguished as it was 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 had 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.

2

‘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 of 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, a dark serious lined face with a hint of subdued passion, an actor’s face some might have called it. ‘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 his craving for information. When that was done he explained that, what with being stuck out at Capel 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 realize he’s on television quite a lot, though we don’t usually get it in Wales, and when 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 a 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 patronize 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 realize 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 realizes 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’d done was juggle two phrases about and had the Americans going on about childlike Welsh vision. 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 bulk and state. On the way out of the room he gave a muffled cry of shock when the side of his heel 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 head-first through the closed window or, more prosaically, overturning the table in his lap. And that 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 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, recognizable 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 man. 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 description 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 the 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 he 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 or 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-