

NATIVES

Ron Berry

Levi Jones swung away from the bar, a mindful slew on his stiff right leg. He returned to the table. ‘Referring back,’ he said, holding out the tray, Martin and Felix taking their drinks, ‘it’s my opinion we have been discussing the modern disease mobility of labour, royal commissions examining this and that, it’s a disease of the soul.’

Felix said, ‘I’ve had politics up to here.’

Martin said, ‘The rot set in when they closed Fawr and Fach collieries.’

‘We’re leftovers from the regime of King Steam Coal,’ said Levi. ‘But listen, the best human stuff comes from roots, from inheritance. Put bluntly, a man can’t, he *can’t* renege on the way he’s made, his birth-given packet. Where people don’t belong, that’s where they go doolally. Therefore, boys, culture, civilisation, these are ours until Upper Coed-coch becomes totally extinct.’

Martin spoke to Felix. ‘He’s still librarian in the Institute, knocked down about eight years ago.’

‘Time has reduced this village,’ conceded Levi. ‘The old cramp of time, in conjunction with economics, the great falsehood, the gospel of men who worship privilege. We are governed by twenty-four carat fakes disguised as civil servants.’

‘Rubbish,’ said Felix.

‘Profitability,’ argued Levi, ‘comes before people. Whole

families have left, drifted away from Wales forever. Every time a house falls empty, the council start demolishing.'

Martin said, 'Train service killed by Beecham, bus service every three hours, our doctor emigrated to Australia, my grandchildren travelling eight miles each way to school...'

'We are living in a ghetto,' pronounced Levi.

'One pub, used to be five,' said Felix.

Levi grimaced, firming his false teeth. 'Boys, truth is we're on shifting ground, similar in miniature to the biblical Jews except there's no redeemer, no flesh and blood God's-son guaranteed to unite the masses. We need a big name figure, a kind of phoenix ready to spurt up from our ashes.'

'Politically powerless we are,' said Martin.

'Cultured decadents,' explained Levi, 'short of a prescribed saviour.'

'We're well past middle age, we're on compo and hardship allowance,' said Martin.

Felix added, 'Knocking back scrumpy five nights a week, beer on Fridays and Saturdays.'

Levi raised his glass. 'We are the immovables, financially deprived, dauntless, capable of social sweetness, murder by degrees, slow suicide, humility, even visions. Anything at all on the graph of human behaviour.'

'Bar earning a living wage,' grumbled Felix.

Martin said, 'Being disabled, the three of us on the books in Hobart House, London SW1.'

'Sacrificial victims to the old black diamonds!' crowed Levi. His friends nodded.

'King Coal, the rotten waster,' said Felix.

Levi rolled three cigarettes and fingered a single match from the ticket pocket of his jacket. 'Aye, Upper Coed-coch has been renamed Isolated Area by our country planning experts. Consequently the Forestry Commission has taken over. Surface pillage succeeding subterranean rape.'

'Mountains around here,' said Martin, 'they'll be like the Western Front when these trees are cropped.'

Felix went into a controlled bout of coughing. Then he apologised, ‘My sixty per cent dust from hard headings down the old Fawr Nine Deep.’

‘Me, I’m seventy-five per cent pneumo,’ said Martin.

‘We shan’t witness the millennium,’ promised Levi.

Martin looked angry. ‘Nor roam the mountains on Sunday mornings. You need a can-lamp and knee-pads to crawl under the bloody Christmas trees.’

Levi dipped a finger in his beer, swam it humming around the rim of his glass. ‘Economics, the name of the game.’

Martin coughed, paused, steadied his breath to mutter, ‘The daft sods.’

Felix suggested, ‘Let’s shift from this corner. Sing-song out there in the back room.’

Levi launched into chicane prophecy. ‘By the year two thousand and eight, every infant will slot-fit instant social service before he’s off the breast, his poop conduited to manufacture manna, his water piped to produce energy from the earth’s magma, and at the end, at the very end his processed corpse will magic blossoms from gravel!’

‘Talking like the Bible again,’ said Felix.

Levi lowered his head, presenting tanned baldness, wispy eyebrows and the blue-scarred ridge of his heavily boned nose.

‘My prerogative, Felix. I’m one of your stall and heading examiners who filled out coal on a diet of Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, Nietzsche, Voltaire and Charles Darwin, with Walter Whitman and Johnny Keats for after.’

‘Some fuckin’ collier,’ vowed Felix. ‘C’mon, let’s see what’s doing in the back room.’

‘He dropped in clover after his kneecap was busted,’ said Martin.

Levi sniggered like a schoolboy. ‘Twenty years in the Institute library, franking the date on Westerns, Thrillers, Ethel M. Dell, and Charles bloody Dickens. Righto then, we’ll join the entertainers. As from tonight universal literacy is a curse, a cancer spread by Fleet Street.’

They left the public bar.

There were less than a dozen customers in the large back room. Friendly atmosphere, greetings, the compo and hardship allowance trio settling at a table near the serving hatch.

Martin whewed disgust. 'This used to be the Singing Room, crammed to the doors every Saturday night.'

'Blind Goronwy tonking the keys as usual,' said Felix.

Goronwy played 'When the blue of the night meets the gold of the day', with Mrs Charles crying temolo fragments from her small mouth.

'Fierce, she's a fierce old bird,' Levi said, remembering Crad Charles, killed, crushed between fallen rock and timber, circa 1959.

'Her and Mrs Sen-Sen James, they've messed up a few marriages,' said Felix.

Levi tutted amiably. 'Mrs Sen-Sen looks fey, a lady born and bred not to lift a finger to help herself. Black hair from a bottled greying out from the crown of her head. She's well matched with Mrs Charles, they're close, spur and stirrup since burying their husbands.'

'Fawr pit widows both,' said Martin.

'Queens of deception,' said Levi.

Felix humphed a noise in his nose. 'Young Billy Tash could do with a bath.'

'Scrap merchants make their contribution to the community,' contended Levi.

'Glenda put the snaffle on him good and proper,' said Felix.

Levi supplied details. 'She's the brainiest woman in Riverside Terrace. Glenda used to fill in Billy's income tax forms. One morning last summer he found her what they call *en déshabillé*. Billy, well, his eyeballs came out like gobstoppers. And then, boys, human nature. Short jump and long hop to their wedding before the end of the taxable year. Glenda's old enough to be his mam.'

‘True,’ agreed Felix. ‘She’s older than Jesse Mackie’ – Jesse was sitting with Billy and Glenda.

‘Orphan,’ said Martin. ‘Underpaid labourer for Billy Tash since Billy went into collecting scrap.’

Levi hoiked himself upright in his chair. ‘Jesse never knew adolescence as a time of pomp and arrogance!’

Martin and Felix pretended they were deaf.

Goronwy played ‘Sixteen Tons and What Do You Get, Another Day Older and Deeper in Debt’, encouraging Hopkin Morgan, who cuffed Whitey, his pale grey alsatian. The animal dropped couchant like a dog-faced sphinx. Hopkin sang ‘Sixteen Tons’, stanced in profile, occasionally shovelling imaginary coal.

Felix called, ‘Core, encore!’

Martin was clapping. ‘Not bad for a man who never filled a dram of coal in his life. Oil-boy and haulier since he was a kid.’

‘Pack of dogs these days and he’s on his third wife,’ said Felix.

‘Sound Coed-coch stock,’ maintained Levi. ‘Head of a druid, muscles bulging below his armpits, chest like a barrel, hands like grappling hooks, and now he’s redundant, probably never work again.’

Felix scowled. ‘Bloody Hopkin, he’ll thrive where the crows’ beaks’ll drop off.’

Pamela Pryor (BA Aber.) came to the serving hatch. She bought a bottle of stout for Blind Goronwy.

Levi said, ‘Evening, Miss Pryor. Visiting Mam and Dad for the weekend? Nice too. If there’s one thing I admire it’s families sticking together.’ He saluted Idris and Maisie Pryor. ‘Shwmae, Id! Hullo there, Maisie!’

The Pryors smiled, tucked at their table by the piano.

‘I’m driving back tomorrow night,’ said Pamela.

‘Smart little car, Fiat,’ said Martin.

Felix winked at the scholarship girl. ‘Ask Goronwy to give us a number.’

She swayed a little, reflective, left knee dipped, her tummy

sagging. Pamela taught English and history in a Surrey boarding school.

Felix recommended, “Your Tiny Hand is Frozen”, that’s Goronwy’s favourite.’

Pamela sighed, ‘Goronwy is a lovely old character. Excuse me.’ She walked to the piano, poured Goronwy’s stout, then went to every table, collecting glasses on her tray, and returned to the hatch, innocently imperious, beckoning to Levi, Martin and Felix.

Martin said, ‘Straight beer, please. Ta very much.’

Goronwy lifted his thin, true eunuch’s tenor through ‘Your Tiny Hand is Frozen’. He followed this with a chorus piece from *The Desert Song*.

Martin said, ‘Something I’d like to do, buy drinks all round. I couldn’t afford to, not even when I was on yardage down in the Red Vein district.’

‘Why bother! You can’t make such comparison,’ declared Felix.

‘Neither is she at all like her father,’ Martin said. ‘Idris Pryor’s a tight man, always was.’

‘Similar to her mother,’ said Felix.

Levi prolonged his, ‘Aaaah.’

They stared at one another, brief, silent, glinty scrutinies.

From Felix, ‘Aye.’

Martin, ‘Well, yes, same as Maisie when Maisie was Maisie Beynon.’

Levi, ‘Undoubtedly.’

Goronwy spun around on his stool, plump face utterly impassive, his blindness shielded, sunk in rolls of pinkness. He spun again, pudgy fingers roving, tinkling ‘Rock Around the Clock’.

Stan Rees and a blonde woman began dancing.

‘Go-go, that’s your real go-go,’ said Felix.

Rising from the table, Levi waggled his stiff leg. ‘Old style, boys, handed down from Africa! Or from Iolo Morgannwg. Come on, have a go-go!’

They trucked awkwardly to the beat. After the dance Maisie Pryor hurried across the room, a trim woman in her late forties. She said to Levi, “Lonesome Road” please, for our Pam.’

He made the announcement. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, by special request, “Lonesome Road” from Martin Davies and Felix Mathias! Give them a big hand!’

Male voice partly baritones, they achieved Gregorian purity, singing directly at each other, solo phrases given each to each, balanced, the harmony of instinct.

Mrs Charles and Mrs Sen-Sen James sent high piercing squeals above the applause. Pamela Pryor brought three whiskies from the hatch.

‘Years ago,’ Felix said, ‘we were near enough perfect. Right, Martin?’

Levi intervened. ‘Water under the bridge. On short notice you boys did very well.’ He caught Pamela’s wrist. ‘See, Miss Pryor, time goes by. My butties are out of practice. Can we expect a number from you?’

‘Contralto,’ said Martin. ‘I remember this girl in a school concert. St David’s day it was.’

‘Oh, I wish I was back in Upper Coed-coch,’ confessed Pamela. It’s depressing where I am now.’

‘Aye, the hiraeth,’ said Levi.

‘Hiraeth won’t pay the rent or keep grub in the pantry,’ said Felix.

Martin carefully pummelled himself on the chest. ‘Hold on! Got it! “Greensleeves”! I’ll pass on the word to Blind Goronwy.’

‘Oh, no no no!’ Suddenly Pamela’s pleading collapsed to enigmatic composure.

Martin waited for her at the piano. He held up his arms. ‘Quiet one and all, right ’round the room, please! Thank you!’

Pamela sang ‘Greensleeves’.

Said Felix, ‘Her head’s screwed on the right way, different from Maisie at her age.’

‘Meticulous, despite the fact she’s half pissed,’ said Levi. Martin downed his whisky. ‘Strong contalto. Sheer quality.’

Felix chuckled in delight. ‘Us three, we’re all of us half pissed.’

‘As we are *entitled*,’ stressed Levi.

Their heads close together over the piano, Goronwy and Pamela quietly chanted snatches of ‘Myfanwy’. Stan Rees had his hand up the blonde’s skirt. Billy Tash gave some money to Jesse Mackie. Glenda seemed lost in daze. The widows Charles and James were watching Stan and the blonde. Hopkin Morgan eyed the clarity of his seventh pint, and lowered it to a third. The dog Whitey remained motionless. Idris and Maisie Pryor smiled at themselves.

Goronwy lifted the lid of the piano. ‘It’s in there somewhere! My Joseph Parry music sheet!’

“Myfanwy”! “Myfanwy”! yelled the widows.

‘In public,’ muttered Felix. ‘Stan Rees better leave that girl alone or she’ll spew her guts up.’

Levi raised his fist, ‘Boys, rapture is on the loose tonight! Blind Goronwy and Miss Pamela Pryor are about to unlock the paradox of paradise! Entrancement of the species! A throbbing pore in the flesh of flux! Aye aye! Reality grinds behind the gargoyles of our humdrum dementia!’

‘Husht, man,’ said Martin.

Miss Pryor and Goronwy sang ‘Myfanwy’.

‘Up, Wales,’ growled Felix.

‘You bloody cynic,’ Levi said.

Martin added a rider, ‘Fel, don’t be a shit all your life.’

Goronwy banged hard for silence. He turned his blind head. ‘We call upon Levi Jones for a monologue!’

Stan Rees came over with his blonde. ‘How about it, Levi? Give us “The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God”.’

“If”! shouted Hopkin Morgan.

Felix and Martin said, “If”.’

“Dangerous Dan Magrew”! screeched the widows.

The blonde's mouth hung open. 'Well a' bugger me, let 'im make up 'is own mind for Chrissake.'

Stan threatened her. 'Watch you language in company.' He grinned at Levi. 'Take no notice, she's been on the vodka and lime since seven o'clock. Tell you what, Levi, recite "The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God" and I'll buy you fellas a pint.'

"If", insisted Martin.

Stan's grin fell sour. 'No offence.' He steered the blonde way. 'C'mon.'

Levi limped across to the piano. 'Ladies and gentlemen, some Rudyard Kipling. These days old Rudyard is seen as a bit of a flag-waver before Britannia turned constipated on her throne. I must ask you to make allowances. My memory is not so good. I might get stuck here and there.'

'He's on form,' said Martin.

Goronwy spun delicate chords, pacing Levi's elocution. Afterwards he recited 'The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God'.

Martin approved. 'Nice performance, Levi. You held 'em in the palm of your hand.'

Stan Rees refilled their glasses.

Eira came into the back room, Hopkin Morgan's third childless wife. The alsatian trailed her to the piano. Blind Goronwy celebrated Eira's faded reputation, playing 'Blue moon'.

'Torchy girl from days gone by,' said Levi. 'Duw, the scorched christs and creamy lucifers of long ago, long before they even sank the bloody pits.'

'*Blue moon, I see you standing alone,*' sang Eira, her arms reaching out to Hopkin, his stubbed teeth grinning pride.

Sprawled at their feet, Whitey dreamed along his nose, sensitive quivers plucking the roots of his cocked ears. Jesse Mackie went to sit beside Mrs Sen-Sen James. His forearms were on the table, each side of his pint. As Eira pecked a thank you kiss on Goronwy's forehead, Mrs Sen-Sen went to the hatch for a Scotch egg and a packet of crisps for Jesse.

‘Eira’s over the hill like the rest of us,’ said Martin.

‘Liberation, emancipation,’ cried Levi faintly. ‘Freedom from anxiety and remorse. We’re aeons from the jet set, light years from lotus delirium!’

‘Quiet, man, talk sense,’ warned Felix.

Levi pulled up the leg of his trousers. Howling softly, he slapped his misshapen knee. ‘Boys, Charity blows her snot in the bandage off the eyes of Justice!’

Goronwy played ‘Calon Lân’. Everybody sang. Billy Tash followed Glenda to the serving hatch. She bought a bottle of brandy. Goodnight, Mrs Jones,’ she said. ‘Goodnight, Mr Davies. Goodnight, Mr Mathias.’

‘Party?’ enquired Martin.

Billy slid the bottle into his pocket. Glenda’s features squeezed disdain. ‘It’s for Billy, he’s not feeling well.’

‘Touch of the ’flu I think,’ Billy said.

Glenda edged herself in front of him. ‘And besides, he works outdoors in all weathers.’

Levi held up his open hands. ‘Say no more! The man who succeeds in business starting from scratch, he deserves nothing but the best!’

‘So long as you don’t cast sneers, Levi Jones.’ Glenda’s eyes were green, glacial. She caught Billy’s arm, leading him from the room.

Mrs Sen-Sen bought three hot pasties wrapped in doilies. Jesse Mackie sat between the widows. They mothered him competitively. Eira bought a pasty for Whitey. Maisie Pryor and her daughter visited the Ladies. Stan Rees and his blonde were kissing. She drooped limply in her chair, eyes wide open, empty as sky.

‘Whoor-master, he’s nothing but a whoor-master,’ growled Felix.

‘Ordinary greed,’ muttered Levi.

Out in the public bar, the landlord rang his handbell.

‘Can’t be!’ Martin said.

Felix drained his glass. ‘Bloody well is! Last orders. My turn.’

They rose together with fresh pints as Goronwy hammered the opening chord of the national anthem. But the widows and Jessie Mackie wound up the night, singing 'We'll Keep a Welcome In the Hillside's'. Blind Goronwy was leaning on two pillars in the Gents.

Levi, Martin and Felix stood near the door. They shook hands with everybody. Outside the pub, moon glow chilling the forested hills, they huddled for a few minutes, talking, then strolled home, still arguing, comparing, marking boom-times, tumults, struggles, the rising and falling histories of Upper Coed-coch.