

A BED OF FEATHERS

Rhys Davies

I

One year Jacob Jenkins, having amassed a little fortune by steady labour in the pit, went for a long holiday amid the rich meadows and stony villages of Cardiganshire. And he brought back to the valley a wife.

To the valley people the union was scandalous and unnatural. For though Jacob was sixty and become arid in a respectable celibacy, the woman he brought triumphantly to the valley was a rose-red blooming young creature of twenty-five, with wanton masses of goldish hair and a suggestion of proud abandonment about her: a farmhand, as everyone knew not long after her arrival. Ach-y-fi. Why couldn't the man marry one of the many local widows near his own age? Jacob Jenkins, a deacon for fifteen years, taking to himself a jaunty-looking slut like that!

But Jacob brought her proudly into the home, presented her to his gaping sister Ann, who for minutes was shocked into silence, and then to his half-brother Emlyn, who accepted her with amused indifference.

'Come to mother us orphans, have you?' Emlyn said with a grin.

'Indeed now, have I been useless, then?' Ann, forty-five and shrewish, demanded at last. She turned to Jacob's wife.

‘An awful business you’ll find it, looking after colliers,’ she said with an unpleasant grimace.

‘With two of you not so hard the work will be,’ Jacob said.

But Ann announced, drawing off her shawl and folding it calmly: ‘Oh, now that you have married like this, so late and cunning, no need is there for me here. Go as a housekeeper I will, somewhere in the country.’ Her lips were bloodless, her big body taut with scorn. She loathed the wife at first sight.

Jacob said indifferently, ‘Your own way you must go, Ann fach.’ He had eyes only for Rebecca now.

‘No disturbance do I want to make in this house,’ Rebecca said, tapping her foot nervously.

But Ann ignored her and went out. Emlyn, child of their father’s second wife, spat into the fire and sat down in satisfied acceptance of the new menage. And he said to Jacob, when the young wife had gone upstairs to take off her new clothes:

‘Jacob, Jacob, a sly taste for women you hid in you. And a juicy taste too!’

Jacob lifted his lizard eyelids.

‘Easy capture she was,’ he said. ‘A lot of silly bumpkins were after her, with nothing in their pockets, and a liking for dear things she has. Think you she is worth a brooch that was fifty shillings and a bracelet that cost the wages of ten days’ work?’ His grey old collier’s face shone exultingly.

Emlyn laughed. ‘Worth every penny she is, no doubt!’

Jacob looked at him in senile rhapsody.

‘Ah, every penny. A fool I was to stay single for so many years. Take advice from me. Don’t you be a frog and remain unmarried for so long. A rare bed of feathers is a woman.’

Emlyn stretched his length in yawning indifference. He was not yet thirty, tall and easy with supple strength, and no stranger to the comforting ways of women.

‘Don’t hurry me now,’ he laughed. ‘Satisfied I am as things are.’ He looked at Jacob. ‘But you want me to go? Ann says she is going, and you want to be alone?’

But Jacob shook his head. 'No, stay you as a lodger, Emlyn bach. An expensive woman Rebecca is going to be I am thinking, and not for ever do I want to work in the dirty old pit. Take some of the expense off you will if you will pay us so and so.' Rebecca came back into the room just then, and he said to her: 'Willing you are that Emlyn shall stay as a lodger? Asking he was if we would rather be alone.'

Rebecca's dark watching eyes suddenly became filled with tears. 'Oh,' she said again, faltering a little, her tearful glance upon the young man, 'no disturbance do I want to make here. Emlyn, stay you will, won't you?'

Her thick hand played with the blood-red stone of her bracelet; and her eyes looked a little weary in the shining fruit-like freshness of her face.

II

Rebecca did not become a collier's wife easily. She would *not* boil enough water for the baths, she neglected to dry the sweat-damp garments that Jacob and Emlyn threw into a corner of the kitchen as they undressed to wash in the tub before the fire, she couldn't patch moleskin trousers, she couldn't make broth as a Welsh collier likes it – thick and heavy with carrots, onions and leeks. This last fault was hard to overlook, though both Emlyn and Jacob were strangely forbearing with the young woman.

'Thin is her broth and heavy her jam pudding,' Emlyn muttered. 'No hand has she for tasty cooking.'

'Give the woman time,' Jacob answered with warmth. 'More used to cows' teats her hands have been, remember.'

At first, too, she seemed to dislike being present in the kitchen when the men bathed, to hand them this and that as they stood naked in the tub, and to wash the coal-black off their backs, as the women do in the miners' cottages. But gradually she got accustomed to it, even to washing Emlyn's back, while Jacob, having taken precedence in the tub, read

the paper or dozed before the fire, attired only in his flannel shirt. For such is the bucolic simplicity of the miner's cottage life; and Rebecca did not mind, presently.

Though she dreamed of a better life. True, this valley was far nicer than the country of Cardiganshire. Here there were shops filled with blue and red silks and satins, fashionable hats, beads, and thin delicate shoes. Here was a cinema too. The chapel was crowded with observant faces, and she had a position there, as the wife of a deacon. Yet she craved for something else, she knew, gazing at her handsome face in the mirror, that some other wonderful thing was escaping her. And as she realised that, a strained and baffled look would come into her searching eyes and she would cross her pressing arms over her body, a half-strangled moan escaping her distended lips.

There were some evenings when she was left alone, Jacob in the chapel attending to deacons' business; and Emyln was always out. She had not made friends yet, and in those long weary evenings she would sit and brood over a novelette, her face a little paler after the work of the day. Or she would go into the parlour and lie down on the sofa in the darkness, or stand at the window and watch with gleaming eyes the few people pass. And then perhaps she would go out for a short walk, to the main street, where the men were gathered in little groups about the street corners, peaceful in the night, the hills rising up tall and secretive, each side of the hushed vale. But she would return with a greater loneliness in her heart.

Jacob would come in to his supper and sink with established familiarity into his chair, his face fixed in a contented leer.

'Well, Rebecca,' he would say, watching every movement she made, every expression shifting on her face, 'what have you been doing tonight?'

He never touched or caressed her out of bed. But his pale eyes watched her with a possessive satisfaction that crept about

her like the tight embrace of a snake. Sometimes she would notice his large oaken hand tremble as it rested on his knee.

Then she would go into the kitchen and wait until the painful throbbing of her heart was stilled.

And he was aware of that, her sheering off from him like a flame from an icy blast. A strange lipless grin would come to his face then. Still the female was not his. The contented leer passed from his face and in his eyes a fanatical glare shone. As it shone when he prayed aloud in chapel.

III

One Sunday morning she said:

‘Staying home from chapel I am this morning.’

Her face was rather yellow, though her cheeks as yet had not quite lost their blooming rose.

‘Not well you are?’ Jacob enquired gently.

‘I will make apple dumplings instead,’ she promised, moving away into the kitchen.

‘Don’t you stay too long over the fire,’ he said, looking for his Bible and bag of peppermints. And he went out dressed in his deep Sunday black.

She was alone. Emlyn had gone to the whippet-racing, the Sunday morning amusement of those colliers who have the courage to scorn the chapel respectability; but she wished he was home, so that she would have someone young to talk with. That morning the house had seemed like a dark and silent prison about her soul, and yet she would not have stirred out of it, fearful lest she would cry aloud in the chapel. She worked, going from room to room with a duster, working without method, only conscious that she must move. She prepared the apple dumplings. A little later Emlyn came in. He brought with him a dog, one of the whippets.

‘It isn’t yours?’ she asked, gazing fixedly at the slim animal. It had a beautiful sleek body, long and narrow, its glistening fawn coat like velvet, the most delicate-looking

dog she had ever seen. 'Ah,' she cried in sudden excitement, 'lovely he is.'

'Keeping him I am for a while,' Emlyn said, taking the dog's head in his hand with a slow pressure that she watched, bending to stroke the animal. There was a bright glint, almost of passion, in Emlyn's eyes as he held the dog's head tight in his hand.

'Oh, he doesn't like me!' she cried childishly as, her hand touching his sleek coat, the dog winced away. Shaking his head free, the whippet looked at her with a swift regard. Then, sniffing the air delicately, he moved his head towards her, his long narrow head that invited the grasp of a hand. And, fearful but fascinated, her hand moved down over the head until it spanned the jaw in a light and trembling clasp.

'There!' Emlyn said in a satisfied voice, 'he likes you.'

Slowly she released the head. The dog turned to Emlyn with a nervous look, as though he wondered at some atmosphere in the air.

'My little beauty!' Emlyn cried suddenly in delight. 'Just like a funny little child you are.'

Rebecca got up slowly, stood watching them, her eyelids dropped, her face inscrutable. Emlyn was as though unaware of her and was caressing the dog, uttering little noises of satisfaction. He passed his large strong hands over the slender body of the dog, slowly up and down, the thumbs on the back and the fingers over the belly.

'Soft and glossy as the back of a swan,' he whispered ecstatically.

The dog was quivering under his grasp.

'Hurting him you are!' she exclaimed.

'No,' he said, 'he likes it.' And his powerful collier's hands, that spanned the animal's slim body, were certain and intimate in their caressive grasp.

Then when Emlyn released him, the dog immediately lay down on the mat, contentedly burying his head between his paws. Emlyn looked up.

Rebecca was still standing against the table, taut, her eyelids drooped. There seemed a strange tension on her face. Neither spoke for a minute or so and at last her voice, unquiet and unwilling, broke the silence:

‘What will Jacob say, bringing one of those dogs in on a Sunday?’ Jacob, as was proper in a deacon, sternly condemned whippet racing.

‘Ah! what will he say?’ Emlyn repeated, a little grin on his mouth.

And then he stared at her, his full moist lips distended in that jeering grin. For a moment she looked back at him. Her eyes seemed to go naked in that moment, their blue nudity, chastened of weariness and pain, gleaming full on him.

She moved away, went into the kitchen and sank upon a chair. The yellow pallor of her face was again evident. She looked as though she wanted to be sick.

Jacob came in, his face still exalted from the chapel prayers. Immediately he saw the sleeping dog.

‘Whose is that?’ he asked sternly.

‘Keeping it for a while I am,’ Emlyn said fondly. ‘A little angel he is.’

‘Bah!’ Jacob uttered, violent wrath beginning to burn in his shrunken cheeks. ‘Bring you one of those animals in this house? Come I have from the Big Seat of the chapel, the words of our prayers still full of fire in my heart, and this vessel of wickedness my eyes see as I enter my house!’

‘Ach, Jacob, if wickedness there is, blame you the men that use the animal.’

‘He is a partner in your Sabbath abominations. Take him away from here.’ A storm was gathering in Jacob’s eyes.

‘He likes the warmth of the fire. Look, Jacob, innocent as a little calf’s is his face.’ The dog had lifted its head and was gazing at Jacob with a pleading expression in his glinting eyes. But his gaze made Jacob more infuriated.

‘Out of these rooms where I move,’ he began to shout.

‘Take him back to his owner or tie him to the tree in the garden. Put evil in the house he does.’

Rebecca had come into the room. She said, her voice scarcely above a mutter: ‘Comfort let the little dog bach have, Jacob. Delicate he looks and company for me he’ll be.’

Jacob turned to her. ‘Ignorant of the wicked sports he is partner to you are, Mrs Jenkins,’ he replied angrily. ‘No, let him go out of this house.’

Emlyn began to grin. He was really indifferent. The grin on his handsome tolerant face was irritating to Jacob, who began to moan:

‘Ach, awful it is for me to have a brother who spends the Sabbath mingling with abandoned and dirty-minded men. Take you warning, young man, the Lord is not mocked and derided long.’

‘All sorts come to our races,’ Emlyn reflected comfortably, ‘and happy and healthy they seem. No sour faces such as gather in the chapels.’ He called to the dog and lazily took him to the garden.

IV

That night she dreamed of hands.

They were upon her breasts, outspread and clasping; and there was such a pain beneath them that her lips moved in anguish. She did not know whose hands they were, her mind strove to discover. A horror came upon her, she seemed to struggle. But the hands were immovable and finally she submitted, drifting into the gloom and the horror, moaning until she woke in the darkness, hearing the bell of the alarm clock.

‘Jacob,’ she called, louder than usual, ‘Jacob.’

Jacob grunted. He had been deep in slumber. Rebecca got out of bed and lit the candle. Then Jacob, his face grey and corpse-like in the dim light, moving his limbs with the effort of an old man, followed and put on, with grunts and sighs, his thick striped flannel drawers.

She went downstairs, after calling Emlyn. Her mind was still drugged with slumber and in her too was the shadow of that unbearable pain. With mechanical drugged movements she set about the usual tasks – blew the fire into a glow and set the kettle, prepared the breakfast and the men's food tins for the pit. She was in such abstraction that when she turned and saw Emlyn, who had silently entered in his stockinged feet, she shrank back with a little cry.

'What's the matter with you?' he exclaimed.

For a moment or two she stared at him. His face! Ah, she had never seen it before, not as she saw it now. Her heart seemed to dart in a flame to her throat, her lips could utter no word. And there he stood, strange and watching, looking at her curiously.

Then she woke with a jolt and bent her head, to cut the bread.

'Make a noise coming down you ought to,' she said. 'Not quite awake am I, early in the morning like this.'

Emlyn began to whistle with a shrill male energy that made her shudder, and went into the kitchen for his boots.

Jacob came down, coughing. He seemed to creak as he sat in his chair, his face like a wrinkled stone.

They all sat down to breakfast, Rebecca between them. There was cold ham and thick black tea. Jacob began to grunt:

'Wheezy I am again this morning. Glad I'll be when I'll be able to lie in bed longer.'

Rebecca was looking at her husband. As he uttered the last word he glanced at her and a cunning grin came over his face. She felt her stomach rise, her mind reel.

'Jesus, white you've gone, Rebecca,' Emlyn said quickly.

Jacob looked at her calmly. The cunning grin had become an obscene and triumphant leer.

'Well, well, one must expect such things now,' he said.

'What!' exclaimed Emlyn in a sharpened voice. 'True is it, Rebecca?'

She suddenly swept her hand before her, upsetting her cup of tea.

‘No,’ she said loudly, ‘no.’

‘Ach, you don’t know,’ said Jacob. ‘And there’s a mess you’ve made, Mrs Jenkins.’

‘No, it’s not true,’ she repeated loudly. Her eyes glittered.

Jacob sniffed as he rose from the table and loosened his belt.

‘See we shall,’ he continued hatefully, sniffing laughter over the words. ‘Think you are different to other women?’

She sat, her face stretched forward like an animal suddenly aware of some ominous portent. The men gathered their things together.

‘Take you heart, Mrs Jenkins,’ Jacob said.

She watched them go off – they worked side by side in the pit, on the same seam. Her husband’s back suddenly roused a fury of hate in her – she could have clawed in venom the coarse thick neck above the cotton muffler. But Emlyn – going through the door last – turned and smiled at her, a quick brilliant smile that rippled in a delighted shudder over her, until her own moist mouth reflected it.

She removed the breakfast things. How quiet and familiar the house had become! She thought of the day’s work in a sudden access of energy; and she began to sing *Merch yr Ydfa*. The rows of polished plates standing on the dresser pleased her – how pretty were the little Chinese bridges and the sleeping trees! She plunged her hands into a bowl of cold water and enjoyed the shudder that ran through her blood.

Then the bark of a dog made her lift her head quickly. She went in haste to the pantry and filled a pan with pieces of bread, pouring milk over. Again came the bark, and she hurried out with the pan to the back garden.

The whippet stood outside its roughly made kennel.

‘Well, well now,’ she called soothingly, ‘is he hungry then?’

She knelt on the earth before it, holding the pan for it to eat; and as the animal ate she admired again the fawn sheen

of his coat and the long delicate shape of his body, which quivered in pleasure.

V

Then from that morning Rebecca seemed to awaken as from a long and dull slumber. Her eyes became wider, a blue and virgin fire glowing beneath the thick lids; and as she went about, her body walked with a taut and proud grace, flaunting a fierce health. Her voice became plangent and direct, coming from her heavy lips.

‘Ha, agree with you does married life,’ Jacob said.

She slowly turned her head to him.

‘Ha,’ he repeated, ‘rich and nice as a little calf you are now.’ And he added with lecherous humour, ‘Afraid of you I was at first, in Cardigan. More like a Bristol cow you were then.’

She pressed her hands down over her hips, lifting her shoulders and looking at him with drawn brows.

‘Not angry with me you are?’ he asked with childish complaint. ‘A compliment I was paying you.’

She said, a metallic sharpness wavering in her voice: ‘Don’t you watch me so much. Continually your eyes are watching me.’

Curiously, he dropped his head before her anger. For the first time she realised her power.

‘Like a prison keeper you behave,’ she added. ‘Always you are staring at me as if I wanted to hide something from you. Suspicious of me you are?’

His instinct was aroused by her question.

‘Something to hide you have, then?’ he asked, jerking his head up.

‘What can there be to hide!’ she exclaimed with such artless surprise that again his face became expressive of his relentless lust for her.

‘Only a thought passing in my head it was,’ he muttered.

She roused herself. She seemed to glitter with an ominous vitality, female and righteous.

‘A dirty old swine you are,’ she said loudly.

He received this with silence. Then his voice became plaintive and ashamed; he said:

‘Harsh you are with me, Rebecca. Forgive an old man’s errors you must.’

He looked at her with abject pleading in his eyes. She stared back at him. And still she saw behind the flickering childish pleading in his eyes the obsessed leer of the old man, the relentless icy glitter of his lust. She drew back and her voice had something of a threat in it as she said:

‘Well, don’t you be so suspicious of me at all.’

She went upstairs to their bedroom.

The evening sun invaded the room with a warm and languid light, a shaft falling on the scarlet counterpane of the bed. The soft glow soothed her. She gazed in the mirror and, biting her lower lip, softly murmured his name. ‘Emlyn, Emlyn.’ Her head dropped, she sank on the bed and covered her face with her hands. But when she lifted her head again her face was smiling. She went to the dressing table and combed her hair. She passed into Emlyn’s room and began to look for some odd job to do. She looked over his garments to see if any buttons were missing. All were in their places, and then she opened the drawer in which he kept his ties and collars. As usual, the drawer was untidy. She began to fold the things.

Among other oddments she found a scrap of paper on which was scrawled *May Morgan, 30 Glasfryn Street*, and she stood up to scrutinise it carefully. Then she tossed it back into the drawer with a gesture of disdain.

When she went downstairs Jacob was sleeping in the armchair, his hands clasped over his stomach. His mouth had dropped open and a thin line of saliva was descending from it. She laid the supper quietly, so that he should not waken. Her senses were marvellously tranquil; she moved about with

soft, intimate movements, her face relaxed as though she were utterly at peace with the world.

Jacob ate his supper with chastened solemnity. She dreamily watched his wad of bread and cheese decrease. He took her long silence as a sign of grieved anger against him, and he anxiously studied her face, eager to see a sign of compassion.

Emlyn came in and joined them. He was slightly tipsy, and his face, handsome and flushed, seemed to give off a ruddy heat of ardour. He sat at the table and gazed round, a critical smile on his lips.

Jacob sniffed with deliberation.

‘God, we had a talk tonight!’ Emlyn exclaimed.

‘About what?’ asked Rebecca.

‘Socialism,’ he said exultingly.

Jacob sniffed again.

‘Wisdom was in your talk, no doubt,’ he said suavely.

‘Godly seems socialism after five or six pots of beer.’

‘Jacob, Jacob, a hard-bottomed old Tory you are getting. No wonder you are such a grizzler.’

‘All your evenings you spend like that?’ Rebecca asked.

‘I like mixing with men,’ Emlyn said, ‘to save my mind and joints from getting stiff.’ He laughed uproariously at this. Rebecca and Jacob remained grave and unsmiling.

‘And your pockets from keeping full,’ Jacob added unctuously. ‘A poor old mongrel you will become, not worth a penny.’

‘Ha,’ Rebecca cried swiftly, ‘a runner after women he is too I should think.’

Emlyn turned his bright, glazed eyes full upon her.

‘The wrong way you put it, Rebecca,’ he said softly, ‘nowadays the women it is who have the pleasantest tongues.’

She drew back her head. Her bosom seemed to rise in a storm.

‘Vain as a silly peacock,’ she jeered, ‘nothing is there in you for a woman to get excited about.’

He laughed again, loudly. There was a coarse maleness in his laughter, a flood of primitive strength.

She sat there, high and proud, the colour deepened and vivid in her face. Jacob seemed to ignore them, sucking up his tea with solemn contempt. He knew that his half-brother was lost to the Baptists forever. His former protests and denunciations had all been in vain, and now Emlyn interested him no more.

Supper finished, Jacob sat by the fire to read a chapter of the Scriptures before bed. Emlyn lit a cigarette and restlessly began to study a racing list which he took from his pocket.

Rebecca cleared the supper things into the kitchen. Her heart beat with a hard painful throb that was unbearable, and as she carried the crockery into the kitchen she seemed to sway with a slight drunken movement, her head drooping.

And as she was washing the dishes Emlyn came noisily into the kitchen and kicked off his boots. Then he turned and looked at her. Through the dim candlelight his eyes shone down on her like a cat's. She crouched over the pan of water in a sudden fright: she thought he was going to advance on her and take her there, suddenly and silently. She began to pant in fear.

They heard Jacob noisily clearing his throat and spit in the fire, and the spell was broken. But Emlyn, with a sleek, drunken smile, came over to her and pressed his hands over her swelling breasts. She moved in anguish and stared at him with remembering eyes. Ah, his grasp was familiar, this agonising rush of her blood suddenly familiar: she remembered her dream. Only the dark horror that had wrapped that dream was not here.

She lifted her face; mutely they stared at each other. Then with a shy and ashamed look she resumed her work.

He went back into the other room, whistling.

VI

Each day passed in an ecstasy of dreaming. When she rose in the early morning she took greater care of her appearance.

But it was a relief to see the two men go off to work – then she was alone to dream as deliriously as she liked. Perhaps she was the only collier's wife in the district who was dressed as though for a jaunt when the men returned from work. She bought a flimsy apron to wear over her frock, and a box of powder to soften the colour of her face: she began to look subtle. Once Jacob exclaimed irritably:

'What's come over you, woman! Extraordinary in your ways you are getting. No respectable woman dresses like that this time in the afternoon. Follow you how the others in the street are – hard-working women they look. A laughing stock you will make yourself.'

Rebecca tossed her head.

'Sluts they look,' she said, 'and sorry I feel for them.'

'Half a dozen children you ought to have, Mrs Jenkins,' Jacob answered warmly, 'and come to your senses you would then.'

Emlyn broke in:

'*Out* of her senses! Like to see women become machines of flesh you do, Jacob. Use them until their wheels are worn out. Yes, use them, that's all you see in women.'

Jacob became angry. 'A worshipper of women I am,' he cried in the manner of a Baptist preacher. 'Did not Jesus Christ come through a woman! And when I see one give herself over to frip-fraps and idle her flesh all day, vexed and disgusted I become.'

'I work all day and change at four o'clock,' Rebecca cried hotly, 'because bright I want to be by the time you come home.'

'Bright with a blouse and petticoat!' Jacob jeered. 'Bright enough it is for me to know that my wife you are. Without meaning are the clothes that cover your body.'

Rebecca shrank back. She went about her work without another word. Not until the time came for washing Emlyn's back did her averted and ashamed face lift itself in ardour again.

She usually washed the thick coal dust off his back with movements that were far too delicate, so that it took a long time before his flesh shone white again. But he did not complain, crouching in the big wooden tub, and did not shiver, like Jacob, for whom she was never quick enough – the nightly bathe was always unpleasant to him.

This evening she felt vengeful. Jacob had had his bath and was sitting in his shirt before the fire in the other room, warming his naked legs. She scooped water over Emlyn's back and passed the soap over the collier's black skin. And with her two hands, softly and ah, with such subtle passion, she began to rub the soap into his flesh, disregarding the rough flannel used for that task. Into the little hollows of his muscular shoulders, down the length of his flawless back, over the fine curves of his sides, she caressingly passed her spread hands. Beneath them his flesh seemed to harden, draw itself together as though to resist her. But – she could feel another answer to her quivering touch. She became exhausted, her breathing difficult. So she rested for a moment or two, and then, as he moved restlessly in his crouching attitude, she took a bowl of clean warm water and poured it over him. The flesh gleamed out, white-gold, a delicate flush beneath, like a heap of wheat burned hot in the sun.

'There,' she breathed, 'you must use the towel yourself. Tired I am.'

He did not answer, neither did he move up from his crouching. She went into the living room. Jacob, his hands clasped over his stomach, was dozing before the big fire. In his multi-coloured flannel shirt he looked gaunt and grotesque. She went up to the bedroom. Her eyes were gleaming with a kind of remorseless brilliance; her mien was profligate and mobile. She squatted on the floor like some brooding aboriginal dark in the consciousness of some terrific deed hovering. She squatted there, dark and brooding, and heard his steps approach, behind her. His

hands were upon her shoulders and entering her bosom. A shock, icy and violent, went through her: she dropped her head. Yet she felt as though she lay amid the softest velvet, folds of soothing dark velvet about her. No word was spoken and presently she was alone.

VII

Then came the time of the Cyfarfod, the Big Meetings in Jacob's chapel – a week of important services. A well-known preacher and other ministers came: every night there would be a long service with two sermons. A week of fiery oratory and prayers like flaming gas. Jacob, his deacon's face pompous and weighty, directed Rebecca to see that his Sunday clothes were spotless, that there were seven clean stiff collars ready, and that a new heart-shaped tie was bought.

As these instructions were given Emlyn blew whiffs of cigarette smoke to the ceiling, a secret and ironical smile on his face. Rebecca saw it with a little shudder. Jacob added:

'Enjoy the preaching you will, Mrs Jenkins. The sermons of Mr Prys-Davies can make you cry, enjoy them so much you do. Sometimes, so great is his shouting that crack like a wall does his voice.'

She was silent. Emlyn broke in:

'Darro, Jacob, those meetings are only for brainy men and old women who cannot take pleasure in anything else.'

Rebecca thought this incautious and she said quickly:

'Oh, enjoy them I shall, Jacob. Little outings they'll be for me, instead of staying in this house every evening.'

Emlyn drew in his stretched legs and spat in the fire.

'Gluttons for religion you two are,' he jeered.

The Cyfarfod opened on the Sunday; there was no hot dinner that day, as Rebecca went to the three services. She arrived home at ten o'clock that night, her eyes rather wild and obsessed. Jacob had stayed back with the deacons in the vestry.

Emlyn was reading a periodical, waiting for his supper.

'God!' he exclaimed, 'their beds people ought to take to that chapel.'

'The preaching was good,' she said slowly. Her cheeks seemed to sag, her face was rather pitiful. He watched her.

'Enjoy it you did!' he laughed.

'I *did* cry,' she answered in a subdued voice.

He rose from the chair and clasped her shoulders. But she drew away a little, her head dropped.

'Ah, foolish you are like all of them,' he said, 'all those damned hypocrites.'

She shrank further away. She was in that mystical state that by prolonged hymn-singing and prophetic preaching can so easily be induced in Welsh people.

'No, no,' she muttered, 'peace was there tonight.'

But he followed her, slowly and sinisterly, and as she reached the table pressed her back over it in his destroying embrace. He caught her unwilling mouth and warmed her with his lips. She tasted the sweet, languorous contact of his dripping tongue. She could have screamed in the violence of her soul. Her hands clasping his shoulders, she could have torn him in her agony of hate and lust.

'Tuesday,' he whispered, 'Tuesday you stay home.' Then he let her go and went back to his chair.

Silent and still, she remained for some moments by the table, her arms across her face. Presently she muttered:

'What am I to say?'

'Oh, tell the old fool that your sickness is coming on again. You know, deceive him with soft soap.' His voice was coarse and brutal.

Jacob came in, fiery banners still burning in his soul. His long, arid face was lit with them. He began immediately, sitting down to supper:

'The children of Israel sit down to their meat with thanksgiving to the Lord who gave it them. With singing voices and loud music we have praised his name, and on our

bended knees given up our sins. We have listened to the voice of one whose soul is deep with wisdom. Out of his mouth has come big words and exalted phrases.'

Emlyn listened gravely and said: 'Ach, Jacob, strange it is to me that you are not a local preacher yet.'

But Jacob waved this derision aside:

'The wicked shall mock in their ignorance. How can they see the hand of the Lord in their whippet-acing and games of painted cards? But with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah they shall sit in misery.'

He ate his supper with austere dignity, seated patriarchally in his armchair, his jaws working rhythmically. He looked rather fearsome. Rebecca did not say a word, but presently he turned to her:

'Rebecca Jenkins, say you that the meeting moved you?'

'Yes.'

'Did not the wings of angels beat about the singing!'

'Very beautiful was the singing,' she answered.

'Tired you look,' he said sternly.

'Well, after three long services—'

He bent his head to her; there seemed to be iron and fire in his voice as he said:

'Yes, a good wife you have been today. When we were singing did I not think, Blessed is our union today: my wife Rebecca lifts up her voice with mine in Cyfarfod, her voice is as my voice, her body is with my body here.'

She met his burning stare. Every motion seemed to flee from her consciousness and she had the taste of death in her. The fiery purpose of these eyes blasted her.

Emlyn seemed not to hear or see anything; he ate his Sunday night cold beef with head bent at the other end of the table. When he had finished he went back to his periodical, stretched his legs into the hearth, and casually lit a cigarette.

Rebecca's steps dragged with weariness and dread as she cleared away the supper things.

And the following two days she waited in a kind of numbness, her eyes glittering obsessively under her sullen brows. Tuesday, as Jacob hurried over his bath, she told him quietly:

‘I am going to stay home tonight and rest.’

‘Why, Rebecca fach?’ he demanded.

‘I—I,’ she muttered, her eyes cast down, ‘something comes over me lately. I could faint, so crowded does the chapel get.’

His face hung over her; she could hear the roused intake of his breath.

‘Better ask Mrs Watkins next door to come in and keep you company,’ he said slowly.

‘Don’t you be silly about me,’ she answered hurriedly. ‘A little rest is all I want.’

‘Broody you will get, alone,’ he went on fussily. ‘Think you it is—’

‘Oh go on, like an old woman you are, making a bother. Wait you for plainer signs.’

‘All right. But take you care of yourself.’

Later she went into the parlour and pressed her hands upon her head in an agony of mingled loathing and fear. She felt as though she bore a sword within her, a glittering blade which might at any moment split her being in two. She crouched behind the door, covering her head, her face contorted and ugly; she heard Emlyn go out and she went to her task of clearing the living-room after the men. Then Jacob came downstairs in his chapel clothes and after an admonishment that she was not to do too much, went off in dignified haste to the meeting.

Slowly she went upstairs and entered her bedroom. Slowly and carefully, as though she were following some definite and dictated plan, she removed her clothes. Her face was repulsive, contracted in an orgasm of primitive realisation, her eyes fixed like balls of blue marble, her lips thick and distended. Unclothed, her body looked hewn out of pure hard flesh, barren of light and shade, solid flesh of marble,

hard and durable. Her breasts sloped forward like cornices of white stone, her thighs were like smooth new pillars. From her head her loosened hair fell in a shower of silky gold threads, rich and lovely upon the polished stone of her shoulders. For moments she stood still in her gleaming nudity, as though she had indeed turned into a hewn white stone. Only when she moved to the bed there was the sudden grace of life.

She heard the click of the front door latch.

He was mounting the stairs; she called out in a voice strange to her own ears: 'He has gone, Emlyn.'

Emlyn went back to the front door and locked it.

VIII

She came downstairs and into the living-room. Emlyn was sitting in the armchair, smoking easily and contentedly.

'Are you going to stay in then?' she asked.

He smiled at her, a fatuous, contented smile.

'Don't you be nervous,' he said lazily, 'or suspicious Jacob will get at once. I am going to sit in this chair until he comes in.' He lay back deeper, his legs hanging limp. 'A task it would be for me to go out tonight.'

But Rebecca burned with a vivid heat that showed in her mottled face and lithe powerful movements. She looked flushed with strong life. Emlyn watched her move through the living room and said in a sniggering whisper:

'A marvel you are, Rebecca, darling.'

'Ach!' she exclaimed, making a gesture of disgust.

'But considerate of you I've been—' he said calmly.

Her cheeks flushed a deeper red.

'But you wai—' he continued.

His lechery was like the stinging of a whip on her quivering flesh. Again, cleaving up through her desire for him, she felt a sword of destruction within her. She looked at his throat with haunted eyes.

‘Now, Rebecca,’ he coaxed, ‘take things in a natural way. Be ready for Jacob.’

But she dropped on her knees, bowed down on the floor before him, crouching, her arms shuddering over her breasts.

‘What shall we do!’ she cried, her distorted face thrust to him. ‘Living in this house together. What shall we do!’

He leaned to her rather angrily.

‘Rebecca, Rebecca, use control on yourself. Shocking this is. What if he came in now?’

‘How can we live together here now!’ she moaned.

‘Ach, certain we can,’ he said sharply.

She drew back. ‘But how can it go on? Two men, and you his half-brother,’ she cried again. There was horror in her face and her eyes seemed utterly lost.

He stooped before her and pressed her between his thighs, lifted her up with his hand, looked at her long and steadily.

‘Go on we will all right. You leave it to me. Rebecca, enjoy it you should. A little secret between ourselves.’

She laid her head on his thigh and burst out:

‘Oh, I love you, Emlyn. Only with you I want to be. Horrible it will be for me to go to bed with Jacob again. That it is will kill me. Always I am thinking of your arms and your mouth kissing me.’

‘Ah! a few good times we will have.’

She wrenched herself free.

‘No,’ she cried with anger, ‘one or the other!’

‘Don’t you be a fool now! Go you cautious and everything will be all right.’ He became impatient with her, and her dramatic and hysterical mien alarmed him. Jacob might come in any moment. ‘Can’t you take patience with an old man like Jacob? Only a little soft soap he wants.’

‘Ha!’ she answered venomously, ‘a part of his God I have become. When I am with him in the night sometimes he prays as though he was praying through me. Like God he makes me feel.’

Emlyn laughed.

‘Don’t you laugh!’ she shouted.

‘Shut up,’ he said quickly.

‘Well, don’t you joke about this.’

He sat back and was silent. Anything to calm her. She went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. And it was just then that Jacob came in.

‘No supper laid!’ he exclaimed.

‘I was just starting—’ Rebecca said, coming into the living room.

Jacob gazed at her. ‘More colour you have than before I went,’ he said. ‘In the first prayer tonight I asked God to see to your comfort. For indeed ill you looked.’

She stared at her husband without a word.

‘Ignorant that she was unwell I was,’ Emlyn said hastily, ‘or stayed in I would have, to keep her company.’

Jacob slowly turned his gaze to Emlyn. ‘So alone she’s been most of the evening!’ he said as though pondering over the fact.

In a caught, nervous voice that sent a flame of anger over Emlyn, Rebecca said:

‘Go on, don’t you worry about me. Accustomed to being alone I am.’

‘Not very lonely were you in the evenings in Cardigan,’ Jacob said. ‘Seemed to me it did that plenty of louts were hanging about.’

‘Louts they were,’ she answered, regaining something of her natural demeanour. ‘And innocent of any behaviour I was.’

Jacob went to hang his coat up in the passageway. And Emlyn shot an angry glance at Rebecca, who tossed her head. There was a strange glint in her eyes now.

During supper she was mostly silent, replying in a short and vague fashion when the men spoke to her. She seemed occupied with some problem, her brow rather sombre. And in that mood Emlyn was afraid of her.

Then from that night something entered the house. It was in the air like the still presence of death, it was in the drawn

tension of Rebecca's paling brow, it was in the forced jocular humour of Emlyn. And, too, in the frozen drop of Jacob's eyelids as he sat in his chair, silent for long periods, there seemed a kind of foreboding, a chill.

Rebecca's conduct sometimes infuriated Emlyn. She would look at him with a long and shameless intensity when the three sat at a meal together: the expression of her whole body seemed to cry their secret. Once when they were alone he said to her:

'Behave yourself, you fool. You make your thoughts plain as ABC. Old Jacob might be, but not a blind ape is he.'

She set her jaw sullenly. 'I know,' she said.

'How is it you act so childish then!' he exclaimed savagely.

He was a different Emlyn now. She saw him contemptuously, his fear. Yet she was determined to force the issue. She said coldly: 'A rabbit's mind you've got.'

'Rabbit be damned. Worse it would be for you if Jacob found out.'

She drooped towards him. 'Then always we could be together!' She whispered with a sudden change of mood, her eyes gazing ardently upon him.

He let her caress him: until he fixed his mouth upon hers with a fury that satisfied her. But with that he too had to be content. Rebecca was becoming wily.

'Tomorrow night,' he muttered drunkenly, 'he will be at the deacons' meeting.'

'Suspicious he is getting,' she said derisively. 'Not a blind ape is he.'

'Hell and Satan take him,' he went on, 'my female you will be tomorrow night.'

She laughed.

IX

Tramping together to the pit in the early morning, Jacob said to Emlyn:

‘What is coming over the woman? Noticed you have, Emlyn, how changed she is?’

‘Yes,’ Emlyn answered irritably, ‘trying she is. Look you, my vest wasn’t dry this morning and my trousers was still damp in the corner where she threw them yesterday. And like a peevish owl she is in the mornings now.’

‘Ah,’ muttered Jacob, ‘more to complain of I have.’

Emlyn glanced aside at his half-brother’s face. Its sharp grey profile was outlined in the keen air as though cut out of cardboard, and it had a flat, dead expression. Emlyn felt a moment’s pity for Rebecca: what joy could she have from this arid mechanism of dry flesh walking beside him?

‘Happy you seem with her,’ he said with a note of surprise.

‘She keeps herself cold to me,’ Jacob said. ‘Yet like a playful little mare she was before we were married.’

‘Difficult is the first year or so with a woman like Rebecca,’ Emlyn observed wisely.

‘Mine she is,’ said Jacob with sudden intensity. ‘Yet I will have her.’

Emlyn said nothing. They tramped along, up the hill towards the pit in the far reach of the quiet vale. Emlyn became aware of something grim and warning in Jacob’s demeanour as he strode silently by his side. His face was still grey and inscrutable, but in his movements there was some dark austerity, like a warning. What was brooding in that shut, resentful mind?

They were joined by other colliers, dark-browed under their caps, tramping in a ragged black procession to the pit, under the dawning sky. Across the bridge the sound of their footsteps softened in the thick black coal dust; they trooped into the alleyways between the black-coated sheds and the lines of small coal trucks, up to the lamp-room, where they were given their polished lit lamps.

Jacob and Emlyn kept together: they worked side by side. At the shaft they waited their turn to enter the cage. The two wheels aloft spun against the metal sky and dropped their

thick and shining ropes taut into the gaping hole beneath: one cage emerged and clashed loudly into stillness. Jacob and Emlyn, with fourteen others, crowded in, and ahead a bell clamoured. The cage descended like a stone.

Arrived at the bottom, a brick-walled tunnel sloped away in the shrill electric light, slimy and dripping. The colliers tramped on, at the side of the rail track, until the walled tunnel ceased and the workings began, propped up by timber. Now light came only from the tiny flames of their lamps. The narrow rail track twisted its way with them, between the walls of rock and timber, the thin rails like twin nerves going deeper and deeper into the rich silence of the earth.

The two half-brothers trudged on without a word, stooping under the beams that held off the earth above, splashing through the pools of black water, until they were alone in their own working.

It was a small clearing thick with props of timber and heaps of stone: at one side the coalface gleamed and sparkled in the lamplight, jutting generous and lively out of the dead earth.

Jacob was looking at the roof examiningly.

‘Lewis put it all right afterwards?’ Emlyn inquired.

‘He’s been here,’ Jacob said. He put his hand on a prop and tried to move it: there was a faint creaking sound. ‘It’s all right,’ he added, and passed to examine another part of the clearing. Emlyn threw off his upper garments and began to attack the coalface; soon he was absorbed, sweating, in the task of removing the coal from its bed, oblivious of Jacob, who, half naked also, was working twenty yards away, still fumbling with the timber props and beams.

The hours passed and at ten o’clock the two men paused for a meal. Emlyn’s face and body was now black with dust, save where the sweat ran down in streaks; tense from his labour, crouching under the coalface, his eyes shone out blood-red and liquid.

‘God above, how difficult the seam is getting, Jacob,’ he panted, looking round for his food tin. ‘Where’s my box?’

‘Here,’ came Jacob’s voice. He was standing, a dark crouching shape beyond the lamplight, ten yards away.

‘What you doing there?’ Emlyn asked. ‘Still messing with the timber?’

He advanced, ducking his head under the low beams.

Then something moved overhead, as he ducked: there was a sharp creak followed by a tearing as of wood slowly snapping. Emlyn turned sharply, and his face showed caught and vulnerable for an instant. Then the space was choked with stone and dust.

Jacob clambered down from his perch in the darkness, ran shouting through the clearing, out into the other workings. His hoarse shout for help leapt with a peculiar deadened sound through the still, hot tunnels.

Men came running up, ducking like strange other-world creatures in the dark alleys, wild-eyed and tense.

‘A fall,’ Jacob shouted, ‘my brother is under.’

There were cries of dismay when they saw the heap of stone.

‘Jesus!’

‘Quick! Hell, what a job.’

‘Ach, not much hope is there.’

They crowded round, worked with feverish haste, shovelling, pulling away with their hands the rock and earth. Jacob clawed like a possessed beast at the rubble, his eyes glaring manically.

‘Right on the head, right on the head,’ he kept on shouting. ‘I saw it falling.’

‘Stay you away,’ one collier muttered, ‘we’ll get at him soon enough.’

A large stone had caught him – it lay upon his head and shoulders. There was a heavy smell of blood. They heaved at the rock. Jacob left them alone to their final task. He stood leaning against a prop, his head sunk in his shoulders. He heard a collier’s sharp intaken breath as he muttered:

‘Christ! a bloody mess.’

And Jacob's nostrils quivered and paled in the stench of blood.

X

They laid him, a shape covered in some dark coarse cloth, on his bed, and, their faces closed and grave, went out softly – the four colliers who had brought him home. They heard the wild, shrill weeping of Jacob's wife in the living room and the comforting voice of her neighbour. Jacob shut the door behind them and upon the little crowd of people gathered on the pavement.

Rebecca's frightened voice was lapsing into sobs now. As Jacob entered the living room she lifted her head from the woman's arms and he stared at her fixedly. Her wild face was drenched with tears, her mouth moving pitifully in its sobs.

'Hush, Rebecca,' he said sternly.

The neighbour protested. 'Let her work it off. Natural is it for her to be frightened. Low enough she has looked lately.'

But his face was stern and sombre, his eyes fixed in a cold, remorseless stare.

'I will wash and change,' he said, 'and go out. Many things are there to arrange. Stay you with her, Mrs Evans, until I come back this evening.'

Rebecca burst into further tears.

'Don't leave me alone in the house,' she wept.

'Why should you fear death?' said Jacob darkly. 'Life it is that we should fear.' And he strode into the kitchen to wash.

Later he went out of the house without another word.

'Strange he is,' commented Mrs Evans. 'Affected by the accident he must be. Daft in the eyes he looked.'

'Yes,' Rebecca whispered, 'it's of him I am frightened.'

'Tut, tut, harmless enough is old Jacob Jenkins,' said the other. 'Shaken him has his brother's death! Fond of each other they were.'

Rebecca shook her head. And she could not keep her

hands from trembling. There was a stern and terrible presence in the house, a horror that was closing round her tenaciously and icily, like a freezing drug gripping into her consciousness. What had she seen in Jacob's face when he looked at her? What dark warning had been there?

Trembling and pale to the lips, she awaited his return. He arrived back about seven o'clock and asked:

'Have you lit the candles for him?'

Mrs Evans said they hadn't, and Jacob took two brass candlesticks from the mantelshelf.

'I will go back now then,' Mrs Evans said. Rebecca made a gesture towards her, then sank into her chair: and the woman went off, after a sharp inquisitive glance at Jacob.

In silence he fixed the candles and lit them. At last Rebecca said tremulously: 'Is it arranging about the funeral you were?'

Without looking at her he answered:

'I have been on the mountain. I fled to the hills for silence and prayer.'

'Awful for you it must have been,' she whispered. 'Killed at once he was?'

Jacob slowly raised his head and looked at his wife.

'No. I had words from him before he died.'

Her eyelids dropped quickly, she moved nervously in her chair. He took the candles and went to the stairs. There he turned and said:

'Come you up when I call, Rebecca Jenkins.'

With a numbed heart she watched him. Ah, what terrible meaning was in his voice and his look! There was something he knew. Her faculties seemed to shrink within her, she felt the horror grip at her will. He knew, he knew. She was seized with panic and yet she could not move. Like a lodestone the will of Jacob held her in its power, she could not move out of the warning of his look. She would have to go to him and tell him all. Emlyn was gone and there was no strength to which she might cling. She would have to tell him all and

pray for his forgiveness. She would serve him and give of her body, all she had, to the last shred of her being. She would content herself with buying pretty clothes and going to chapel to display them, she would make a friend of young Mrs Rowlands and they would go out together in the evenings. Tearfully she thought this, her head sunk in her shoulders, her hands still trembling, while the minutes passed. Her face began to look wild and obsessed. Suddenly she dropped her face into her hands and moaned aloud. No, no, she could not bear the thought of living alone with Jacob, it would be horrible, horrible now.

‘Rebecca!’

Violently she started in the chair.

‘Rebecca.’ His voice was stern.

She forced herself to answer. ‘What do you want?’

‘Here I want you.’

She stood up and her body seemed to droop within itself. She heard him go back into Emlyn’s bedroom. What did he want of her up there, what could she do! But she knew that some awful revelation was waiting, that a deathly horror was gathered in that room for her. For a moment she looked round wildly, as though to flee. And yet there was something reassuring in this familiar room, her living room, where she had laboured and lived in so much loneliness the last year. Ach, she would face him. What if he *did* know! She had something to tell him. An old man like him. She would not stand in fear of any man. Yet she felt her heart plunging as she slowly climbed the stairs, into the silent darkness of the upper floor.

The door of Emlyn’s bedroom was shut, and for a moment she crouched before it in acute dread. Then again came Jacob’s voice, sharp, imperious: ‘Rebecca.’

Why should he bully her! The old fool. She opened the door and entered quickly, demanding: ‘What do you want?’

The two candles were burning on the little mantelshelf. Jacob was seated beneath them, the Bible open on his knees.

He did not answer her question as she came in – only stared at her with his deadened eyes fixed unswervingly upon her. Then he rose, put the Bible on the seat, and took up a candlestick. Sombre and tall in his black clothes, his sere face began to kindle with a dull wrath. The shape on the bed had been covered with a white sheet.

She crouched against the washstand by the further wall, and again her strength ebbed from her, her face paling to the lips. But she forced herself to speak, her voice coming in a dry gulp:

‘Afraid you make me, Jacob! How is it you are so strange?’

He advanced to the bedside, holding the candle aloft.

‘There,’ he said, extending his finger downwards over the corpse, ‘there is your dead.’

She stared at him. He went on: ‘Come you and look for the last time.’

Her mouth had gone dry, she could not move her tongue to any word. She lifted her hand to her face, and her eyes were livid with fright.

‘Come,’ he repeated.

She did not stir. His brows drawn, stern and righteous wrath in his countenance, he went to her and took her arm in his stony grasp. She quivered away from him, a curious sound coming from her lips, but, tightening his grasp, he drew her to the bedside. Her face had become sickly and loose, her breasts panted. Stonily Jacob looked down on her.

‘Gather yourself together, woman. Make yourself ready to look for the last time on what you have worshipped.’

For a moment she went stiff and taut in his grasp, then, had he not held her, she would have fallen to the floor like a heap of rags. He put the candlestick down on the little table at the side of the bed, and with one gesture swept the white sheet away from the head and shoulders of the corpse. She saw. Jacob had taken the canvas wrapping from the filthy wax of the head and the horror lay there revealed in its congealed blood. Rebecca’s body quaked, her back bent

forward, she screamed at last. Then Jacob half-carried, half-dragged her to a chair and sat her on it, as she moaned, her head dropping pitiably on her breast.

He went back to the bed and covered the corpse. Then he took up the Bible again and sat down. And he began to read aloud:

‘And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them. And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

‘They said unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

‘Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?’

‘This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

‘So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her...’

For a moment he was silent, glancing up at Rebecca. Her head still dropped on her breast, she sat immobile as one dead. He went on:

‘When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?’

‘She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, ‘Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more.’

He closed the book, went on his knees, and, leaning his elbows on the chair, prayed:

‘Lord, who am I to condemn my wife Rebecca? Thy son forgave the woman taken in adultery and now I ask thee for strength to do likewise with Rebecca. Gone far in sin she has, dear Lord, looking with desire on the flesh of my brother Emlyn. And thou hast punished him with this visitation of

death. The voice of the world would say, Stone her, cast her out, let her go from thee into the highways and byways. But have I not read the words of thy son! And what the great Jesus said has opened my heart in pity. Lord, forgive her her great sin against me. Tonight the hills cried out to me to slay her, the rocks mocked at my anguish, her name was written in letters of blood upon the sky. For before he died did not Emlyn confess to their behaviour together? Lord, she has done evil while her husband laboured for thee in thy chapel. Visit her with more punishment if thou wilt. Let her beauty shine no more, let her countenance be marked with grief, let her belly sicken her. But she shall rest quietly in her home with me, for I will not harden my sorrowing heart against her. For little Jesus' sake. Amen.'

He rose. Rebecca had covered her face with her hands. He went to her and touched her hair. She moaned.

'Ah,' he muttered, 'a fool you have been. Think you your sin would not be found out?'

She flung up her head; her face had gone loose and mottled, twitching in tears. 'He told you—' she sobbed.

'But already I knew,' he cried harshly. 'Think you I have no eyes, no sense to see how you flaunted yourself before him, and how his eyes burned with lust for you! Then confessed to me he did before he died that given yourself to him you had.'

Jacob, after one of the Big Meetings, had gone up to his bedroom and found a certain belonging of Emlyn's beside the bed.

She got up, crouched against the wall, swaying and sobbing. She felt all her life falling to pieces, there was no hope or happiness anywhere. Then Jacob's hand was laid upon her arm.

'Come, Rebecca. Young and pretty you are. Like a little wanton mare frisking in a field you have behaved. But look you now, settle down to life you must and there's peaceful we'll be together—'

He drew her to him. He passed his large strong hands over her, his sunken eyes began to kindle. She swayed in his gentle embrace. Then his arms closed like oak about her, and she lifted her face. It was like a shining hot flower. She was his now.