

OLD PEOPLE ARE A PROBLEM

Emyr Humphreys

I

Old people are a problem. What other conclusion could he come to? It seemed as though nothing on earth would persuade Mary Keturah Parry to move out of the chilly squalor of Soar chapel cottage into a comfortable room, or even a suite of rooms, in Cartref Residential Home. Alderman Parry-Paylin felt responsible for her. She was ninety-three and his mother's only surviving sister. And there was the question of how much time he could afford to spend on such a fruitless enterprise. He wasn't feeling too young himself. That very morning he had exhausted his strength trying to break in and then stable one of his mountain ponies. He was pushing sixty and made to realise how much stronger the pony was than himself. There was the depressing possibility, on such a bright summer morning, that he might have to give up this hobby. Then as if to demonstrate further the strength and intractability of youth, no sooner had he succeeded in stabling the wild animal than his only daughter turned up, breathless with triumph, from demonstrating and protesting in Genoa. And in tow, like campaign trophies, she brought a wispy unmarried mother and her snivelling offspring.

‘Thought we could put them up for a while,’ Iola said. ‘A bit of rest and recuperation.’

It becomes clear that the young are a problem too. When your daughter corners you, it is hard to decide whether this world is too big or too small.

‘Where has she been this time?’

His aunt was glaring at him as she crouched over a small fire, cooking peppermint cake in a dirty little saucepan. At the heart of the glare lay the congealed reproach of a lifetime. He had gone over to the enemy and she would never allow him to forget that that was still the way she looked at it. All he had done in effect was marry the daughter of Penllwyn Hall, in her view the pretentious home of a family of turncoats. At some stage well within Keturah Parry’s copious memory, his late wife’s grandfather, a mean and grasping quarry owner, had deserted Methodism for the established church. These fragments of local history did not concern him much, except to remind him, on occasions such as this, of the appalling narrowness of his aunt’s views. They were no more relevant to modern living than her working wig that rested low over her forehead like an inverted bird’s nest. He could never venture to laugh at her. She knew too much. He had a perfect right after his marriage to abandon primary school teaching, and to go into business in a limited way as a property developer, but she had a way of referring to the transformation as something vaguely discreditable. As far back as he could remember there was always accusation in her glance. When he was small in chapel, if he became restless during the service, she would never fail to transfix him with a glare across an expanse of sparsely populated pews.

‘Genoa,’ Mihangel Parry-Paylin said.

He pronounced the name clearly for the benefit of her hearing. She took quiet pleasure in getting it wrong.

‘Geneva,’ she said. ‘*From Bala to Geneva*. Nice little book. Things were so much more civilised in those days.’

She had acquired the perverse habit of appropriating the life experience of her parents' generation as her own. The world had taken a definite wrong turning in 1914. The Alderman said that may well have been the case: but since Keturah was only seven at the time, there would have been very little she could have done about it.

'Genoa,' he said. 'Where those terrible riots took place. A young lad was shot dead there.'

'I haven't got a television,' she said. 'You know that.'

She had a wireless that was fifty years old but she only heard what she wanted to hear. She liked to complain about Radio Cymru. Too much noise and not enough sermons.

'I've been telling you for years, Mihangel Paylin,' she said. 'You spoil that girl.'

He could only agree with her. On the other hand, what else could he have done? She was still in school when she lost her mother and he lost a wonderful wife. Easy enough for an old witch to talk. What had she ever lived for except the chapel and the good name of her family: and both these were no more, he suspected, than extended aspects of her own absorption in herself. All these things he thought and could never really tell anyone since Laura died. His closest friend Morus had moved to live in the Dordogne. His daughter Iola had driven off Charlotte Sinclair, who with a great deal of persuading, might have become his second wife, on the grounds that she was too English and should never be allowed to defile her mother's bed or Penllwyn, which was in fact her mother's inheritance.

'You want to bring her to heel,' Auntie Keturah said. 'I've told you before. Her mother was weak enough with her. Spare the rod and spoil the child.'

Mihangel Paylin sat in the uncomfortable wooden chair despairing of his situation. No movement seemed possible on any front. His only daughter was impervious to argument. This old woman would never budge. She loved squatting in her squalor, so what could he do about it? He

looked up at the shelf above the open fireplace and stared at a tin with Mr Gladstone's stern features painted on it, staring back at him. That was where she kept her pennies for the Foreign Mission. They were still there long after pennies had ceased to be legal tender. That's the kind of woman she was. Wedded to the past. Like one of those clothed and crowned skeletons that hang in the crypts of Sicilian churches. A bride of silence. If the chapel was to be sold somehow or other she had to be moved out. As things stood she would only leave feet first in a box.

And how are things at home he asked himself. Will somebody tell me exactly what is happening?

II

The first thing he noticed in the dining room was the absence of his framed photograph on the Welsh dresser. It was taken when he was the youngest mayor ever to be elected by the County Council. He wore the splendid mayoral robes. The chain itself was worth several thousand pounds. A colour photograph, tastefully lit, demanded a substantial frame. There was no good reason why a man should not be allowed to take a certain pride in his appearance and achievements. People had been known to remark he was a fine figure of a man.

'Where's my picture?'

Iola was fussing about helping the unmarried mother to feed her little son who seemed to be rejecting unfamiliar food.

'In the drawer, with your albums. Standing behind the Queen opening the new bypass. Church parade in full regalia. It's all there. Safe and sound.'

'What did you want to do that for?'

'Well it's a bit out of date, isn't it? And you wouldn't want people to think you were self-important, would you?'

Who were 'people'? This wretched girl and her wretched

boy. Iola said her name was Maristella and the boy she called Nino. What were they to him that his daughter should remove his mayoral portrait from its place of honour on the dresser? The furnishing at Penllwyn was unchanged since his wife died. And she in her day had cherished her family antiques with a religious care. They still stood as memorials of her quiet devotion – in such contrast to his daughter’s iconoclastic inclinations. Did the girl do anything these days except protest, and when she could spare the time, call the whole purpose of his way of life into question? It was his habit to be genial and generous. They were essential qualities for public life. Smiles all round. You needed to work the familiar streets, dispensing cheerful greetings and armed with pockets full of goodwill. Did that mean he had to be genial and generous to this unlikely pair? He had a legal right to turn them out. Flotsam and jetsam didn’t have a vote. There were facts to be established. He addressed his daughter in a tongue the new arrivals could not understand.

‘Where did you find this one?’ he said.

He made a stiff effort to be judicious and impartial.

‘On the ground,’ Iola said. ‘A policeman was kicking her. And hitting her with a truncheon.’

He knew these things happened. Outside the limits of his council’s administration there existed a dangerous world. There was his regular evening television viewing to demonstrate this ferocious fact. But why should his only daughter want to plunge into the heart of it? Such a perfect quiet child. She was twelve when she lost her mother and a light went out of his life. She grieved so quietly. So intense. So determined. It was only worrying about her, and the increasing demands of public life – he would tell sympathetic colleagues when they were inclined to listen – that kept him sane. She showed every sign of academic brilliance. And then just before her sixteenth birthday a police car brought her home from some large-scale language protest. Her forehead was bleeding and he had never seen her look happier. That

had to be the take-off of a great career of protest. For years it was something to tolerate. From prison or from foreign parts she would come limping home to recuperate. He could not but welcome her. She was his only daughter. Remonstrations proved ineffective. Iola was an excellent cook and it became her practice to prepare a celebration supper as soon as she felt she had recovered. This, however, was a new departure and it made him nervous. This was his home; his citadel. He needed the privacy, the space; the relaxation that belongs to a proprietor at the heart of his estate. Did she propose to turn it into a refugee centre?

‘We won’t be in your way, Mici Paylin.’

She had a way of creating a variety of versions of his name and using them, in the first instance, as badges of affection. As time went on and he felt her character toughen, it would all depend on her tone of voice: it could vary from habitual affection to thinly veiled contempt. With both these women, as it were at both ends of his life’s candle, he was obliged to be so circumspect. They had never much taken to each other. His theory used to be, because they were too alike: stubborn and intractable. Even when Iola was small her great-aunt was displeased with her prolonged stubborn silences. ‘I don’t understand this girl at all,’ she would say, as if her inability to fathom Iola’s hidden depths was entirely the little girl’s fault. And now when Keturah Parry was clinging so stubbornly to her unhygienic and desperately independent life, he had noticed how little interest and sympathy his daughter had with the old woman’s predicament. ‘Go and visit your aunt,’ he would say. ‘She doesn’t want to see me,’ she would answer. ‘We don’t have anything to say to each other. We live in two different worlds. It’s your problem, Alderman Paylin,’ she would say. As if it were only one more of his civic responsibilities instead of a family problem that reached in fact, right back to his childhood and even to his birth. With all her capacity for indignation, Iola could be quite heartless.

‘I need help in the house and in the garden. There’s an awful lot to be done. You’ll be free to attend even more committees, Mici P. Think how much more good you’ll be able to do.’

Was that snide or was it sincere? These were the questions that beset him latterly almost whenever his daughter spoke. How much good in fact did he do? Public Health, Education, Ways and Means, Planning. Why should there always be a question mark over Planning? There was a crying need for better housing and it had been no more than coincidental that the three barren fields below the closed quarry were part of the Penllwyn estate. It was a social necessity, and the purchase price came at a crucial time.

‘I think you ought to know, Alderman Paylin. Maristella and your darling daughter have been through the fire together.’

He inquired more closely. It transpired that Maristella had been tear-gassed at the EU summit in Nice. This had aroused her ire and stiffened her sinews. Protesters of the world unite! You have nothing to lose except your unemployment benefit. The world was disintegrating and there were fragments flying in all directions and what good was that supposed to do? There was a string of sarcastic remarks he could make that remained stillborn in his brain. He managed to mutter a question in Welsh about the identity of the little boy’s father.

‘She was raped.’

Iola snapped her answer out rather than saying it. For a moment she seemed to be the voice of women through the ages. It was up to him to accept the universal guilt of his sex.

‘By a Corsican.’

And that was that. The subject was closed. He could not inquire whether there were black Corsicans. Any further enquiry would have been unpardonably indelicate. He had his own thoughts to cultivate. What was this girl any more than one of those decorative drifters who hung about Riviera resorts? She knew how to be still and unobtrusive

like a piece of furniture. It was possible to discern that, in her own fragile way, she had once been decorative. And here they were, old comrades in arms, who couldn't have known each other more than three weeks or possibly a month: and Iola using a blowlamp flame of enthusiasm to create twin souls. Strangers were settling under his roof protected and patronised by his only daughter and there was so little he could do about it. At what point would he be able to inquire more closely into her motives and purposes?

'I thought I'd make a bread and butter pudding, Tada. Would you like that?'

The least he could do was show he was melted for the time being by the warmth of her smile.

III

In the damp vestry of Soar chapel Mihangel Paylin marvelled at the transformation in his aunt's appearance. And in her manner. She was no longer an ancient witch, crouching over a bunch of hot cinders, stirring a brew in a battered saucepan. In some way she was more alarming. A lighter wig was mostly concealed by a black hat of ancient vintage trimmed with a skimpy veil. The black costume she wore had a green tinge and a square shouldered wartime cut. He saw her as an emaciated simulacrum of the stern deacon and Sunday School teacher who had tyrannised his childhood. The washing facilities in Soar cottage across the road were limited. In any case it was possible that in old age Keturah had got out of the habit. The creases on her neck and the wrinkles on her face seemed lined with venerable grime. She had unlocked a safe and was laying out documents on the green baize of the deacon's table.

'You will be fascinated by this, Dr Derwyn. A membership paper. Or ticket should I say? Dated April 15th 1819. "Let it be known that Jane Amelia Parry who bears this paper is a

full member of the Christian Society gathered in Soar chapel, Llandawel.” Isn’t it wonderful?’

Dr Derwyn Dexter had no choice but to agree. He was a tall thin man with a prominent nose and a small mouth set in a propitiating smile. Since he had been placed in charge of the university archive he had cultivated a manner of inoffensive shrewdness.

‘Well yes indeed,’ he said. ‘Yes indeed.’

He clasped his hands behind his back and bent to scrutinise the faded paper more closely.

‘My great great-great-grandmother,’ Keturah said. ‘She thought nothing of walking thirty miles to a preaching meeting.’

Her voice was loud with triumph. Dr Dexter half turned to indicate that by the same token Jane Amelia would have been related to Alderman Paylin too, since his late mother was Keturah’s sister. To Keturah in her present elevated mood this could be no more than a peripheral detail.

‘1822 this sanctuary was built on the foundation of the original chapel which had been a barn. “A delightful wayside temple,” Dr Peate called it. I was standing just there when he said it. “If I had the funds,” he said, “I would love to transport this chapel stone by stone all the way to the Folk Museum at St Fagans.” “No indeed,” old William Cae Clai said. “Indeed not, Dr Peate. This is a place of worship and it shall remain so as long as I live.” “Well of course William Jones” Dr Peate said. “Quite right too”. Poor William did not live so long after that.’

Dr Derwyn saw a chance for a pleasant diversion.

‘Ah, Dr Peate,’ he said. ‘He put me in the second class for the Crown Poem in ’74 was it? He was dead against *vers libre*. “If this competitor is under twenty-one, there is still hope for him.” I was twenty-seven at the time so I gave up competing. No crown for me. He knew his stuff though. About architecture. And about poetry if it comes to that. I was never meant to be a poet.’

Keturah Parry paid little attention to the archivist's anecdote. She had the pressing anxiety of a peasant woman who has arrived late at the market to display her wares. From a drawer in the deacon's table she extracted a rusty key that opened the stiff door of a wall cupboard. Inside there were stacks of notebooks.

'Now this is something,' she said. 'Really something. The sermons of five generations of ministers. And all of them notable preachers. Just look at them.'

Mihangel Parry-Paylin shuffled to one side and left the responsibility of looking to the archivist. Keturah took down a notebook as if to display a sample. She opened it and held it at a distance to read the handwriting.

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not appear what we shall be"... John Jones' last sermon. My grandmother remembered it you know. The chapel was full to overflowing and they sang, she said, full of joy and thanksgiving for the blessing of holy eloquence. It all happened here. Those were the days, Dr Derwyn. Those were the days. They had something to sing about.'

Keturah stared at each of the men in turn defying them to disagree with her assessment.

'A better world inside these walls,' she said. 'Simple people wrapped in love and righteousness.'

Dr Derwyn felt obliged to make a judicious comment.

'A simpler world certainly,' he said. 'Less complex. Less loaded with distractions.'

'It will come again,' the old woman said. 'It will come again. Only if we keep the flame alight. John Jones had a wonderful sermon you know on the parable of the ten virgins. The church is One you see. The living and the dead keep the lamp burning. We need money Dr Derwyn. There's the roof you see and other repairs. Now then. If you take this wonderful collection of documents into your care, the question is how far could you help us?'

Dr Derwyn's small mouth opened and shut as he pondered

a sufficiently tactful reply. Keturah made a visible effort to contain her impatience.

‘Men like to talk business,’ she said. ‘Mihangel here is a Trustee. We have to save this place one way or another. I’ll go and make a cup of tea.’

Leaning on her stick she moved carefully to the small kitchen and scullery attached to the vestry. She opened the rear door to empty the teapot of a previous infusion. An early section of the graveyard stretched between this rear door and the lean-to toilets that needed painting. The headstones were mostly in slate and dated from the nineteenth century.

Alderman Parry-Paylin took hold of Dr Derwyn’s arm and led him into the body of the chapel. They were in solemn mood, both very conscious of their responsibilities. They sat close to each other in the shadow of the mahogany pulpit, so that they could exchange views without being overheard by the old woman. Because of the reverberation in the chapel their voices barely rose above a whisper.

‘Don’t think I am unsympathetic,’ the Alderman said. ‘But you can see my difficulty, can’t you?’

‘Difficulty?’

Dr Derwyn repeated the word slowly as if he were trying to give himself more time to think. He found himself in a situation far more awkward than he had anticipated. His best defence was an air of unworldly detachment. Mihangel’s whisper grew more vehement. It seemed to whistle through his clenched teeth.

‘What are we reduced to?’ he said. ‘This place has more trustees than members. Could this be described as a building of distinction? I hardly think so. I expect Dr Peate was just being nice to the old people. He could see how much Soar meant to them. In any case, it was a long time ago. I was never all that happy here myself. She was a bit of a tyrant you know in her day. A fierce spinster. She disapproved of my father. He was a sailor and he had no business to go and get himself torpedoed. She doesn’t really approve of me

either. Just because I married into a family of better off Methodists. Talk about sectarianism. Makes you think, doesn't it?'

Dr Derwyn had come to a decision.

'We could take those papers and all the written records,' he said. 'And care for them properly. But we couldn't pay for them. A courtesy *ex gratia* maybe, but nothing more than that. As you well know these things are regulated by market forces. I don't suppose there is an overwhelming demand for handwritten sermons in our dear old language.'

The acoustic was too sensitive to allow them to chuckle at his mild academic joke. Alderman Mihangel Parry-Paylin clenched his fist under his moustache to demonstrate the intensity of his sincerity.

'I try to be understanding,' he said. 'And tolerant. It's no use being in public life without being tolerant on a wide range of issues. The truth is she lives in the past.'

He made a sweeping gesture to implicate the rows of empty pews in front of them.

'She still sees this place filled with God-fearing peasants. A whole world away. And what kept them in good order? Fear. The fear of death. Weren't they dropping like flies under things like typhoid and tuberculosis? The NHS with all its faults has done away with that, for God's sake. So what is she on about? I used to sit over there you know and sit as still as a graven image while some old preacher went droning on, just in case she should catch me fidgeting or sucking a sweet. She could glare like a basilisk. She still can when she feels like it. You can see what she's like can't you?'

This was a whispered appeal for sympathetic understanding. Dr Derwyn was minded to be put in possession of more of the facts before he could unreservedly extend it. He knew the Alderman was Chairman of the County Council Planning committee as well as a Trustee of the chapel.

'Forgive me for asking but am I right in thinking this chapel is scheduled for demolition?'

Mihangel Parry-Paylin could only lean forward to bury his face in both hands. Dr Derwyn was moved by the strength of his reaction.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't wish to be inquisitive. It is widely rumoured. And these things are happening. I read something in the *Chronicle* that said they were still coming down throughout the Principality at the rate of one a fortnight.'

He submitted this as a melancholy statistic from which the Alderman might derive some comfort. The moving finger of history had written and in its own roughshod manner was moving on.

'It isn't that,' Parry-Paylin said.

He stared into the middle distance as if it were inhabited by a seething multitude of problems.

'It wouldn't worry me all that much to see the place come down. It's the vested interests involved. You are lucky, Doctor Derwyn. You don't have to deal with vested interests.'

'Oh I wouldn't say that...' The archivist was unwilling to have the difficulties of his profession diminished.

'People can be very sentimental,' Parry-Paylin said. 'You can't ignore that. And yet in public life the guiding principle must be the greater good of the greatest number. The road needs widening. There can be no question about that. On the grounds of public safety. On grounds of commercial and industrial necessity. There are jobs involved. And progress. There's always progress isn't there with a capital 'P'. Politicians can't survive without visible Progress. She's ninety-three. She can't live for ever. The roof is leaking. Who is going to pay? Should we let the weather and neglect finish the job. You see my difficulty?'

His jaw froze as he heard his aunt's measured approach. She appeared in the open door to practice a gesture of old-fashioned hospitality.

'Now come along, gentlemen. What about a nice cup of tea?'

IV

The sun shone and the verandah's sharp shadow spread across the drive as far as the first herbaceous border. The Alderman paced back and forth somewhat in the manner of a captain on the bridge of his ship. In the bright light of morning the problems that beset him had to be more amenable to solution. There had to be a residue of authority in the very place where he stood. His late wife's great-grandfather had been far sighted enough to build his mansion on the brow of a hill that commanded a view of a magnificent mountain range, as well as the slate quarry he needed to keep an eye on. The quarry had long been closed and the bitter criticisms Mary Keturah made about the old minister's hypocrisy and bogus religiosity were no longer in any way relevant: nevertheless the owner of Penllwyn (the 'Hall' had been dropped on the insistence of his dear wife who found it insufferably pretentious) was in an ideal position to lift up his eyes to the hills from which help and inspiration were bound to come to a man of goodwill such as himself, devoted to public service.

He stretched himself and blinked in the sunlight. There were interesting smells wafting through the open kitchen window where his daughter Iola was busying herself with baking cakes. From the walled garden he could hear the little boy Nino laughing as he dodged about the raspberry canes while his mother picked the fruit. Iola had persisted in drawing his attention to how phenomenally well behaved the little boy was; not to mention his mother who seemed to tremble gently in her anxiety to please.

Iola insisted that a great movement of peoples was taking place: not unlike the great waves of emigration that gave the nineteenth century its special character. He smiled as he took in her youthful exaggerations. At the same time he acknowledged it was wise for a man in public life to lend an ear to what the young were saying. There were great unseen

forces at work as difficult to fathom and control as the world's weather. And since his house had nine bedrooms he had to admit he was in a privileged position. He had to accept that it was her benevolent intention to lead him gently into the new paths and patterns of positive existence. 'You are never too old to learn, Mici?' she said. Her innovations, surprising as they were, he had to believe would in no way detract from his civic responsibilities; it was up to him to make sure that, if anything, they would enhance them. It was not impossible at any rate while the sun shone, that he would come to be proud of his daughter's colourful eccentricities.

The little boy's laugh provided the amenities of Penllwyn with a new and pleasant dimension. It was Parry-Paylin's habit before committee meetings to take a walk in the wooded area above the house in order to rehearse arguments and sometimes test oratorical phrases aloud. Primroses grew among the trees in the spring and crocuses in the autumn. He was always ready to enthuse about the views he could enjoy throughout the changing seasons. Yesterday he had looked down at a wild corner of the gardens and saw the little boy chasing butterflies among the overgrown buddleia bushes. He was raising his little arms and trying to fly himself. The Alderman was so pleased with what he saw he wanted to race down the slope and chase the butterflies himself.

Bicycle wheels crunched across the drive and a young man braked and skidded with a flourish, to pull up in front of where the Alderman was standing with his hands behind his back enjoying the undisturbed beauty of the morning.

'Lovely day, isn't it?'

The Alderman had little choice but to agree. The young man's hair was dyed yellow and sprouted around in indiscriminate directions. It wasn't a spectacle that he could contemplate with pleasure and he was obliged to look up at the sky as though a sudden thought had occurred to him he needed to hold on to.

'Iola back then? Hell of a girl, isn't she?'

This wasn't a statement he could disagree with either. This was Moi Twm, Iola's friend and devoted admirer. Not a suitor he had long been given to understand by his only daughter. This only brought limited relief. They were, Iola said, 'partners in crime'. What could that mean except, an unappetising procession of raucous protests? Moi Twm kept a bookshop in an unfrequented corner of the market town. The books in the window were fading in spite of the cellophane he wrapped around them. He lived behind the shop among heaps of magazines and papers and flags and slogans of protests gone by. It was his way of life he said. Living on a pittance was the best guarantee of eternal youth. This light-heartedness might fill his daughter with admiration; all it brought him was suspicion and foreboding. He had an Uncle Ted who wrote a muckraking column in the local weekly. Uncle Ted followed the proceedings of the Council with relentless diligence. The more so because he had failed to get on the Council himself. There was always the possibility Moi Twm could wheedle secrets out of Iola; which meant he had to take extra care when talking to his own daughter: and that in itself was an unnatural curtailment on the resources of family life. If he couldn't talk to his own daughter, who else could he confide in? It all made the business of local government more irksome than it needed to be. And this thin and hungry-looking young man with his silly hair a less than welcome visitor.

'I wanted to see you too, Alderman, Sir. If you can spare a moment.'

Moi Twm had a trick of cackling merrily as though the simplest statements he came out with were potentially a huge joke. Iola had said she couldn't be sure whether this was evidence of a depth of insecurity, a need for affection or just a nervous tick; whenever he heard it the Alderman closed his eyes and racked his brain for an avenue of escape.

'About Soar chapel, Alderman Paylin. I've got just the answer. A rescue operation.'

The alderman restrained himself from saying Soar chapel was none of his business. His long experience of public life had taught him the value of a judicious silence.

‘It could make a lovely bookshop of course,’ Moi Twm said. ‘But Miss Parry would never allow that would she? She’s a hell of a girl, I have to say, but we have to respect her wishes.’

Parry-Paylin winced in anticipation of another cheerful cackle.

‘You must know this,’ Moi Twm said. ‘Being one of the children of Soar yourself. But I have to say it came as a complete surprise to me. R. J. Cethin was the minister at Soar for ten months in 1889.’

The alderman did not know this and saw no reason why he should have known. The name of R. J. Cethin meant little to him. Moi Twm was an amateur antiquarian as well as a bookseller and he had an irritating habit of displaying his arcane knowledge at inopportune moments. It often came with a brief cackle.

‘A deep dark secret,’ he said. ‘At Soar I mean. You wouldn’t have heard Miss Keturah mention it, I expect?’

‘I wouldn’t be sure,’ the alderman said.

He resented being cross-examined. A shuffle of his feet on the verandah floor suggested he had more important matters calling for his attention.

‘I dug into it,’ Moi Twm said. ‘Nothing I enjoy more than a bit of research. There was just a paragraph in the old *North Wales Gazette* for February 1890. But it was enough to give the game away. The fact is he got the organist’s daughter pregnant. They fled and started a new life in the United States. He became pastor of a Unitarian Church in Toledo, Ohio. And began to write pamphlets in English about workers’ rights and female emancipation and all that sort of thing. Author of *Christ the Socialist*, *The Church against Poverty*, and *The Land for the Poor and the Poor for the Land*. He’s very well known over there now. As a pioneer. Not much

honour for a prophet in his own country though. The old story Alderman Paylin.’

There was a powerful cackle.

‘Anyway, I don’t want to keep you. Now this is my idea. Why not turn Soar into a nice little museum? A tourist attraction you could call it on the lowest level, so to speak. But in the true interest of culture and local history it could really be made into something. With your personal associations, it could be a jewel in your crown. So to speak. Don’t take any notice of my frivolous manner, Mr Paylin. It’s a silly habit I can’t get out of. I’m making a serious suggestion. And who would have thought of it. The great R. J. Cethin the minister of Soar chapel Llandawel. Ten months or ten years. What does it matter? And the organist’s daughter into the bargain. I haven’t investigated her background yet. But it’s bound to have interesting local connections. As you said in the council last month. We needed to diversify. In the face of the decline of agriculture and the quarries closed and being too remote to attract new industry. Tourism is our best chance. Our best resource if handled properly. With taste and discretion of course. How else?’

The alderman gave so deep a sigh, the young man grew apologetic. For the first time his enthusiasm subsided sufficiently for him to become aware of another person’s reactions. For the alderman, he had taken the bloom off the morning.

‘It’s only an idea,’ Moi Twm said. ‘I just thought I’d mention it. A contribution. People ought to know about these things.’

The alderman’s silence implied he was wondering whether in fact they should. He was startled by a yelp of delight as his daughter rushed out of the house. Down on the drive below him, Moi Twm and Iola became locked in a fierce embrace. They were like two footballers who had managed to pierce the defence and score the winning goal. He had to

look away. He was always embarrassed by too much explicit emotion. And it was hardly right that these young things should be so close. People were talking freely about 'partners' these days. In that case could someone tell him what was to become of the family? It was as if he had to live with a veiled threat of being thrust out of his own nest.

'You little devil,' Moi Twm was saying. 'You just shot off without telling me. Without a word. I'm furious with you. You know that, don't you?'

'Listen you old bookworm. I've got a surprise for you. A lovely surprise.'

'Chocolates? Pearls? Green bananas?'

She took his hand and dragged him towards the walled garden.

'Something you've been looking for, for ages. The nicest girl you could ever wish to meet.'

V

In a matter of days Iola established a routine at Penllwyn that her father found moderately reassuring. Price the gardener who came three half-days a week remarked, not for the first time, how much she reminded him of her dear mother and how Iola had always been a young lady who had a way with her. This was the kind of music the alderman liked to hear and he heard it again from Mrs Twigg the diminutive cleaner who was ever faithful but had a chronic inability to detect dust anywhere higher than her eye level. Maristella and the boy Nino were proving satisfyingly low-pitched and even docile. It amused him to detect that when they passed his study they moved on tiptoe. The flow of chatter through the house did not disturb him unduly. When he stopped to listen it was invariably Iola that was doing most of the talking. The guidelines of dispensation had been laid down skilfully enough to avoid disrupting in any way his own focused way of life.

It was summer and the new arrivals had contrived to make themselves pleasing figures in the landscape. Maristella had a knowledge of plants and was very willing to go on her knees and do some weeding, even without gloves. In the orchard, Price the gardener put up a primitive swing for the little boy and Iola drew her father's attention to the child's remarkable capacity for amusing himself for hours on end. 'It's the Garden of Eden for the child,' she said in a subdued tone that was loaded with darker implications. It suggested too that her father could derive satisfaction from the knowledge that he had helped to rescue a child from an unmentionable fate. The Corsican father was a gendarme in Marseilles notorious for his brutality. The Alderman would have liked to learn more. He had to be content with the knowledge that Maristella, in spite of her courageous nature was extraordinarily naive. Her father must have noticed, Iola said with a passing sigh, how often it happened that nice girls were taken in by the most awful shits. It was in the end a phenomenon that could only be attributed to some obscure force that surfaced from a primaeval past in the animal kingdom.

Supper time became a pleasing occasion. The strangers were transformed into guests and out of courtesy the Alderman spoke more English. Maristella for her part clenched her small fist and declared her firm intention to *dysgu Cymraeg*. This caused much pleasant laughter. The Alderman was especially pleased when Iola prepared a lamb stew with mixed herbs in exactly the way her mother used to do. It was in the middle of this meal, he could only assume for want of a fresh crusade, that she returned to the attack.

'I hear there are plans afoot to bury toxic waste at the bottom of Cloddfa Quarry.'

Alderman Paylin looked longingly at his plate. There was a lot of delicious stew left and he would have liked to enjoy it in peace.

'In a democracy I suppose we have to put up with

incredibly stupid and vulgar politicians. At least until the population arrives at a higher level of education: and that seems a long way off. But you are in a position of authority, Tada. You can make decisions. Or see to it that decisions are made. Whose idea was it?’

Public life could never be that easy. The blonde bookseller, and his daughter’s bosom friend, had this horrid uncle who wrote a column in the local paper and haunted council meetings in search of scandal and the raw material of muckraking.

‘Planning.’

He answered briefly, in the vain hope of heading off further discussion.

‘Well, that’s your committee, isn’t it? Your special baby!’

‘We are running out of landfill sites,’ he said. ‘In a high consumption society, this is becoming a problem.’

‘Everything is a problem with you Alderman Paylin. It’s not problems we need. It’s solutions. What about this cyanide business?’

‘Cyanide? Who said anything about cyanide?’

He was provoked and his stew had gone cold.

‘Moi Twm’s Uncle Ted. And when Ted’s your uncle you can smell monkey business a mile off. Who is the Treasurer of the golf club these days?’

‘Ennis Taft. And has been for years. As you well know.’

‘Taft Bronco Products. With cyanide drums to dispose of before they can sell their redundant premises for redevelopment.’

The Alderman raised his hand to his brow and Maristella looked at him anxiously. Plainly her genial benefactor had been struck by a sudden headache. The Alderman rubbed his forehead and wondered why the resemblance between his dear wife and only daughter should be so superficial. Laura was a romantic and an idealist in her own way. She had none of this unwholesome passion for smelling rats and conspiracies all over the place. It had to be a generational

change of consciousness. This was just the kind of philosophic thing his friend Morus loved discussing. Perhaps it was time to take a holiday in the Dordogne. Summer should be a time to relax and reflect and recuperate. Perhaps he was getting too old and shouldering too many responsibilities.

‘It’s up to you to put a stop to it, Tada. They’re our quarries after all.’

Did ‘our’ mean she was anticipating her inheritance? Why should she make these hints and threats when all he had done, all his life, was cherish her. At the first opportunity he excused himself and made for an early bed. Whichever way he laid his pillows, sleep eluded him. This was an annoyance in itself. He was a man who depended on and cherished eight hours solid sleep. His window was open and as the sun went down there was a noisy commotion among the crows’ nests in the tallest trees above the house.

It seemed as if he could cope with anything except what was left of his own family. Long ago the family had been a source of strength and encouragement. He had his mother’s resolve and courage to emulate. When his father was lost at sea, she went out to work as a daily domestic in order that her Mihangel should enjoy a proper education. They had lived in a small terrace house with his grandmother and both women had seen to it he was well fed and given peace and quiet to study before the open fire in the little parlour. The initial objections to his marriage to the heiress of Penllwyn Hall were overcome and the family background and family backing were enlarged and immensely strengthened. His father-in-law became his mentor and patron. Now it was all gone. All that remained was a cantankerous maiden aunt and a headstrong daughter.

The sad fact was that he enjoyed more encouragement and companionship in the golf club than in his own home. After a prolonged tussle in the Ways and Means committee where else could he turn to for a drink and a joke and a measure of

innocent relaxation? Old Ennis Taft would be waiting there at the bar, ready to slap him on the back or on the shoulder and say things like, 'Now then San Fihangel, what are you going to have?' Ennis was on all the committees raising funds for all the charities God sends. It helped to soothe his conscience. He said so himself. 'Not that I've got all that much. It's drinks and laughter and fair play and decency. And a bit of a sing-song. Those are things that mark the man of goodwill, San Fihangel. Now then, how about another?'

It was possibly Ennis' whisky-soaked lips that let those wretched drums of cyanide out of the bag. He was too fond of boasting about his wealth and influence. Uncle Ted had his spies in the golf club. What harm could a few drums of cyanide do buried deep in the bottom of the quarry? Poison the water supply once the drums had rusted away. Always ready with an answer, Iola. How could a man sleep in peace in his own bed in his own house?

In the end he fell into a trouble-haunted sleep only to be awakened by a piercing scream and then the wail and whimper of a child crying. He sat up in bed seething with indignation. There was a full moon and in the wardrobe mirror he could see a white ghost that was nothing more than his own dishevelled image. A man devoted to public service deserved a decent night's sleep. There were more committees tomorrow and he would need all his wits about him to steer through a minefield of amendments. There were enemies on all sides ready to oppose the creation of positive compromise. He was in the chair precisely because of his ability to steer through the waves of controversy to the calm water of any other business. Was there singing going on as well as wailing? He could never get back to sleep. He was the victim of his own benevolence.

There was a piercing scream, he swore, sufficient to shatter the universe. He had to get up and register stern disapproval. This was the kind of disturbance that should not be allowed to continue. It may be a city was going up in flames and his

mother was lying unconscious in the street and the tentacles of anarchy were tightening around his little throat so he had to scream; but it had to stop. Down a moonlit corridor he saw Maristella sitting on the floor outside the door of the little boy's bedroom. She was in a skimpy nightdress, nursing a large white bath towel. She said she was waiting there in case little Nino woke up again.

'They come sometimes,' she said. 'These nightmares. Soaking in sweat. I think it is my fault.'

He could only respond with a sympathetic stance.

'I'm afraid he will disturb Iola,' Maristella said. 'Iola can't function without her eight hours' sleep.'

The phrase was so obviously his daughter's. Repeated in this soft exotic accent it sounded like a confession of faith. He was abruptly reminded of his own long-suffering mother and his own childhood.

'I had nightmares,' he said. 'When I was small. I used to think I was drowning. Sinking to the very bottom of the sea.'

This was another mother trying to bring up a fatherless son. An emblem of anxiety, patience, and suffering.

'If it is my fault,' she said. 'He may grow up to hate me.'

The alderman smiled to reassure her.

'I don't think so,' he said. 'I don't think so at all.'

She raised a hand to let it rest on his arm. The scent of tender feminine concern was a comfort he had forgotten.

'You are so good to us,' Maristella said. 'So good. We thank you.'

When he returned to his bedroom it seemed emptier than when he left it. There were forms of consolation, beyond language, that could still exist.

VI

A series of meetings of local government specialists called the alderman first to Cardiff and then to London. He fussed over the preparation but it was a relief to get away. At meal times

when he was inclined to make polite inquiries into the kind of life that his guests had emerged from, it seemed incredible that such a docile creature as Maristella had been turned out of a prosperous home in Bordighera. Iola would commandeer the conversation with more probing questions about the Council's planning policies and particularly about the extension of the landfill in Cloddfa Quarry. When Iola spoke Maristella lapsed into respectful silence. It was difficult too for him to establish any reaction on her part to Iola's sporadic and rather crude efforts to push the unmarried mother in *Moi Twm's* direction. Could both the creatures be so much under his daughter's thumb that they would go to any length to please her? It was none of his business and yet he had a right to know what was going on under his own roof. He found *Moi Twm's* increasingly frequent visits distinctly nerve-racking. He claimed now to have established contact with a R. J. Cethin Society, in Toledo, Ohio, through the internet. He also claimed that Dr Derwyn the college archivist was showing a keen interest in his discoveries. He even had the temerity to suggest he interviewed Miss Keturah Parry. He was certain the old woman would have more information about the affair with the organist's daughter. In such a closed society, he argued, knowledge of such a scandal would be vigorously suppressed but not forgotten. There could even be papers still kept under lock and key.

The meetings in Cardiff and London were pleasant occasions. His expenses were paid and comfortable accommodation provided. There was the mild excitement of brief conversations with celebrated politicians. Old acquaintances were renewed and new friendships made warm with promises of being useful in the future. An old farmer who used to accompany him earlier in his civic career called the process 'setting out mole traps.' A more recent phrase he learnt was 'networking.' The meetings resembled social occasions enlivened with a measure of pomp and conviviality. Consensus or a genial agreement to postpone

were both easy to arrive at. This led him to observe to jovial colleagues that government on the larger scale was infinitely more tractable than squabbles on the home patch.

However diverting the excursion, he was always glad to catch the first glimpse of Penllwyn in the taxi from the station. The old minister had set that stark strong square house on the brow of the hill and it still exuded its own endowment of mid-Victorian confidence. He had designed the place himself, and in a sense it would have been true to say he was monarch of all he surveyed: the theocratic ruler of pulpit and workplace, composing sermons and hymn tunes, and opening quarries and investing in ships that seemed to have gone down in storms with monotonous regularity. There was something about the old man's arrogance that made the Alderman shudder slightly and he had been relieved when his late wife removed the full-length portrait in oil from the drawing room to the attic. The past was to muse upon at leisure, the present was alive with problems that cried out to be solved. There were clouds scudding along high in the blue sky above the hill and he was glad to be home.

The house was empty and it was the sound of the little boy's laughter that led him to the orchard. There his mother was rocking him to and fro in the swing Price the gardener had put up for him. She pushed the swing with one hand and with the other held on to a floppy hat that threatened to fly away in the breeze. She wore a thin pink and white frock, and mother and son together made an attractive picture. He took his time before making his presence known.

'Where is everyone?'

It was something to say. He didn't really want to know. It was agreeable to have the place to themselves.

'They have gone to the Rally in Caernarfon,' she said. 'In support of the coffee workers of Nicaragua. Iola leaves me to look after your house. And my son of course.'

'You mean Iola and her partners in crime.'

Maristella took time to interpret the phrase and decide whether or not the alderman was joking. She offered to make tea and he was pleased to accept. She was a good listener whether or not she understood everything he was saying. For too long the house had lacked the attentions of a woman prepared to listen to a man of some consequence who returns from a conference primed with telltale fragments of the gossip of high politics. Ministers spoke more freely in a convivial social context. Would Maristella be interested to know that the minister had pulled a grim face and said something needed to be done about the Teachers Union? Her response would be more satisfying than his daughter's. All he would have got from Iola would be yet another disparaging remark.

'Alderman...'

She had something to ask. Was it too soon to suggest she used a less formal mode of address? Was there too wide a gap between his title and his first name? Would she have been able to pronounce Mihangel? Iola's frivolous modes of address could well have confused her, which was a great pity. Youth was so obviously the antidote to all the uncomfortable premonitions of old age.

'I have seen the piano in the drawing room,' Maristella said. 'Would you allow me to give my Nino music lessons? He is not too young to learn.'

'But of course.'

It was such a pleasure to be generous and gracious. This would be an opportunity to inquire more closely into her background. It was an operation that needed to be conducted with a degree of delicacy and expertise. He had a reputation for success in interviewing candidates for all sorts of posts. These enquiries of course would be far more friendly and intimate. Maristella had gone to the kitchen to make tea and left the Alderman and the little boy gazing at each other in a state of benevolent neutrality. There was the sound of tyres on the gravel outside. Parry-Paylin saw Dr

Derwyn emerge in some haste from his economical little car. He became aware instantly of trouble afoot. Derwyn was not his usual restrained and urbane self. Something serious had ruffled the slippery smoothness of his feathers.

‘I’m so glad you are back,’ Dr Derwyn said. ‘Something of a crisis I fear. Keturah Parry has locked herself in the chapel.’

Derwyn’s small mouth was twitching. Under different circumstances, at a distance perhaps, the disclosure could have been amusing. A nonagenarian had caught up with the methods of the age of protest.

‘I have to admit, to some extent, the fault was mine. That notion of *Moi Twm Thomas*’ about a museum for R. J. Cethin. Professor Dwight Edelberg of Toledo was quite enthusiastic about it. On the e-mail. Americans when they’re enthusiastic are always in a hurry, aren’t they? They like to get things done. He was all for a joint operation by his department and mine. I told *Moi Twm Thomas* to wait until you got back. But your daughter was all for striking while the iron was hot. And they made matters worse, you see. I told them the approach was too crude. Turn Soar into an R. J. Cethin Museum or see it demolished for the new road scheme. This is her response. She’s locked herself in the chapel.’

Maristella appeared from the kitchen with the tea tray.

‘Shall I get another cup?’ she said.

The alderman was too angry to answer. He stalked out of the house. Dr Derwyn hurried after him.

‘I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news,’ he said. ‘She’s taken her paraffin stove into the chapel. A lamp on the communion table. And blankets. And a chamber pot. She’s ready for a long siege.’

‘That woman is the bane of my life.’

Dr Derwyn stepped back in the face of such a blaze of indignation.

‘And that young devil... mischief makers have made matters worse.’

‘I did stress that it would be wiser to wait until you got back. I did stress that.’

Alderman Paylin raised both arms and let them fall again. This academic had no idea how to handle people. He was just the type to rush in where any sensible experienced angel would fear to tread.

‘She’s mad,’ the Alderman said. ‘And she’s been mad for years. Do you realise we had an electric stove installed in that cottage thirty years ago? She had it taken out. She sold it and gave the miserable price she got for it to the LMS. She lives in a nineteenth-century time warp. You’ve seen it for yourself. She’s completely out of touch with reality.’

He waved a hand to specify the unique solidity of their surroundings, the house and the gardens and the woodland above them: the view of the noble mountain range: the honourable scars of the quarries: the sea on the western horizon. This was reality.

‘Did you speak to her yourself? What did she have to say? As if I couldn’t guess.’

‘She said R. J. Cethin was a heretic and a scoundrel and the sooner his name was forgotten the better. She said I should be ashamed of myself not giving the sermons of five glorious ministers a place of honour. She said I had joined the worshippers of the Golden Calf. Both of them she said. The English Calf and the Money Calf. It was quite upsetting.’

The Alderman allowed himself a grim smile.

‘She said something else too. The organist’s daughter was one of your family. On her mother’s side. It was a terrible secret!’

‘One of her hobbies. Making family trees. I used to tell her if we went back far enough we’d find we were all related.’

‘Will you speak to her Alderman Parry-Paylin? She’s in quite a state.’

The Alderman shook his head. At least he could give the archivist a brief lesson in the exercise of authority and the management of people.

‘Let her stew in her own juice,’ he said. ‘She’ll soon get fed up in there. Chamber pot and all.’

VII

Iola was the first to point out that in the kind of community in which they lived people would soon start talking. Since when may he ask had she and her ilk worried about what people were saying? He slumped in his chair at the head of the table as though he were sitting for a portrait of a brooding monarch. He could see that his bad mood was disturbing Maristella and her little son; whereas Iola was just treating the whole affair as a joke. The only way he could wipe the grin off her face would be to threaten to turn the strangers out of the house. That would be worse than a futile gesture. It would deprive him of the few crumbs of comfort available. In the worst possible case if he tried to turn his only daughter out she would go around the place screaming that he had deprived her of her mother’s heritage. And that would cause more talk than the scandal of the old woman locking herself up in Soar chapel. The only measure of discipline he had been able to impose was to insist that *Moi Twm* be kept out of his sight. However this did nothing to diminish the frequent mutterings and chatterings that took place at the back of the house or down by the road gate.

Within twenty-four hours he was perched precariously on top of a tombstone trying to communicate with his aunt through a chapel side-window above the level of green opaque glass. To maintain his balance and make himself heard he was obliged to lean forward and place his hands on a stone sill that was covered with green slime. The grass grew high between the gravestones. He was made to realise that the volunteer caretakers had become too old to cut the grass. A cloudy drizzle was looming to put a damper on everything. Soon the place would be overrun by creeping

brambles and briars and what on earth was he to do about it?

‘You are breaking the law!’

Against his better judgement he had to shout. It was the only way he could make himself heard. The old woman seemed to treat his warning as a joke. From the end of the pew where she sat she was raising her hands to warm them above the paraffin stove in the aisle.

‘The moral law, Mihangel Paylin,’ she said. ‘That’s something you don’t know too much about.’

‘I offered you rooms in Penllwyn years and years ago. You know that as well as I do.’

In his uncomfortable position he made a strenuous effort not to sound cross.

‘Your poor grandfather would turn in his grave if he knew you were living in the enemy’s citadel. That’s what he called your precious Penllwyn. The enemy’s citadel.’

The old woman was enjoying the reverberations of her own voice in the empty chapel. The sound was an incentive to preaching. She stood up and placed a hand on the back of the pew in front to support herself. She was ready to address an invisible congregation.

‘That was your grandfather, auntie. I said your grandfather. It was a very long time ago!’

He struggled to maintain his balance as he raised his voice. His aunt persisted with her litany.

‘Persecuted he was. Gruffydd Owen Parry. Driven out of his smallholding by a vicious landlord for voting against him. Driven to work in the quarry and driven out of Cloddfa by that old monster of Penllwyn. Driven to work as a farm labourer and walking ten miles a day there and back for fourpence a day. But he never soured in spirit. He was the leader of song in this chapel for forty years.’

She started to sing in a quavering voice, ‘*Driven out of Eden and its blessings I came to kneel before the Cross...*’

The effort was too much for her. She sat back in the pew

to mumble the words of the hymn to herself. For his part Mihangel could no longer hold his precarious position. A drizzle was beginning to fall.

‘I’ll be back.’

He shouted as he waded through the long grass.

‘I’ll be back. We’ve got to be sensible about this. It’s got to be settled.’

In reality he had little idea how. The weather wouldn’t allow him to pace to and fro among the trees above the house and Penllwyn itself was being given a thorough cleaning by Iola assisted by Maristella and Mrs Twigg. There would be no peace there. In any case they had no idea of the depth of his problem.

He repaired to the golf club. Ennis Taft was already there enjoying, he said, his first Dubonnet before a light lunch. He insisted Saint Mihangel should join him. Didn’t they have a whole agenda to discuss? Over fish, he said, which was good for the old ticker and a bottle of white wine, in no time at all they could set the world to rights. He was full of a new scheme to deal with industrial waste products and make a healthy profit. There was also an amusing crisis at the Comprehensive school where the kitchen staff were threatening to go on strike. It took Ennis Taft some time to apprehend that Parry-Paylin was weighed down with a critical trouble of his own. After an initial burst of amusement, which included an embarrassing rendition of a vulgar ditty about two old ladies locked in the lavatory, Ennis Taft became serious and intensely resourceful.

‘The poor old biddy,’ he said. ‘She must be suffering from senile dementia. There’s only one thing to do, San Fihangel. Section her. Or whatever it is they call it. All they need to do is ask her a few questions. What’s the name of the Prime Minister of New Zealand? What day is it the day after tomorrow? That sort of thing.’

He grew excited with the sharpness of his own intelligence and the fumes of the white wine. Parry-Paylin had to beg him

to keep his voice down. This was a family matter and he found it intensely embarrassing. His friend and colleague was not to be put off his brilliant line of thinking. He continued in a fierce whisper that was hardly less audible than his raucous laughter.

‘A doctor and a policeman,’ he said. ‘That’s all you need. And a court order maybe. That should be easy. You’re a serving magistrate. I don’t want to be callous but you’ve got to look ahead. Have her put away and you could have the chapel demolished in the twinkling of an eye. And the road widened and the lorries rolling by and everything in the garden will be lovely.’

There was no comfort anywhere. Certainly not in the voice of Ennis Taft. The Alderman sat at the wheel of his car in the spacious golf club car park, stricken with paralysis and the sense of no longer being in charge of anything. This ludicrous crisis called the whole romance of his career into question. In his heart of hearts it had always been a romance: the sacrifices his mother and his grandmother made to ensure his higher education. He was never all that academically bright and he would be the first to admit it, but he had worked hard and overcoming obstacles that in this more comfortable age would have been counted daunting. His greatest triumph had been his marriage. It couldn’t be seen as less than a triumph. The daughter of the big house giving him the courage to confront her formidable father to ask for her hand in the most charming old-fashioned manner, with nothing to offer in return except a decent measure of good looks, a winning smile and a manner that, again in this day and age, would be counted a touch too ingratiating. But it was good for politics and his father-in-law set him on the right road. Laura said that was what fathers-in-law were for.

If only Laura were with him now. Their life together was a wonder and a marvel. Laura had presided over a golden age. She knew how to handle everybody. In the case of Mary Keturah she plied her with delicious home-made cakes and

jam and praised her grubby mintcake as though it were manna from Heaven. She did more than that. Chauffeuring the surly spinster from one eisteddfod or singing festival or preaching meeting to another. The centre of gravity of his existence had been lost since the day Laura died and in some baffling way both his daughter and this impossible aunt seemed determined to hold him responsible for a loss that he felt far more keenly than either of them were ever capable of doing. There seemed to be very little left for him to do except feel acutely sorry for himself.

VIII

It did not take long for the substance of Ennis Taft's advice to her father to reach Iola's ears. While the Alderman brooded in his study, she bustled about the place increasingly excited by the notion of nurturing a plan of her own. She tried to explain the background of the situation and the opportunities it offered to Maristella, and became impatient with her when she was slow to understand.

'Taft Bronco is hardly the World Trade Organisation,' she said. 'But the principle is the same. A chance to wake up the community. Get the people to reassess their sense of values. If we plan this carefully and get *Moi Twm's* Uncle Ted to write it all up in his column we could start a home-grown revolution.'

'What are you going to do?'

Maristella would at least understand action and showed that she was as ready as ever to take part in it. She had every confidence in Iola's leadership. This was a woman who knew how to act and bring about satisfactory change. She owed her a great debt and was ever ready to pay it.

'We'll join her,' Iola said. 'We'll have a sit-in strike in Soar. The only thing is we have to keep *Moi Twm* well away from the place.'

Maristella frowned hard as she struggled to follow Iola's line of reasoning.

‘They rubbed her up all the wrong way. All that half-baked nonsense about a museum to the memory of R J. Cethin. It was a daft idea.’

‘But you encouraged, I think...’

‘Well it didn’t work did it. And things have moved on. The essence of revolutionary practice is to seize the moment. I’ll get Mrs Twigg to look after Nino and we’ll go and talk to her. Right away. There isn’t a moment to lose.’

Maristella felt obliged to listen intently while Iola communicated with Moi Twm on her mobile phone in a language she didn’t understand. Somehow or other troops of protesters, mostly from the student body of the colleges within a reasonable radius, were to be put on standby. When Iola gave the signal, the ancient bus that Moi Twm used to collect support for rallies would rumble into action and collect enough bodies to lie in the road when the local authority and the police attempted to take possession of Soar chapel. Iola switched off and waved the mobile phone under Maristella’s nose.

‘Democracy is a fine thing,’ she said. ‘We’ve just got to learn how to manage it.’

She became so excited with the potential of her gift for management that she could no longer keep still. They would go now and she would make immediate contact with her great-aunt herself.

In the car she turned to make Maristella appreciate that a dialogue with Mary Keturah would not be all that easy. There were historical difficulties that had to be overcome. Sectarian difficulties in fact. Did Maristella have any idea of what sectarian difficulties could be like? Her best hope she supposed was that blood in the end would be thicker than the bitter waters of contention. That much Maristella could understand. They stared at the unpretentious façade of the chapel. The west wall was slated from roof to the overgrown path.

‘Soar,’ Maristella said. ‘Like soar up to heaven, yes?’

Iola was so amused she embraced her friend and shook with the effort of controlling her laughter.

‘Is it Welsh then?’

Iola breathed deeply to stop laughing.

‘Hebrew, you ignorant Papist. Did you never read your Bible? Soar was saved from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.’

Iola embraced her again.

‘Don’t look so worried. Now then. Here we go.’

Iola grasped the iron ring on the main door.

‘My ancestors built this,’ she said. ‘Some of them did anyway. Quite a lot of them are buried over on the left there. Those gravestones buried in the long grass.’

She began to bang the door determinedly.

‘Auntie! Auntie Ket! It’s Iola. Let me in, won’t you? Let me in!’

She realised she spoke with too much authority as if she had automatic right of entry. With an effort she injected a note of pleading into her voice.

‘Auntie. It’s Iola. Please Auntie. I want to speak to you.’

Mary Keturah’s voice was harsh but noticeably feeble when at last she spoke with her face close to the closed door.

‘Who’s there with you? Not that Moi Twm Thomas? You keep him well away from this place.’

‘Are you all right Auntie Ket. I’ve brought you some milk and fresh bread.’

‘Men do not live by bread alone,’ Mary Keturah said. ‘She was your great-grandfather’s cousin.’

‘Who was?’

Iola beckoned Maristella to bring her ear closer to the door. Maristella shrugged and shook her head to show she couldn’t understand a word either were saying.

‘That girl who ran away with that false prophet R. J. Cethin. So you be careful.’

‘I don’t care about R. J. Cethin, Auntie. I only care about you. And Soar of course.’

‘If you marry that stupid Moi Twm Thomas you’ll be making the biggest mistake of your life.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of marrying him, Auntie. People aren’t getting married any more.’

Iola pulled herself up and tried to turn the dangerous observation into a joke.

‘It’s gone out of fashion. So there you are. You were well ahead of your time, Auntie Keturah.’

There was no response to her attempt at humour. For an old woman who attached so much importance to family how could the demise of marriage be something to laugh at? What would become of the family tree that hung in her bedroom and stretched back generations? And what about the first chapter of the gospel according to St Matthew?

‘There’s got to be a succession,’ the old woman said. ‘Things can’t carry on without a succession. If you were as old as I am, you would know that. Where’s your father?’

‘We want to come in, Auntie Keturah. We want to join you. We want to support you.’

‘Do you indeed.’

‘Really we do. We want to save Soar.’

‘I’ve never seen you darken these doors before. Dashing about the world getting into trouble. That’s what I hear. You run off now, child, and get your father. He is a Trustee. It’s his responsibility. He’s let the whole fabric of this building run down. It’s his job to repair it. And the sooner he starts the better. You go and tell him that. Him and his precious County Council. And tell him I’m not budging out of this chapel until they start repairing it. You tell him that.’

‘Won’t you let me in? Please.’

‘No, I won’t. Go and get your father.’

IX

Iola was too furious to speak. The old woman had left her to glower at a closed door. Maristella was standing behind

her, a model of patience, waiting for some form of explanation. She was no more than a refugee in a foreign country, without the language or any acquaintance with local custom. All she could gather was that her champion and benefactor and friend was hugely displeased. On the way home Iola kept repeating the same imprecations under her breath.

‘The old witch. She’s impossible. She always was impossible. Who wants families anyway? They should be done away with.’

A cloud of gloom and despondency descended on Penllwyn. There was a sharp and unforgiving exchange between the Alderman and his only daughter that Maristella could not follow and from then on they stopped speaking to each other. Mealtimes were particularly uncomfortable. Nino was quick to sense an atmosphere of discord and clung more closely to his mother. His large eyes scanned the faces of father and daughter at either end of the table. The Alderman, when he thought Iola wasn’t looking, extended an open hand in Maristella’s direction as though looking for sympathy and then closed it abruptly. He was cut off from his habitual source of consolation and comfort at the golf club by a compelling desire to avoid Ennis Taft’s poking and probing. Iola, for her part was reluctant to contact Moi Twm. She would have to admit her scheme was a total failure and she had put him to great trouble for nothing. It seemed as if they could not agree what to do about Mary Keturah, they would never be able to agree about anything.

After lunch, Maristella led Nino to the drawing room to give him a music lesson. It was something he had already begun to enjoy. He had two or three notes he could strike in the treble clef so that his mother could tell him they were playing a duet. He hammered away delighted with his own efforts and his mother was pleased too. The volume of sound increased. Iola marched into the room.

‘For God’s sake, won’t you stop that row?’

When she saw how much she had startled them she clapped a hand to her brow.

‘I’m afraid I’ve got a horrible headache,’ she said. ‘It’s not at all my day. I tell you what. Why don’t you go and visit Moi Twm in his precious shop. Tell him the sorry tale. You can stick Nino in front of the telly. I’ll keep an eye on him.’

Maristella was reluctant to accept the suggestion.

‘I don’t know what to tell him,’ she said. ‘I find it difficult to talk to him. He speaks so quickly. I don’t really understand what he say. Most of the time.’

‘Not good enough for you, is he?’

‘Good. He is good of course. Very good.’

‘You prefer to be knocked about a bit. Bit of a masochist aren’t you, on the quiet?’

Maristella was slow to understand that Iola in her frustrated mood was looking for a fight. She grew pale and took what comfort she could from the little boy clinging to her side.

‘Just you remember, if you don’t like it here, you can leave tomorrow. I can turn you out the minute you feel like that.’

Her display of nasty temper seemed to bring her some temporary relief. When she saw that both the mother and child were crying, she left the room. It seemed large and empty when she had gone. In the corner of a sofa Maristella nursed and comforted her little boy. They were only here on sufferance. They were isolated in a cold unfriendly world. Within less than half an hour Iola was back again, contrite and full of apologies.

‘I’m so sorry my dear. I’m such a nasty spoilt bitch. I know I am. I try to control it. I’m one of those miserable creatures trapped in their own nature.’

She came around the back of the sofa and laid her cheek on the top of Maristella’s head. The little boy shrank closer inside his mother’s arms. Iola whispered more urgently.

‘It comes bursting out sometimes. You do forgive me don’t you? Say you forgive me.’

When Maristella nodded she stroked her cheek tenderly.

‘We’ve been through so much together. You are so good for me, Maristella, my guiding star. You help me escape from myself. I mean that. Doing good is more than a backstairs method of getting your own way. You taught me that.’

She moved around the sofa to sit on the floor at Maristella’s feet. She took hold of her hand to squeeze it. The little boy gazed at her with his mouth open, wondering what she would do next.

‘The Dominican Republic,’ she said. ‘There’s enormous work to be done there. Shelter are very keen on starting a housing project. It’s something to think about Maristella, isn’t it? You can speak Spanish?’

‘Only very badly.’

Maristella sighed deeply. She was anxious to please Iola, but there were simple facts that had to be faced.

‘It’s an idea anyway. Something to think about. I have to get away from this place. There’s so little I can do about it. You can see that for yourself. It’s my home of course. I have a deep deep attachment. But what good can I do? It’s sunk so deep in a morass of complacency. There’s nothing I can do about it.’

Her father and her great-aunt only seemed to exist to make her uncomfortable. She shifted up to the sofa from the floor and sat so close to Maristella that Nino was crushed between them. He gave a little squeak of protest and this amused her.

‘Go and bang at the piano,’ she said. ‘Bang it as hard as you like.’

Once he had more space, the little boy was reluctant to leave his mother’s side.

‘You do what you like,’ Iola said. ‘Don’t ever let people bully you, especially me. We’ve got to think about what to do next, haven’t we, Maristella? Whatever happens we’ve got to be in the same boat.’

X

At four o'clock in the morning Alderman Parry-Paylin was woken up by a loud cry. He studied his wristwatch on the bedside table trying to decide whether it was part of a dream, or the little boy having another nightmare: considering the oppressive atmosphere in the house the previous day, it would not have been surprising. He had seriously considered the possibility of asking the little boy's mother to act as some sort of go-between or mediator, between his difficult daughter and himself, only to conclude that such a move would have been too ridiculous. Since when had a foreign girl been able to intercede between a widowed father and his only daughter, who in any case had no excuse to be harbouring imagined wrongs. As so often happened in these matters, it was a case of sitting it out: just waiting until all the parties concerned came to their senses. In all his dealings throughout his life, he had relied on common sense to prevail.

He was slow to become aware of a blue light outside revolving in the grey mist of early morning. He saw the police car in the drive. In a state of agitation he stumbled around the bedroom aware of an impending emergency but uncertain how to prepare for it. Half-dressed and carrying a raincoat he walked down the stairs to be met by Inspector Owen Evans a police officer with whom he had good relations. In their dressing gowns Iola and Maristella stood in silence on either side of the bottom of the staircase. Iola reached out to take her father's hand. He had to assume she was prepared to offer him comfort. In any event, it looked right. The Inspector was a large avuncular figure who liked to say that he was a farmer's son from Meirionydd, who had to make a choice between the ministry and the police force, and had settled the matter in his own mind by making his professional manner a mixture of both.

'Sad news, Alderman. And bad news. I've already

informed these young ladies. A fire at Soar. I'm very sorry to tell you Alderman Parry-Paylin your dear old aunt has passed away.'

'A fire?'

The Alderman gripped the curved balustrade to steady himself.

'Yes. Well now then, I thought it was the least I could do to come and tell you myself.'

Iola reached out to take his hand.

'Daddy. I'm so sorry. I really am.'

Her sympathy was a form of reconciliation and he smiled at her. The Inspector placed his large hand on the Alderman's shoulder, and Mihangel Parry-Paylin lowered his head in gratitude for so much thoughtfulness and consideration. The Inspector looked at Iola and she bestirred herself to make some tea. The Inspector and the Alderman made their way at a solemn pace to take tea in the study.

'A nasty accident,' the Inspector said. 'It's too soon to jump to conclusions but I suspect it was that paraffin stove. It is a great sadness of course, but in my job, alas, we have to deal with these tragedies every day. At least here, my friend, there was a touch of heroism in the story and good deeds are bright lights in a wicked violent world. Nick Jenkin the postman was on his way to work and saw the smoke billowing out of one of the windows and from under the door. He didn't hesitate. He soaked his jacket in the river, put it over his head, smashed the door open with the jack from his van and dragged the old woman out. Too late of course, but a fine gallant action. She was dead of course, overcome with the fumes.'

They shook their heads and contemplated the postman's courageous action as they sipped their hot tea.

'They put the fire out,' the Inspector said. 'But the dear little chapel is little more than a smouldering ruin. There was a lamp you know on the communion table. Was it the lamp or the paraffin stove? Did she knock it over? Was she

desperate to escape? She was very old of course. But old people are still people, aren't they? I know how upsetting it must be for you. I know you thought the world of Soar. All those family associations. When you have recovered sufficiently I want you to come with me and look at the damage. Not much we can save I'm afraid. Plenty of scorched papers fluttering around. You, more than anyone else will have to decide what is to be done. And of course, when you feel up to it, we shall need to identify the body.'

XI

In the portico of Moriah, one of the largest chapels in the county town, Uncle Ted drew on the fag end of his cigarette while Moi Twm stood alongside him anxious to find a seat inside. The chapel was filling up rapidly.

'There'll be room in the gallery,' Uncle Ted said. 'Above the clock. That's where I like to sit. Keep an eye on things.'

Moi Twm was embarrassed by the note of cynicism in his Uncle Ted's rasping voice. There was a limit to the extent you could suspect everyone and everything. The death of the old woman and the destruction of the chapel had touched him deeply. He had washed the colour out of his hair and had his head shaved like a Buddhist monk. He hoped people would take his transformation seriously. It was not such a big step, he said, from protest to pilgrimage. Uncle Ted's comment he found thoughtless to the point of being hurtful. He said it made him look like an overpaid professional footballer.

'Here they come.'

Uncle Ted's small eyes ferreted about.

'Two by two the animals enter the ecumenical ark.'

He threw his fag end away and pushed Moi Twm forward to climb the gallery steps on the left side of the vestibule. The weather had taken a turn for the worst. Umbrellas and raincoats abounded and a steamy atmosphere gave the impression that the chapel was packed. In the gallery there

was more room, and from his chosen vantage point above the clock, Uncle Ted and Moi Twm could take a close view of the proceedings. The coffin, mounted on a wheeled chromium-plated bier, was parked under the elaborately carved pulpit, where the communion table usually stood. It was adorned with one large wreath of white lilies and red roses. The pulpit itself was overshadowed by the shining mountain of pipes of the powered organ. The curved deacon's pew was occupied by ministers of all the denominations, including the Anglican Archdeacon and the Roman Catholic priest.

'I wonder what the old girl would have had to say about that...'

Uncle Ted fidgeted about the pew so that he could get closer to Moi Twm's ear. There was ceaseless comment he wanted to make for his nephew's edification.

'Quite a bing-bang you know at the Ecumenical Council. How best to take advantage of the occasion. The Bishop was there you know. Agreed to Moriah, provided the Archdeacon made an address all designed to prove the old girl died to prove the church was One and indivisible.'

Moi Twm made an effort to shift further away from the buzz of his uncle's excited whispers. The organ had begun to play low sonorous music. He wanted to be left alone with his own solemn thoughts. Uncle Ted had too much to say for himself. This wasn't the place to be dishing dirt.

'The Press is here you know. We are on the verge of a mini-media event. Jones Llandudno Junction has been trying to get the tabloids interested. Working himself up no end concocting tasty headlines – *Nonconformist spinster sets fire to herself*.

He began to shake as a sequence of witty elaborations occurred to him. In the end he had to clap his hand over his loose dentures to stop them slipping out. He seemed incapable of sitting still. He leaned over the edge of the gallery in case persons of importance might be sitting at the

back of the chapel. Moi Twm tugged fiercely at the tail of the black coat his uncle wore to attend funerals.

The two front pews according to custom had been left vacant for the immediate family. Mihangel Parry-Paylin and his daughter Iola occupied the first.

‘Not much of a family.’

Uncle Ted felt obliged to comment. He was surprised almost to the point of outrage when Maristella and her little boy took their place in the second pew. Before she sat down Maristella genuflected in the direction of the coffin and crossed herself.

‘Good Lord! Did you see that Moi Twm? Did you see that?’

It was a neat and unobtrusive gesture, but surprising in a nonconformist chapel.

‘What do you expect her to do?’

Moi Twm was fed up with his uncle’s prattle. The man was tied to his bad habits like a wayside goat on a tether.

‘She’s a Latin, isn’t she? It’s a mark of respect. We could do with a little more of it around here.’

In a brief address, the Archdeacon said that he was speaking on behalf of the county branch of the Ecumenical Movement. This was a special occasion. By her sacrifice this lonely old lady had brought the whole community closer together and made it aware of all the present dangers that threatened its Christian roots. The fate of our little nation, he said, was inextricably interwoven with the faith that gave it birth in the first place. There was such a thing as an apostolic succession on the humblest level and by her untimely death, Mary Keturah Parry had made a whole community more aware of this vital fact. Uncle Ted made notes in his own peculiar form of shorthand and grunted full approval of the Archdeacon’s eloquence.

Mary Keturah Parry was buried in the new cemetery plot opposite the ruin of Soar chapel. For this service the mourners were far fewer in number. When the interment was

over, Alderman Parry-Paylin stretched out a hand to hold back Maristella.

‘I wonder if I could have a word,’ he said.

They stood still on the wet grass as the straggle of mourners went past them. There was some curiosity to take a closer look at the ruins of the chapel. Someone said the pews were still smouldering.

‘Something I’ve been wanting to say.’

The Alderman breathed more deeply to gain courage to speak.

‘If you and your little boy wanted to make Penllwyn your home, I would be very glad for you to stay.’

Maristella looked down as if she were measuring the degree of tenderness in the proposal.

‘You are very kind,’ she said. ‘You have been very kind to us both.’

‘Will you stay?’

There was a level of pleading in his voice. He had his own problem, being obliged to grow old alone. This gentle unmarried mother could be the answer. He had to make the offer.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I shall have to ask Iola.’

‘Ah well, Maristella. I am sure you will find life more comfortable in Penllwyn than wandering the wildernesses of this world. Much easier you know.’

‘I don’t think my life was ever meant to be easy,’ Maristella said.

In her deep black, Iola was approaching to ask them what they had stopped to talk about.