

Martin Selby
Spaniards
in the
Valleys



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In The
Valleys

By Martin Selby

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Affray at the Inn

The Welsh village, tucked mid-way along the Swansea Valley, had never endured such sweltering, suffocating heat. The steep towering hills served as a gigantic cauldron, and for weeks the sun had borne down relentlessly as if to sap every last drop of moisture from the once lush valley. Wisps of haze rose spasmodically from the parched River Tawe and drifted eerily over the glistening boulders, washed to a gold silken smoothness by past torrents.

Villagers, dressed in their Sunday best, picked their way wearily along the well trodden paths and lanes leading to the small grey-stoned chapel which, at first glance, appeared to be perched perilously close to the edge of a rocky ridge high above a gorge. The thickness of the walls and the stoutness of the massive oak doors would reduce to a ripple the deafening pounding of the river when in full flood. Many a sermon had been interrupted when the doors had been opened to admit stragglers, and unwary visitors in the congregation had leaped to their feet, terrified of being engulfed. Such was the formation of the rugged rock face that the wrathful roar from the seething current below would echo along its deep cavities, entering the doorway with a fiendish wail.

Two groups of chapel goers had, thankfully, reached the protective shade of the east wall and were about to ascend the crumbled moss covered stone steps, anticipating the almost chilly coolness of the sanctuary within, when they stopped abruptly and stared up into the heavens. The uncanny stillness in the oppressive heat on that sun baked mountain was suddenly shattered and ignited with the sonorous strain of music. 'Religious Maggie', whose enormous size was proving an almost unbearable burden on her weekly pilgrimage, wrenched free from her husband's supporting arm. "Harps," she cried out in anguish, as she dropped to her knees, "I can hear harps."

"They're not harps," snapped Owen, "they're those bloody Spannies with their guitars," struggling in vain to heave her to her feet.

“Giss’ a hand, Yanto” he hissed, acutely embarrassed by his wife’s outburst, but his neighbour was already at his side taking a firm grip of a colossal ham shaped arm.

Owen glanced over his shoulder as he hastily flicked away some dried lichen from her black astrakhan coat. With relief, he observed from the bright flashing reflections along the lane, that the ponies and traps bearing the dignitaries were still a safe distance away. The last thing he wanted was for them to witness such as spectacle. He had recently been promoted from the coal face to that of Pit Official, which was accepted by all and sundry as the fruits of blatant creeping, although the phraseology more often bantered among the miners took on a much cruder note. He was, nevertheless, saddled with the less obnoxious nickname of ‘Trotter’, as his paramount desire to please his employers sent him running in all directions.

“Whow! *cariad*, whow!” The first pony arrived a good fifty yards ahead, and her owner spoke to her soothingly. She was a sleek, brown, lively little mare and the sweat gleamed on her flanks like polished mahogany. She pranced nervously in front of the chapel doors, and as Owen stepped forward dutifully to steady her, she jerked her head, sending a swab of foam from her gnashing bit to settle on his bowler hat. Little Miss Gwyneth, alighting from the trap, covered her face with her dainty lace gloves to hide her uncontrollable mirth. Her mother stepped discreetly to her side and slapped her sharply on her bare arm.

The Davies family waited on top of the steps for their neighbours to catch up so that they could enter the *Set Fawr* together. The pew which they were privileged to occupy was much larger than the others, and more decorative, hence the name. They were all assembled, and stood aside for Grandma Bynon to lead the way when the music started up again, but this time it was accompanied by the lusty singing of a score of Spaniards. They all looked aghast in the direction of the summit. “I’ll soon put a stop to this, Mr. Davies.” Owen was at his side like an ever faithful terrier. “Send Modesto to my office tomorrow,”

ordered his boss gruffly as he followed the ladies down the aisle.

There had been much hostility in the village at the arrival of so many foreigners, recruited in their native land by agents of the mine owners. For the first few months a war raged in the valley, but the police rode the storm without a single arrest, due, no doubt, to the magistrates' vested interest in the mines. To penalize such vital labour would have been counter productive. It was a slow process of acceptance, but the Welsh miners were appreciative of the Spaniards' sheer physical strength at the coal face and their mastery of mining technique.

Modesto was a sobering, fatherly figure, born more than half a century past in the mountainous Basque region, and was very tall for a Spaniard. In spite of his age he was reputed to be the strongest, and was hero-worshipped by Dai Bach who assisted him at the coal face. Dai would stand back in amazement as Modesto pressed his back against a derailed tram and, with effortless ease, drop it back on the track. He would often be heard relating excitedly about the day he called at the local Inn with Modesto. They had been supping their ale leisurely at a corner table when six young miners from over the Drym Mountain descended on the village to attend a Rugby Club concert, in search of fresh skirt. The first through the door, held ajar with a polished seven pound weight, was Bryn Evans. "The dirty scumbag," muttered Dai, remembering his encounter on the rugby field. He still felt twinges in his right calf and, had it not been for some nippy side-stepping, he feared he could have been crippled for life, so vicious was the foul. One of the burly forwards, Ned Cook, seeing young Dai's plight, waited his chance and the moment Bryn broke scrum he weighed down on the back of his neck and, on the blind side of the ref, brought his fist up to his fat gut with terrific force, folding him like a jack-knife and causing him to spew his heart up.

"*Salud y pesetas.*" Dai Bach raised his glass in their direction, showing off his limited Spanish. "And strength in your *castañetas,*" chimed in Modesto in Spanish with a deep chuckle. "What are you

doing drinking with that bloody Spanny, Dai?” scowled Bryn Evans. The long trek over the mountain in such heat had done little to sweeten his temper. “He’s alright, is Modesto. I’m his butty down the Three Foot.” Coming from the Neath Valley, they had little knowledge of the Spanish invasion, or that the rift was gradually narrowing, except among the very young hotheads who constantly fought over the pretty Welsh girls.

The next hour passed quietly enough, apart from some sneaky jibes from the visitors, but the more ale they guzzled the more belligerent they became. Modesto, completely oblivious of the taunts, was returning from the bar with a full glass in each hand, when he was pushed violently from behind, completely drenching poor Dai. “Go back home you Spanny.” Modesto steadied himself by dropping the glasses and grasping Dai’s shoulders, and as he swung around, he noticed for the first time the hatred in their coal-grimed eyes as they closed in on him.

“Outside, outside, all of you.” The landlady’s voice shrilled out, but they ignored her, and one lout aimed a wild kick at Modesto who roared out in agony. His clenched fist shot up, crashing against the low ceiling, bringing down the caked plaster in a flurry of giant flakes, and he then brought it down on the table with incredible force, more in pain than in fury. There was a loud crack as the stout oak top split down the middle, clattering noisily to the stone floor. He then swung his right hand sideways, catching Bryn Evans full in the mouth with the back of his hand, sending him reeling, dazed and bleeding, against the bar. The landlady cried out in alarm as empty glasses tottered and then smashed dangerously close to her feet. Modesto braced himself to withstand the onslaught and grabbed a leg of the shattered table and swung it, knocking over the assailants in two mighty swipes. “I’ve broken my back,” wailed one of the gang as he slid to the floor against an age-blackened post. Will Coch took a flying leap on to Modesto’s back and tried his utmost to throttle him by hooking his arm under his chin, his red hair contrasting vividly with

the Spaniard's wiry black mop. From his high perch he soon observed that the odds had rapidly diminished and hastily slid down, bolting through the kitchen door, chased by the landlord's ageing collie.

Modesto viewed the damage with dismay. "*Yo pago,*" he said, holding out some sovereigns in his open palm. "No, no, Modesto. You tell him, Dai Bach, my Dan will make those braggarts pay." They both looked towards Dai, but there was no response. He had got in the way of the swinging table which had lifted him off his feet on to the low window-sill and, although he sat there bolt upright, his eyes were glazed.

The colliery manager had been instructed to interview Modesto but had been advised to be tactful. The audacious disregard for the Sabbath demanded firm action, but the Management was fully aware that the Spaniards were producing an ever increasing tonnage of coal each day and thereby swelling their coffers. It would be difficult to appease some hostile villagers, and keep the Spaniards working at the mines, and on that very morning a deputation, led by Religious Maggie, had demanded their immediate dismissal.

Modesto emerged into the blinding light at the pit head and, shielding his eyes from the glare, crossed the maze of rails to the office. The manager was apprehensive at the impossible task confronting him. He spoke no Spanish and Modesto knew no English, and had declined the services of Dai Bach, in spite of his linguistic boast. Dai was bright enough at understanding and carrying out instructions at the coal face, and was equally good at repeating them to his mates. Modesto was almost fastidious in his desire to keep the tram lines clean and be rid of the muck which separated him from the coal seam. "Grab that shovel and clear the road," had been one of his first commands to Dai in Spanish.

The manager stood at the window and beckoned him to enter. He bade him sit at the only seat available which was a clerks' high stool. Modesto's massive frame looming over the manager placed him at a disadvantage from the outset. How could he, who had a passion

for music, even consider restricting others who had the same passion. He, an almost fanatical admirer of the celebrated Adelina Patty who resided just up the valley in the beautiful Craig-y-nos Castle, and still savouring the delights of her memorable opera he had attended recently in London. It had seemed an endless journey from his village, which commenced with a two mile walk to the main road to catch his bus to Swansea, from where, after an hour's wait, he boarded a train to Paddington. The journey had been quite pleasant as he knew he would arrive in good time for the opera. He had sat enthralled throughout and remained to the very end. His intention to slip out before the national anthem had been completely forgotten, and he had remained standing as if mesmerized. It was not until a lady of ample proportions tried to squeeze past that he had finally regained full consciousness. "*Arglwydd Mawr!* my train." He did not stop to consult his watch as he knew that every second would count. He barged his way through the shuffling crowd, and when a drunk lurched against him outside on the pavement, he instinctively felt for his wallet and was reassured when he touched the large safety pin, so placed to deter the nimblest of fingers. He arrived at the platform just as the train had started to move and managed to jerk open a door and almost fell inside. A porter slammed the door, yelling abuse, but he was past caring and slumped exhausted on to the nearest seat. He dozed most of the way, not unduly worried that the best transportation he could expect was a bone-shaker bus to the terminus, four miles from his home. It would be a hard up-hill slog, but Madam Patty's exquisite voice had so uplifted him that nothing would have daunted him that evening. It had been a beautiful evening, cooler than of late, and as he trudged through the deserted village he had seen the welcoming oil lamp in the kitchen window. "Home sweet home at last." His wife, Martha, had waited up, worried sick at that late hour. Although weary, he had been extremely happy and hummed a few haunting notes as he hugged her in the doorway.

Not knowing what next to do, the manager glanced up at the

production graph which had been soaring incredulously. He then reached for the calendar on a nail below and proceeded to underline the Sunday dates, looking up enquiringly at Modesto. "*Si, si, comprendo*". There was a trace of irritation at being treated like an imbecile. He then drew two pinnacles with a crudely sketched chapel at the foot of one and, bursting into a few notes of a Spanish jota and strumming an imaginary guitar, shook his head vigorously and crossed off the pinnacle with the chapel. The tiny office boy looked across, his mouth agape. Such an exhibition was entirely out of character by such a strict disciplinarian. "*Por que no, señor?*" Modesto was bewildered by such a demand, but the manager was pleasantly surprised that he had been so easily understood and drew him over to the window. Pointing to the summit of the Drym Mountain he repeated the only Spanish he knew, "*Si, si, si,*" and nodded his head eagerly. The Drym was not very picturesque, being boggy and covered in reed even on the steepest slope. It was the mountain east of the valley from which the coal was hewn, and a chain of conical slag heaps strung across the entire base.

When the stark reality finally dawned, Modesto became very angry and demanded to know the reason for this banishment from such a favourite haunt, and such monstrous interference with their private recreation. The hill farmers could not have objected as they had always greeted them warmly, and drank their wine. The manager raised his hands helplessly at the incomprehensive tirade in Spanish. He placed his hand on Modesto's shoulder to calm him and led him back to the stool. Modesto glared across the desk at him, contemplating the reaction of his compatriots. He could envisage their wrath and the usual insults directed at the manager, accusing him of being of doubtful parentage, but as this was not their country it was not too high a price to pay for peaceful coexistence. Suddenly he felt pangs of hunger and his stomach began to rumble noisily, and as the big man straightened up and got to his feet a further violent gastric eruption almost shook the room and the manager strode quickly towards the

door to hasten his departure.

A workmate was waiting outside, anxious to know why their spokesman had been summoned to the office, but Modesto did not slacken his pace as he was already late for his meal and the thought of food was uppermost in his mind, and the much shorter man was quite breathless by the time he heard the full story, having to almost run alongside to keep up with the enormous strides.

Modesto scraped his chair away from the table, belching loudly and stretching his legs until his feet reached the other end where his wife, Maria, was seated. He gave her chair a playful push causing her to spill a spoonful of rice down her chin. "*Idiota!*," she scolded as she mopped herself "You're a wizard, Maria. I'm sure you could make an old boot taste delicious." The hen had been old and scraggy and she had steamed it for hours before placing it in the spiced rice.

River Walk

“*Vamos al rio,*” Modesto said, lifting Maria away from the pots and pans and setting her down gently near the water butt outside the kitchen door. The river bank was his favourite walk during the long summer evenings. The butt was full of spring water which had mercifully kept trickling through the length of iron pipe embedded in the clay bank. Some neighbours had sought permission to call daily to draw water, their wells having long since dried up.

Maria scooped some water in her cupped hand and swilled her hot brow. She unpinned her bun and shook her raven black hair to tousle loosely around her shapely shoulders. Glancing quickly in the cracked mirror, she dampened and stroked the few grey hairs at her temple. “Look here,” she cried in mock despair, “the worry of trying to fill that bottomless pit you call a stomach is sending me grey.”

“Calm yourself, Maria. The only worry in that little head of yours is that I might run off with a beautiful *señorita*. If bald headed Paco can do it, there’s hope for me yet.”

The Spanish community had been buzzing with the news of Paco’s latest escapade. He had deserted his ever nagging wife and run off with pretty little Margarita, whose marriage to her handsome husband had come to a disastrous end after only one month. They had lived under cramped conditions with her parents, *Los Gitanos*, so named because of their gypsy-like appearance. It was rumoured that the marriage was never consummated, and the nattily dressed husband claimed it was due to the flimsy partition which separated their matrimonial bed from that of his fiery father-in-law who terrified him. One night *El Gitano* found his daughter sobbing hysterically down in the kitchen and, upon hearing her doleful tale, stormed upstairs and dragged his son-in-law from his bed and threw him out into the yard, followed noisily by his tin trunk.

Modesto and Maria were nearing the end of the lane which led to the river, when they heard a soft patter behind. Their neighbour’s two children, unable to sleep, had begged their mother to be allowed to

follow them. Modesto held out his arms and swung them high into the air. They skipped ahead but stopped suddenly at the first bend, where they crouched behind a bush and peered through to the river below and, with an excited squeal, slid down the bank. "Come back, come back," screamed the over protective Maria, but they were already clambering over the boulders towards a trickle of water on the far side. With a triumphant swoop, Ramona grabbed her prize and rushed back, knocking over her little brother as she turned.

Modesto examined the policeman's helmet which had drifted in the shallow water, its open end uppermost. The inside felt warm and clammy and had not been long parted from its owner. Sensing something sinister, he ordered his wife to take the protesting children home. He then stealthily rounded the bend and heard a gurgling and splashing behind an old tree trunk, left high and dry. Parting some branches he was appalled at the scene below. At the foot of a waterfall, in the only pool of any depth for a mile or so, three men were struggling to hold a policeman's head under water. Modesto realized that if he was to save the man's life he would have to act quickly as the shiny black boots were kicking feebly and the gurgling had stopped. He stepped back a few paces and, with a roar like a bull, cleared the bush in one mighty leap, landing with a splash only feet away from the startled trio. A tall, lanky youth, intent solely in silencing any witness who could jeopardize his wild freedom, picked up a rock and would have smashed in Modesto's head had not his friends grabbed him in time. He did not know the lad, but instantly recognized the two older men who worked the same shift. They knew and respected Modesto as a fellow miner, banded together in the same sweat hole, clawing a living from the same dust laden coal face. Not so the mad looking youth who worked in the stone quarry where he did not share in the same comradeship and loyalty. All three knew the desperate plight they were in. The mine owners held the fishing rights and owned most of the land along the river edge. Three Keepers were employed to patrol the two mile stretch and were a mean looking

bunch, recruited outside the valley for their physical strength and callous nature. They wore knee-boots and carried heavy walking sticks which they did not hesitate to use savagely in the course of duty.

Hurrying to the assistance of the drowning man, Modesto growled "Go! Go!" pointing to a thicket on the far bank, through which the miners soon disappeared, dragging the bewildered youth with them. Modesto lifted the limp, almost lifeless body, and placed him face downwards across a large boulder and exerted powerful pressure to the back. There was a sudden loud moan and his entire stomach seemed to erupt, spewing out torrents of water. "*Muy bien, muy bien,*" soothed Modesto, relieved at not having to explain away a corpse on his hands. The policeman continued to cough and splutter and nearly fell off the boulder in an effort to stand. "Where are they? Did you see them?" He enquired in Welsh, not realizing in his stupor that he was addressing a Spaniard.

Modesto helped him over the rocky river bed, satisfied that he had not seen the dead fish floating in the pool. The poachers had used an explosive charge of carbide in a sealed cocoa tin. This method was considered to be the most dastardly form of poaching, the next being the setting of night lines. This latter practice caused the arrest and downfall of many a young man. The crafty Keepers would walk along the river bank trailing their sticks in the water, and many a long night would they spend hidden until the unsuspecting poacher returned to inspect his lines. In a recent court hearing a Keeper stated that his attention had been drawn to a hooked eel thrashing about in the water.

Next evening, Modesto sat thumbing through an old Spanish magazine while he was waiting for his wife to serve up his favourite *cocido*. His mouth dribbled as he watched her pile his deep enamel plate with a mountain of boiled vegetables and large chunks of fatty meat, fallen away from the bone. "Smells good, Maria, *guapa, preciosa.*" He viewed the steamy mass gleefully and ate quickly and

noisily, and in no time at all he was scraping the bottom. He was contentedly picking out some marrow when there was a sharp rap on the door. "*Madre mia!*" Maria jumped up in alarm, ever conscious of her humble abode. She hurried to clear away the plate of bones, snatching the last one from her husband's greasy hand. Her heart had been set on a pretty cottage on the water edge, but Modesto, having observed the debris and shingle trapped against the cottage wall, declined the offer. To Maria's dismay he settled for a derelict stone barn, the front of which had collapsed with age and neglect. However, there was no shortage of volunteers and the tons of flat stones in the untidy grass covered heap were soon cleaned and mortared back in place. The mortar-mix was a consistency of lime and coal ash, there being an abundance of the latter, strewn slovenly and piled haphazardly throughout the village. He had worked diligently transforming the interior, and when he thought he had finished, Maria insisted on some privacy from the much frequented right-of-way some yards only from her kitchen window. He pondered on the mountain hovel he had loved and reluctantly abandoned back home, and decided to fashion the patio on the same Spanish style, rendering the inside walls a dazzling whiteness.

Such was the dwelling into which the three men entered. "*Nos da.*" The policeman crossed the room to shake Modesto warmly by the hand. "*Diawl!* that was lucky for me that you were passing, mun." He understood not a word but could see that the man spoke with much emotion. Maria was placing chairs for the other two callers and the bobby glanced around for one for himself. "*Otra silla, Maria.*" Modesto spoke softly, with much reverence, convinced that the tall distinguished gentleman must be of much importance. Maria quickly left the room and returned from the bedroom carrying a flimsy cane chair. The policeman eyed it suspiciously and eased his weight gently until the creaking stopped.

Modesto nodded acknowledgement towards the short dapper man dressed in a tight black suit, whom he knew as an interpreter

from Swansea. He was a slick city type who spoke down to the miners as if he considered them to be half-witted, and emulated the British characteristic of speaking with not a trace of gesticulation.

“What could these people want?” Modesto knew little of police investigation. In his remote village, many a quarrel had ended in violent death and that was the end of the matter. He sadly recalled one such occasion when two of his good neighbours intervened in the tearful squabble of their sons. One of the men died, and on the morning of the funeral the two little boys played happily together in the gutter.

The man from Madrid cleared his throat and put on his official airs. “This is Police Inspector Daniels who wishes to question you regarding the incident at the river.” He then looked up for his instructions and continued to question Modesto for more than half an hour. When they finally got up to leave, the inspector shook Modesto by the hand and asked the interpreter to convey his deepest gratitude for the prompt action which had saved the constable’s life. Modesto added his regret at not turning up soon enough to see the attackers. As far as he was aware, it had been a tragic attempt at suicide.

War at the Well

There was still no sign of rain and there was an acute shortage of water. Three little girls were playing in the street when they spotted the unmistakable figure of Juanita approach the well and ran to meet her. They were fascinated by her startling colourful attire and the way she balanced the tall earthenware pitcher on her platted head, whilst her left hand held another on her shoulder, leaving her right arm to swing gracefully. Her canvas cord-soled *zapatillas* caused a cloud of dust to swirl around her ankles, rising slowly to engulf the bottom of her flowing gown, as if re-enacting a scene from biblical times.

The children ran alongside, gazing up, smiling and chatting gaily in Welsh. She beamed down on them and tousled the tight red curls of the tiniest of the tots. She had never seen such fiery red hair.

Ianto Coch had wasted little time since his wedding day, not three years past. His wife had just borne his third child and she looked as she had on the previous occasions — near to death. The sight of her sallow, sickly complexion and sunken eyes was driving her mother to distraction. “Now then, Ianto,” she turned wrathfully to her son-in-law, “are you bent on killing your wife?”, but he had been oblivious to all around him except for the tiny bundle she had just placed in an open drawer at the bed side. He had wept openly with emotion as he gently lifted and scrutinized the minute hands and feet of his first son.

Juanita was surprised to see so many villagers congregated at the well, chatting in the warm sunshine, their pails already filled. Mock Fawr looked up and immediately drew away his half filled bucket, and with an elaborate sweep of his arm, bade her take his place. She smiled graciously and removed the pitcher from her head. “*Gracias señor. Muchisimas gracias,*” and continued to smile her gratitude. Mock’s wife stood a few paces away, gossiping with her friends but keeping a wary eye on her amorous husband. She was now resigned to his zealous flirtations with girls less than half his age, and had tolerated his crude jokes and horse play, but the scene she witnessed

next infuriated her. Juanita had already placed the larger pitcher firmly on her head and was reaching for the other, when Mock stepped forward, oozing charm and hovering around to assist. As his hand pressed hers on the handle, his other passed under her arm to grope clumsily for her breast. "*Cerdo! lechon!*" Her sweet smile changed to the snarl of an alley cat and the obscenities she screeched would have made a barrow boy blush. Her sharp elbow struck with lightening speed, bringing Mock painfully to his knees.

One pitcher had come crashing down, splashing its contents at the feet of the bewildered onlookers. She picked up the other, and with both hands brought it down on the back of his head with a sickly thud. She looked up just in time to see the squat form of Mock's wife come charging towards her, a rusty disgarded water can held high, and raised her arm to ward off the blow. To Juanita's amazement she went sweeping past to attack the dazed molester with the ferocity of one demented. The infernal din carried through the still air and brought heads popping out from quite a considerable distance away.

The Whimpering Whippet

At long last the drought ended with a terrifying storm which raged through the night. The first flashes of lightening illuminated a young couple entwined in a passionate embrace. The night was not cold, yet they sought the extra warmth afforded by the end wall of John Wick's terrace cottage. The constant heat from the kitchen fire, their only means of cooking, had turned a section of the outside wall a bluish grey. Megan lay limp in the arms of the lustful Spaniard, her whimpering protestations stifled under a flood of seething passion. Not even the first burst of torrential rain could quench the fire that raged within him. She finally managed to break loose and dash for cover.

Before they were both through the kitchen door there was an angry yell from within. "Shut that bloody door." The drenched couple were surprised to see the entire family downstairs trying to pacify their prize whippet.

"We can't let Tony go home in this weather, Dad. Can he use the front room?"

"Yes, yes, yes." He waved his arm irritably towards the room without looking up. Antonio, not wishing to intrude further, hung his wet clothes behind the door and stretched out his slim, sinewy form on the dusty rag mat near the empty grate. The late nights and early mornings were taking their toll and the loudest clap of thunder would not stir him.

The wind continued to shriek like a tormented monster imprisoned between the steep craggy hill sides of the narrow valley and, as if to compete with the wailing wind, terrified dogs howled plaintively to the heavens as if pleading for some respite. Each deafening crack of thunder would jolt heads from their pillows and eyes would look anxiously to the ceiling.

The skinny little whippet shook uncontrollably and squealed like a petrified child. The lightening lit up every corner of the room, distressing the animal even more than the thunder.

“Fetch my overcoat, *cariad*.” Mrs. Wicks rummaged in the cupboard under the stairs for some minutes before she emerged shaking her husband’s heavy black coat. “The smell of these moth-balls will kill our Queeny if the storm doesn’t.”

“Giss’ it here, woman, and stop cackling.” He placed the coat carefully over the animal but kept his hand underneath, continuing to scratch her affectionately behind the ear.

“Put the gramophone on as loud as you can.” He was looking towards his daughter.

“You’ve no need to tell her that. She always plays it full blast.” The music blared out within a foot of the dog’s head, and the trembling miraculously became less violent. John Wicks looked up triumphantly.

“She’s settling down.” He had hardly spoken when all hell was let loose. The tin bath was dislodged from its stout nail and crashed across the back yard before being lifted by a sudden more powerful gust which sent it crashing against the window. There was a roar as the wind and slashing rain tore into the room, carrying curtains and splintering glass and wood in its wake. Megan had been vigorously winding the gramophone when she shrieked out in pain as a sliver of glass embedded itself in her cheek, but John Wick’s concern at that moment was for his whippet, which he bundled up and dashed through to the safety of the front room.

The coming of the dawn brought heavenly calm to the valley, and on the upper slopes there was a tranquil peace and stillness in the air, but along the river banks the devastation was all too apparent. Dozens of tributaries still gushed forth carrying luckless sheep and poultry from the hill farms, to be hurled into the gnashing, frothing storm water of the swollen river. Many cottagers, whose ancestors had stubbornly borne the brunt of past storms, dragged out sodden clothing and furniture with not a single thought of seeking higher and safer terrain. By noon the heat of the sun had vaporized the dampness in the meadows, completely obliterating all trace of life and

homestead well up the mountain side, the long winding steam trail stretching to the river mouth.

Teresa Rebels

The local shopkeepers and tradesmen welcomed the influx of immigrants. It was a new experience to receive prompt payment for goods and services. The 'slate' was frowned upon, and most mothers instilled upon their children the need for thrift.

Jones the Shop breathed on his pince-nez and wiped them on a piece of muslin as he waited patiently for a young Spanish wife to illustrate her requirements. "Miaw, miaw," she wailed and brought her palms together with a resounding clap. "*Cuanto?*" The enterprising shopkeeper had learned a few useful words and phrases, and reached for three mouse-traps on seeing three fingers raised.

The clap-trap startled a tiny baby and its crying started off two others. The Spanish mothers seemed oblivious to the abominable din, and merely raised their voices in conversation. When the crescendo was at its height, they in turn groped inside their unbuttoned blouses, and within seconds, as if by magic, there was complete silence. One of the more gluttonous babies, which should have long past been weaned from the breast, was relieving himself down his mother's drab hessian apron on to the sawdust floor, soon to be absorbed undetected.

They stood inside the doorway, almost blocking the exit. One shopper had been on the point of leaving but there was no attempt to allow free passage until all their questions regarding her husband's accident had been answered. "Never, never, will I allow him to return to that black hole," were her parting words as they shuffled aside.

When Teresa arrived home with the groceries she found her husband downstairs, his face drained of colour. "Get back to bed this minute, you stupid man."

"But Teresa, if I don't try to walk on this leg, I'll never get back to work."

"And a good job too. You're not going back and that's final."

"Where will we live? You know this cottage is tied to my job," he protested, but she had the future neatly worked out in her mind,

having thought of little else since the day they were wed. She was fully aware of the formidable task she had undertaken, as no miner worth his salt would readily wrench free from generations of tradition.

In Spain, Teresa had supplemented the family income by cleaning and cooking for a widowed Sea Captain; that was, on the rare occasions he remained on terra firma. She would prepare him elaborate meals with painstaking dedication and pray he would not rise from the table and dash for the door, his digestion ruined by ships' cooking and revolting food slopped up in filthy quayside cafes. She sometime dreamed of leading a crusade to pioneer a clean, wholesome food campaign, catering for seamen sadly deprived of home cooking. Being a realist, the most she could ever hope to achieve would be a dingy cafe in the Bilbao dock area, but even that modest ambition was denied her when, through poverty and desperation, they accepted the Agent's rosy picture of a new and prosperous life in the Welsh valley.

Having seen so much suffering and deprivation, Teresa was determined to do all within her power to prevent her young brother entering the mines, and decided to enlist the help of the Sea Captain. He listened sympathetically and finally agreed, under the pretext of it being an emergency, to seek permission from her parents for the temporary services of their son. The wily Captain did not divulge that his depleted crew could not possibly handle the additional tonnage of iron ore required by the Welsh ports. At first, as she expected, her father was resolute in his refusal. For some uncanny reason he feared the sea, yet daily risked his life and limb at one of the most dangerous coal seams. His wife watched him pace the kitchen, scowling defiantly at the Captain, and still limping from a recent accident. She remembered the years of stress and filth, and joined in to support her daughter's plea. The incessant inflamed enmity intensified until he was forced to capitulate, and he eventually gave his son his blessing.

Teresa was brushing out her tiny Welsh cottage when her niece

breezed in, full of vitality. She still had an excited, awesome look in her eyes. Many of the older folk suffered painful pangs of nostalgia. Not so, Nina, who thanked the Lord each day for her deliverance. She had come over to keep house for her three brothers, and to her delight was in charge of the domestic finance. Each Friday the boys would toss their pay packets on to the kitchen table and she would dole out their pocket money. There had been a prior agreement to set aside a certain amount each week to send back home to their parents who had refused to leave their stony, unproductive small-holding, and had stayed to tend to their goats. All three worked at the face and she had never handled so much money. She gave her aunt a hug. "Tia Teresa," she began, looking over to her uncle with some apprehension. "I'm going to Brecon to buy three pairs of moleskin trousers. Will you come with me for company?" They both looked across at Pedro and waited for his reaction. "Why not! Why not! I think I'll hobble along with you."

"*Ole!*" They both danced around the table like a couple of excited schoolgirls. "Are you sure you'll be alright? You're too big to carry."

It was market day and Brecon was full of sheep and farmers. "All these sheep and not a goat in sight," giggled Nina, revelling in all the admiring glances. She was tall and strikingly beautiful, her high cheek bones and pinned up hair style gave her a distinguished regal look. A gang of young farm workers, allowed to roam the town, their sheep safely penned, were approaching them and when a yard away, one was pushed into their path. The embarrassed boy stumbled forward, his face cushioned abruptly against Nina's bosom. Pedro turned angrily and would have struck him with his walking stick had not his wife restrained him. "They're only young spirited lads."

"I'm starving. Who'd fancy a nice thick *tortilla?*" joked Pedro. It was not yet noon and many farmers and their wives were already milling around the entrance of a cafe. "So many mouths to feed." Teresa's thoughts were never far divorced from the ambition she

nurtured. "What better place than this for a cafe?" She linked arms and steered them firmly towards the cafe door. Not knowing what to ask for, Pedro pointed to a laden plate being carried to a nearby table. He looked at the food with little relish and tasted the watery cabbage, which he placed with disgust to the edge of his plate, and proceeded to mash his potatoes into the transparent gravy. The ladies sliced theirs daintily and smothered them in salt and pepper. Teresa was the first to give in. "If this is what they eat, I don't think I'll devote my life to cooking it."

Teresa woke up one morning with a feeling of despair. Time was running out as her husband's injury was healing rapidly and he would soon be expected to return to work. She looked anxiously for the postman, having written to her brother a month ago. It was a slim hope that he would know of a suitable property to let in one of his ports of call.

She sat at the kitchen table and absently started writing out her weekly order for Garcia, who supplied Spanish food and drink. "*Dios mio!* Why didn't I think of it before?" She remembered that his shop was not so far from Swansea Dock, from where he collected most of his wares. He, surely, would be the one person who could really help.

"Come away from that window. It's nearly ten o'clock." As they lived at the top end of the village, it was always his last call, but was seldom later than eight. Teresa would cook him a meal, but he insisted on supplying the food, which was set out neatly in a shallow wooden box. Teresa was almost in tears, and was lifting off the remains of the home-cured ham from its hook, when she heard a chugging noise and almost jumped for joy when she caught sight of the black van, but it was a very harassed Garcia who entered the kitchen. She waved aside his apologies as she took the box from him. "Poor man, you must be starving." Pedro poured paraffin on to the oily hands held out over the sink. "It's my own fault for breaking down. I should not have tried to cross the flooded road, but I did not want to disappoint you. She's still

spluttering and so I'll have to put it right before I leave here tonight.”

“You'll do no such thing. We'll put you up, and Pedro will give you a hand in the morning.” He needed no second bidding. “I'd better pop out to the shop to 'phone Simona, or she'll give me up for lost.” When her guest was comfortably seated in the only soft chair, Teresa poured him a glass of brandy. “*Salud.*” He raised his glass to them both before consuming half its contents in one appreciative gulp.

When they had eaten they chatted well into the night. Garcia's glass was topped up for the third time before Teresa blurted out her dreaded fear of the pit and her aspirations away from it. He needed no further proof of her ability to cook and always looked forward to his meal with them. “You'll do well, and it's just what those seamen need. Since widow Perry closed her cafe there has been no one to cook their kind of food.” Teresa's eyes shone. “Is her place still empty?”

“She still lives there, but a few months after closing down, she felt so isolated that she decided to partition off a section near the front door into a sort of kiosk from where she sells sweets, mainly to the children — a waste of a good property. She won't move as she is hoping that one day her daughter will return. She was engaged to be married to a Spanish boy but ran off with a Greek Sea Captain and has not been heard of since.”

Teresa had already mentioned the urgency of the matter, and Garcia had been quick to respond, as he had lost much custom when the cafe closed. “Why don't you both come back with me? There are plenty of empty buildings in Swansea, and Simona will be glad of your company.” Teresa looked across at her husband and the imploring look in her eyes confirmed his fears that any opposition would be futile.

Next morning, both men started on the van almost at the crack of dawn. Garcia handed up the parts for Pedro to clean, and he was so absorbed in this meager task, having been idle for more than three months, that he was reluctant to stop, even for the huge breakfast prepared for them, “Take your time or you'll choke.”

“I’m sure he’d be happier in a garage than a cafe,” joined in Garcia, teasingly. “There’s plenty of time. We’ve made a good start.”

Teresa was busy packing a box of groceries to take with them when she almost jumped out of her skin. The van, just outside the kitchen door, sprang to life with a succession of loud bangs and the clanging of the shuddering exhaust pipe before settling to an even rhythm.

“Simona will murder me if I allow you to bring that food.” Teresa protested loudly but he held the box firmly and replaced it on the kitchen table.

A spare seat had been wedged between two crates in the back of the van for Teresa, while Pedro sat up front. As they careered down some of the steeper hills she would lurch forward off the slippery leather seat. “I’ve had more comfortable rides on the back of a mule,” but her protests were lost in the ceaseless clattering on the rough road. The two men continued to chat and joke, oblivious to the plight of their rear passenger.

Simona came out to welcome her guests and was appalled at the sight which met her eyes. There were upturned boxes, which had spilled their contents, and Teresa’s seat had slid against the rear door. She turned angrily on the men, and if Teresa had not intervened, her verbal torrent would have kept gathering momentum. After freshening up and partaking of a glass of brandy she felt little the worse for her ordeal.

An enormous *paella* had been prepared for them, and as they feasted, the men seemed to wash down every mouthful with a gulp of red wine. Before the women had cleared away the table, they had lounged back in chairs and were asleep. “Listen to them grunting like contented pigs. We’ll leave them a note, but they’re sure to be still asleep when we get back.” Teresa had earlier voiced her concern at not having heard from her brother and was anxious to seek news of him at the docks. Simona remembered a short cut along some back streets.

Groups of women eyed them coldly and dogs and children chased after them, the latter to beg a coin from the strangers. With relief they stepped out into the main street which led to the docks and had walked some distance along its wide pavement when a loud honk from just behind them startled Teresa, but her companion recognised the familiar sound. "It's a good thing I woke when I did or you'd be floating in the dock with your throats cut." "I should have realized that your weak bladder would not hold out for very long." "Be serious, woman; you've never been afraid because I've always been with you, but there are some mean villains lurking around the docks."

Garcia parked the van and they walked along the quay. "Look! there's his boat, *The Pacheco*." Teresa ran ahead, but her heart sank when she saw that it appeared to be deserted. "Hold on a minute while I find out what's happened to everyone." They followed Garcia on board, wary of the odd lick of wet paint. "Anyone about?"

"*Un momento!*" A voice came from the galley and the shuffling sound of cord soles on the steel stairway drew nearer. A head appeared above the deck and they gasped in amazement at the wild and weird sight. The cook had apparently been swotting flies with his paint stained hands, and his face and bare arms were gaily streaked, resembling a Red Indian warrior. Some blobs of pitch stuck to his hair, causing it to stick out like a porcupine. When he spotted the smartly dressed ladies, he dobbed his head and fled for his cabin. "Be with you in a minute. Make yourself some coffee."

"That was Rodrigues," whispered Garcia, "the man who was once engaged to the Perry girl."

"Well, it's no wonder she ran off to sea." Teresa sniffed the foul air in the galley and looked around for the cause of the offensive smell. Her eyes fell on a plate of fly-infested meat set down for the ship's cat. "No coffee for me in this stinking hole. I'm going on deck for some fresh air."

"Me too," echoed Simona, leaving Garcia to wait for Rodrigues. A warm breeze rustled along the quay, pressing firm the red

taffeta frock to outline Teresa's curvacious thighs. A group of Chinese seamen glanced up with polite appreciative smiles, but there were those who leered and skulked around the crates and oil drums. Teresa shuddered as a grisly, drink-sodden wreck of a man placed a foot momentarily on the gang plank, his loose mouth dribbling freely on to his filthy oil impregnated boiler-suit.

The women turned away quickly as they heard voices from within the boat. Rodrigues was the first to appear, apologising profusely for the disgusting state in which they found him. "Not at all, I envy your freedom," grinned Garcia.

The transformation was incredible. The long, gaunt, clean shaven face and high forehead shone like a beacon against the immaculate black sweater and dark tight trousers. The tall priestly figure beamed down benevolently, his confidence fully restored. "*El Señor* Garcia tells me that you seek news of your brother. As you probably know, this boat was damaged when the cargo of iron ore shifted in a storm and repairs have only just been completed." She looked alarmed and he raised his hand to calm her. "You have nothing to worry about. He's perfectly alright. At least he was when I last saw him. The crafty devil asked to be transferred to the Morocco route."

"Probably found himself a Belly Dancer," mused Garcia. "The little monkey is too lazy to write," but she was relieved to hear that he was well and showing some initiative.

The conversation soon turned to cooking and cafes, and when Garcia enquired after old Mrs Perry, Rodrigues coughed nervously. "I have been meaning to call on the dear lady."

"Well, there's no time like the present. You're all spruced up, so why not now?" Teresa showed little interest as the property was still occupied, and was at a loss to understand why Garcia seemed so eager to go.

Rodrigues climbed up in the back of the van, allowing the ladies to ride in the front. After much wriggling and stretching, Garcia

finally managed to find first gear. “You could do with losing a stone or two, woman.” His wife tried to jab him with her elbow but was too tightly wedged.

They were soon clear of the docks but it was a slower process along the busy street. Three hand carts were being pushed along by a motley trio, and just as the van was about to pass, the one in the rear hurried forward to walk abreast of his mates. Garcia jerked frantically at the steering wheel and Teresa screamed and covered her face. The swerving van missed the man but struck the corner of an overhanging bedstead. The force of the impact sent it spinning to the left, striking the second hawker chest high. A normal sized man would have had his rib-cage smashed, but Garcia did not hang about to find out, as it would have been suicidal to tangle with such a brute. “You’re passing the Perry shop,” called out Rodrigues.

“Yes, I know, and the faster the better.” Glancing in the rear mirror, he caught a glimpse of a shaking fist, before turning the corner for home. “We’ll have to postpone our visit until that gorilla is well away.”

They came upon a worried Pedro looking up and down the street. He had woken in an empty house without a clue of their whereabouts. “Didn’t you tell him where you were going?” scolded Simona. “He was so well away that I don’t think a stick of dynamite would have awakened him,” and Teresa nodded in agreement.

“I need a drink.” Pedro and Rodrigues followed him into the parlour while the women went through to the kitchen. Pedro laughed heartily at Garcia’s description of the hulk of a man who had scared him so. “You’d better put a shawl over your head when you next go out.”

The women brought through thick slices of bread and *chorizo* sausages, still sizzling on the hot tin plates. With relish, Rodrigues placed one on his bread and as his teeth sunk into it the red grease soaked through to trickle down his wrist.

“If you’re going to visit *la Señora Perry*, you had better not leave it

too late. You can go without me. I've had enough excitement for one day. Keep your eye on them, Teresa." The men busied themselves fixing two old car seats securely inside the van before setting off.

Garcia's foot danced nervously on the accelerator as he kept a sharp look out on the road, and was relieved to complete the journey without a glimpse of a hand cart. "Here we are. Let's go," but Pedro and his wife just stared up at the shabby exterior. Most of the windows had been boarded up to prevent further damage by vandals. Garcia was already rapping at the door, and almost immediately the remains of a dusty curtain parted to reveal a thin, frail face, but for one so old the eyes and features were remarkably sharp and alert. She pressed her face closer to the grimy glass and, on recognizing Rodrigues, smiled and waved before descending from her observation post, and seemed overjoyed to see him. "Hello Tony, I thought you'd forgotten me," as she clasped his hand and kissed him lightly on the cheek. She nodded politely towards Garcia, whom she remembered as one of the suppliers to her once flourishing cafe.

As she showed her unexpected guests through to the back, she raised a bony hand apologetically towards the rows of jars and cartons of sweets on a make-shift counter. "It seemed a good idea at the time when boredom and loneliness was almost driving me insane." Teresa followed closely behind, expecting to find the same disarray and squalor but to her astonishment the room, which served for both living and sleeping, was clean and tidy and a pair of crisp, freshly laundered floral curtains neatly draped the back window. The men sat on the couch and Teresa crossed over to the high backed leather chair to which the old lady had indicated, while she sat on the edge of a sparkling brass bed.

"You must be wondering why we're here." Garcia tapped Pedro on the knee as he spoke. "My friend here met with an accident at work, and his wife is determined to keep him out of the mines."

"Don't blame her," she nodded. "Teresa's passion for cooking has brought them to Swansea in search of a cafe to rent, and I'm afraid

that I led them to believe that you had retired from business.”

“And so I did, and hope to do so again as soon as my meager stock runs out. I just cannot cope with the unruly children in this neighbourhood. They plague my life.”

“What will you do? Where will you go?”

“Well, that is a problem which haunts me at the moment, and I think of little else.”

Garcia was only too aware of her dilemma. “May I be so bold as to make a suggestion. If you rent the premises to Teresa and Pedro, they will only be too pleased to share it with you.” She looked over to Teresa for her reaction, but could only see her daughter’s face before her. There was something about those dark eyes which tore at her heart. She then glanced absently at Rodrigues and remembered how handsome he had looked when he called to court her daughter. He too had taken it badly and his heavy drinking and resentment of authority had warned off many a would be employer. She had completely misinterpreted Teresa’s hesitation. “I’ll be no trouble. The room over the shop will meet my needs.” It was some moments before Teresa could utter a sound and looked at her husband with disbelief, and then over Garcia for some reassurance. She then suddenly jumped up from her chair and rushed over to embrace the old lady. “Me look after you. *Si, si*, me look after you,” she repeated, her eyes filling with tears.

They dropped Rodrigues back at his boat, and it was not until they were home did Garcia really show his overwhelming delight. He hugged his friends and brought out a celebration drink, and then they all sat down to a very serious discussion. “We’ll go back in the morning to assess the cost of making the place habitable.”

“*Madre mia!* we’ll never be able to afford it.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head. Simona and I have been left completely on our own and there is no one in the whole world we’d rather help.”

“But you’ve done enough already,” protested Teresa.

As they lay in bed that night they vowed that they would not spare themselves, and strive to make their venture a success and pay back as quickly as possible the generous loan from their good friends.

“Wake up Pedro, you’re wasting valuable time.” She playfully tore off the bed clothes and he made a grab at her arm, but she jumped back nimbly. “No time to linger today. Breakfast is nearly ready.”

They both stood for quite a while staring up at the dilapidated but formidable building. For one brief moment she blocked out the sight of the paint peeled shuttering and broken window panes, and envisaged it freshly painted and with an abundance of her favourite potted geraniums. They crossed the busy road and were greeted with a cheerful “*Buenos dias.*” Mr. Solomon had been watching them from the doorway of his tailor’s shop and beamed a welcome as they approached. Mrs. Perry had already informed him of the proposed change over and he was anxious to make their acquaintance. He made and altered suits and uniforms, mainly for a seafaring clientele, many of whom were Spaniards. His knowledge of Spanish was considerable but they found the accent difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, they were delighted with their good fortune and valued the advice he offered. Part of the ground floor, he suggested, should be set aside for the serving of food for consumption off the premises. A good line, he emphasised, would be *patatas fritas*, which he kept repeating as if he liked the ring of the words. “The local urchins seemed to find the money for sweets and sticky buns and so why not chips.”

Pedro was impatient to make a start, and his first task was to let in some daylight by removing the shuttering where the glass was still intact. He poked at the frames with his pocket knife and was pleased to find them sound and free of rot.

The old lady, instead of being fatigued by all the activity, appeared to have taken on a new lease of life and was a great help. She opened up boxes laden with bric-a-brac from every corner of the globe, and one was crammed full of beautiful material. She held up a

gaily striped pattern against a bedroom window and made it abundantly clear to the delighted Teresa that she was making everything available to her.

"I'm sure my niece, Nina, will help me make the curtains as she loves sewing."

"She'll enjoy the change," joined in Pedro from the top of a step-ladder, "and a rest from those mad brothers of hers."

For the next few days they worked like Trojans, cleaning and painting. Mr. Solomon volunteered to undertake the work on the badly pitted interior doors, but finding it an almost impossible task with so much dust and activity around him, he took them off the hinges and carried them into the comparative quiet of his workshop next door. He worked painstakingly preparing the surface before opening a tin of scumble, and set out before him a fine assortment of graining combs, and the ingenious knots and grain which he conjured up with such uncanny skill produced a measure of authenticity as to deceive but the closest scrutiny. When the top varnish was dry, he proudly rehung the first door. Teresa passed her palm over the smooth, glossy panels. "*Perfectamente*. Solly, you are a genius."

"Where's everyone?" Garcia stepped through the front door and was amazed at the transformation.

"We're in here. Come and join us." The old lady's face looked flushed and happy as she beckoned him in.

"I shouldn't be sitting here with all the work there is to do." Teresa got up, guilty of being caught lounging on the sofa. "You sit yourself down again and listen to what I have to say. There is a deep-fryer going free, or should I say, for its scrap value. Are you interested?"

"Need you ask. Why, what is wrong with it."

"This morning I saw it being carried out from the kitchen of that big hotel down the road. I inspected it closely and, apart from the burned out fire bars, it is in perfect condition."

"*Madre mia!* so much good fortune begins to worry me."

“They want to be rid of it soon, and so if you’re fit, Pedro, we’ll go right away.”

“Never been fitter. Lead the way, and many thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. The more chips you sell, the more potatoes you buy from me.”

With Mrs. Perry’s permission, the men chiselled a hole in the chimney breast to take the flue pipe, while Teresa filled a bucket with boiling water to wash off the thick grease. “Garcia, did you say this came out of that smart hotel? Well, I wouldn’t like to eat the food cooked in their kitchen.”

“Don’t fuss, Teresa. See how well the grease has protected the metal.”

She was so engrossed in her work that she did not see the small gathering outside the window, and was polishing a large brass plaque bearing the maker’s name when she noticed their faces reflecting in it. Scruffy urchins pressed their noses hard against the glass and behind them was a group of thin, impoverished women peering in at her. Feeling embarrassed, she drew a sleeve across her hot brow and wiped her hands on her apron before lifting strands of damp hair from her eyes.

“They want to know when you’re going to open.” It was Solly at the door, looking happy at the sudden surge of interest. “But we’re nowhere near finished.”

“I should forget the frills and start drawing in the cash.”

“But we can’t light up without new fire bars, and Garcia has only this minute gone off to have some made.”

The Pattern Maker set out the remaining twisted pieces of fire bars on his bench and immediately started to prepare the wooden pattern. “They’ll be casting at four o’clock which should give the moulder enough time.” Taking nothing to chance, Garcia sought out the foreman and pressed a florin into his squelchy palm. He had been assisting the furnace men with the messy job of lining the furnace with a canister of wet, gritty fire-clay.

The next morning Pedro got up very early and hurried to meet Solly outside his shop. They had decided, as fish was so cheap and plentiful, to take advantage of the thriving fish market so near to hand. Pedro had intended to use the old hand cart which Garcia had given him, but Solly had insisted on accompanying him on the first day. "I know Sammy will see you alright if I'm with you." Solly was waiting in his car which had a small trailer attached. "Borrowed it from my friend, Kramski. Didn't want my car to stink of fish."

It was a smart little car with a leather hood and a dicky-seat which, when closed, was almost undetectable without its detachable handle. Solly seemed to spend little time in his own shop and when he was not helping to get the cafe ready, he would be polishing his car, and it now gleamed in the morning light.

At such an hour Pedro did not expect to see so many people. They passed droves of casual labour heading for the docks, many of whom would doubtlessly be sent away, having been subjected to much prodding of their puny muscles to ascertain their ability to endure a long day's arduous toil. The fish market too was a hive of industry, and fresh fish was piled high on clean white glazed slabs. A short man in a white coat shook Solly warmly by the hand and then turned to greet Pedro. "I've put aside a few boxes. See how they go." He then called over a young lad who pulled up a trolley to convey the boxes to the trailer. It all happened so quickly that Pedro was impressed by such efficiency. There had been no long drawn out haggling as he so often witnessed in one Spanish port.

He was triumphant at his first morning's business and proudly led his wife out to inspect his purchase. "*Hombre!* we'll never sell that lot."

"Well, I can't take it back. If it goes off you'll be able to fatten up all those stray cats you're so concerned about." She looked anxiously up the road. "If Garcia doesn't turn up soon with those fire bars, I'll be doing just that. Ha! here he comes."

Garcia had arrived at the foundry as the gates were being opened

and searched in vain along the rows of castings, tapped loose of their floor moulds. "If you're looking for the fire bars, I've just slipped them up to the fettling shop." He had followed the foreman into a low, dust-laden lean-to. The rough edges were being ground off by the fettler who had seemed unconcerned at the swirling dust around his nostrils and entering his mouth, half agape, with a stained, burned out cigarette hanging limp, its end stuck to a drooping lip. Garcia thanked the man and hurried out into the fresh air.

"They're a perfect fit. This range is as good as new, and all for a few bob." The coal and kindling wood had been placed ready to hand and Garcia seemed to enjoy the task of laying and lighting the fire. "Draws well. Lets see how quickly she'll heat the oil."

When Teresa's experienced eye told her that it was the right temperature, she dropped in a bowl of chips and six large fillets of cod, dripping their rich golden batter. She looked through the haze and thought the heat and the excitement was causing her to see double. Two tiny, identical faces appeared at the window and then vanished. She rubbed her eyes with her apron and carried on lifting the chips and shaking the wire basket. "They look delicious. Fetch some plates, Pedro, and knock the wall for Solly."

"Not for me. Simona must have given me up for lost."

"Then you must take some with you, and mind you go straight home," and she piled a deep dish with chips, topping them with two of the largest fillets.

Mrs. Perry picked up the longest chip from her plate and was nibbling away contentedly when she smiled towards the door as two raggedy little girls entered, one carrying a battered, blackened saucepan, which she held up to Teresa. A more affluent mother would have delighted in dressing the identical twins alike, and tending lovingly to their auburn curls, but their cast offs were drawn tightly around their little bodies, and a safety pin sufficed to render them a reasonable fit. "Poor little brats." Teresa smiled warmly and filled the pan to the brim. She then gently folded the tiny, grubby fingers back

over the money held out in an open palm. “No pay today, — *mañana*.” The bright eyed child tightened her hold on the pennies and hurried home.

They had hardly set down their forks when the door way was crammed with a score or more carrying an assortment of pans and dishes. A burly youth pushed to the front and placed a cracked basin on the counter. “Free today, Missis?” The bewildered Teresa looked at her friends, and Solly, the truth dawning, roared with laughter.

“You’ll have to improve your English, Teresa. No pay today, you said.”

“Chop some more chips, Pedro, and stoke up the fire.” Solly’s laughter was infectious, and all appeared relaxed and contented as they waited orderly and patiently.

As Solly was leaving, Teresa drew him to one side. “You spend so much time helping us that you must surely be neglecting your own business.”

“Not at all, usually quiet this time of year,” but she was not wholly convinced.

Teresa’s generous helpings, especially to the many vagrants, was noted far and wide and business was so brisk that they found it impossible to cope on their own. A note stuck in the window, brought forth many applicants, and the two selected had previously worked in the fish trade. Their speed and skill in gutting and cleaning enabled Teresa and Pedro to concentrate on frying and serving, and the takings increased considerably.

One day when she was on her own, Teresa became quite alarmed on seeing a wizened little man cram food into his mouth with both hands. He started to cough and choke and collapsed on the floor, his eyes protruding and his face turned grey and then blue. She banged on Solly’s wall and then ran out into the street screaming for help. Passers-by stared at the hysterical foreigner, not comprehending her plea. Solly rushed in and wasted no time in grabbing the man by the ankles and hoisted him clear of the floor. “Quick, bang his back.” It

took several hefty thumps to dislodge the offending fish bone which spewed out with the poor man's false teeth.

Solly's business did not pick up as expected, and his bubbling joviality seemed to have deserted him. He would stand for hours in his doorway and stare out blankly into the bustling thoroughfare. He caught sight of Pedro, bent almost double under the weight of his loaded hand-cart, and went to help him. When the fish was unloaded he unburdened his troubles and outlined his immediate plans. The couple listened sadly and were distressed at the news. To lose such a good friend and neighbour would be a bitter blow and they were prepared to go to any length to help him. "I'm deeply touched, but there's no turning back now." Pedro had often heard him refer to his brother's business in London's East End as a basement sweat shop, and things must have taken a very sad turn of events for Solly to even contemplate such a partnership.

"Pedro, seeing you struggle with that creaking handcart gave me an idea. Why don't you buy my little car, and I'm sure Mr. Kramski will sell you the trailer."

"You can't be serious, Solly. The only transportation we've ever owned was an old mule called Horacio."

"But you've both worked so hard and deserve some relaxation. I'll teach you to drive before I go. Think it over."

He left the two staring at each other. They thought of the hardship and poverty they had endured. Cars were not for the likes of them, yet Garcia owned a van, and his background in a neighbouring Spanish village was even more Spartan than theirs. Simona used to chop and bundle firewood throughout the week, and every Saturday would carry the heavy load on her back to sell in the market place three miles away.

"We'll buy it." Pedro was taken aback, as his wife had always been the thrifty one. "If it will help Solly, we'll buy it," she added with determination.

Pedro could think up no more excuses and reluctantly agreed to

take his first driving lesson. The weather had suddenly turned warmer and Solly pulled back the hood. They entered a long, smelly side street and it appeared as if all the children of Swansea were playing there. As Solly pulled up, three men passed, each with a bull-terrier walking obediently at their side. The dogs were in perfect condition and immaculately groomed. Pedro had seen many such breed in the neighbourhood and some had accompanied their owners into his cafe. It puzzled him why the children looked half starved, yet the dogs so well fed and with so much care lavished on their toilet. "They're on their way to a dog show up Green Hill way." Solly's curiosity had once taken him to a small hall at the top end of the High Street, where a few dozen men were almost fanatical in their quest for honours. He had heard of much money changing hands at other meetings where fights were secretly organised. Dogs that did not make the grade in the show ring were cast out into the street to learn sordid fighting skills with any size or shade of opposition.

Solly did not change seats immediately but continued to explain the rudiments of the combustion engine and the position of the gears. So engrossed were they that they did not observe three urchins climb up silently behind. Solly happened to spot them in his rear mirror and signalled to Pedro to keep still. He slowly unbuckled his stout leather belt, and with a lightening turn, swung it with terrific force. It landed with a crack on the shoulder of one of the boys who screamed out in pain. He quickly withdrew the strap to make a second swipe, but the young lads almost fell off in their haste to escape. He replaced his belt with a satisfied chuckle and resumed the lesson. He questioned Pedro on several points and then bade him take his place in the driving seat. Pedro was so nervous that beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead, and he grasped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles gleamed white. He let out the clutch so quickly that the trim little car lurched forward, jerking and shuddering. "Whow! whow! Let's start again." Pedro composed himself and was about to make a second attempt, when the narrow street was completely jammed with

a swarm of bedraggled, bare-footed youngsters, bursting with excitement, their eyes gleaming in anticipation of a bloody massacre. In their midst was a hideous, black bearded hulk of a man, and the shirtless boy at his side was pointing accusingly at Solly while he fingered the bright red weal across his skinny shoulder. The ape of a man looked as if he was about to explode with rage, and with a roar of fury proceeded to drag Solly out of the car.

Pedro was not a fighting man, nor was he a coward. Years of toil in the pits had built powerful arms and shoulders which gave him the appearance of being almost as broad as he was tall. The wrath of the black bearded monster was not unlike that of a maddened boar once hunted back home, its gnashing teeth checked only inches away from his feet. He leaped out of the car and ran around to assist his friend who had now been dragged clear of the door. He cupped his hand under the brute's bristly beard and jerked up his chin with a dull clap, causing him to bite deeply into his tongue. He released his hold on Solly and with blood dripping from his lips managed to swivel his greasy neck free of Pedro's grip. Pedro had never seen such a vile, revolting countenance, now only inches away, and thrust forward his head with all the force he could muster. There was a squelching sound as his bullet head crashed against his opponent's nose, crushing the bone and gushing a stream of blood. As the man backed away clutching his distorted face, Pedro completed the assault with a powerful, well aimed kick which doubled him up with an agonising yell. He looked down aghast at the writhing heap and was sickened by so much blood, now taking on a yellowish tinge as it percolated through an impregnation of grease and filth in the coarse material.

Maria almost fainted when her blood-stained husband appeared at the door. Solly was still in a state of shock, his face drained of colour and his limbs shaking visibly. She regretted having agreed to buy the car, believing it to be the cause of some terrible disaster.

The weeks slipped by and there was still no sign of a reprisal. The incident was never mentioned in the cafe, but the customers looked

upon Pedro with a new interest. Some craned their necks at the window to catch a glimpse of the man who had licked Mad Ben, reputed to have killed more than once in uncontrollable rage.

“Let’s hope our worries are now behind us.” Teresa had given up her nervous vigilance at the window, and even joked about the sorry plight of the two men on their return that fateful day. She had been humming away merrily one morning when the postman walked in and slapped a letter on the counter. She immediately recognized the writing and was fumbling to open it with her wet hands when Pedro took it from her and slit it open with a gutting knife. Letter writing was not one of Nina’s strong points and she wondered what urgency had compelled her to make such an effort. She read with dismay of the tragedy which had befallen the family. The youngest boy had collapsed down at the coal face and had been carried home by his two brothers. He had brought up much blood in a fit of coughing and she knew it could be no other than the dreaded consumption.

“We must get up there as soon as we can. Do you think you can drive all that way?” Pedro assured her that, thanks to Solly, he was now an accomplished driver and the car was performing perfectly. His tuition had continued unhampered through the Sketty area, where there was little likelihood of encountering anyone remotely resembling Mad Ben. They worked well into the night, completing as many chores as they could to enable their two helpers to cope for the day. Teresa would have enjoyed the journey under happier circumstances. The craggy hills reminded her so much of home, and the snatched glimpses of the distant river between the trees and boulders, reflected like so many mirrors in the morning sun.

Nina came out to meet them, her eyes streaming with tears. A reporter from the local paper had just arrived, accompanied by a photographer, who propped up his tripod at the foot of the bed. Nina fussed around her brother and tried to comb his hair, but he grinned, and cheerfully waved her aside. When they had finished their business, her attitude was quite brusque as she ushered them out.

“Your silly football make Ramon very ill,” were her parting words as she slammed the door.

Two tiny tots from next door ran into the parlour and tried to climb on the bed, but she held them firmly by the hand. “Come and see Polly.” As they entered the kitchen there was a loud squawking, “*Caramba! caramba!*” A seafaring friend had brought them the parrot and Nina was always scolding her brothers for teaching him rude words, but thankfully this was not one of them. She opened the cage door and held out a finger. “Come to Nina.” The bird turned its head sideways and backed away to the end of the perch. She then prodded it impatiently and it shot its head forward and hooked its beak in a vice like grip on the outstretched finger. She cried out in pain and swung her hand against the side of the cage, sending the bird spinning in a flurry of feathers. “Cruel Nina,” protested the children and, still smarting with pain, she shooed them out into the garden, clipping the little boy trailing behind and almost tipping him over.

It must have been a heartbreaking disappointment for Ramon, whose skill on the rugby field was renowned in the valleys. Pedro remembered him as a lithe, bronzed lad leading a herd of goats through his village and up into the hills where he stayed guarding them until dusk. He was not content to sleep in the sun and dream the day away. He felt the strength in his limbs and wanted to run as fast as the hares he disturbed from their forms. Each day, when the animals had settled he would run for hours along the summit, but made sure that his charges were constantly in his sight.

“He’s a natural.” Dai Rees had been enthusiastic in his praise of Ramon’s swift moving action, his sure handling and accurate passing, and his ability to swerve like greased lightning in either direction. The audacious way in which he constantly ‘sold the dummy’ had been hilarious to watch, but not so for the opposing players who were repeatedly left floundering. Dai had devoted months of his time teaching him the finer points of the game, and dogmatic perseverance produced such wizardry that the flying boot and fist was no longer

tolerated, and the spectators showed their displeasure in no uncertain manner at the brawling louts who often dominated the game.

It was Ramon's dedication and love of the game which contributed to his terrible illness. No amount of Nina's nagging would make him stay long enough to eat a substantial meal before dashing off for his almost nightly training session, and he would often return wet and weary, with no inclination or stamina to partake of any sustenance before flopping down exhausted on the sofa. He would often lay there fully clothed until the early call from their neighbour, who would prod remittently at the back of his grate with a poker until someone responded with three raps on the wall.

While Teresa and Pedro were there, the doctor arrived with a tall grey haired gentleman who examined Ramon thoroughly and suggested he be admitted to the sanatorium. The news distressed Nina so much that they had great difficulty in calming her.

She blamed herself for encouraging him to take up the game rather than see him go out at night with his brothers on heavy bouts of senseless drinking which resulted in stupid pranks and wilful damage. It was only the leniency of the local Bobby which prevented prosecution or even worse. It was his way of repaying the heroic deed of their compatriot, Modesto, for saving him from the river poachers, but Nina had often to dig deeply into her precious savings box to pay for the damage they had caused when the excess of drink had rendered them devoid of sense or sanity. They had taunted their brother unmercifully for his obsession with such a childish pursuit as football, but when they questioned his virility in the crudest possible terms, she flew into a rage and set upon them with the yard broom. They covered their heads and fled from the garden, crying for help in mock terror as the broom crashed down repeatedly. So incensed was she that she would have chased them down the street had not Ramon restrained her. "Don't fret yourself, little sister. They don't worry me. The gluttons are mad because I no longer help pay for all that drink they guzzle."

Hill Farm Tragedy

Nina would often lay awake at night pondering the reason for the dramatic change in her brothers' behaviour since coming to Wales. It was beyond her comprehension that two such strong husky lads could possibly suffer pangs of homesickness, and that the only relief from the constant unbearable heartache was to fuzzle their brains with ale. They did not appreciate the Bobby's kind endeavours and would have readily gone to jail if it would lead ultimately to deportation. Their latest escapade would have probably resulted in such a course had they been caught. They had made the acquaintance of two Welsh shepherds who had for the first time in their lives been in possession of money in their pockets and respectable clothes on their backs. Their tyrannical father had never taken the slightest interest in their welfare and had made them toil every hour of daylight. One morning he left them to repair a boundary wall whilst he galloped off to inspect the sheep at the far end of the farm, where the mountain rose sharply to its highest peak. They carried stones to the wall from a massive pile, laboriously collected over the years, from a very tender age. They had been too young to remember the pain or the time their good neighbour had rebuked their father for his callous inhumanity towards them. A terrible row ensued and the men never spoke to each other again.

Selwyn broke off at mid-day to light the kitchen fire and prepare a meal. His father had shown him the rudiments of cooking, but some old recipe books gave him a clearer insight. He had received no other tuition as no woman had crossed the threshold since his mother's death at their birth. The farmer had been a sociable and reasonable enough man, but after the tragedy he became bitter and unapproachable. He drove himself to the limit, toiling until he almost dropped from exhaustion, accepting the torturous pain as an act of penance. As the twins grew older his tormented brain implanted blame on them and they were forced to endure untold suffering. Their combined labour, although arduous, transformed the farm from

stony dereliction to an orderliness seldom achieved with thrice the man power. The farm house, on the other hand, received no more attention than the outbuildings, which was an occasional hurried brush through, but this was not so with the parlour. Their father always took off his boots before entering, which he would do so every Sunday evening, and would clean and polish the room like a proud housewife. He would then take down his wife's portrait and, after wiping it over slowly and gently, would place it before him and look at it for hours on end. When he came out of the room his eyes were red and he looked a broken man.

Although the farm stood highest and furthest from the village, it had the advantage of a reasonably flat summit where they were able to grow root crops for winter feed, and there were a little more than fifty rock-free acres of corn.

Selwyn thrust his head out of the kitchen window and let out a piercing whistle. His brother acknowledged by raising his arm, and he in turn hooked two fingers in his mouth and whistled and yelled until the sound vibrated along the crags and crannies. He waited a moment or two, scanning the horizon, but his hunger pangs sent him running and whooping down to the farm. "No sign of Dad. Let's start."

"What! and get our blocks knocked off." They craned their necks and there was still no sign of him. "He's never been this late. Best go and look for him."

"Not me. I'm starving and am going nowhere without food in my belly." Selwyn filled their bowls with broth and they dropped in chunks of bread which they pressed below the surface with the back of their spoons. Forgetting all else but the food before them, they tucked in noisily and helped themselves to more. They then climbed the hill to Gorse Meadow and struck a tin can with a stick. Their two ponies came cantering to the gate, followed by two mares in foal. They allowed them a mouthful of oats while they slipped the halters over their heads and tipped out the rest for the mares.

They were about to start off when Selwyn spotted a frizzy red

head passing just above the boundary wall. He flicked his halter and kned the pony into a gallop. "Where you off to now?"

"It's Blodwen," he yelled over his shoulder. "Best tell her what's happening." Blodwen beamed with delight, her ruse having worked yet again. Whenever Selwyn was in the vicinity she would take the same walk and hope they would be hidden from prying eyes, but her strategy was no secret to her mother.

"What you can see in that dirty boy I shall never know. I hope to goodness that one day he'll fall into the sheep dip."

Although the wall separated them, the combined animal smells in his filthy clothing sifted through in the mountain breeze. In their last 'chance' encounter, the abominable smell had been even more poignant. A sudden shower had drenched them and as they stood chatting in the sunshine which followed, the steam rose visibly from him and the stench increased. She stood her ground and as they talked of sheep and pigs and laying hens, a voice had bellowed from the meadow above. Griff was always ravenously hungry and no slip of a girl was going to delay his meal. Selwyn flashed her a quick smile and dropped out of sight into the grassy hollow, and she had watched him clamber up the side and sprint over the uneven ground with such strength and grace. She bitterly blamed his father for their filthy, unkempt appearance as he had done nothing to guide or encourage them in any way. She had seen hired hands in a similar state, but the sons of farmers were expected to wash and dress up at least twice a week; once for chapel and the other for market day, but the brothers had lived such an isolated existence that they were scared to set foot in the village, and their appearance would have probably frightened the villagers.

If only she could line them both up with her Dad and brothers for their quarterly haircut. It was alway the same ritual. Her father would make the same solemn announcement in his booming voice from the head of the breakfast table. "Take heed! Take heed! Tonight is the night of the shears." There always followed yells of protest and much

good humoured thumping on the table, but all would help with the hot water carrying for the prior head wash. The youngest, Gomer, always helped with this and delighted in rubbing their scalps so vigorously with his knuckles that his brothers winced in pain. She watched him approach and knew it was to be a fleeting visit. Not wishing to appear too obvious, she walked along briskly as if on some purposeful errand. He reined up the pony with the urgency of one who could stop for but a brief moment, and was soon galloping off to join his brother. "Will tell my Dad. Good luck!" she waved, but it was not what she would have liked to have wished on the skinflint farmer.

They crossed and recrossed the mountain several times without success, and then they saw a group of horsemen in the distance, and immediately recognized the unmistakable outline of Blodwen's father with his three sons, but what puzzled them was that they were being led by Sandy, one of the three dogs that had left with their master that morning. She gave an urgent sounding bark as she came up to them but did not alter her pace. Mr. Watkins signalled for them to follow and they learned from his sons that they had found the bitch whimpering at their door, and on seeing them she immediately made off in the direction of Craig Fawr, which was the huge rock towering high above the stony, unproductive end of the farm where the snow always took so long to clear. They dismounted and followed her up the sliding shale and she suddenly stopped and barked frantically. She was soon joined by the other two dogs which licked and fussed her, and followed her shoulder to shoulder. The men came across a rope securely bound around a boulder, and when they looked over the side they saw its end dangling near an injured sheep, which was balancing miraculously across a narrow jutting rock.

"Look! there's our Dad." A boot and khaki puttee was just visible behind a flat rock thirty feet below the rope.

"Fetch my rope, Gareth." Mr. Watkins took command and pulled up the loose rope as he waited for his eldest son to return from the horses.

"I'll go down," volunteered Griff when the two ropes were securely knotted.

"No, best let our Gareth go. He's got the brawn if not the brains." Gareth ignored him and grabbed the rope. He slid down like an expert, his powerful legs pushing him clear of the protruding rocks. His intention was to rescue the trapped sheep later, but as he drew alongside, the scared animal lurched away and started to slide off her precarious perch. He instinctively shot out his hand and dug his strong fingers deep into the oily fleece and they both swung helplessly, like a giant pendulum.

"Steady, Gareth. Steady now, we've got you." He checked the swing by scraping his toecaps against the rock surface, and they slowly hauled up man and beast.

Gareth fell forward on his face, panting heavily. "Be alright once I've got my breath," but they had started to untie the rope from under his armpits. He protested angrily and tried to stop them, but Griff insisted on going down. He saw the determination on the young lad's eyes and took his place at the back of the rope. Griff was anxious to be started and showed his impatience at the slowness of the descent. "Faster, faster," he called up and was soon astride the rock which had partly concealed his father's body from above. They watched him remove his rope harness and drop out of sight on to a ledge below. He re-emerged seconds later and they understood his gesture of hopelessness. After several minutes securing the rope he gave the signal to hoist, and when they had released the rope which bound him they dropped it over the side again and Griff clambered up it with the agility of a monkey.

Selwyn clutched his brother's arm as they both stared down. One trouser leg was ripped from top to bottom and a shoulder of his jacket was hanging on a thread, but the thick cloth cap was still pulled tightly over his head, the wide peak shading a look of tranquility which they had never seen before. They felt no grief, but simply disbelief that there would be no more violent outbursts or scathing, wounding criticism.

They were then overcome with a feeling of helplessness and near panic. What was to become of them? They knew not whether their father had been landlord or tenant, so divorced were they from matters other than their serfdom existence. Not once had they been consulted on the financial management which he conducted with cunning secrecy. They stood there in agonising despair when two strong hands gripped them by the shoulder and, as if he sensed their anguish, Mr. Watkins spoke to them earnestly, assuring them of the loyal support of his family. With one of the ropes, he knotted together a crude hammock, and the weight was distributed evenly by three holding on either side, whilst the ponies followed behind, linked together. It was a long slow haul back to the farm and fingers were drained white with the biting cord. They stopped and rested several times to rub back the circulation and regretted not fetching the cart.

They lay the body down gently in the front doorway and Selwyn went inside. He looked up at the key nervously, hardly daring to take it down off the nail. The neighbours entered, expecting to see the parlour as filthy and chaotic as the rest of the house. They stared around the room in amazement and felt ill at ease, as they knew they had entered a glowing shrine especially prepared as his chapel of rest. They carried him to the sofa and Mr. Watkins opened up the white sheet which had been neatly folded and draped it carefully. He closed the door quietly and rallied his sons around him.

“Well boys, the doctor and Jones the Burial will be calling today.” He did not need to say more and they began carrying the furniture outside. The twins stood back bewildered and looked enquiringly at their burly neighbour. “Will you draw some water, boys. We’ve got work to do.”

Selwyn worked the pump and Griff carried the pails. Garath and his brothers were bent double scraping vigorously every square inch of the floor with spades and shovels until most of the caked muck floated on the surface. They then swished it out into the yard with stiff

brooms before giving the flagstones a final swill. When they had all departed the twins walked aimlessly around the house, followed closely by two of the dogs, always alert for a word or a signal, but Sandy lay morosely at the parlour door and ignored the food and water set down before her. Selwyn knelt down and stroked her and for the first time realized that there had been much love and devotion between master and dogs. There was not a single kennel at the farm and his must have been the only working dogs on that mountain that were not chained outside at night. His wrath and resentment had never been directed at them.

The doctor arrived with the policeman and, having first called at the farm below, knew the circumstances of the tragedy, but the policeman checked with his notes while the doctor was in the parlour. They had not been gone long when Jones the Burial panted in and flopped down in a chair. "This farm must surely be at the end of the world," as he removed his hard hat and mopped his bald, bony head. He was in the parlour for some considerable time and when he came out he asked the boys about the arrangements and their preferences. He spoke slowly in a high pitched voice, emphasising and repeating every detail with the clarity of one trying to penetrate the mind of a mute. He stopped abruptly and shrugged his shoulders in hopeless abandonment. "You've had a very nasty shock today, my good boys. I will sort things out with your neighbour, Mr. Watkins," and he was gone.

Next morning it was still pitch black outside when Selwyn lit the oil lamp and kindled the fire. He placed the heavy black frying pan over the flames and cut off four large rashers from the ham before replacing it on its hook. He then cracked in six eggs and knew that once his brother got a whiff of the sizzling ham he would be down like a shot. He was piling up his brother's plate when, sure enough, there he was pulling up his chair and beaming at the breakfast as if it was manna from Heaven, but Selwyn had little appetite that morning and poked and prodded his food before sliding it on to Griff's plate, and

watched him wolf it down and then set about his usual ritual of slowly and methodically mopping his plate so thoroughly that he was able to set it aside ready for the next meal. Selwyn waited patiently until every crumb on the table had been eaten. He looked at his brother and thought how alike he was to their gluttonous sow which stayed slurping and snorting long after the others had left the trough.

Selwyn had tossed and turned all night worried stiff about their future, and waiting to draw out his brother's views, when there was a timid tap on the door. The two young dogs hurled themselves against it, barking wildly, but when they saw it was Blodwen they whined and squealed with excitement. The boys were stunned, but quickly invited her in.

"Thought I'd catch you before you went out. My Mam wants to take you shopping today."

"Shopping! What for?"

She glanced quickly at the torn flannel shirts they had slept in. "And there are hats to buy," she continued quickly. "I'd best snip off some of your hair or you'd never get one on." She chuckled nervously and busied herself filling the kettle and putting it on the fire.

"Is it a cup of tea you are wanting, Blodwen?"

"No, no, not tea, Selwyn *bach*. It's soap suds we'll be needing." She opened her bag and took out two clean towels and then groped in the bottom for her comb and scissors. Griff had seen enough and made his escape. She felt the water with her finger and led Selwyn over to the stone sink. She continued to scrub and rinse until the water flowed off clean and she rubbed his head with the rough towel until she was breathless. "Now, sit yourself down, Selwyn. You've been very good. I just want to snip off a little here and a little there." She would have broken her comb had she tried to pull it through the tangled mass and she cut out the largest knots. The hair was fine and golden and not wiry like her own, and she snipped away contentedly, and parted it away from the handsome bronzed features. "If my Mam could see you now," she thought as she stood back in admiration. He would have

willingly sat there all day. Her friendly chatter and the closeness of her body gave him a glowing warmth he had never known, and she had to pull him up off the chair. "Now for your brother. Carry him in if you have to, and when I go from here can I trust you both to get in the bath tub before my Mam comes for you?" He looked scared and went outside to call his brother. She expected a long wait and was surprised to see him standing in the front doorway while his brother was still looking for him at the back. She had been so absorbed that she had not noticed his face at the window watching her every move. He crossed over to the sink and stripped off his shirt. His hair was darker and coarser and proved more difficult. She noticed his strong square chin and bull-like neck. He must have been a stone heavier and she was surprised that twins could be so different. He actually thanked her and promised smilingly to scrub the skin off his brother's back and his own before her mother arrived with the trap.

Mrs. Watkins bustled them from shop to shop, but spent most of her time at the grocers as she had taken it upon herself to invite all the farmers and their families back to her place after the funeral. She and Blodwen boiled sides of ham and prepared a feast to be remembered. The twins were shy and awkward at the table but as the drink was pressed on them they joined in the conversation on farming with enthusiasm, and for the first time felt able to discuss their achievement with pride.

"Yes, boys *bach*. You've got the best farm in the valley, but you've sweated blood, you have." Mr. Watkins was full of praise, but when he realized how little knowledge they had of the financial aspect, he drew them to one side. "Your Dad took over the farm from his Dad and owned every stick and stone. He made much money and spent little. I'll ask Jones the Bank to call to see you."

On Saturday night, a week later, they jumped into the bath tub and then donned their best suit and bowler hat. The many callers had bestowed praise on the neatness of the farm and the excellent condition of the sheep, and their confidence had soared by the time

they reached the Inn. They pushed open the heavy black door and peered in through the thick haze of smoke swirling across the low ceiling. All eyes were turned towards them and someone tittered. The twins turned on their heels and would have fled back up the mountain had not Pablo and his brother, Vicente, spotted them and dragged them back. The twins knew the Spanish boys as two of a gang they had often seen drinking incessantly from their botas on a hill top near their farm.

Vicente pushed them down on a bench in the corner and Pablo went to the bar for some ale. "You work like Spanish man on Spanish mountain," he shouted down above the babble. They grinned up at the earnest face and were immediately at ease. They drank steadily and the Spaniards held them in high esteem. A Spanish hill farmer with as many sheep would live in a spacious *hacienda* and not rub shoulders with the likes of them. The twins listened enthralled at their tales of endless conflict in their fight for survival, especially at lambing time, when vicious eagles swooped on the flock, desperate for food for their ravenous young.

Some more Spaniards joined them and the ale flowed faster, and it turned into a night of revelry. Selwyn's forehead hit the ale-swilled table with a thud, rendering him completely oblivious to the noise and merriment around him. "No more, no more. You've had enough."

Griff had staggered up to the bar and tipped a fistful of coins before the landlord, who stuffed them back into his pocket before going over to speak to Pablo. "*Si, si*. Me look after me *amigos*," he assured him and dragged his brother away from a group of revellers. "*Vamos, vamos*," but before leaving, he persuaded the landlord to sell him four bottles to take away. Neither he nor his brother wore a jacket and so he stuffed them into the pockets of his new found Welsh friends. Pablo steered Griff towards the door, but Vincente had to almost carry his ward. They stepped outside into the black, clammy wall of dense fog and the cold air partly revived Selwyn, who groaned loudly.

“We’ll never get them home in this. Hadn’t we better put them up for the night?” Vicente spoke anxiously in Spanish but got an abrupt response.

“Blow that. Nina will murder us. When we find the mountain lane we can’t go wrong.”

They walked along the road, the clomp of their boots on the hard surface their only guide, when Selwyn stopped suddenly and turned his head to the right. In spite of his stupor he had felt a cold blast bearing down from the hills through a gap in the buildings. Their footsteps now were muffled as they trod the grass-tufted dirt track, sheltered on either side by a steep bank and dense hedgerow. The Spaniards helped themselves to two bottles of ale and swigged away between bursts of song. Selwyn clutched his throbbing head but did not complain. The noise disturbed some sheep, already penned and awaiting sheering, and the twins knew they were passing their neighbour’s farm.

“Let’s give our friends *un regalo*,” Pablo chuckled wickedly and he and his brother were soon groping among the startled animals and emerged with one each firmly straddled across their shoulders. The twins stood horrified as sheep bleated and dogs barked, and a pale yellow light appeared faintly from the farmhouse door.

Selwyn managed to find his voice. “Bring them back,” but he could hear the thumping of their boots get fainter and fainter. He was almost paralysed with fright, but pushed his brother into the ditch and lay down beside him. The snarling dogs, released from their heavy chains, were almost upon them when the barking suddenly stopped as they recognised the familiar shepherds. Selwyn pulled out a bottle of ale from his pocket and poured the contents over his brother and then himself. One of the dogs, which had a liking for it, licked away furiously before it filtered through the new serge. A lantern moved from side to side above their heads and they moaned and groaned.

The farmer looked down on them and smiled sympathetically. “The yoke is broken. Ay, and so much to glean.” The powerful man

heaved Griff over his shoulder and carried him into the house.

When he returned for Selwyn, his daughter came with him and she nagged and scolded ceaselessly. "Look at your lovely suit. It's ruined, it is."

"Where are our boys then?" The mother peered out and called their names but they were in hot pursuit of the two Spanish jokers who had dropped their fleecy load to clamber up a steep bank and hurl themselves through a spiky hedge, leaving strips of torn shirts to rustle in the wind. A flock of startled sheep darted in all directions, their white shorn bodies briefly lighting through the fog. The meadow suddenly sloped away and Pablo kept sliding until he found himself ankle deep in water and grabbed his brother as he brushed past.

"This is the stream that passes behind the *taberna*," he whispered excitedly. They followed it carefully, sometimes sinking above the knees but they dare not climb the bank lest they be hopelessly lost again. They struggled over boulders and squeezed between jagged rocks until they heard the distant droning of the river. As they drew nearer, it gurgled and groaned ominously, and they followed the rumbling until it changed to a higher pitch, and they knew they had reached the bridge at the end of the village. The light from the oil lamps along the terraces hardly penetrated the depressing gloom, but when they lit their own lamp and surveyed each other, they had to stifle their laughter lest they woke their sister. Their shirts were in ribbons and their faces were caked in mud. They stripped off their shirts and dropped them on the hot coals, still glowing in the grate, and before creeping exhausted up the stairs they laid out their sodden clothing to dry.

Back at the hill farm the twins had been covered with blankets to be allowed to sleep it off, and pretended not to hear the incessant fuming and ranting of Garath. "Fine neighbours we've got. Helpless drunk they are and rustlers stealing our sheep," but the only response he got was a louder groan from Selwyn.

The Sanatorium

It was with a sad heart that Teresa went about her daily tasks, and was so preoccupied with the tragic events up the valley that she could not work with her usual care and thoroughness. She was helping to prepare the wet fish when the sharp gutting knife slid off the slippery gills and cut deeply into her thumb. She grabbed a cloth and tried to stem the blood but it was soon saturated. Pedro ran in and wrapped another clean cloth around the hand and bundled her into the car. She was sick with pain and weakened by the loss of blood, but it was her disappointment at not being able to accompany her husband to the sanatorium which was the hardest to bear, and she succumbed to a tearful outburst. "The doctor say I no can go," she blurted out to Lily.

"Oh! Can I go? I've never been further up the valley than Morriston."

Teresa was taken aback by such a request and for a moment there was complete silence. Lily was an excellent worker, and her reluctance to leave the warmth and friendship at the cafe, for the chill loneliness of her bed-sitter, kept her working many hours far in excess of those for which she was paid.

"*Por que no?*" and realising he had spoken in Spanish, Pedro grinned and said "Why Not? You come, you come."

Teresa was up early to see her husband off, and was giving the car a final polish with her good hand when Lily turned up wearing a scarlet dress which was so tight that she wondered how she had managed to get into it. She went indoors and returned carrying her best cardigan, which she handed to Lily, who thanked her but did not put it on.

Pedro was pleased with the car's performance and it was only on steep hills that its lack of power was evident. They were creeping up one such hill when some children ran alongside and teasingly offered to give them a push. "You're carrying too much weight," panted one cocky youngster, pointing at Lily.

“You cheeky urchin,” and she swung her handbag, missing his head by inches.

Nina looked out when she heard the car approach and was dismayed when she saw a stranger where her aunt should have been. Pedro quickly explained and introduced Lily. An early lunch had been prepared but Lily was not able to do justice to the Spanish food. Hardly a word was spoken during the meal and she was relieved when three children burst into the room.

“Can we come?” the neighbour’s two children were tugging at Pedro’s sleeve causing him to spill some vermicelli on to his black jacket. Their little friend, Nico, stood well back, not expecting to be included in such a rare treat. Pedro looked across at the little lad and a pang of pity overwhelmed him as his eyes fell on the leg support irons, far too heavy for one so frail.

“There’s only room for one. Little Nico, go and ask your mother to put a warm coat on you as you’ll have to wait in the car while we’re in the hospital.” The two friends screamed out their protest and ran from the house to plead with their mother. Nico did not move and simply stared up unbelievably, and when the truth finally dawned, he whooped with joy and made for the door. Pedro watched as he struggled down the street, his feet dragging pityfully along the dusty road. When he returned, his face flushed with excitement, he asked if he could wait in the car. As he sat in the driving seat clutching the steering wheel, his two friends ran up, now partly over their disappointment, having been promised a ride when Pedro returned.

“Look, I can drive.” They opened the door and looked in contemptuously and then ran off. Nico stretched over to close the door, but the little girl suddenly ran back to slam it shut. There was an agonising scream as Nico’s fingers were trapped, squashed and bleeding. Pedro ran out and opened the car door. He carefully inspected the injured hand and saw that the tips of the fingers were split, but luckily the smallness of the hand had prevented more

serious injury. He eased up the flattened fingers and stroked them gently. The long car journey for Nico was now out of the question, and having bathed and bandaged the hand, he sat him on Nina's lap for the short ride to his home.

His father plucked him up as if he was a toy and carried the sobbing boy to the open front door. "If you feel better when we get back you can come for a ride with your friends," called out Pedro as the car moved away.

Lily sat in the open dicky seat and the chilly breeze soon made her don the cardigan she had earlier declined. They passed through Brecon without a hitch, and it looked so peaceful without the farmers and their sheep. The doors were just opening for visiting time when they arrived. Ramon's bed was half-way down the ward and he waved cheerfully as they approached. Pedro pulled up chairs for the two ladies and was shocked to see Lily scrape hers back a few feet and take out a large white handkerchief which she pressed tightly against her nose.

Nina jumped up infuriated, but her brother stretched out his hand to restrain her. She glared at Pedro. "If you don't take this imbecile out of here I'll drag her out by the hair." Her outburst in Spanish caused many raised eyebrows and a nurse walked briskly up and spoke quietly to Lily.

"I'm afraid only two are allowed at the bedside." The relieved Pedro saw her safely to the car and returned hurriedly to the ward. The nurse was still there and he soon discovered that the pretty little redhead had lost her heart to the handsome Spaniard, and although it was her day off, could not bear to be parted. Ramon grinned mischievously as he tapped the slight bulge under her starched tunic. "You'll have to come to the christening." The nurse slapped his hand sharply and, on seeing the look of astonishment on their faces, uncovered the hot water bottle suspended from a shoulder strap. All windows were kept fully open at all times, and any form of heating was considered detrimental to the health of the patients. The more

chronically sick were housed under Spartan conditions around the perimeter of the spacious grounds.

The atmosphere on the journey back was tense and Pedro sensed that he was to blame for inflicting further suffering and humiliation on his nephew. However, the happy scene which met their eyes helped to ease the tension. "Just look at the little dears." Lily was thankful for the distraction as the children clambered aboard. Pedro dropped off the ladies and headed for the stoney lanes which linked the many small farms. The sudden dips and jolts caused much merriment to the three in the open seat. Pedro saw some chickens dusting themselves in the middle of the lane and accelerated. They flew up frantically and one squawking hen landed on Nico's lap, its flapping wings momentarily blinding him. "Hang on to it," but the squeels of excitement drowned Pedro's voice, and Nico pushed the bird away from him as it rose clawing at his face in a bid to escape. The children ducked their heads as the terrified bird took off, loudly cackling its indignation, and raced off in the direction of the farm from which it had been abducted.

"Who let my dinner get away?" called out Pedro as they tumbled out, anxious to rush home to relate their adventure. His voice sounded so earnest that Nico wondered whether he really meant it, and excused himself by raising his bandaged hand.

The Roving Spaniards

The Spanish miners were, on the whole, a home loving community and seldom ventured outside the village. There were, however, three young bloods whose adventurous spirit was alien to that of their colleagues. Most Spaniards did not at first take to the taste of ale and preferred to drink their own coarse table wines, but these three young men downed their first pints minutes after emerging from their dust choked shift, and their enormous capacity held them in high esteem with the habitual Welsh drinkers. Their drinking bouts would start quietly enough, but the consumption of ale increased rapidly and so did the volume of song and laughter. Cervantes, whose stocky bull-like figure hardly resembled that of a dancer, could click his fingers and stamp his heels and swerve around with amazing grace. The locals gathered around and took up the rhythmic clapping, and one would step forward to clear the table of glasses as the time drew near for the spectacular finale. The last glass was hardly off when he would squat on his heels and, as if released from a giant spring, soar upwards and land almost noiselessly on the centre of the table where he would pivot with incredible speed and skill for one so cumbersome in appearance.

The landlady's brother had just crossed the rough mountain track to bring their parents to spend a few days away from the farm. It had been a long bone-shaking journey in the milk cart, but the old couple had refused to rest, not wishing to miss the remarkable exploits of Cervantes.

It was a friendly Inn, where the landlady's jovial disposition and the landlord's enormous stature helped to create a happy tranquil atmosphere, but such was not the case in many outlying Inns where strife and violence prevailed. Cervantes and his two friends had called at one such Inn, and it was Gregorio's turn to buy the drinks, and he was pleasantly surprised to find such a pretty girl waiting to take his order. Her dark, striking features would not have looked amiss in an Andalusian gypsy encampment, and the two red combs which held

up her jet black hair gave her a distinctive Spanish appearance.

“Could she really be Welsh?” A voice in Welsh from the far end of the bar soon dispelled his speculation as her uncle, the landlord, gruffly instructed her to serve the stranger. As she looked up to take the money she flushed slightly as she met the admiring gaze of the Spaniard. Her uncle was attending to the next customer and she had time to watch idly as he returned to his table. She noted his broad shoulders and slim waist, not yet thickened with an excess of ale.

“What a waste on a man,” she thought, as she observed the mass of tight curls clustered on the nape of his thick neck. She looked away quickly as he glanced over his shoulder, but she watched with amazement as he downed his drink in one swift go and was walking back towards her, holding out his empty glass before him. He flashed her a cheeky grin as he set it down, but the watchful uncle stretched out his arm to take it. The two friends shrieked with laughter as they saw his amorous tactics foiled. The landlord grunted angrily as he pushed the full glass towards him, but Gregorio hardly noticed, so intent was he in following her every graceful move.

That night Gregorio did all the carrying and fetching from the bar, but was crafty enough to wait until the uncle was too busy to intervene. By the end of the evening she had become so amused by the blatant advances of the merry Spaniard that she smiled readily each time he approached, and felt the warmth of glowing friendship. He had earlier seen a young man go behind the bar and speak to her sharply in Welsh, but she had tossed her head defiantly and walked away. He was soon to learn that he was one of her three brothers, infuriated by her conduct.

To the annoyance of his friends, Gregorio was content to do his drinking in the same Inn. They had often seen him flirt with pretty girls, but never had he been so smitten with so much desire for one for so long. When she finally consented to his persistent request to see her home one evening, they both felt that it was the parting of the ways and were about to lose a good friend and drinking partner.

All three waited outside until they saw Sarah come out through the kitchen door, when Gregorio gave his friends a gentle push, anxious to see them off. “*Adios, hasta mañana,*” he called after them.

As the two Spaniards walked home sadly, they passed the three brothers lurking under an old oak tree, disfigured by the ravages of age and vandalism, and two of its branches lay rotting, partly submerged neath a thicket of brambles. Under different circumstances it would have been criminal to desert their friend, but this was a family matter. “Perhaps they’ll knock some sense into his thick skull,” but they both knew that the slim youths were no match.

Gregorio strolled along with eyes only for his beloved Sarah. He spoke so little English but his eyes said it all. They were within ten yards of the tree when, unable to contain himself, he drew her to him and his strong arms engulfed her in an embrace full of pent up passion. He would have yelled out in sheer ecstasy had it not been for the sudden drastic turn of events. He felt a sickening blow on the side of his head as the youngest brother, unable to hold back a second longer, grabbed a chunk of wood and made a lone attack. He raised the wood to strike again but his sister, maddened by the cowardly assault, swung the bag of stout bottles destined for her grandmother. There was a crash of broken glass as it struck the lad’s head, sending him reeling across the road before collapsing into a flooded ditch. Gregorio, in spite of his throbbing head, rushed to help him and was reaching down when he received a vicious kick in the ribs.

He gasped in pain and yelled out in Spanish, “*Idiota!* Can’t you see your brother is hurt.” They did not understand, but realized that the Spaniard was more concerned with their brother’s injuries than his own, and helped drag out the unconcious lad, drenched and bleeding. Sarah showed not the slightest remorse for her young brother, and continued her verbal onslaught with all the ferocity of her fiery temper. When they arrived home it was to Gregorio she turned her devoted attention, and with tears of shame blurring her

vision, bathed the egg-sized lump on his curly head.

“This is the girl for me,” he vowed, as he took his leave for the long lonely treck home.

Gregorio had never had the opportunity or the inclination to learn a second language, having spent all his working and leisure hours among Spaniards. His courtship with Sarah, however, brought him into contact with her Welsh speaking family and friends, who now greeted him warmly and invited him into their homes. His enthusiasm to learn Welsh pleased them immensely and each visit turned out to be a lengthy and often hilarious language lesson, but the older folk would take the matter seriously and delve deeply into the gramatical aspects. Back in his village he was teased unmercifully and accused of desertion when he sipped his ale down the valley with the Welsh miners of a different colliery.

The Blacksmith

The Spanish miners had never known such prosperity, and although their basic wage was meager, their physical strength and mining skill enabled them to increase it ten fold, but one of their compatriots was not so fortunate. In spite of a long apprenticeship he was not able to reap the reward from his trade as a blacksmith, and would have continued to earn a pittance but for much overtime brought about by the frequent breakdown of overworked machinery.

Victoriano was an easy going man and would have been content to while away his leisure hours playing his favourite card games or strolling in the evening air as had been his custom in Spain. His wife, however, was not prepared to sit back and accept her lot. She had come to Wales to make a new and better life, and within weeks of being installed in their end of terrace colliery house, she sought permission to build a forge at the bottom of their long garden. One of the Mine Owners, whose large estate butted up to the garden, readily agreed as he was well aware that a smithy, so close to hand, would be invaluable for the shoeing of his many horses and repairs to farm implements.

Victor's Spanish friends rallied forth to help with the construction, knowing full well that it would also benefit them to have their tools sharpened promptly. His services were already in great demand at the colliery workshop, with some miners bringing in their tools from other mines, confident in the knowledge that the work was done expertly with no fear of sharp edges snapping off, as often happened when metal was badly tempered. The grateful men would collect their tools and slip a few coins into the hand of the blacksmith. Even before the workshop was completed, tools and implements were left to be first in the queue.

A nearby farmer, also employed in the pit, often called him out to do emergency repairs during hay time and harvest. He never paid in cash, but the abundance of farm produce received more than paid for his labour. He also allowed the blacksmith to set a row of potatoes

along the entire length of a ploughed field, and what they could not eat, they boiled up for the chickens.

The farmer's wife had taken a keen interest in his son, Nico, and vowed to her husband that she would build some strength into his frail limbs. She would take no payment for much of the butter and cream she left when delivering the milk. "Got some left over from yesterday. Pity to waste it," she would say as she breezed in cheerfully like a breath of country air, and with unbounding vitality. When she came accompanied by one of her three daughters, Cristina, determined to reciprocate, would hold the little girl back while she ran the inch tape over her. The beautifully embroidered dresses she ran up were the envy of their friends and she received requests from several villagers. All the girls in her home village had been accomplished at needle work and she did not consider herself to be more than average at this skill, but the enthusiasm shown encouraged her to work late into the evening to increase her output. The money saved was invested in a Bradbury sewing machine, and she would strive to have at least a dozen partly finished dresses of various patterns hanging on a rail to await prospective customers. Those who required modifications were impressed with the speed and skill displayed.

During the weekends and long summer evenings there was much activity at the smithy. Victor would manage single handed all the light work, but when the iron needed more weight than his seven pound hammer, he would pop his head around the cottage door and call out for his wife and son. One particularly sultry evening, Nico had worked the heavy leather bellows with more vigour than usual because of the extra heat required to weld some thick rods. But in spite of his discomfort he prayed for the day when he would be strong enough to relieve his mother of the heavy striking. The blaze of the flaming forge glistened beads of perspiration as they flowed freely into her eyes and down her sallow face. The red blouse stuck wet and steamy to her thin shoulders, and the saturation under her armpits caused the red dye to trickle down her arms like rivulets of sweated blood. Each time

the heavy sledge hammer struck the bonding metal, filling the shop with sparks, she would give a little grunt and shake the sweat from her face, hissing silently as it sprayed the hot metal. At last the weld was tapped rhythmically and skilfully into shape. Nico noticed that his father's technique seldom varied. Always two sharp clouts on the weld and a single tap on the anvil. He jumped down from the stool, especially made so that he could reach the handle, and as he swung around to make his escape he saw his friend, Tommy, standing in the doorway with a towel under his arm. He was scared of the sparks and would not venture inside. Nico hobbled and hopped up the garden path.

"Wash yourself before you go, or you'll poison the fish," called his mother, but he stopped only long enough to grab a towel and a bar of soap. He would lather himself and rinse under the waterfall.

He felt a sudden pang of sorrow for his father whose toil for the day was not done, as he had been recalled to the mine to splice a steel rope. An Official had called earlier to bring the message. His mother had nodded a polite greeting, "Me much sweat," she remarked, almost apologetically.

"Horses sweat," replied the Official curtly, "humans perspire."

"Me work like horse, me sweat like horse," she retorted, ruffled by the arrogance of the rebuke.

Nico loved the river, and although he could not swim, enjoyed watching the miners dive into the deep, fast flowing water, which was almost completely shaded by tall trees. Even on the hottest days there would be a wood fire burning where the bathers dried themselves, teeth chattering, and there was always so much excitement.

"Where's Mark?"

"Been and gone." His face fell to learn that he had missed Mark's antics in the water. One of them was to swim up and down, smoking a pipe and wearing his cloth cap and glasses. He sat near the fire, his legs stretched out before him and with his heels almost touching the white ash, listening to the adult chatter. His friend had gone up the

river to a shallow pool called Pull Merched, where the girls usually paddled. He watched one of the miners rub his legs vigorously with a rough towel. There was a loud sizzling as he stooped over the leaping flames, his sleek, black hair shining in the fire light. Nico observed that the substance dripping from Ivor's head was too thick and sluggish to be water and it was now clearly trickling slowly down his face. At that moment one of the bathers cried out, "Stand back Ivor or you'll set us all alight." Nico jumped back in alarm as a huge blob fell hissing near his feet, and was suddenly aware why Ivor was nicknamed 'Lardy'.

Nico felt a pair of hands over his eyes and knew Tommy was back. There was little more than a foot of water at Pull Merched, which was a warm stagnant pool away from the main river flow. There was no visible inlet and must have been fed by a subterranean seepage. He had suddenly felt too grown up to be splashing about with squeeling little girls and sought masculine company at Pull Du.

"Come on, Nico, let's go in for a dip," as he dragged him away from the fire. There were many non-swimmers at the pool, but the deep water did not deter them from diving into the narrow channel and gliding arms stretched to surface over on the shallow side. It looked so easy and Nico was often jeered at because of his reluctance to follow them in. His young friends had seen him indulge wholeheartedly in most other forms of sport and did not realize that his leg irons would hamper him in any way. There was a loud whoop and Tommy was sprinting towards the river and dived into the swirling current below.

Nico ran to the bank just in time to see his friend emerge, cutting through the clear water like a spear, both palms still pressed together. "Well, I'll be blowed," gasped Nico unbelievably. "Well, this is it." He knew his friend would taunt him unmercifully if he still funked it. Slowly he peeled off his sweat-caked shirt and stood there in his well darned underpants. He climbed down to the water edge to wash the grime off his body. "If I'm to drown I'd better look respectable." He

then remembered the soap, and was about to turn when, with a loud shriek, Tommy flung himself on his back almost knocking him into the water. "You fool, you nearly got me in then."

"How did I do? How did I do?" He cried out triumphantly, dancing around Nico and prodding him into action.

"I'm not scared," snapped Nico. "If a twerp like you can do it, there can't be much to it." He fetched the soap and with teeth clenched, rubbed fiercely, dismayed and angry. He had hoped for tranquility by the river side, but this was not to be. As the stained, frothy suds dropped from his head they were snatched away hurriedly by the throbbing, swirling water beating against the rock below, as if impatient to be away to explore the beautiful valley ahead. A miner swam powerfully against the current, his black back contrasting vividly against his white neck and limbs. He had often heard it stated that a back washed meant a back weakened. Saturday was usually reserved for the weekly back wash before the kitchen fire, on which steamy black cast iron saucepans would be waiting in readiness, but many younger miners proudly displayed weeks of black caked coal dust.

Nico climbed to the top of the bank, his knocking knees rattling his leg irons. He glanced along the glade where the sun beams flickered through the leafy boughs, lighting up a swaying array of lush greenery. He shut his eyes tightly and dived, but instead of entering the water head first, he landed on his tummy with a resounding splash and then disappeared beneath the greenish, blue ripples. To his horror, on either side was a wall of huge boulders, and directly before him were the washed roots of a tree lodged in the deep water like a giant menacing octopus. He grabbed desperately at the nearest tentacle, his lungs now at bursting point, but was hurled somersaulting into the midst of the entangled roots which held him firmly against the massive trunk. There was a deafening roar in his head as if it was about to explode. He reached feebly for the root above but a sudden surge of current thrust his puny body slithering upwards

against the slimy bark. Everything went black but as his shoulder struck a branch he instinctively clung on, his head mercifully just above the surface. He held on, gulping in air and spewing out water, each contracting stomach spasm almost jerking him free to be dashed against the boulders ahead. His head began to clear and his eyes slowly focused on a moving form on the river bank.

Up river there had been pandemonium. Tommy was beside himself with grief and had wailed and screamed his confession of guilt for goading his friend to his doom. The moment his first shriek of alarm was heard, six miners dived in almost simultaneously, some fully clothed, but one, Islwyn, with a little more foresight, raced along the river bank scanning the surface before diving in. It was he who spotted the little black head almost submerged in the frothing water which swirled around the fallen tree. A strong hand grasped the mop of coarse hair, lifting the gasping, spluttering boy well clear, and a few powerful strokes took them safely ashore. Nico, his ordeal over, threw himself on the grassy bank and sobbed hysterically, and Islwyn waited until the little lad had partly recovered his composure before calling off the search.

When Nico had bathed his smarting eyes he was whisked aloft and carried shoulder high. "Look what I've found," called out Islwyn as he approached the solemn group staring down as if into a watery grave. For a moment Tommy stood rooted, not daring to believe what his misty eyes portrayed, but when Nico grinned down cheekily he almost when beserk.

The New Dress

Every Wednesday evening Cristina's niece, Angela, would cross the field from the big house where she worked as maid. It was a short cut to the bottom of the garden where her uncle had conveniently railed some stout planks in a gap in the hawthorn hedge. Nico looked forward to the girl's visit and would clamber to the top of the fence, from where he could see her the moment she emerged from the hollow in which the grand house sheltered. The sight of the frail boy never failed to bring a lump to her throat and she ran the last few yards to smother him with her love, and clung to him until he struggled free.

"Is that a tear in your dress? You should come the road way and not through the hedge like a peasant," scolded her aunt.

"Aren't we all peasants," retorted the spirited girl breathlessly as Nico slid off her back.

"No niece of mine is going around in rags," and she took out an inch tape from the machine drawer. "Stand still, can't you?"

That night when her husband and son were in bed, Cristina dragged out a tin trunk from the stair cupboard. She lifted out the various remnants which she used, in the main, for making her son's clothes. Pieces of shabby, worn coats she would turn inside out and transform miraculously. When she found what she was looking for she fondled and caressed the material and held it to her cheek to further savour its rich texture. She sighed and pushed back the trunk. "If I don't use it now, it will never be used."

She sat and worked diligently and was relieved to hear her husband's snores from the bedroom above. For the first half hour he had called for her to come to bed, and her reply was always the same. "Be up in a minute." Now she could concentrate all her skill and artistry.

The following Wednesday Angela had hardly stepped inside the door when she heard her aunt's voice call out. "Your dress is in Nico's bedroom. Hurry and try it on."

“*Madre mia!*” She held up the dress and could not believe her eyes. “Is this really for me, Tia?”

“Well, I didn’t stop up all night to make it for your uncle.” Angela rushed downstairs clutching the dress and threw her arms around her aunt. “Steady on, it will be like a dish cloth before you’ve even worn it.” She took the dress and smoothed it carefully against her body. “Take off that sack cloth you’re wearing. I haven’t got all day.” Angela could hardly contain her excitement. “If you don’t stand still I’ll stick this pin in you,” and she finally completed the only alteration required, that of shortening the hem.

Nico was tucked up in bed much earlier than usual as Angela could not wait to get back to work to show off her new dress, and with the pretext of calling on another Spanish family in the village, she bade her aunt and uncle goodbye. She ran along the ash strewn back street until she was in sight of the main road, and with her head held high she slowed her pace to a sedate walk. A group of miners squatting at the corner watched her approach, and although she knew not what they were saying, the admiring looks lifted her heart and lightened her feet, and she felt that she could float along. She beamed happily at everyone she met and once she had slammed shut the big iron gate, skipped along the long gravel drive, her arms raised high, feeling as proud as the noble eagle back home, displaying the splendour of its mighty wings.

As she rounded the bend she startled a flock of her master’s fantail pigeons pecking up grit. There was a loud flapping as the nearest sought the safety of the stable roof, but most merely ran quickly to the grass verge. “Hello my dearest ones.” They knew they had no reason to fear her as she was often called upon to feed them, but instead of throwing down the corn hurriedly, she would crouch in the low loft and encourage them to feed from her hand. At first the timid ones held back but in time hunger overcame their fear. One bird persisted in following her around the farm and she was never sure if it was greed or genuine affection. The master would shoo it away from

the house and accuse the staff of throwing out scraps.

Angela felt there was a certain holiness about the grace and pure whiteness of these beautiful birds. They seemed so far removed from the multi-coloured ones she helped pluck and cook back home. Nearly every house in her village had been erected with a built-in pigeon loft in the rafters. The birds were seldom fed and flew off at dawn to forage for food in the surrounding countryside, and when they returned to roost they were easily accessible for the cull.

The sudden flurry of wings had alerted Bonzo, the Spaniel, and he came bounding to meet her, "Good gracious! Angela is back early. Hope nothing is wrong." Mrs. Davies walked through to the kitchen where she found her the centre of attraction.

The cook was scrutinizing the exquisitely embroidered collar and stepped back to allow her mistress a closer look. "What a beautiful dress, Angela."

"My *Tia* Cristina, she make."

"Do you mean the blacksmith's wife?"

"*Si, Si Señora.*"

"You must look after it, it's so beautifully done." She smiled and walked back to join her husband who was for ever singing the praises of the capable blacksmith. Now she would recruit the services of his equally talented wife.

The Smashed Window

Nico was not one of the brightest boys in school but his parents were content in the knowledge that he appeared to be endowed with an abundance of commonsense, and not easily led by the few hotheads who sought his company. Apart from the time when he was accused of throwing a piece of rock through a large expanse of plate glass, he had given them little cause for concern.

The Bobby had been sent for by the irate shopkeeper, who had forcibly restrained a witness from scampering away from the scene of devastation. Some glass littered the pavement but the bulk had shattered over the display of hardware, so fastidiously arranged along narrow tiered shelves which formed a pyramid structure.

The shopkeeper charged out of his shop on seeing the Policeman. "Look! There he is, there he is." The Bobby turned in the direction of the accusing finger and looked in astonishment at the tiny tearful child being led across the road towards him, and glanced down at the stout irons which encased the spindly legs. Nico's mother was about to make her apologies, when he suddenly walked over to inspect the lump of rock which lay under the splintered glass.

He then turned angrily on the shopkeeper. "Do you mean to tell me, Dai Owen, that you are accusing that little lad of hurling this rock? Good Lord, man, he couldn't even lift it."

"I saw him. I saw him do it. I was passing the shop when I saw him."

"Oh! it's you again." He looked down with suspicion at the, hitherto, reluctant witness, whose house he had visited the previous day on receiving a complaint from Lloyd the Milk. The milkman had started off on his daily journey along the narrow lane which linked his farm with the village, when his milk cart struck a boulder. It was part of the dry wall which lined the lane on either side. He got down to replace it, believing it had been dislodged by a clambering sheep, and trotted his mare to the next bend, but was forced to rein sharply. The black mare reeled up, and her front hoofs crashed down on a pile of

sandstone. The furious farmer managed to back the startled beast to the nearest gateway, and was forced to make a three mile detour before making his first call. The Bobby's enquiries revealed that a gang of youths had been playing at being miners, using stout sticks to lever out the imaginary coal. He could hardly believe his good fortune in rounding up the offenders so speedily. He had walked up to the first known delinquent he met, and grabbed him gruffly by the shoulder. The frightened boy denied his involvement but readily volunteered names and addresses of the culprits.

The urchin before him continued to screech out his persistent accusation at the terrified Nico, and the Bobby recalled the interview he had with his abusive parents who were the only ones who did not reprimand their erring offspring. The others chastised them with their buckled belts before sending them out to clear the obstruction they had created.

"Hold on now. Steady on, boy *bach*." The Bobby placed his hand on the boy's head in an attempt to calm him. "Now then, boy *bach*, tell me exactly where he was standing when he threw the rock."

He ran into the middle of the road and stamped his foot to indicate the spot. Nico's mother smiled with relief and felt ashamed for doubting her son's word, and the shopkeeper knew instantly that he would have to seek recompense elsewhere. The Bobby lifted Nico high into the air and examined the irons.

"Without all this wretched weight holding you down I'm sure you'd blow away." He then turned to question further the witness, but he had vanished.

The Mighty Oak

Cristina raised her arms in despair. She had turned away yet another bad payer, but had learned from bitter experience that she could not afford to be taken in by every sob story. Since being allowed to convert the parlour into a shop she had devoted more time to selling haberdashery than to her dressmaking. "Why, oh why can't people live more orderly lives?" The men were in full employment, yet the women had to skimp and lie brazenly to beg credit. The Inns were doing a roaring trade and she suspected that many dominant miners deliberately kept their wives short to satisfy their own gluttonous greed for drink.

She had, however, recently and unexpectedly received payment in kind for a debt incurred for which she only could be blamed. As the woman had been so pathetically helpless, she had taken it upon herself to take her sadly neglected child under her wing, and not charge a penny for clothing her. She had known full well that there would be little or no likelihood of ever recovering any payment for the goods supplied to the mother.

Nico was awakened by a voice in the street below. "That you, Victor? Sorry to wake you up but we're moving right away from this cursed valley. I've left you a couple of sows which will help pay off some of my wife's debt. Thank your missus, bless her, for all she's done." Nico peered out of the window and saw him climb back on to the donkey cart to sit beside his wife. In the faint moonlight he could see two legs dangling over the back of the cart. He guessed it was little Fiona who was such a pretty, cheerful girl.

As he was jumping back into bed his father entered the room. "You awake, Nico? Could do with your help tonight." He was up and dressed in a wink.

"How exciting life was." His father was anxious to get hold of the pigs before other creditors got there first. Father and son walked to the end of the deserted village and then climbed the steep track to a pair of tumbledown cottages in a small thicket. One had remained empty for

years, as no self respecting family would live next door to such an evil smelling hovel.

Curiosity took them through the open door. “*Dios mio!* What a way to live. Surely the pigsty can’t be worse. Can’t understand why your mother does business with such people.”

They walked through the back door, which had the bottom gnawed off, and into the garden which looked like a ploughed field where the starving pigs had been rooting for food with their powerful snouts. “What a mess. What a mess,” repeated the father as they walked ankle deep in mud. The pigs heard them and rose expectantly from their sleeping quarters, which were reasonably clean, and the dry fern bedding was freshly harvested. “Not many a pig will soil his own bed, Nico. We’ve got a couple of greyhounds here,” feeling their scaly backs. “Let’s get away from this filthy hole.” He spat into the air and then produced two lengths of rope from his pocket. He climbed over the gate of the sty and succeeded in tying one hind leg. “Here, hold this one while I tie the other sow, which, as she could not smell food had ambled back, snorting loudly. Before opening the gate, he cut two sticks from the hedge and handed one to his son. “Right, we’re off.” He led the way, guiding his by tapping it lightly on one ear and then the other. Nico crashed into a bucket and the familiar sound set the two sows squeeling for food. Nico’s tore off towards the cottage, dragging him along on his tummy. “Hold on. Hold on,” called out his father, but she had stopped abruptly at the cottage door. Nico wiped his eyes with his sleeve and spat out a mouthful of filth.

They skirted the silent village, not wishing to pass the Bobby’s house. There was a light in their kitchen and Nico could see his mother trying to peer out into the darkness. “They’ll have to spend the night with the chickens until I build a sty.” Nico ran up to the house, leaving his father to try to satisfy their hunger with chicken food. Luckily, he had that day boiled a drum of potatoes, which he mashed down and mixed with grain.

“Get out, get out, and take off your clothes out there in the yard.

I'll bring you hot water," but she did not trust her son to wash himself properly and scrubbed his head and stuck her soapy fingers into his ears, and gave him a gruelling time before allowing him indoors.

Saturday was always a busy day at the shop and Cristina wished she could do more business during the rest of the week. She now had a little capital and was impatient to expand, even if it meant risking extended credit. Through trial and error she had been able to sort out the good, the bad, and the indifferent, and devised a scheme whereby her good paying customers would be allowed to take away goods without making an initial payment, and trust them to bring in a fixed amount each week. The very doubtful would be allowed goods only to the value of the money already deposited in advance, which Nico would collect from their homes each pay day. The system worked well and she received many enquiries from the neighbouring villages, but few were able to travel so far with their weekly payments. It grieved her to miss so much business and discussed her problem one evening with her husband.

He recalled that some months earlier, two women from the next street had approached her with the view to teaching their two teenage daughters dressmaking. "I know you said at the time that you were too busy," he began, "but if you can find time to teach these girls to sew, they will not only be able to collect in the villages but also help in the shop."

She looked up quickly, having not expected more than a grunt or two of consolation, and he had come up with the obvious solution. "*Excelente!*" she said gleefully, kissing the top of his bushy head.

Next morning, as she was working with extra care on a special order from the big house, she saw the doctor pass the window on his daily walk. The tall young Irishman was strolling along, pipe in hand, with his two Red Setters panting noisily at his heel, when he stopped to watch some children at play in the street. "Be sure now, it can't be little Nico." Rickets were rife among the impoverished youngsters, but none had legs so frail, and it was feared that they would never develop

strongly enough to support him unaided. The magnificent dogs were impatient for their unrestricted romp in the meadow beyond, but he called them back sharply and made them sit outside the shop. He pushed open the door, and the through draught lifted the flimsy paper patterns off the table.

“Shut that blessed door.” Cristina looked up from her sewing and apologised humbly. “Thought it was my Nico.”

“Now, he’s the little fella I be wanting to see.”

She went to the door and called his name three times before he heard her above the din. “Look at him, he’s wringing wet.” She wiped his face and sat him on the table. With some difficulty the doctor removed the forged supports and eased his weight gently as he stood him on the slab floor, and helped him around the room a few times. He then stood back and watched him take his first hesitant steps unaided by the heavy supports.

“’Tis a miracle, woman. Now take these back to the mighty blacksmith,” as he handed her the irons.

“*Gracias a Dios.*” She thanked him, the tears flowing freely as she hugged her son.

“We’ll surprise Papa when he comes home from work.” She took him by the hand and walked him slowly to the corner of the street. All who saw him without the hideous irons beamed with delight, and the neighbours kissed and hugged him. He instinctively tried to rush forward to meet his father but his mother held him back. “You’ll have plenty of time for that, *chicito.*” When Victoriano saw his son, he ran and hoisted him on his shoulders. A group of young Spanish miners whooped with joy and, linking hands, they danced around the pair, their happy smiles sparkling through coal-black faces, and they almost pulled Cristina off her feet as they dragged her into the merry circle.

During the weeks and months that followed, Victoriano devoted every spare minute to his son’s full recovery. He would take him up the mountain each day and was always right behind him when he scaled

the rock surface or climbed the many stone walls, which penned in the sheep. One day he called him into the smithy to show him his latest invention. He had by-passed the heavy bellows and had inserted a fan direct to the furnace and which was operated by pedalling an old bicycle frame. "Now you can build up your muscles and help me at the same time," he chuckled as he lifted him on to the saddle.

Nico threw himself whole heartedly into all sport. It was as if he had so much lost time to make up. He would run everywhere, usually kicking a ball before him, but it was his passion for tree climbing which almost ruined his steady progress. He had persuaded Tommy to climb the high wall surrounding Major Gilbert's vast estate, in search of conkers. Both were high up in the tree when they heard voices below. They kept perfectly still, hoping not to be seen on the leafy branch. "I know you're up there. Come down this minute. I'll count to ten." They could not see him but recognised the posh English voice of Sinclair, the Major's son. They still clung on, and on the count of ten, there was a loud crack of a rifle and Nico fell screaming, his head striking the bough below and his body jolting from branch to branch before landing with a thud at the feet of the Gilbert children, his leg twisted beneath him.

"You fool, you stupid, stupid fool! I didn't think you'd be so mad as to fire." Little Babs yelled at her brother, "You've killed him, you've killed him," and she ran off towards their grand house.

When Tommy dropped to the ground he was horrified to see Nico prostrate and bleeding profusely from a cut on his forehead. "You maniac. You crazy maniac!" He wrenched the gun from him and, aiming it at the ashen, stupefied face before him, pulled the trigger but, mercifully, it contained only the spent four-ten cartridge. He then grasped the barrel and swung the gun repeatedly as he screamed abuse at the top of his voice, but the young lad was in a state of shock and did not attempt to defend himself. He backed away, his oversized wellington boots slipping on the dewy grass. In his fawn knee breeches and velvet waistcoat he would have portrayed a

humorous picture of a Country Squire in miniature had it not been for the lethal weapon entrusted to him.

“Stop it. Stop it this instant, Tommy Morris.” The bustling Mrs Powell, the cook, got to them first, her hands still floury, and tore the gun from the hysterical boy and threw it into the bushes. Nico started to groan and she took off her white starched apron and pressed it tightly against his head. “Thank God Miss Barbara was mistaken.”

Old Ned, the gardener, covered him with his jacket and felt carefully along the skinny leg and eased it from under him. “Can’t feel anything broken. Best to wait though.”

The Doctor and the Bobby were hurrying down the grassy slope, and when the boy opened his eyes and stared at them, the Doctor flew into action. He examined him thoroughly and then looked up and grinned, “Sure now, the little fella’s just fine. Soon have those pellets out of your bottom, back at the surgery.”

The Bobby lifted Nico and carried him to the Doctor’s car, while Sinclair ran alongside explaining how he had fired at the trunk of the tree just to frighten the boys. “Must have ricocheted. I can offer no other explanation. Indeed I can’t.” Tommy, satisfied that his friend was alright, scaled the wall and dropped out of sight and made off to break the news to Nico’s parents.

Nico had to spend the next two weeks away from school. The pellets had penetrated deeply and he had to eat his meals kneeling on his chair. His mother often grumbled at him for getting under her feet and persuaded him to stay in bed until mid-day each day. She would make him scrub his hands before allowing him to touch the books she took from the shop, and when he had finished reading them they were returned to the shelf. On the previous Christmas, she had set out a corner of the shop as a colourful toy bazaar, an experiment which proved very successful. It did not now worry her that so few story books were sold, as Nico was making it his business to find out the birthdays of all his school mates, and between them put pressure

on the parents when he called with a selection on the pay day before.

He was stretched out on his tummy reading in bed one day when he heard such a rumpus downstairs that he feared for his mother's sanity, as he had never known her so agitated and shout so loudly. He dared not go downstairs and it was sometime before he learned why his father was home so early.

The blacksmith shop at the colliery had been filling with smoke as the westerly wind dipped as it passed over the towering tree at the rear, which was far too close to the red bricked chimney stack. His father had stood outside the door, his eyes streaming. "Enough is enough," he coughed, and picked up a huge axe and drove it deep into the base of the trunk.

He had been to the office many times to complain but with little response. "Yes, yes," they would say, "leave it with us."

Having once lived in a stony, hilly woodland, he wielded the axe long before he learned his skill with the hammer. Hefty white chunks leapt out fast and furious from the gaping, widening chasm as he swung the axe with a rhythmic movement, and with an ease borne of long practice. The onslaught continued undetected until an ear splitting crack brought an Official running to investigate. He stared at the fallen oak as if mesmerised. His mouth opened and closed but no sound came, and he sped in the direction of the Managers office.

"You, you, you," spluttered the Under-Manager, raising his walking stick threateningly. He could have thought of a dozen choice words in Welsh, but for the moment even one in English escaped him. "You're sacked," he finally roared, pointing to the Work's exit.

It had been a desperately worried man who confronted his wife that mid-morning. She had listened speechless and he had been lulled into believing that her momentary silence had signalled an easing of tension, and as he sank dejected on to the sofa he quickly jumped up again, startled by her sudden hysterical outburst.

"What are we going to do?" she wailed. "They'll throw us out into

the street. What possessed you to do such a stupid thing?"

Nico felt sad and helpless and stayed in bed rather than risk his mother's wrath, covering his head with his blankets to shut out the misery. He lay huddled there, his mind in a turmoil, when a sharp rap on the back door made him fling back the bedclothes and jump out of bed. He recognised the voice of Thomas the Clerk and crawled out on to the landing to listen.

"Will your husband report to the Main Office tomorrow morning at eight o'clock." He would have delivered the message and left had he not seen the look of panic in her eyes. "Don't you be fretting yourself now." He could not let these good people spend a night of anguish, and accepted a chair by the fire. Carefully he explained the Management's verdict. "This is in the strictest confidence, mind you, but you are not sacked, Victor. They've fined you £15, and I have been instructed to dock you ten shillings a week until it is settled. Now don't let on you know or I'll be the one who'll be getting the sack." They both thanked him and Victoriano embraced him, unable to stem the tears of relief.

The moment Nico heard the door close he dashed downstairs and flung himself into his father's outstretched arms. "Now we can all sleep," and carried his son back to bed.

The Frenzied Geese

Business was booming, yet Cristina was furious. One of her apprentices, the giggly one, had got herself pregnant and was being secretly shipped off to her Auntie Olwen. "There's only one thing for it, Nico. You'll have to do her round, starting Saturday."

"Can't I do it Friday night, Mama? I'm playing cricket for the school on Saturday."

"You and your silly cricket. Now, mind Mrs. Quick's window this time." They were being allowed to play on Major Gilbert's private field, and the last time he played there he hooked a ball through the window of a cottage on the main road. He often wished he could master the stylish off strokes with as much ease, but almost his entire cricketing practice was done on a narrow strip of waste land near his house, and to the right of the stumps were the greenhouses of a fanatical gardener. A neighbouring miner, prematurely retired with severe broncho, would spend endless hours to relieve the boredom, teaching him to bat. He consequently took up the perfect stance at the wicket and played the straight bat with impeccable precision but, regretfully, every off ball had to be smothered in the interest of old Jacko's prize chrysanths. He envied his class mate, Elwyn, who could cut the ball to the boundary with a mere flick of the wrist.

Cristina asked her son to empty his pockets and she examined the linings before handing him some loose change. "It's a wonder they're not in shreds with all this junk. Now, try walking for a change or you'll leave a trail of money behind you." She watched him from the door and knew he would not turn to wave as he strode proudly out of sight.

It was a three mile walk to the first call and he was now in sight of the farm cottage. The first couple of miles had been a lonely steepish climb, his only company a flock of sheep which he had seen leap the barbed wire fence on which much of their fleece remained blowing gently in the breeze. On his right he had passed a derelict colliery, discarded long past, its deep shafts now completely flooded. He had

glanced over at a newly erected circular fence and had turned his head away quickly. "Poor Dickie." He had spoken aloud and in anger. It had taken the loss of a young life to instil some urgency into the Authority. Nico plodded on, his eyes fixed straight ahead, and for a brief moment a vivid recollection startled him and, clutching the pocket which held the money, he began to run across the stretch of reed covered waste land separating the road from the cottage. He tried to block out the memory of that desolate pit head. The rows of gaunt buildings stripped of doors and corrugated iron, the bulk of which had been used in the construction of the many pig-sties and chicken sheds in the village, or wrenched away in gales to clatter noisily along the miles of twisting tram rails. He stopped running and shut his eyes tightly to see more clearly the picture embedded in his mind, and scrutinized each detail of the alert, expressive features he had known so well. The hair lay flat and straight, apart for a tuft above the forehead which seemed to resent such conformity and stand rigid before resuming its normal course, giving him an even more impish look. He felt suddenly morose and started to run again, and was nearing the cottage when he heard a strange rustling and loud hissing coming from a reed thicket some distance away. The reeds shook and swayed as if caught up in a whirlwind, and out of the blackness of the dense reeds emerged a white torrent of seething rage. There must have been at least fifty geese, their necks stretched menacingly and their powerful wings beating up the moisture from the marsh land, almost engulfing them in a sea of spray. He stood paralysed and gaped in horror as they bore down, their quivering tongues spitting forth venom of hatred. He closed his eyes and slumped to his knees as the first bird was upon him. He felt a sharp slap across the back of his head and was sent sprawling, and it seemed as if a thousand feet were stamping his face deeper and deeper into the soft squelching moss.

The deafening wails and flapping reached its crescendo for barely a second or two before petering out like the tail of a tornado.

Nico, his whole body shaking uncontrollably, managed to raise his head just in time to realize the true reason for the terrifying onslaught. A small dog was pressing itself tightly against a stout gate, now latched shut against marauding mountain ponies. The scared puppy squeezed its head between the wooden bars and yelped in panic, its fluffy neck craned towards the cottage door. The frenzied geese now bent on avenging weeks of yapping and snarling of the elusive tormentor, having seen him wandering alone without the protection of his burly master and his lethal stick, rallied in unison for the attack. The speed and ferocity sent them sliding and slithering against the wire fence, bending it over under their sheer weight and snapping off the thinnest stakes; yet above the uproar could be heard the small animal's piteous squeals.

Nico scrambled to his feet and rushed forward with hands flaying and feet flying and tried to beat a path through the solid feathered mass of fiendish fury. One massive gander had its yellow beak embedded in the throat of the luckless animal and was shaking it as a terrier would a rat. Nico was yelling in a vain effort to make it drop its prey when the cottage door swung open, and Mr. Perry came running down the path, his ash stick held high. A few vicious lashes soon quelled their murderous intent, and as they turned away Nico saw with dismay the still, almost lifeless form, in the mud before him.

"Better put him out of his misery." The big man picked up the dog by the hind legs and was about to smash its skull against the gate post when Nico screamed out.

"No, no, Mr. Perry. Please don't." By this time his wife was at his side, and on seeing the look of despair on the boy's face, raised her hand to restrain her husband.

"No good to anyone. Never has been. Just a bloody throwback!" Nico did not know what he meant, nor did he care. He took the pup and held it tenderly to him. "Give him here to me *bach*, and come indoors for me to clean you both up." She poured a kettle into the sink

and very gently smoothed away the grime, and with equal care stroked him ceaselessly with a towel before wrapping him warmly in a strip of red flannel. "Nothing broken, just fright it is, *bach*. Be right in no time."

"Can I have him?"

"Of course you can, my *cariad*, but what will your Mam say? Better ask her first before your walk in with a strange dog."

"It'll be alright, Mrs. Perry. I've been promised a dog," lied Nico.

"Sit yourself down while I make you a cup of tea."

"Thanks all the same. Mrs. Perry, but I must be off. This is only my first call. Can I pick him up on my way home?"

"Certainly, he's sure to be right by then. Look, he's trying to get out of the box."

Nico hurried from call to call until he came to Tin Town, as Marion called it. The tiny bungalows were made of corrugated iron, some painted with green and others with red oxide. He had heard her say how, when it rained, you could not hear yourself speak. He hesitated at the gate. This was the one, she had warned, with the evil tempered monster. The back door was open and he called out "Anyone at home?"

"No, not for the likes of you, you thieving little toad."

"Leave the boy alone. Come right inside, Nico."

He was a gruff, sullen man with heavy features, topped with black eyebrows, which were much blacker than his greying beard, and which seemed to bristle as he glared at the frightened boy.

"Fetch Nico a cup. The teapot is still warm," feeling it with her hand.

"No thanks. I'm late already," but there was no escape as there was no card or money in sight. He watched the man go into the scullery and look in a bowl of dirty dishes, he then took one off the top shelf of the dresser. To Nico's disgust he tipped out a set of false teeth into the palm of his hand and handed her the cup without even a

rinse. She poured out the tea, chatting merrily, and asked what had happened to Marion, but Nico did not hear a word she said, so intent was he in thinking out a way to avoid the revolting drink. "Can hear a whimpering outside. Think my dog has followed me." He was out in the yard in a jiff, the tea safely poured into the ash bucket. "No, not mine. It's a black one."

"I'll shoot that little pest if I see him skulking around here again. That Mat the Post must be starving that animal."

He was not sure where the next call was and so he stopped a young mother who was dragging along her rebellious infant, whose head was smothered in a mass of multi-coloured strips of knotted rags. She pointed it out to him. "I hope its good legs you've got, *cariad*," and grinned, and even the child forgot her tantrum and her eyes sparkled. Nico was puzzled as he climbed the long winding path to the tiniest house he had ever seen.

There was something about this call which he felt he should have remembered, but Marion had imparted so much information in such a short space of time. The dog heard him before he knocked and started to bark and snarl and claw at the door. "Be with you in a tick. I'll just lock up my little doggy." It did not sound so little, and he was worried for the old lady's safety as the bad tempered snarls grew louder until an inner door slammed shut. He heard her hobble to let him in and she looked pale and fatigued from her exertion.

She sat and rested a while before fetching the card, but once she had paid him she seemed anxious to get the boy out of the house as quickly as she could. Nico felt hurt by the sudden rebuff, and was less than half way down the path, feeling a little dejected, when he heard her call out, "Run, boy *bach*, run." He needed no second bidding, as a fat waddling corgi was making straight for him across the lawn and through the flower beds, and was almost upon him. There was no warning bark but a glazed look of wild resolution. Nico got to the gate and slammed it shut in the nick of time, when he suddenly remembered Marion's indignant words of protest.

“Sorry, Marion, she said to me. Sorry I let my little doggy out, but it’s the only exercise he gets, poor dab. It’s my rheumatics, you see. I can’t take him out for walks like I used to.” He looked up at the house and saw her on the step smiling sweetly and waving serenely as if she had let out nothing more vicious than her tabby cat, which stood at her feet with its neck stretching up like a zealous spectator taking delight in a thrilling spectacle.

Nico squeezed past the nettles and long briars which almost hid the path to his last call. He had often seen the bedraggled woman at the shop and knew she was yet another of his mother’s lame ducks. Although she had little sympathy for the parents who choose to live in squalor, she would try to help maintain the dignity of the children by replacing their rags with neat, clean school attire, which she made from an assortment of oddments, as there was little prospect of payment. “Just take what the poor wretch offers you.”

He picked his way through the debris blocking the back door and recognized his old tricycle, now red with rust, and minus the front wheel and saddle. He tapped the door with a penny and it seemed ages before he heard the bolt being drawn, obviously for the first time that day. “Hello, my *cariad*. Come on in.” Nico stepped back quickly as a noxious, misty swirl of putrid air escaped from the room, engulfing him like a foul, clammy blanket. A dog pushed past, growling feebly, and made with much urgency for a black currant bush across the yard. Nico fussed him to allow time for the stiff breeze to flush out the abominable smell.

“Where are you? Come on in and shut the door.” He tried to hold his breath, but a whiff of ammoniated fumes from a sodden mattress propped against a make-shift fireguard, sent his head reeling. He could not believe his eyes. It seemed as if every packet or tin ever opened had been tossed behind the greasy sofa. A filthy naked toddler clung wailing to her mother’s skirt and was dragged along as the woman carried a rickety chair across the room. It creaked and swayed dangerously as she reached for a dirty jam jar on a high shelf. She had

difficulty in shaking out the coin, eventually handing Nico the sticky shilling. "Fell out of my Dan's pocket, it did," she said with an almost toothless grin. "Gone off, he has, over to Banwen. Yes, gone off with the boys to their Gran's for a few days." She then shook the child. "Pest! Pest! Pest! Should have gone with your Dad, you should." She lifted her screaming offspring aloft before plonking her bare bottom down heavily on a loaf of bread in the middle of the cluttered table. The crying stopped suddenly as the child plunged her grubby fingers deep into a pan of rancid grease. There were clean streaks down her grimy legs and Nico eyed with disgust the saturated straw protruding from the revolting stained mattress. The tiny metal windows, sealed tight with rust, could not admit a breath of air and his face turned a deathly white as he bolted for the door, overcome by the nauseating stench wafted towards him by a sudden down-draught in the chimney, and only just made it to the yard before heaving his heart up. He looked up through streaming eyes and was surprised to see that the old collie still had its leg cocked against the bush, and as Nico was about to run past, he flopped over on his side and, with a hind leg pointing skywards, continued to jet-spray the lower branches as he gazed up with a bleary eye.

All the money was safely collected, so Nico hurried to the remote stone cottage, holding his weighty pockets. "I've given him a bath and he's as pretty as ever." Mr. Perry sniggered as Nico took possession of his new pet. Should he show his mother the full order book before the dog? He knew what she thought of dogs and cats, and as he neared home his fears grew.

The oil lamp had been taken through to the middle room, where Cristina sat sewing, but she heard him in the kitchen. "What are you doing out there in the dark? Come in here so that I can see you."

"Fraid, Mama." She got up, puzzled by his remark and saw him clutching the strange looking dog, which barely stirred as if he could sense the fear within his new master.

"Whose creature is that?"

“Mine, Mama,” and blurted out the whole story.

“Now calm yourself. Calm yourself.” She put her arm around Nico’s shoulder to comfort him. “We’ll see what Papa says. Hope he’ll be a good ratter as we’ve been plagued with them since we had the pigs.” She looked more closely. “I’ll have to take my scissors to this long mane over his eyes or he won’t find the sty let alone the rats. You must admit, Nicolas, he does look a funny little fellow with a head like a lion. Let’s hope he’s got the heart of one. Yes, I think Leon would be a good name for your hairy friend.” He smiled through his tears and gave his mother a hug.

Nico and Leon became almost inseparable. Uncannily, at the same time each day the dog would run off to meet Nico from school, and would be seen trotting along the top of the high wall surrounding the school until he overlooked the classroom, where he would sit patiently with his head on his paws and his eyes fixed on his master. At first there was much merriment and the teacher threatened to send him away if the children continued to be distracted, but soon all looked upon him as a reliable time piece and the ones at the back of the class would start quietly to clear their desks.

Whenever Nico arrived home from school there were always errands for them both to run, and the villagers marvelled at the speed of the lad who, not so very long ago, had been the object of their pity. One day Nico’s mother met him on the doorstep. “Quick, Nico. Take this food up to your father. God knows when we’ll see him tonight, and take Leon with you. You know how he likes to see him leap up on his shoulder.”

“Where’s he working, Mama?”

“How do I know. In a pool of oil by the look of his clothes.”

He had not told her of his father’s frightening encounter with the Ostler. A few days earlier he had been on his way with a can of coffee and some bacon butties, when he heard a commotion at the far end of the stables. He had walked between the two long rows of restless, stamping hoofs and peered through the hinged end of the partly

opened door, and had watched aghast at the savage thrashing being inflicted on Nelson, his favourite pit pony. Each time the thick rope was brought down viciously, the pony would squeal like a pig and kick his hind legs high in the air, which angered the Ostler even more.

“*Bastante! Bastante!*” Through the narrow slit he saw his father walk over and try to restrain the Ostler. “Enough! Enough!”, this time in English.

“Get back, you bloody foreigner,” screamed the Ostler and raised the rope to strike the blacksmith, who jabbed the head of his hammer into the pit of his attacker’s stomach, winding him and making him release his grip on the poor animal. Before galloping off, the animal bucked and gave a final kick, a hoof glancing off the side of the Ostler’s head, spinning him around to land flat on his face. Nico watched as his father took hold of the back of the Ostler’s shirt and wide leather belt, and toss him into a heap of steaming manure.

Nico ran back through the stable and completed the journey along the colliery road. His father thanked him, not showing the slightest sign of having been involved in a scene which haunted Nico for months to come.

The Wedding

At long last it was the day of the wedding. Nico's mother had talked of little else for weeks and her customers took second place as she worked and fussed over the clothes they would wear. Two charabancs were ordered to take the Spanish, and also the small Portuguese community, the six miles to the church, and then on to the reception at the Miners' hall.

Nico looked on in amazement, at not only his parents' transformation, but that of all the others. He had to look twice to make sure they were one and the same, and wondered where such elegant garments could be stored away in such humble abodes.

Sarah looked radiant and more Spanish than many of the Spaniards. She scarcely took her eyes off her enchanting husband who was overwhelmed with all the affection bestowed by his many Welsh friends, who had taken him to their hearts. Gregorio's Spanish friends listened in wonder as he rose to make a speech in both Welsh and Spanish, and almost broke down under so much emotion. Nico had seen so much strife and bitterness in his short life and rejoiced to see two people, once an ocean apart, be solemnly joined together.

The long trestle tables were draped in shiny well-ironed white sheets. Plates of coloured glaze were heaped high with a variety of meats and sugary deserts. An abundance of wine was evenly distributed along the tables in green uncorked bottles and small oak barrels, replicas of the octaves in the bodegas, each nestling in its own carved stand.

When all the kissing and speeches were over, the guests tucked in ravenously, and the Welsh folk drank excessively to wash down the spicy food. When their heads were reeling with the strong wine, they joined in with the stamping and clapping to the lively music. The Spanish musicians struck up the opening bars of a *paso doble* and Nico was surprised to see his parents being dragged protesting to the centre of the hall. His father, poised erect, his tight black sash exaggerating an enormous expanse of chest, almost bursting out of

his frilled shirt, looked down haughtily as his strong wrists steered his wife with amazing grace to trip daintily to and fro. He knew his father could strum a guitar with the best of them, and he and his mother often joined in to sing the many humorous ditties, but never had he envisaged them in such a youthful and glamorous role. His father seemed unfatigued, his part requiring far less physical exertion than that of his partner, who dipped and swerved and pivoted like a puppet superbly controlled. “Bravo! Bravo!” The dance over, she collapsed into the nearest chair, fanning her flushed but happy face.

“Lovely, lovely it was. Never seen such a lovely dance”. The mother of the bride kissed and hugged her. “I’ll fetch you a drink, my lovely. Yes, lovely it was.”

That night of celebration was a night to remember, when the Welsh and Spanish language combined to orchestrate a deafening unified babble of joyous benevolence and comradeship. “Steady Dai.” One of the drivers had missed his footing as he climbed up into his cab. “Talk about knocking ’em back. There’s enough in his guts to float a ship.” He was lifted high by unsteady hands, and his head crashed against the metal roof. The charabanc chugged away amid cheers from the Welsh contingent who continued to wave until it swayed out of sight over Tawe Bridge.

Apples and Snails

Nico heard his mother come down the garden path, calling his name. "Quick! Hide the saucepan." He hurriedly smothered the fire before rushing out to intercept her. "Where have you been all day?" He met her a few yards from the door of the blacksmith shop and tried to dodge past to lure her away, but she grabbed him by his jersey which stretched a foot or so before he was dragged back. "What are you up to, and why is the furnace on?" She pushed him into the forge, and through the dense smoke saw four pairs of startled eyes focussed on her. One little lad was crouching over the steaming saucepan behind the anvil and, believing him to be on fire, she grabbed an empty meal bag and rushed towards him. The frightened boy bolted for the door, but Nico slammed it shut, missing his nose by inches.

"No use running, Alun, we're all nabbed."

"You wicked thieves. Don't you ever learn?" She was referring to the time when the Spanish miners downed tools until one of their colleagues was reinstated. One of the mine owners had caught a Spanish boy, Luis, in his orchard and took it upon himself to set an example by sacking the boy's father. Although a dozen or so boys were involved in the raid, all but Luis heeded the warning of the barking and baying advancing dogs. Thinking he had no time to escape, he dropped from the tree onto the roof of a chicken shed and then into the rain-water butt which stood on two brick piers alongside. He sank into the slimy mass of evil smelling decayed leaves in the stagnant water, and, in spite of his discomfort, felt reasonably secure.

The dogs tore around the shed like a raging whirlwind and a fox-hound took a flying leap at the top of the barrel and hung there, his front legs hooked over the rim. He felt the dog's hot breath, and the flashing gleaming white fangs gnashed within an inch of his ear. There was a sharp crack of a whip and the hound yelped painfully and dropped to the ground. A few more cracks partly silenced the array of breeds which skulked and whined just out of range. Luis was now panic stricken, his puny form quivering with cold and fright as

the booming voice drew nearer. "Down Mandy! Down Carlo!" A sharp swipe across his head dazed him and he slumped beneath the surface. A fat hand groped in the sludge and took a firm grip on the squelching mop of hair and dangled him above the snarling beasts. He screamed and kicked, then writhed and twisted convulsively. There was a final spasm and the terrifying ordeal was momentarily over as the limp form was carried through the orchard.

Nico pulled out the bag of apples from under the work bench, and although they were slightly coloured, his mother recognised them instantly as cookers from their neighbour's garden. She picked up an empty bag and glared at her son. "No, it's not Nico's. I got the sugar from home," confessed Alun. "The apples were sour and so we stewed them ."

She then turned angrily on her son. "I hope, for your sake, that *El Cojo* did not see you as I want you to go and ask if you can look for snails in his garden wall."

Nico's face turned scarlet, and then realised, thankfully that she had spoken in Spanish. The word snail made him cringe, as barely a week had passed since his teacher, whose crippled uncle lived next door, had been discussing French food and customs. It had been one of her rare informative chats, when the whole class was relaxed and joined in the discussion. She suddenly pursed her lips, squared her shoulders and glared at the babbling pair at the back of the classroom. They stopped their chatter and sat bolt upright, their arms folded tightly and looking a picture of innocence. Fortunately for them, they had kept a wary eye on the teacher as they had learned from bitter experience the outcome of such a posture. She would stand rigidly for a minute or so, her neck getting redder and redder and, as if something snapped inside her, would explode into a torrent of rage, throwing chinks, books and anything that she could lay her hands on, and when the supply of missiles was exhausted, would rush up and shake the victims until their teeth could be heard clattering. Her composure, on this occasion, had been quickly restored and she beamed at her

favourite few before resuming her snippets of information. “Did you know,” she continued, surveying the class with an air of superiority, “that the French eat snails and frogs’ legs?”

“*Uch a fi!* You are not joking are you, Miss?” Only a teacher’s pet would have dared speak out in class. Nico had shrunk down in his desk and prayed that the other Spaniards in the class would remain silent, as most had accompanied their parents to the monthly gathering at his home to savour a meal of snails in rich spiced red sauce with wine. His father had insisted on this get-together with his closest friends and his mother had reluctantly agreed.

Bronwen curled her lip and tossed her golden ringlets as she jerked her head around to convey to the class her disgust. She continued to wrinkle her nose and display her goofy teeth long after Miss Lewis had moved on to another subject, the one of humour. “We, in this tiny island, have a different sense of humour to that of, say the French or the Germans. Oh, and the Americans. We mustn’t forget the Americans. If, for instance, I said to poor Yanto Peg that he did not have a leg to stand on, that would be sick humour. Trust you to laugh, Gwyn Williams. I’ve always suspected that you have a sick sense of humour. If not sick, it’s certainly twisted.” The class was soon in an uproar as they laughed and jeered good humouredly at the school practical joker, whose humour was anything but sick.

“Please, Miss. Please, Miss.” Her pet’s screechy voice could be heard above the din.

“Quiet! Quiet all of you. What is it, Bronwen?”

“Please, Miss. I know a joke about Dewi the Shepherd.”

There were groans from the rest of the class. “No, not that one.” The joke had been circulating the classrooms for days, but the dim teacher’s pet had only that morning heard it.

“Well go on. Let’s hear it, Bronwen.”

“Please, Miss. If Dewi the Shepherd crossed one of his sheep with a kangaroo, what would he get?”

The teacher frowned her distaste, and then, uncharacteristically,

responded in the good old Music Hall fashion. "Tell us, Bronwen. What would he get if he crossed a sheep with a kangaroo?"

Please, Miss. A woolly jumper, Miss," and she squealed out in alarm clutching the back of her neck where an ink pellet had struck her.

The teacher stormed up to Tommy's desk. "Let me see your fingers" but his were clean; at least, clean of ink.

Nico's mother kept reminding him about the snails and he racked his brain for a way out. Tio, his arthritic uncle, had taken to his bed and the job of snail collecting had fallen to Nico. He had helped his mother gather up all the crude snail traps strewn around the garden. "This place is like a rubbish dump. There must surely be a tidier way." There were pieces of rusted corrugated iron and strips of decaying linoleum. In fact anything which his uncle thought would be an ideal hide-out for the snails, was propped up or laid out along the boundary hedge. He looked around the garden, now cleared of the unsightly debris, and remembered how it had looked before his uncle had come to live with them. Even with the clutter of old iron it was a great improvement to what it was then. To walk down to the blacksmith shop had been quite hazardous, especially in wet weather, as the pigs often had the run of the garden, and although they did not churn up the soil due to their ringed snouts, hardly a square yard was free of their foul litter. He and his friends had enjoyed many a ride on their backs. It had been easy enough to climb on, but the moment they felt the weight on their back, would buck like mules and race for the sty. There was now a neat herringbone brick path the entire length of the garden, with a row of gooseberry bushes on either side. When these were last picked, some over ripe fruit remained and he had watched fascinated as his dog rolled over on his back and very gingerly plucked them off from amongst the menacing thorns. Half way along the path, another of crazy paving branched off to a rustic seat snugly placed under a pergola, now smothered with a tiny pink rose. He and his friend, Tommy, had spent a day with Tio, plodding

the lanes and woods in search of suitably shaped wood. They had watched him make a start on the garden seat and wondered if he would ever finish it. It had been a slow and painful process with his disfigured fingers, but he somehow managed to hold the tools and chisel out the ends to recess into perfect joints.

“You’ll never finish it, Tio.” “Well, let me tell you something, little Nico. When people have admired my work, never once have they asked me how long have I taken.”

Apart from the roses which he tended lovingly, the only other flower which seemed to take his interest was the chrysanthemum, and Nico was surprised when his mother insisted that he grew them at the bottom of the garden. He learned later that when Tio’s sister and her husband, with whom he had lived in Dowlais, returned to Spain he went to lodge with a widow in the same street. She had been grief stricken and believed that her departed husband was ever present in the garden which he had loved, and she spent every hour of daylight tending it. The colourful, dazzling display would draw passers by to gaze admiringly over the garden wall. Tio had been particularly impressed with the large flowering chrysanthemums, especially the incurved variety. His orderly mind was drawn to the exquisite uniformity of the wax-like petals which, in his estimation, formed the perfect sphere, and he was soon learning all their fads and fancies in their skilful cultivation.

Tio’s life with Mrs. Tyler would have been so cosy and tranquil had it not been for the endless stream of children who scampered daily across the garden to retrieve a ball or do wilful damage to repay one whom they hated and feared. The moment he returned from work he would take up his paranoid vigil at the window, and if a ball came careering over he would dash out and carry it indoors amid yells of abuse and cat calls from over the wall. He would then return with a bucket of slops and drench the luckless few too slow to retreat.

Nico and his friends were not aware that the large bag of balls for which they had so excitedly awaited on Tio’s annual visit had caused

so much anguish and frustration. An example of his fiery temper was witnessed one day when he had been attending to his flowers. He would allow no more than three prize blooms to grow on each plant and had just completed disbudding the last row under the inquisitive eye of three year old Olwen from number four, when he heard his call for dinner and got creakingly up from his stool. He had barely sat down at the table when little Olwen danced in proudly displaying her pinafore pockets bulging with chrysanthemum buds. Tio's face had turned white with rage and he thumped the table with his arthritic hands until the crockery clattered.

During a game of football in the street, Nico seized an opportunity to hunt for snails when he saw the goalkeeper climb the neighbour's fence to retrieve the ball. "Come back. Come back, Trev. Can't you see the old man's in the garden? I'll go and ask him for it." He looked surprised but jumped down and watched Nico walk through the front gate. There was no reply to his knock and he wandered around the garden in search of Mr Lewis. He heard some rustling at the far side of the house and was horrified to see the formidable figure of his teacher, Miss Lewis, bending over a tangled mass of rambler rose which had blown off its supporting wires. He turned slowly and would have crept away had he not seen her uncle hobble towards him. "Excuse me, Miss," Nico started to say, and she swung round startled, tearing her finger on a thorn.

"What do you want, boy?" she almost shrieked, clutching her finger.

"My ball, Miss."

"You should not play in the street. What is wrong with Tip Meadow?" It was obvious that she had not been near the field at the foot of the tall slag heap. The fence had been flattened by huge boulders unloaded from the trams, and then the spillage encroached, gradually covering most of the meadow. If the Management had been approached, authority would probably have been given to redirect the rails to the east side of the tip where there were acres of marsh land,

but such was the timidity of many surface men that none would risk a confrontation, and so allowed the destruction of the only flat recreation area at that end of the village.

Nico walked away dejected. He had not reckoned on the old man's niece turning up. The garden was so vast and overgrown that he could have remained hidden to seek the snails that his mother so urgently needed, and the ball would have been his excuse for being there. "Where have you been, Nico?" A score or more boys now lined the fence and he threw the ball to them and joined in the game.

They had not been playing long when a squeaky voice piped up "Look out! Here comes the dragon." Nico looked up to see Miss Lewis climb the steps to the road, supporting her uncle's arm. He had donned his best overcoat with the velvet collar and they were both heading in the direction of her house on Station Hill.

Nico could not believe his good fortune and a bright idea struck him. He pounced on the ball and stopped the game. "Just remembered those chickens. I forgot to fetch the corn and they'll be cackling all night if they're not fed."

"What do you expect us to do about it, clever cloggs?"

"Let's give them a feed of snails, they love snails," and before they could question him further he had dashed indoors for a couple of buckets. "Come on, follow me. The old man's spending the night with the dragon. He told me so."

It did not take many moments to realize that his idea was not so bright as he watched them running about. Two were holding little bespectacled Emlyn Birch, while a third was stuffing snails down his back. He struggled free and almost stood on his head to shake out the crushed, gluey mess. A mucky swab of cotton wool was still stuck to the bridge of his nose but the wire spectacles were lost in the undergrowth. A race to pick the most was in progress at the bottom of the garden and part of the wall was demolished in their feverish endeavours. Nico looked anxiously up the road, and with a kick here and a sharp clout there, managed to restore a little sanity, and from

thence on there could be heard a constant clanking as the snails were tossed into the buckets.

He was about to call a halt when the podgy form of Tubby Owen crawled breathlessly through the long grass towards them. "He's back. He's back."

"Is the dragon with him?"

"Didn't see her." They all lay motionless until they heard the front door shut, and then there was a mad scramble to escape. Nico stayed long enough to scoop up some snails that had been spilled in the rush before he too disappeared through a hole in the hedge.

Kitchen Blaze

Tommy had been tossing his ball against the open kitchen door as he patiently waited for his friend to finish his chunk of bread and jam. "You no play inside house." The harassed woman had earlier been preparing an omelette for her son. She had sliced some leftover potatoes and was about to add them to the sizzling chopped bacon and onions when there was a loud knock on the front door. "*La Señora Bynon*," she gasped, and got to the door just as the silver topped cane was poised for a second rap. Before entering, the elegant white haired lady nodded to her chauffeur and the shiny black car glided away. "Sit down, *Señora*."

"I want you to make curtains for my kitchen, but first let me settle my bill."

Cristina's hand shook slightly as she opened the account book. The long awaited day of reckoning had arrived and she would soon be the possessor of another sewing machine. She placed the money safely at the back of the till and was reaching for a roll of curtaining when a dark shadow suddenly fell over it, robbing it of its warm, colourful hues. The huge car had been to the end of the street to turn and was now completely blocking the mid-day sun from entering the tiny shop window. She hesitated, and wondered if the roll above would be more suitable for a kitchen. She climbed onto a stool and was lifting it off, when a gust of black smoke seeped under the door.

"*Madre mia! La tortilla*." She almost fell off the stool and collided with her son.

"Mama! mama! the kitchen's on fire."

The old lady coughed as the shop filled with smoke and calmly rapped the window with her cane to beckon in her driver. Cristina tore down the burning towels and clothing airing on the brass mantelpiece rail, and would have grabbed the hot pan handle with her bare hands had she not been held back and pulled firmly away from the leaping flames. Samuel's bulky frame almost filled the kitchen as he stamped

on the burning rag mat, his highly polished gaiters reflecting the darting flames. A bucket of dusty slag coal had been set aside for banking the fire up at night, and he emptied this over the blazing pan, smothering the flames but filling the room with belching, choking smoke.

Nico started off for school, leaving his sobbing mother on hands and knees cleaning up the mess. As they were dribbling the ball along the lane, he missed a pass from Tommy and the ball bounced into the hedge. He slid down the bank and was reaching for it when he received a sharp peck on the back of his hand. He cried out in alarm and, in the gloom of the thicket, made out a brown hen skulking low in her nest.

“What’s up Nico?” called Tommy.

Nico picked up the ball and pushed past his friend. “It’s those thorns. Quick there goes the bell.”

That afternoon Nico was constantly reprimanded for not paying attention. Glancing across at Tommy, he wondered if he too had spotted the hen. He suddenly shot up his hand.

“Please, Miss. May I leave the room, Miss?”

“Can’t you wait? You’ll be going home in ten minutes.”

“No Miss, sorry Miss,” and ran from the room clutching his sides.

“Hope you can make it,” giggled one girl as he sped for the door.

He ran past the row of brick closets and was soon on the open road. He felt sure his mother would be delighted, as their own hens were moulting and had not laid for over a month. Peeling off his jersey, he tied a knot in each sleeve before placing in the warm eggs.

“Look what I’ve found.” He carefully placed the laden jersey on the kitchen table and proudly displayed one of the eggs. His father, still in a foul mood, got down off the step ladder, his hands sooty from the blackened ceiling, and clasped his son by the ear. He picked up the

eggs and led him back along School Lane towards the farm. Drove of children were coming out of school and he tried to break away, but his father was relentless and gave his ear a painful twist. The farmer had been mucking out the stable and stopped to watch the blacksmith and his son approach. "I found them in Sandy Robert's hedge and he hasn't got any chickens," protested Nico, tearfully, for the umpteenth time.

The farmer inspected the eggs and held one up to the light. "You would not have enjoyed eating these, Nico."

Nico led them across the road and was relieved to see the hen clucking noisily near the nest. She had returned from a quick meal at the farm and was quite agitated at finding her nest empty. The farmer made a sudden grab at the back of her neck and closed up the flapping wings by pressing the broody hen against his jacket. "Glad you found her before the fox did. I'll stick her in the coop where she'll be safe."

Although the journey home was not so painful physically, Nico had to endure a scathing verbal chastisement in Spanish.

The New Bike

Nico lay drowsily listening to all the familiar noises from the kitchen below, but the raking of the fire and the clanging of the coal bucket seemed much louder than usual and it puzzled him. "It's my birthday," he yelled as he leapt out of bed and ran in to his mother, who was still in bed.

"So what!" she smiled teasingly, "I've had plenty and they don't make me happy."

On previous birthdays there had not been much money to spare on presents, but he had been convinced that this would be a special one. The cracked lustre jug on the top of the kitchen cupboard had been crammed full of money. The jug was always used when his mother set her mind to the future purchase of some special item, and she would count and recount the money almost daily. He and his father would know to the nearest penny the current total as it grew gradually. "What's the score, Mama?" Nico had enquired some months earlier, but she had shut him up sharply and pushed the jug to the back. Another unusual occurrence was when his father removed his leather apron one mid morning and changed into his best suit to go shopping in Pontardawe, but he did not question it. It was the first time he had ever known his father to do any shopping.

Nico almost fell down the stairs in his haste. His father stood at the bottom blocking his way. "Thought you'd never wake. What's the hurry?" Nico pushed, and tried to squeeze past him and his father then stepped aside, to watch his son's eyes fall on the sparkling new bicycle. He stood gazing unbelievably and turned to hug his father.

His mother, not wishing to miss the excitement, was half way down the stairs when Nico saw her, and bounded up to meet her, flinging his arms around her legs. "Steady now, you'll break my neck".

He flew back down, leaping over the last three stairs. "*Gracia Papa. Gracia Mama.*"

“Go on, it won’t bite you.” He had stretched out his hand but stopped short of touching it. Only once before had he seen a brand new bicycle in the village, and that was through the massive gates of the big house. He and his mates had stared fascinated by the skilful antics of the rich boy who looked as new and shiny as his bicycle.

Nico was lifted onto the saddle but nearly cried with disappointment when he could not quite reach the pedals, although the saddle was down. “Don’t worry. Don’t worry, Nico. Everything is under control.” He beckoned his wife to take hold of the bicycle and within a second or two was back with two wooden blocks which he fastened to the pedals by means of neat brackets, made especially for the purpose.

“Didn’t I tell you? Wasn’t I right?” Nico’s mother had insisted on the conversion kit being made before the all important day. His father had inspected the bicycle in the shop with the eye of a blacksmith, and although it was certainly not the fastest on display it was without doubt the strongest.

Nico gulped down his breakfast that morning and was pedalling furiously along the back lane of his street when he heard his mother call him. The screaming urgency of the call brought him to a skidding halt at the end of the row. His mother was waiting for him at the back door and she clipped him sharply across the side of his head, her wedding ring striking a previous tender bump, and he cried out in pain, “Don’t you know what day it is? After all the commotion your father caused last Sunday, I thought you’d have more sense.”

The echoing sound of hammer on anvil had prompted a group of chapel goers to call at the forge to protest. “You clear off. Me plenty work.”

The intrusion had infuriated the blacksmith, and he brandished a red hot rivet under ‘Religious Maggy’s’ nose. She backed away in terror, her huge black-coated form crushing her band of cronies against the work bench. Nico’s mother had spotted the forbidding entourage from the bedroom window and hastily combed her hair

and donned a clean apron before hurrying down the garden to investigate.

“Have you gone mad?” She grabbed the menacing tongs and bundled her husband out through the door. “Do you want to ruin my business? These are my best customers,” and she continued to slate him in Spanish, “and keep out of sight until I get rid of these screwballs.” She then fussed and grovelled in an endeavour to set matters to right. “*Nunca, nunca*, he no work no more Sunday. *Nunca, nunca*,” she repeated, not knowing the English for never. Skinny Nelly, still in a state of shock, had pressed her back against a sack of barley meal, and brushing her down by hand did little to remove the floury dust, and so Cristina took down from a shelf a stiff bristled brush used for the pigs’ scaly rumps. “Me go home and me pray *Dios* forgive wicked husband,” and she clasped her hands piously as she led them up the garden path.

“May I take my bike to school today, Mama?” “If you must, but you see that the big boys don’t ride it as there’s no money for another.” Nico had been up even before his father and could not wait to show Tommy his bike. Most of Sunday had been spent wheeling it from room to room or back pedalling furiously until the whirling sound got on his mother’s nerves. She watched him weave through the pot-holes at amazing speed and crossed herself in silent prayer for his miraculous recovery.

He cycled down the steep Station Hill at break-neck speed and rang his bell as he rounded the first bend, and nearly died of fright when he saw the road was completely blocked. Jack the Coal had been leading his old black mare on a zig-zag course to alleviate the strain of the heavy load.

He snatched at the rein, “Whow! whow!” Nico jerked the handlebars and grabbed frantically at both brakes. The new brake blocks gripped tightly against the rims and the sudden check sent him hurling through the air, just missing the top of a partly demolished wall on that dangerous corner. There was a crack like a gun shot as a

rustic pergola snapped with the force of impact, and the whipping, thorny rose stems clawed and tore at face and limb. With a final groan of creaking timbers, the limp form was held fast, cradled high in a cruel, bloody embrace.

The horrified coalman clambered over the padlocked side gate and thrashed through the dense shrubbery, expecting to witness a gory scene. He saw the boy's limp form suspended high above the rose bed, and Gwen, the maid, was running towards him, ignoring for the first time ever, the tinkling bell on the kitchen wall which should have sent her scurrying to the breakfast room.

"It's little Nico, the blacksmith's son," she shrieked. "Quick, quick, Mr. Morgan, help me get him down," and she tore frantically at the thorny stems.

"Steady now, Gwenny. Let me take the weight." They managed to free him from the tangled mass and carried him gently into the house. At that moment the mistress had released her hold on the bell cord and was storming through to the kitchen, but when she saw the tiny face covered in blood, she immediately took command.

"Hot water and clean rags. Hurry girl, hurry." She dabbed at the trickling blood as she questioned the coalman.

"I'd better call in and tell his mam right away." He had hardly spoken when the distraught woman burst in breathlessly.

"*Mi niño. Mi popre niño,*" she wailed as she fell upon her son.

The tactless paperboy had rushed into the shop, "I think your boy's a gonna," and on seeing the buckled bicycle, she had feared the worse.

"He'll be alright." Mrs. Lewis tried to console her. "There now, he's coming round." Nico's eyes blinked against the bright morning sun rays, and when his head cleared he clutched his mother's arm.

"Sorry Mama. Sorry Mama," but at that moment the bicycle was of little concern as she sobbed hysterically.

The Tragic Birth

The women of Tawe Terrace peered from their windows as Gregorio passed, clutching his wife's arm as he guided her around the deepest pot-holes. Most were amused, but some were envious of such chivalry, their own pregnancy having been a painful drudgery, tolerated irritably by a deprived lustful spouse. "She's carrying high, bound to be a girl."

Gregorio opened the front door which was the only one in the terrace ever used, as space was so limited that an item of furniture was usually placed against it, or it was so heavily laden with clothing hanging from a row of nails.

With so much devotion and with every whim and request so readily bestowed, Sarah continued to bloom. She would polish leisurely and lovingly the Welsh furniture she had so meticulously arranged throughout their tiny cottage. The entire contents of her grandmother's cottage had been bequeathed to her, and she shed a tear as she rested on the oak settle which had been used as her wedding chest. It had been crammed full of blankets and linen, emitting a fresh fragrance of lavender. She struggled slowly up the narrow staircase and lay on the bed with her hand smoothing the cream crocheted bedspread, which had been completed with so much urgency.

Sarah had been passing her grandmother's cottage one late evening when she noticed the oil lamp was still burning and had called in to see if she was alright. As she walked through the door, the lid of the chest was quickly closed and the key turned. She looked weary and frail but grinned mischievously as she hugged her favourite grandchild. Sarah made her some cocoa and helped her to bed, but the next morning, when her father looked in on his way to the pit, there was no welcoming smile to his cheerful greeting, but she looked so serene and so truly at peace.

Sarah reckoned that her baby would be born in about a week, and her mother had already started baking piles of cakes and pies to

feed her gluttonous sons while she was away, but had arranged with a neighbour to cook their main meals. The one thing which greatly worried Sarah, however, was that the village midwife, known as Jolly Jill, had recently secretly married an ageing widower and had called that day to say that Lotty Pritchard would be looking after her.

“Don’t fret yourself, *cariard*, she’s very capable. I’m going to be midwife to my husband’s sheep up on the mountain,” she chuckled. “Can you picture me slapping their back sides?” and she was soon convulsed in shrieks of laughter, her flabby form shaking uncontrollably, and she clutched her heaving breasts to restrain the increasing momentum.

“I think it’s time you went for Mrs. Pritchard.” Gregorio leapt from the chair as if he had been stung. There was a look of panic in his eyes as he flew from the room. In no time at all he was back, almost dragging the flustered woman through the door.

“Can’t you send this man of yours out for the day? He tore into my house like a bloody tornado.” She tried coaxing, then threatened, but it was of no avail and so she set him the usual chores while she questioned Sarah. She would have left, to return later, but realized that there was little chance of escape, and it was not until midnight, above the resounding chimes of the grandfather clock, that Sarah’s first agonising screams were heard. Gregorio covered his ears and ran from the house. He beat frantically at the dusty mat draped over the clothes line but could not shut out the torment, and ran back indoors, to be met at the foot of the stairs by Lotty.

“It’s a breach. Quick, get my son to fetch the nurse and you come back to me, sharp.” He did not question her as the look of anguish sent him racing along the back alley ways, and he returned to a scene of terror and despair. He knelt at the bedside and placed his hand against her mouth so that she could sink her strong teeth into it, and he tried to will away the pain and turmoil.

“She’s coming. She’s on the way,” but Lotty did not mean the baby. He glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of a wavering

lantern at the foot of the mountain. It disappeared but emerged seconds later from behind a hazel coppice.

“Hurry, woman, hurry. Won’t be long now, *cariard*. Won’t be long.” The screaming stopped suddenly and Sarah lay motionless, her face deathly white.

“She die. She die,” cried out Gregorio.

At that moment the nurse burst in, hot and breathless and bustled out the lamenting husband. “More hot water, quick, quick, and plenty of it.” A bottle of strong smelling salts pressed under her nose revived her to suffer further the unendurable agony. Gregorio was lifting a kettle off the fire when the first penetrating wail of his newborn made him drop it down heavily on the hob, splashing his knee, but he did not wince for he did not feel it. He flew up the stairs and banged on the bolted door but they would not admit him. When it finally opened he rushed past Nurse Jill, whose face was bathed in perspiration and so red that it looked at bursting point, but she smiled triumphantly and flopped down on the foot of the bed.

Lotty was carrying the tightly swathed baby to place her in her mother’s arms but she screamed at her in Welsh. “Take it away, and that monster too.” Gregorio was thunderstruck and tried to get close to her, but she covered her head and continued to yell abuse from under the bedclothes. It was only sheer exhaustion that finally silenced her.

Each day her resentment of everyone and everything Spanish increased, and she found a ready ally in her young brother. “If you had listened to me.” he began, but his mother shut him up sharply and pushed him out of the house. Her son-in-law, in her eyes, could do no wrong.

The new baby had brought no happiness into the household and she kept a constant vigil lest her deranged daughter should do it harm. The weeks passed and Gregorio fetched and carried and fussed, but with no kind response from his embittered wife. He took out his frustration on his mates at the coal face, particularly those who had

loving wives awaiting them and even his best friend, Vicente, did not escape his wrathful resentment.

“You’ll have to keep an eye on that little woman of yours. You don’t know what she gets up to when you’re at work.” Vicente flew at him but was knocked flat.

Vicente’s friends rallied round and warned Gregorio of the consequences if he persisted with his malicious taunts.

“But it’s true, it’s true.” Gregorio had been listening to Sarah, who would spend hours at the window, spying on the Spanish community and eager to impart any occurrence she deemed detrimental to their good standing, but he did not realize how serious was her mental disarray and that the tales were wilful, wishful figments of her imagination. Seeds of suspicion had, however, already been sown and Vicente fretted and pondered if there was a grain of truth in the caustic jibe. One day he could stand it no longer. He downed tools and slipped along a disused working which brought him out through an air shaft.

A startled sheep scampered off, leaving him alone on that desolate hillside. The soft breeze swept gently over him like a warm physical embrace and he cried out in anguish at the dreaded thought of life without his beloved wife Manuela, and started to run blindly down the hill. He jumped down off the coarse, tufty grass onto a cart track, his metal stripped soles sparking along the stony surface, when he stopped suddenly to observe the distant colourful blur moving across his garden. It disappeared from sight, and he knew she would be tending her pimientos, the first of which she had picked that week and hung on the kitchen beams, their glossy, silky red skins sparkling and twinkling in the fire glow like a row of fairy lanterns.

“Fetch me some more glass,” she had said proudly, “and I’ll show you what I can really grow.” He had built her a small greenhouse by nailing together some frames wrenched out of a railway signal box, demolished in a landslide, and had promised to go back for some more. His eyes wandered beyond his isolated home to the two rows of

cottages built to house miners. The long row ran from north to south and the shorter one cut through it from east to west as if the architect had connived to scar the landscape with a stark symbolic cross which the colliers were destined to bear. He shuddered and closed his mind to the horrific disasters in the Spanish mines where the measure of life was infinitesimal to that of profit. His thoughts returned to the more peaceful, hereditary domesticity of the planting of grape vines and the sowing of melon seeds. She was alone, yes, alone in the garden she loved. He lay relaxed with his eyes closed to contemplate the warmth of her smile and the tenderness in her eyes. He rose quickly. "I must be mad! mad! mad!" and he began the steep climb back to his bolt hole.

That day Gregorio's black depression was at its lowest ebb, but the Management was still reluctant to intervene. His coal output had not been affected, and had in fact shown a considerable increase, as each day he had driven faster and deeper into the dust laden coal seam with little regard for safety, and had to be restrained while the roof timbers were wedged to the props.

The long hazardous shift over, he stamped out ahead of his work mates and blinked in the blinding sunlight. He stopped and thumped his head with his fist to block out the tantalizing vision before him, but it loomed nearer and clearer, and a dozen hands lifted him bodily and set him down before her. She stood proud and erect, her eyes now clear of doom, and radiating the love and warmth so long denied him. "Welcome back." He whispered, burying his head in her soft raven curls to hide his tears, but his body shook violently. The group of happy miners surrounded them and slapped him on the back, but she was not aware of the reason for such spontaneous frivolity. Her mother was waiting on the door step and she handed her the baby, then turned and kissed Gregorio. "The *diawl* has left her, and good riddance it is too." He could not understand what part the devil had played in this sad episode, but whatever had possessed her had mercifully departed.

The Smelly Dog

“Nico, run down to the shop with my order and make sure you chain up that wretched dog.” He was not likely to forget after the fiasco on the previous Friday. Leon drooped his ears and skulked into his kennel. Usually, the word *tienda* meant a romp out and a tasty morsel being tossed his way by the kindly shopkeeper, and would set him off barking excitedly. He had returned home on that fateful day in a filthy state, and when he saw the tin bath being lifted off the hook had tried to sneak out again but was grabbed just in time. It had been advisable, from past experience, to lock him up for at least an hour after his bath, but on that occasion someone had left the door open and he had sped off to the nearby farm. He headed straight for the meadow where the cows were grazing and, with his nose to the ground, had darted from mound to mound until he came across a recent steamy deposit. A cow had been placidly chewing her cud and had gazed over inquisitively as the dog rolled over and over to relieve the irritation of the carbolic soap. He had then kept a safe distance from home to delay as long as possible the inevitable second bath which was always undertaken well away from a cozy fire, and either in the garden or the draughty forge. From his high perch on a flat rock jutting over the stream, he had suddenly spotted his young master and, forgetting all else, leapt the stream and bounded after him.

“Where’s your little pal today, Nico.” He was soon to find out as a fierce barking was heard outside the shop as he leapt against the window with his filthy paws, but the long haired Tabby continued to bask unconcerned.

Mr Jones always took great pride in his window dressing, and on the first Monday of each month would have a complete change of product on display. On this occasion he had persuaded the traveller to supply a quantity of dummy tobacco cans. He had also brought a large cardboard cut-out of a contented smoker whose walrus moustache hid half the stem of his white clay pipe, and the beady eyes looked upwards with a glazed ecstasy as he puffed away midst tall

neat columns of tins and cartons. A shopper, laden with groceries, braced herself to heave open the heavy door with her free hand. She screamed out, dropping the heavy box, and clutched at her twitching skirt as the smelly, sodden dog pushed between her legs in pursuit of the infuriating cat. The hinged panel behind the window had been left ajar and he was through it like a flash. The confined space was soon smothered in flying fur and cow muck, and the spitting and snarling could be heard above the clanging cans. The first onslaught had decapitated the blissful smoker whose torso slid and whirled on the slimy surface.

“Come out. Come out, you blasted . . .” but his words were cut short as he was struck in the mouth by a soggy mass of flying fur.

Nico ran to block the only exit from the window and to prevent further havoc to the rest of the shop. He ran home clutching the panting animal and tied him to the garden gate before yelling through the open pantry window. “Mama, Leon has wrecked the shop.”

The distressed woman ran out through the shop door and ran all the way. She raised her arms in despair at the grieving shopkeeper, who was still spitting out chunks of fur and filth. “Me clean, me clean, me come back.” When she returned home, the young apprentice was still giggling as she cut carefully around a dress pattern. “You no laugh, you soon no laugh, you come, and you Nico.” Soon all three were carrying pails of hot water along the back street, and although the destruction had taken but seconds, they were there an hour cleaning up the mess, but the appalling smell lasted for days.

Cristina was irritable for days and neither her son nor his dog dared to go too near her. “Isn’t it time that dog of yours caught a rat? Here we are overrun by them and all he does is chase cats.” Nico often took him down to the pigsty, and although he put on a great show of enthusiasm, was never able to sink his teeth into one. It was as if he enjoyed the chase but not the kill. Nico knew of many drastic ways to accelerate the process of training, but he would not subject his pet to any. One was to drop the dog into a barrel which contained one or two

rats. Squeals of pain were often heard, mainly from dogs far too young to react swiftly enough. A rat, fighting for its life, would not release its hold on paw or throat until the dog owner lowered his gloved hand to throttle it.

A week had passed since Nico had witnessed a scene which baffled him. He had been sprinting along his back lane when a huge rat came out of number seven's back yard, carrying a crust of bread. Leon immediately took up the chase and skidded against number three's garden gate, just as the rat disappeared underneath it. There was then a faint rustling and a squeaky yap from the other side of the high boarded gate and he pulled himself up to investigate, and had hung there gaping unbelievably. The rat was already dead and was being tossed daintily by the prettiest, daintiest dog one could wish to see. It was the petite beribboned Pom, Susy, and although fully grown, was less than half the size of a standard Pomeranian lap dog. As she pranced around the garden with her gruesome toy, her long silky hair was lifted and parted in the breeze to flow on either side like a snow white pair of illusive wings in graceful flight. Nico gasped at such beauty and elegance. It was no wonder that her mistress doted on her and provided her with a life of luxury.

Few people were ever allowed inside number three, but Nico was invited in when he called for the weekly bucket of pig swill. "Come and talk to my friends, they're so lonely with only me to talk to." She opened the cage door, but the sleek cockatoo ignored Nico and dived squawking to attack the sleeping cat. "Naughty! Naughty!" and she tapped him sharply with her knitting pattern. She stroked and soothed her flustered pet and lifted her onto Nico's lap. "Say hello." He had often seen the black cat open the back door by hooking a leg through the handle, and as she pressed her right paw on the latch, would jerk her lithe body to jolt it open. "Now, would Susy like to play hide and seek?" She stopped jumping up at Nico and sat on a foot stool with her paws covering her eyes. Nico hid the ball under one of the many cushions, and when Susy went straight to it he had a faint

suspicion that the paws had not completely concealed those bright eyes as he watched her sit upright to await her reward.

Mrs. Rees had first met her husband on a busy railway platform on Cardiff station. He was a porter and she a secretary commuting daily. They smiled each day but it was weeks before either spoke. He was not handsome and had a somewhat craggy face, but it was the warmth of his smile that captivated her. She would get to the station early to watch him from her carriage window. At first he appeared to be a trifle awkward in his movements, but she soon saw how surprisingly agile he was for one so tall and broad. He had little time or money to entertain her but during the long summer evenings they would put their bicycles in the goods van and head for the open country. After a short, secretive courtship, she broke with her well to do family and they got married. The pittance he earned drove him to seek a more lucrative employment to support the jewel fate had bestowed upon him to brighten his hitherto drab existence. He cherished her to the end of his life, which, sadly, like the fate which had befallen many of his mates, came prematurely. She had seen the once beautiful body become bent and racked with pain under such harsh conditions at the pit, and he had often come home soaked to the skin.

“That roof leaks like a cullendar,” was his repeated complaint but to no avail. He never forgot his very first love, that of the railway, and it had showed up conspicuously in the form of a locomotive, trimmed lovingly and painstakingly along his privet hedge.

Nico was determined to convince his friend, Tommy. “Don’t be daft,” he had retorted; you must be seeing things. A rat would gobble her up in one go.” He knew Susy was locked up in the garden every morning, weather permitting, but the fence looked impregnable and resembled a Wild West stockade. Soon after losing her husband, Mrs. Rees paid a neighbour to dig out the neat hedge and replace it with a wooden fence. This had been skilfully constructed with split pit props, most of which were delivered in the dead of night. Number three was

the only cottage in the row with an enclosed backyard, and the key was hung behind the glass door, which was never locked on Saturday because of the various deliveries. It was also her day for shopping at the high class emporium at the far end of the village.

Nico waited until Old Jacko went into his potting shed at the bottom of his garden. "Now, Tommy, give us a whistle if you see the old man come out." He turned the key in the gate and little Susy rushed up the garden path to greet him. "Hush! Hide and seek." The confused dog allowed herself to be lifted into the brown paper bag and she lay perfectly still while he replaced the key. They cut across the fields to the back of the colliery stables. "Got the matches?" Tommy stuffed some oily rags into a disused pipe while Nico held the tiny dog at the other end.

The first rat was hardly out of the pipe when a lightening snap almost severed its head. A gust of wind forced through the dense black smoke, and a dozen or so rats tumbled out. They stood back amazed at the speed with which she pounced from one to the other, and were so enthralled that they did not notice the two scruffy thugs smirking down at them. Nico's heart sank. Since his father had fought with the Ostler, he had had several narrow escapes from his two mindless sons. He and Tommy were no match for them and he now had the responsibility of Susy as well. 'Ragamuffins', was how the headmaster referred to them. Many of the children in the village were ragged, but their rags were not steeped in horse manure and so putrify the classroom. When they played truant from school, which was often, their names were deliberately omitted from the list which was passed on each week to the Attendance Officer, known as The Whipperin, whose task it was to remonstrate with the parents and round up the elusive absconders.

Nico thought it wiser to ignore them and continued to bang the pipe with a length of angle iron, but a vicious kick in the rear sent him sprawling. The hefty lout again raised his foot, whooping gleefully, and Nico swung the iron, catching him squarely under the jutting

chin. He raised his hands to stem the flow of blood and Nico brought it down again to open a deeper gash on the top of his head. Tommy seemed to be rooted to the spot and made no attempt to stop the younger brother from grabbing hold of Susy and running off with her. "Come back." Nico clambered up the side of the slag heap and caught up with him as he was climbing over a rusty bedstead which served as part of a chicken run. Howling with fury, and screaming abuse, Nico dragged him down, causing him to drop the dog. He then waded in like a whirlwind with fists and feet flying, but it was his knee which finally rendered him helpless. As he was searching frantically for Susy he received a stunning blow on the back of his head and his knees buckled.

Through hazed eyes he could just make out the form of a witch, just like the ones in story books. She had a long pointed nose and wild glaring sunken eyes. Her grey wispy hair swirled in the wind around her bony shoulders, but instead of a cauldron, she clasped with both skinny hands a soot blackened saucepan which she again raised high above her head. "Hit him, hit him mum," the injured boy managed to screech, but Nico, feeling the whimpering dog at his feet, staggered to the edge of the slag heap, struggling to regain his senses, and flung himself over the side. He rolled painfully down the steep, bumpy slope, clinging tightly to the terrified Pom. There was no sign of Tommy or the bleeding bully, and when he arrived home there was pandemonium. The whole street was out looking for Susy, and Mrs. Rees was hysterical with grief. There was now no paper bag in which to hide Suzy, so Nico pulled her out from under his jumper and strode straight on. "Is this your Susy, Mrs. Rees? I recognised the ribbon."

She hugged and kissed them both in turn. "Where did you find her?"

"She was with a gypsy boy, and I had to fight him to get her back." He was relieved that she did not question him further and prayed his secret was safe.

Dog Killer

The smithy had been particularly busy with a steady flow of men or their wives calling to collect their tools or repaired household utensils. "Me finish. Me lock door." The blacksmith had spoken to the two old men who had been seated all morning on a plank placed across two upturned buckets near the furnace. He welcomed them in his forge because they were so very old, by far the oldest in the village. Like most Spaniards he treated the old with the utmost respect, and the very elderly with more akin to reverence. One was exceedingly tall and thin and still retained two long black front teeth, and every comic in the village had several tales of ridicule to relate concerning either his long skinny body or his two long tusks, the most corny being that he had served a useful term in the navy as an oily pull-through for a cannon. His friend was very tiny, frail and slightly deaf. They would sit for hours defying the sparks and snips of white hot metal, and the blacksmith was puzzled why their families had not called to complain about the numerous holes burned in their clothing, but no one came.

Lofty would chew away contentedly and from time to time, call out "Up Joss", and would stop chewing as his friend slowly straightened up and removed his head from the line of fire. Two jets of twist-tobacco juice would then rake the air in rapid succession and ping the hot metal band around the top of the furnace, before trickling quickly into the hot coals. "Why you no change places?" but they looked up at him blandly and turned their heads to watch the sizzling spit dry up and quickly disappear. He was giving the frail one a helping pull off the bench when a gun was fired just outside the door. The startled blacksmith let go his grip on the old man, who tipped backwards. He dashed outside and was not unduly surprised to see the man the Spaniards had dubbed Dog Killer, but this time he had led his latest victim well away from his own backyard to escape the wrath of his fanatical animal loving neighbour who, on the last occasion, had stood defiantly between gun and dog, and, in spite of

his bullying threats that he would prosecute her for theft, had carried it into the safety of her own home.

The whole village condemned the man who, on one day would sit in the Inn and boast that he owned the best dog in the valley, yet on the very next day would be seen with a different dog, having shot the last one before tossing it in the river.

The blacksmith looked on with loathing and was glad that his son had not witnessed the slaughter. Although he could not call himself a dog lover, and believed that they should only be kept if they could earn their keep, he deeply deplored seeing one so callously destroyed whilst tied to his fence.

The report of the gun brought out several people to investigate, and some women ran back indoors to fetch their husbands. The blacksmith wondered why there was not an outcry, but they just stood in a group talking earnestly in Welsh as they watched him remove the rope from around the neck of the dead animal. He then slung it over his shoulder and headed once more for the river.

The small gathering suddenly swelled to more than double and they followed as if in a funeral procession. They stopped and waited until he had thrown the dog in the river and then they grabbed him and threw him, kicking and yelling, into the swollen muddy water twenty feet below. They knew he could swim, but the current was strong in the narrow gully and they saw him roll and tumble towards a wider shallower stretch. They walked along the bank in stony silence until they saw him scabble up the slippery bank, bruised and gasping, but he was able to hear above the roar of the river, their final warning before they turned for home.

It was John Wicks who shouted it down to him, "If you shoot another dog, we'll put you under for good," but the incident started a feud in the village. When the dog killer arrived home soaked and bleeding, his five brawny sons got all keyed up to smash every window in the street and any face that showed itself. To them, the killing of dogs in their household was a common occurrence and no different

from wringing the neck of a chicken, so accustomed had they become. They rallied support from all the thugs with whom they associated, and there were many.

Saturday night was planned for the attack and most, by the nature of their lifestyle, were the possessors of an assortment of gruesome weapons. Little did they suspect how keen was the hearing of their neighbour, and she wasted no time in sending out a warning. The word spread like a mountain fire, and soon a contingent was knocking at the blacksmith's door to ask for the use of his smithy to hold a meeting.

Someone suggested that they go to the police, "No, no, Elwyn. Let's leave the police out of this."

"What do you suggest we do Victor?"

"Shit." They all looked surprisedly at the blacksmith, and he pointed to a huge heap of stinking pig manure smothered in wriggling maggots, where the starlings flocked each day to gorge themselves, fit to burst. The farmer was due to collect it the following day to spread along the furrow in which Victoriano was to set his seed potatoes, but he generously offered as much as they required for their defence.

The assailants would have to pass under the bridge that linked the farm and which spanned the road to the Neath Valley. A human chain was formed to pass buckets of the foul, runny manure the short distance to the bridge, and were then placed along the edge at both ends.

"Here they come," whispered John Wicks as they heard boots clomping in the darkness, and a gruff voice echoed under the bridge as they approached.

"We'll give 'em what for. Don't forget, ten of you round the back and the rest with me round the . . ." but he had no time to finish when the first row of buckets was tipped up, spilling the obnoxious contents on their heads with a loud splash. Those leading, fled under the bridge only to be met with the second line of defence as they emerged at the other end. There was also a third line of which the adults had no

knowledge. They had warned their children to stay indoors but Nico had little difficulty in enticing them out to fight. They had earlier raided his father's bin of pig potatoes and picked out the largest which they divided and stacked in the shadows on either side of the road, but after the first volley the road was deserted, apart from one who lay injured. He had felt the full weight of the bucket and its contents thrown down by an over zealous defender.

Pigeon Mad

“You’re pigeon mad, Tommy. You’ve been down there every day this week.”

“He’s promised me some squeakers. Two are from the blue hen that won the National, but it’s a secret.” Nico laughed and clipped his ear, but he was soon to find out that it was not a story.

There had been a terrific row at the Pigeon Club, culminating on the majority stamping out and refusing to race against Bill Roberts. “Go to hell, the lot of you. I’ll stick to the National where there’s real competition.”

Bill was an old campaigner, invalided out of the army with a small pension, although there was no visible sign of injury. No one had ever seen him away from his loft where he spent every hour of daylight shuffling around in heavy unlaced boots. He had initially paid considerable sums on good stock from the best breeders and would not give loft room to an indifferent bird. By meticulous pairing and training, his were the best, hence the frustration of the competitors.

Tommy and his father had been sworn to secrecy. Bill was to supply them with his best birds and discreetly supervise their feeding and training. “I’ll teach them.” Tommy’s father who often assisted the local undertaker, constructed their new loft with seasoned elm, and was a draught proof masterpiece, erected on top of a corrugated iron coal barn with a removeable ladder to keep out the cats. “Darn good loft this, and a darn good site,” encouraged Bill, moderating his language in front of such staunch, respectable chapel goers. The wily Bill had chosen well, as a short walk along the tree lined river bank and through a spinny would bring him undetected to the bottom of Tommy’s garden.

“Come along lads, let’s go and fetch the little beauties.” They walked in single file through the thicket and the boys observed his straight back and the way he swung his arms from the shoulders in true military style, the only non military feature was the shuffling

unlaced boots. Could it be that a war wound prevented Bill from bending to lace them? His garden had never been cultivated and was as rocky as the river bed. He gave his birds an early warning of his approach by making a shrill sound by sucking in through his teeth, and which could pass as a whistle, but sounded more like the plaintive distress call of a curlew. He knew exactly which birds to part with and did not hesitate as he reached out and dropped them carefully into the long low basket.

“Grab your end and let’s be off.” Tommy was anxious to get the birds home in case Bill should change his mind, but Nico was compelled to delay their departure.

“Mind if I use your bog house, Mr Robert’s?”

“Sure, my boy, don’t fall down the hole.”

He sprinted down the garden, his braces undone before he reached the door. It was jammed tight with the damp and he gave it a mighty kick, so desperate was he, but realised to his dismay that it opened outwards and that he had jammed it tighter. He pressed against the side post and heaved with all his might, frantically conscious of the consequence of such exertion. It flew open with terrific force, swinging him backwards, his trousers falling around his ankles. He shuffled inside quickly, not bothering to lift them, but when he entered the narrow, lime washed hut he nearly died of fright. Instead of the usual earth closet he looked down through the extra large hole in the seat at the swirling water pounding the rocks in the river below. He drew back quickly and grabbed a handful of newspaper squares from the nail in the wall before making a desperate dash for the hole in the hedge.

There was no football for Tommy that year and he cycled miles with his young birds, or cadged lifts from vans or lorries to further points of release in the course of training. “They’re doing fine.” Bill was delighted with his dedication.

It was time for the first young birds’ race and his mother carried a tray of tea and sandwiches down to the rustic seat. “Which way will

they come?" asked Nico and Bill pointed to a gap in the hills.

"Time to go, young Tommy. Wait at the bridge for Nico, and no shortcuts. You don't want to get disqualified." Bill had thought it prudent not to lend his clock, and the Committee had measured and made a time allowance for the ring to be carried to the nearest Inn. Tommy could have hardly reached his post when three specks appeared over the mountain. "The cunning little fellow," Bill kept muttering as he climbed the ladder. Both of his birds had dropped like stones and swooped through the open door, and Nico was up there like a shot to take the rubber rings from him.

"Joe's got one home." A flying leap and Nico was off like the wind. Tommy was idly watching the trout in the river below, his head squeezed between the iron railings of the bridge, when a shriek from Nico nearly scraped off his ears as he jerked back. He arrived at the Inn, hot and sweaty, and clocked first and second, but there was no joy for Bill. "Joe Garner's got no bird to touch yours. He trailed yours home."

Tommy's huge success that year encouraged many youngsters to take up pigeon racing, but their eagerness to succeed often brought the sport into disrepute. Some would walk miles along the railway line to the derelict brickworks to catch the resting long distance birds roosting on the rafters, and would cut off their rings and hope they had procured a good strain for breeding. One youth was caught blowing out an egg the day before the race and inserting a live worm to fool the bird it was about to hatch. Another blasted a returning bird off a chimney pot, but the ring stripped off the dead bird was clocked too late to be placed.

One day Tommy rushed up waving a postcard. "Blacky's safe. He's over in Seven Sisters. Will you come with me to fetch him back?"

The next day they both set out at first light, each clutching a bag of Welsh cakes, freshly baked on the griddle. They trekked for miles over the mountain and finally sat in the sunshine in clear view of their destination. As they munched away they watched the pigeons circle

their respective lofts and wondered which had given sanctuary to the lonely bird blown off course the previous week and flown down the wrong sheltered valley. They looked up the number and rapped on the front door. There was no reply and they walked to the back of the house and heard the familiar scraping coming from the loft. Tommy called out and waved the postcard. The old man eyed them contemptuously as he propped up the long handled scraper. "Brought a basket?" he asked gruffly, and they shook their heads.

They watched him go grumpily into an adjoining shed and reach for a battered cardboard box on top of his feed bin. He took out a stack of prize cards and thrust the empty box into Tommy's hand while he went back into the loft. "Look! Nico, Look! There he is!" The delighted boy thanked him and held the box lovingly as they made for the hills. "Was that a spot of rain?" They were both in their shirt sleeves and cursed their luck. By the time they got to the summit the clouds were looming low and there was a steady downpour. A clap of thunder startled Tommy and he began to run.

"Come back you bloody fool before you land on your arse." Nico pulled him back by his soggy shirt and they plodded on, their boots squelching in the spongy marsh. There was a cry of alarm as Tommy sank up to his knees, not spotting the tell-tale reeds in the driving rain and nearly dropped the box. Every flash of lightening brought him to an abrupt halt as he shielded his eyes with his arm. The gale swept full against them and they could hardly breath. A sudden blast swung them right about and they had to clasp each other until it waned. "Poor Blacky. Poor Blacky," he wailed as the sheer weight of a deluge forced him to his knees, whimpering in despair as he groped into the disintegrated box and held the bird under his dripping shirt. "Let her go. She's sure to find her way home from here."

"Or blown back to that miserable begger!" he shouted angrily and began to run again. It was now down hill all the way to the pit head and they could see the welcoming glow of the boiler house.

"Well! Well! Well! Look what the cat's dragged in." Warbling

Willy lined his large lunch basket with paper before putting in the sopping bird, and in no time at all got the bedraggled boys stripped off and seated before the open furnace. He twittered away merrily the sweet chirping of a jenny wren as he spread out their clothes on a hot pipe, and then burst lustily into the high trilling notes of a canary, bursting its throat in joyous song. Yes, Bill was a star turn at the valley concerts and was always in great demand. The warbling soared to a crescendo above the loud hissing of the steam which drove the massive wheel.

A high pitched tinkling bell would signal, from the Journey Man, a change from the straining, rumbling groan to the piercing squeal of the loosening cable. Only once had it ever snapped, and poor Yanto Peg was a stark reminder of the vicious, unleashed power of the terrifying whip lash. "Get this down you boyos." They slurped noisily at the scalding tea while they listened to his complete repertoire. "Sorry I haven't got a flat iron, boyos," as he grinned down at the crumpled pair.

They ran and slid down the steep hill to the village and saw Bill at the loft, trapping in the last of the birds. Tommy held up the young bird triumphantly and handed it to him, but nearly fell back off the ladder in horror as he watched him calmly wring the bird's neck and toss it over his shoulder. He was too stunned to speak and ran up the garden path to his house, his eyes filling with tears.

A few minutes later his father came out and spoke very calmly, but Bill became quite agitated. "What! Not race them? The best birds in the country and he wants them as pets," but he knew that he could do nothing about it. He marched up and down, his boots clomping loudly as he lifted them well off the ground. "Mad! that's what you are, bloody mad," and he stormed off, his boot laces flapping wildly in the gale.

The weeks that followed were fairly hectic for Nico, but he found the hilly cycle rides from village to village had been far less fatiguing and a pleasant diversion from the hot, grimy toil in his father's smithy.

He did not think he would be allowed to cycle again but one day his father, in spite of a stormy protest from his wife, took down the wrecked machine from the hook in the forge and began the slow process of straightening the buckled front wheel and bent frame. "I must be mad to mend it, but you must be madder to ride it," and he slapped his son playfully across the head.

When Nico finally found time to visit his friend he was intrigued by the casual and carefree atmosphere. He glanced up at the pigeon loft where a solitary bird was sunning itself on the roof, one wing stretched out in complete relaxation. The others were at the kitchen door pecking merrily at half a currant loaf. If Bill had witnessed that scene of blissful domesticity he would have thrown a fit, as his stringent discipline had been completely ignored and abandoned. Tommy's mother was squatting in the doorway, her arms folded over her black apron which was draped all around her dumpy form and she looked as proud and contented as a hen surveying her brood.

"Tommy, your friend is here." He came out holding a comic and shooed away a blue hen from under his feet. "Be careful, Tommy," she scolded, "you nearly stepped on little Alice then."

He looked glum and would have remonstrated had not his Aunt Ethel breezed around the corner at that moment. She clasped his head so that he would not escape and gave him a smacking kiss. "Can't stop. Huw is waiting out the front."

"There's rude you are, our Ethel. Bring him in this minute."

"No, no, not now. We're on our way up the mountain for a lovely walk." Tommy sniggered and gave Nico a knowing wink.

They had both heard varying detailed episodes of their passionate courtship from the local Peeping Toms, known as Pimpers, who boasted openly of how near they had been able to crawl up on unsuspecting couples. Nico was baffled why grown-ups, many of whom were married, participated in such a pastime. There was also the element of danger, as a beefy lad like Huw would knock the living daylight out of an over zealous Pimper whose blinding fervour

would cause him to cast caution to the wind.

Tommy was anxious to get away from the house that day and, for the want of something better to do, suggested a spot of pimping. They followed at a safe distance along the meadow above the road. "My Auntie Ethel's back side must be black and blue," and they watched him continually pinching and squeezing as they climbed the hill. He then tried to force his fingers inside the back of her skirt, but Nico knew he would have little room for manoeuvre in that quarter as she had just been fitted for that skirt and had insisted on it being skin tight. His mother had often protested that she would lose her good name as every garment made for Ethel had to be pulled in until the stitches almost burst. She had obviously used her influence on Huw's attire as his trousers were so tight around his massive thighs that they showed up every ripple.

"They're not going up the mountain after all." They watched in dismay as they ducked under a strand of wire to climb onto the railway line. "A fat lot of good that is. They'll see us a mile away," grumbled Tommy, and they were about to turn back when the couple crossed over the line towards the old coal washery with its look of gloom and desolation. The boys kept to the wooded area beside the railway line and climbed the bank from time to time to keep them in sight.

It was Tommy's turn to climb and he called down quickly "Look! Look! they've gone into the old Saddler's shed."

"That's it then." Nico's enthusiasm was waning and he was glad of the excuse to call it off.

"No way. I've not come all this way for nothing" replied Tommy as he ran across the line and dobbed from building to building until he was within ten yards of the shed. He then crawled along the ground and tried to peer through a hole in the rusty iron. After which he climbed the iron staircase, which was all that was left of the washery, apart from the heavy girders linking the Saddler's shed with the two others.

“He’s nuts,” thought Nico, as he watched Tommy crawl along a girder and edge himself on to the roof of the shed, where he remained motionless for several minutes. He then lifted his arm and beckoned Nico to join him but Nico ignored Tommy and climbed on to a low branch to wait, but the waving became so persistent, that when Nico saw Tommy get up on his knees and beckon urgently with both arms, he decided to chance his luck. On the way to the staircase he wondered why Tommy had so quickly given up the hole in the side of the shed as it appeared to be fairly large. Nico decided to investigate and soon realised why. A silky garment was hanging over the hole and could be no other than the red blouse Ethel had been wearing with her grey skirt. He declined Tommy’s invitation to share his spy hole on the roof and settled for a small crack in the eaves. The first thing he spied was her white brassier hanging on a nail, the spacious cups uppermost, and a draught was swaying it to and fro like the cradle in the nursery rhyme. He had never paid much heed to what he considered to be exaggerated or invented claims by the Pimpers, but there in that gentle rocking bra’ was proof enough that the first parts of her corpulent anatomy Hugh was always eager to expose were her overbrimming lillywhites, and by the glazed look of pride and ecstasy in his eyes he held exclusive rights, there in both hands.

Tommy was inching his way to a larger hole near the centre when there was a loud crack and he disappeared on top of the falling iron sheets and rotten timbers. Ethel screamed and Huw protected her with his broad back. When the dust had settled he let fly with open palm and nearly knocked Tommy’s head off his shoulders. He then picked Tommy up roughly by the scruff of his neck and threw him down at Ethel’s feet.

“Grab this little brat while I get the other,” but she was so preoccupied with the impossible task of covering her generous endowments with her dainty hands that Tommy, although dazed, slipped out through the open door.

“I’ll tell your mam.”

“And I’ll tell yours,” he squealed back as he made his escape.

Nico, however, was not so fortunate. He had dropped from the girder on to a loose rail and his ankle had twisted beneath him, but no amount of pain or terror would have rooted him to that spot. He dragged himself across the rails and under the wire fence, but Huw was closing in, yelling like a raving madman. Nico rolled down the bank on to what seemed to be a soft landing of dry coal duff and Huw yelled out a warning, but too late. Nico sank to his waist as the black sludge dragged him down like a treacherous quicksand. Huw slid down the bank and hooked his arm around a prickly hawthorn bush and stretched out to grab Nico’s threshing hand just as his head was being sucked under the surface. Huw heaved firmly but carefully lest he should uproot the young tree in its soggy base, and finally pulled him clear with a loud squelch, blinded and spewing up black slime. Huw climbed the bank with the boy tucked under one arm and crossed the line to the other side where the water flowed clean, and washed his mouth and eyes out.

“Look at your lovely suit, Huw Morgan, it’s ruined.”

“No time to worry about clothes, Ethel, love. Better be getting this lad off to the doctor.”

“I’m alright now,” coughed Nico, “honest I am,” and hobbled away, apologising tearfully, as he headed once more for the boiler house and the kindly Warbling Willy.

The next morning there was no sign of Tommy. Nico waited at the street corner until his mother saw him there just as the school bell started to ring. Suspecting he was about to play truant, she yelled at him. “If you don’t be off this minute I’ll fetch your father’s strap to you.” He sat at his desk, his eyes fixed on the door. He had never known Tommy miss school and wondered whether Huw’s blow had caused serious injury, such as fractured skull, when his own was struck a stinging blow. “Wake, up boy, your bed is for dreaming.” The hours dragged and he learned little that day and was relieved when the teacher, still eying him contemptuously, instructed them to put

away their books.

Nico hurried home as fast as he could on his swollen ankle, and after bolting down his meal, called to see his friend. What he saw was not a pretty sight. Tommy's face was swollen and a muffler was knotted above his head to hold in place a muslin bag of hot salt against his jaw.

"Got the mumps?"

"Mumps? Mumps? Are you stupid or something? Stinking toothache, that's what I've got. Stinking toothache all night and all day and now I'm off to see that stinking butcher."

His mother came down the stairs with one shilling and six pence. "Now be polite to Mr Llewellyn and come straight home, won't you Tommy dear." Kindly parental twaddle was the last thing Tommy wanted just then. He grabbed the money and marched down the road, looking straight ahead and trying desperately to blot out the many conflicting tales of torture inflicted within that gloomy blood spattered dentists. He stopped to dry his sweaty palms and mop his brow. He felt sick and a sudden gripping pain knotted his stomach, almost bending him double, as he entered the doorway. He feared that at any moment he would heave up, when a firm hand hoisted him upright, and he looked up at the pink, plump, jovial face of Mr Llewellyn, whose warm benevolent smile put him immediately at ease.

"Lies, all lies," he muttered to himself as he was guided gently but firmly to the back room.

Nico waited in the musty waiting room, but upon hearing the first agonising scream, scurried out to seek a place to wait well out of ear shot. Tommy was lowered from the rusty chair, his rotted molar packed tightly in a minute square of grease proof paper and tucked inside his shirt pocket. He pressed his father's large white handkerchief to his mouth and the dentist seemed to ignore the blood which flowed from the boy's torn gum, and continued to wipe his hands on his filthy apron.

“How much do I owe you, Mr LLewellyn?”

“Sh sh sh shilling an an and . . .”

“Thanks, Mr LLewellyn.” Tommy plonked one shilling on the desk and was out through the door and down the steps before he could complete “and sixpence.”

He pocketed his hanky and was spitting blood into the gutter when Nico caught up. “What’s the rush? Where you off?”

“To Brachi’s, that’s where we’re off.”

He watched Tommy place sixpence on the counter and ask for two three-penny icecreams. The proprietor, in his stiffly starched white jacket, wedged three round scoops on each dish.

“What do you want on yours, Nico, raspberry or vanilla?” but he was too flabbergasted to answer. He had just witnessed his friend blow six weeks’ pocket money in one go. “Give him a dollop of each, Mr Antonelli.”

It was difficult to distinguish the blood from the flavouring as it swilled around Tommy’s mouth, and Nico was forced to turn his back on him when the blood spurted out quicker than the icecream could be stuffed in. When he had finished Mr Antonelli came over with a small lump of ice on a saucer. “Open da mouth and sucka dis.” He opened his mouth wide and struggled to hold the slippery ice against his gum, while Nico mopped up the blood as it cascaded over his chin. Within minutes, as if by magic, there was no blood, only an excruciating freezing numbness. “Ifa she bleeds some more, you seea da kinda Meester Leweleen anda he plugga da hole.” Da kinda Meester Leweleen was the last person he wanted to see, but he thanked Mr Antonelli and they left the clean, airy cafe.

When outside, Tommy turned left instead of right and refused to give a reason for the long detour, and Nico’s protests went unheeded as he hurried on regardless. “By the way Nico, I shouldn’t mention the sixpence. You see my dad gave it me for being brave in the night, and he’d be livid if he knew I’d blown it all.”

They cut through the woods and came out at the bottom of

Tommy's garden. He was about to duck through a hole in the hedge when Nico reminded him that it was First Aid Class the following day. "Will call for you, same time as usual."

"Don't bother thanks very much. Not after last week's fiasco." Nico started to laugh. "See what I mean. They'll all be tittering."

The previous week, Price the Ambulance had taken the class and decided to have answers chalked up on the blackboard. "Now you, Tommy," he called out, "How would you treat shock?" Tommy strode confidently to the front of the class and wrote the answer in bold letters, but his atrocious spelling caused much merriment.

He stepped back to inspect his work. "Can't see what's funny," he scowled.

"No you wouldn't, boy bach," laughed Mr Price. "Not if you can't spell wrap."

Tommy had written "Rape the patient in a warm blanket."

Nico started off for his First Aid Class but was not keen to attend without his friend. He was just about to set foot inside the tin-roofed Ambulance Hut when he decided instead to watch the weekly spectacle at the other end of the village.

Every Saturday the eccentric Mrs Moreno would take all her grandchildren to the cinema, some ten miles away. Her daughter who was also a little odd, and always referred to her mother as *Señora Marquesa*, would line up the children outside the house and call out, "*Señora Marquesa*, all ready for inspection." Her mother would then stand on the doorstep while she fussed around her with a clothes brush. The inspection which followed must have been a daunting experience for the children. She would glare down at them, and although she took no heed of patches and darns, the merest trace of dirt and she would drag the culprit from the line and yell out in Spanish.

"Go and tell your mother soap and water is cheap enough," and the unfortunate child would be sent home bawling its head off. This time it was the turn of little Alberto, who must have strayed off to play

in some coal dust after his mother had scrubbed him from head to toe, but instead of running home he rolled on the ground kicking and screaming, and holding his breath in such a terrifying manner that his face turned scarlet.

Nico had intended to follow the procession and watch them march in single file to the bus stop in the centre of the village, and was surprised when they still stood in line long after the inspection. Suddenly the children broke rank and Mock the Garage had to slam on his brakes as they swarmed to meet him, and fight to climb on board. Mrs Moreno called upon the Saints to help her, and thrust her walking stick across the door, and as she dragged them out each got a wack from her stick.

Alberto's mother had managed to quieten him but his spasmodic sobs shook his body as he clung to her, his tears saturating her dress. She pleaded with her mother-in-law to allow him to go with them, but she pushed past brusquely and climbed up beside the driver. The moment the car started to move and the little boy realized that he was being left behind, he struggled free to run after it, but a neighbour grabbed him and held him back until it disappeared around the bend. He threw himself on the floor again and then decided to give chase. As it crawled up the steep hill it was feared that he would catch up, but luckily, the chugging heap of old iron that Mock lovingly called his limosine, got to the top in time.

They arrived at the cinema and the manager, who had been looking out for a bus, saw Mock pull up and waited while, what seemed to be an endless stream of children, tumble out. A few sharp words of command from their grandmother and they all lined up obediently in the foyer while the manager counted them and escorted them to the pay desk. Two pretty girls in smart maroon uniforms greeted them warmly and ushered them to the front row and they were all served with an ice cream, followed by another in the interval. It was no wonder that little Alberto had been so distressed.

There seemed to be no shortage of money and she still had two

brawny boys living at home, who handed over their entire wage packets each week in return for a little pocket money. Her three daughters had married Spaniards, but four of her sons had got wed to Welsh girls from the same village, and although she refused to contribute to the cost of the wedding celebrations, each had been given a substantial deposit on a cottage and money for furniture.

As the film progressed, the children would cheer the heroes and boo the villains. In one scene where a Mexican bandit was crawling through the undergrowth with a knife between his teeth, Mrs. Moreno jumped to her feet to yell a warning to the unsuspecting rancher, "Look out, he's right behind you." Her spontaneous reaction was often more entertaining than the film and many parents would accompany their children to the matinee simply to witness her hysterical outbursts. The manager had, on more than one occasion, been thankful that the organ pit separated her and her flaying walking stick from the fragile screen.

Tim Full Pelt

The four men working on the slag heap were in a quandary. The trams had descended on the wire rope and had taken the strain, to come to a clattering halt twenty feet from the edge. The first had been unshackled and allowed to run freely, and Mock the Block had brought it to a skidding halt by skilfully thrusting the tapered end of his wooden sprag between the fast revolving spokes. Mock could boast that he had never lost a single tram over the side, which was more than could be said for some of his colleagues, as the many battered wrecks which were all too evident in their resting place at the bottom of the black mountain of barren waste would attest to.

He was about to remove the sprag to allow the tram to run the last few yards when his mate called out a warning and pointed over the side. "He's back. The stubborn old man's back." On the previous day, all four workmen had slid down to remove him bodily and he had kicked and struggled as if fighting for his life. They had tried shouting down at him, using the foulest language they knew, but he had shaken his fist at them and reciprocated with equally vile Spanish.

Until recently the trams had been unloaded by a score or more workmen using shovels, therefore, there had not been the same urgency for safety, but a new system had been devised, whereby the front wheels dropped over the side into a steel cradle, and the sudden jolt would fling open the unpinned flap and the entire contents would spill out in a matter of seconds. Great care had to be taken, however, not to allow the tram to enter the cradle at speed, a procedure which Tim Full Pelt could not quite master. After the third tram had somersaulted over the cradle and down the side, the foreman almost pushed him down after it.

"You idiot. You dash about like a bloody madman. It's the Screen for you tomorrow." Tim tried to plead with him, but he would not budge. "We'll run out of trams if you stop here much longer."

Poor Tim cried like a baby and his pride would not let him turn up for work at the Screen. He brooded at home for days until his

brother-in-law called at the Office and asked the Management if they would allow him to take Tim on as his Butty at the coal face. "I hope you know what you're doing Griffiths, but if you can channel that blundering vitality into coal production, it would be beneficial to all concerned." He thanked him and was only too well aware that Tim's future depended solely on his ability to increase output considerably.

When he arrived home, Tim was still hunched up in his chair. "How would you like to come and work with me, Tim?"

"Go away, I'm in no mood to play games." To see his temper rise was at least a change to his constant doldrums, and he continued to torment him.

"Stop your teasing and put Tim out of his misery. I've had as much as I can stand." He looked up enquiringly at his sister.

"What are you on about, our Glad?" It took some time to convince him, but when the truth dawned he yelled and shrieked so much that Mrs. Ellis and her daughters rushed in from next door, believing that the deep depression had got the better of him.

The Screen was the worst place to work in, where only the old and the disabled were employed, and occasionally a few lads would serve their time there while they waited for a place down the pit. The conveyor, carrying a mixture of coal and slag, would shake and jolt noisily at a snails pace, shaking out the muck through the narrow mesh, and the draught through the side of the tin-sheeted building would swirl clouds of dust into eyes and nostrils. Through the thick dust it was just possible to make out the dull slag from the shiny anthracite, which was allowed to pass through to the end of the building and down a shoot into a railway wagon. The tedious, soul destroying job of the two lines of men and boys was to pick out the lumps of slag and see that none passed through to the cantankerous Yanto Peg at the end of the line, and whose task it was to let only the best anthracite through. During the summer, the terrific heat from the tin roof was almost unbearable, but in the winter the wind blew so

bleak and icy that it took a heavy toll on all but the fittest, and those who survived the choking dust finally succumbed to the bitter cold. It was strange, though, why the very young did not complain or resent the harsh conditions, and were content to be involved in whatever capacity as long as it was connected with coal, considering it manly to spit and cough up coal dust wherever they were. Consequently, much prominence was given on the colliers buses to the sign 'Do not spit.'

The three young lads, who happened to be the only youngsters employed in the screen at that time, had been disappointed when Tim Full Pelt had not turned up for work as they had looked forward to a lively confrontation with die-hard Yanto Peg. Their thoughts had then turned enviously to their friend, Emlyn, who was spending his first day down the mine, and the moment the hooter blew they made a dash for the pit head to meet him. They had been surprised to see him walking slowly in a crab like fashion, but so excited had they been in having a close friend who would soon be able to tell them about the working of such a mystical domain, that they dismissed his posture as the consequence of arduous toil. The youthful miner stuck out his chest and spoke excitedly of sweating pit ponies and tame rats that would eat out of your hand, but not a word did he mention of his initiation. Four burly miners had waylaid him, and as they shrieked like hysterical schoolgirls, had torn off his pants and smothered him in axle grease. Even the yellowish new grease had an abominable smell about it, but they had used a well used gritty substance, the smell of which was undescrivable.

His parents greeted him home proudly, but when he stepped into the tin bath, his mother saw the state he was in and cried out in alarm. A sharp object in the grease had cut him badly and he was caked in blood.

"What madman has done this to you, Emlyn?" She called her husband in. "See what some lunatic has done to your son."

"Don't fuss. It's only a harmless prank. We've all been through it, *Cariad!*"

“Harmless! Do you call this harmless? Tell me Emlyn, who did this to you and I’ll go straight up to the Office and report him to Mr. Davies himself,” but the boy’s lips were sealed. He was now a bona-fide miner, registered that day in blood and grease, his credentials an inch long scar.

“That Manzana is back,” called out Mock the Block to the Official who was hurrying down to investigate the hold up. They looked down at the snow white head half way down the side. “Can’t you shift him?” He yelled down but the old man kept scratching for coal. He then tossed down a stone to draw the old man’s attention. “Is he deaf?”

“He’s not deaf, just as artful as a load of monkeys.”

“Wait a tick. I’ll soon shift him,” and the Official took a heavy jack-knife from his pocket and opened the blade. The alarmed Mock grabbed his wrist to restrain him but was pushed aside roughly. “You clown, you don’t think I’m going to cut his throat?” and he reached for the two signal wires above his head, and after drawing them together, drew the blade across them to request the release of the steel rope. The four workmen then slid down the side, dragging it with them and tried to hook it under the old man’s belt to hoist him to the top, but he fought them off desparately and broke away. He slid down, still gripping his bucket, and disappeared through the bushes to where he had hidden his cart.

“Let him go, and grab the rope.” When the winding rope had dragged them to the top he added to his insults. “I’ll leave a message in the Lamp Room for his grandson to come and see me. Foreigners!”

Manzana had been too old to work when he came over with his grandson and his wife Ramona. He had outlived his wife, and neither of his sons had escaped the treacherous Spanish mine in which they had worked. In spite of his age he was not the type of man to sit at home and rock himself to sleep.

Every morning he was up, often before the crowing cocks, and,

after a breakfast of four or five apples, would harness himself to the cart he had made, which was in almost every detail a replica of the one he had left behind. A month before they were due to leave Spain, Ramona had asked him why he was spending so much time grooming his donkey, Chico. "Don't be stupid *muchacha*. It must be obvious, even to you, that we must look our best for the long journey." It was only when they managed to convince him that donkeys had to travel on a special donkey boat that he finally agreed to join them.

He was placing the wide canvas strap across his shoulders when she shouted down at him from the bedroom window. "You act like a donkey, but I don't see why you also have to look like one." She turned to her husband in despair, "I wish we had left him behind with that animal of his, they were made for each other."

Their friends thought the old man, though eccentric, was always good for a laugh. "You should try living with him. He eats so many apples and onions that the stench seeps out through his pores, and at night he spends more time on his chamber pot than in his bed, the house stinks of him."

Manzana was the name the Spaniards had given him because of his enormous appetite for apples, but most of the Welsh were of the opinion that it was his real name, and always acknowledged him cheerfully as such, whenever they met him. He would manage to draw the empty cart with little difficulty, but when it was loaded he would call out to any boys who happened to be playing on what was left of the playing field, and they would readily give up their game and rush over to his assistance.

He would give them instructions slowly and clearly in Spanish, and organise the operation in an orderly fashion, with each holding the rope precisely where he placed them. Some would move their hands mischievously or take a stance to pull in the opposite direction, trying desparately to control their mirth. He would make allowances for any whom he thought might be dim or deaf, and instruct them again, but more slowly and louder. Those who then persisted in dis-

obeying him were dragged from the line and their backsides were booted, his voice could be heard from a mile away. When they had had their fun, they would calm him down and take their places obediently on the rope, and each time the strange procession passed through the streets, doors would be flung open and curtains twitched, the villagers smiling and waving at the noble figure of Manzana proudly strutting between the shafts.

When Ramona heard of her husband's interview with the Official, she was fuming. "Let them sack you and we can all go back to Spain. As if we haven't enough to worry about. I'll never get my washing dry in this place. Yes, let them sack you and it will be the end of all our troubles." She became hysterical and yelled at the old man, "You donkey. You old windbag. You'll be the ruination of us all," but he glared back unflinchingly.

"Cheats and liars never prosper. If you had not parted me from Chico, the only friend I had in the world, we would be going about together each day in search of apples instead of coal. The orchard at the big house is loaded with them."

Rugby Field Crisis

An emergency meeting had been convened at the Rugby Club, and there was an atmosphere of doom in the Committee Room. A storm had raged in the valley and the swollen river Tawe had washed away part of the rugby field to within ten yards of the corner flag. "We'll have to alter the course of the river by straightening the bend." Seth the Sec looked doleful. "It will be a mammoth job, but if we don't, we can kiss goodbye to our field."

Dai Bach shot up from his chair and waved his arms in despair. "It'll be bloody Spring time, or even Summer, before we can get on to the river bed. If we wait that bloody long there'll be no field left to save." Someone suggested felling some of the huge trees which lined the river bank, many of which had started to lean over dangerously, most of their roots washed clean of soil. "Stupid bloody idea. They'll be washed all the way to Swansea in no time at all."

"Well, come on, Dai Bach. You've opposed every suggestion so far. Let's have some concrete ideas from you."

Dai looked across at Seth and pondered a while. "What we need is something really heavy, temporary, just temporary. Concrete comes later."

"What about trams full of boulders?"

He smirked at Will Jones, "And will you be the one to knock on the Office door and say please can I have a dozen trams?"

"No need for that, Dai Bach, there are plenty at the bottom of the slag heap, thanks to Tim Full Pelt." There was a buzz of excitement around the room and Dai's eyes shone like a couple of beacons.

"Better ask for permission, though," suggested the Secretary.

"I'll do that. Leave that to me." Little Dai had been suddenly miraculously transformed from a slouching state of despondency into a human dynamo, and organized the operation like a General. Things went smoothly until his first irritating delay when the Management insisted on consulting Victoriano, the blacksmith, before they would grant permission to remove the trams. He was to

inspect them and see if he could salvage any for re-use. Dai caught him on his way home after working almost a double shift, but managed to persuade him to go with him to the tip, where they went through the motions of inspecting them under the watchful eye of an Official looking down on them from the top of the tip. They climbed up to him and the blacksmith shook his head solemnly, but Dai did all the talking.

“They’ve had a rare bashing. They’re buckled all to hell and Victor says they’re past mending.”

The Official grinned, “You crafty beggers,” and left them to it.

Dai had been confident of their co-operation as it was in the Management’s own best interest for the men to let off steam at the football matches instead of causing mischief elsewhere. It had always been during the off season that there had been unrest, politically and otherwise.

It was still raining heavily, but Dai would not let up. He had been granted permission to borrow Nelson, the pit pony, as he had not been down the mine for weeks since his good eye had been giving trouble, and he had also persuaded Warbling Willy to stay on late at the Boiler House to build up a good head of steam to drive the drum. It would have taken too long to dig out the submerged trams by hand, but the wire rope would soon shake them free, and it would then be up to Nelson to pull them to the river bank.

Dai rushed around the streets to call out all the able bodied men, but when he knocked on Ramona’s door, she nearly died of fright, and pleaded with him to be allowed to stay on in their lovely cottage. Dai was baffled by her sudden outburst in Spanish and was relieved when her husband appeared on the scene. “Calm yourself, woman. This man has called for my help,” and he explained to her what had happened to the football field. He put on his cap and coat and they were almost out of the yard when Manzana trotted after them and said that he would rather help than stay at home. He joined the procession and when he saw Nelson, his face lit up and insisted on

leading him, and patted him and spoke to him incessantly as if he was greeting a long lost friend.

Dai put himself in charge of the wire rope and remained on top because of his skill in signalling. He had once ridden the long line of trams bringing the coal to the surface. It was a job which demanded speed and agility as it entailed jumping off while the trams were in motion, to signal instructions, and then race to catch up and leap on the rear one.

The tram nearest the bottom was the most difficult to move as it was almost completely buried, and before he dare let the rope take the strain he waited for the men below to remove most of the muck around it. He then signalled for the rope to be drawn in sharp jerks to prevent the tram from ploughing back into the side. When it had been shaken free they called for Nelson to be brought up.

“Let go you stupid sod,” but Manzana refused to release his hold and threatened to swipe them with the back of his hand. They stood back, expecting the powerful nag to pull him off his feet, but they were all amazed at his skill and watched spellbound as man and beast worked as one. It was as if Nelson was fluent in Spanish as he responded instantly to every command, and when the last tram was pulled out into the lane, Manzana collapsed onto his knees with exhaustion.

“You’ve done well, Manzana. You deserve a ride,” and they hoisted him up on Nelson’s back, where he sat straight backed and eyes front like a guardsman on parade.

They waited until the blacksmith and his friend, Gregorio, had bashed out the biggest dents in the last tram. “*Adelante!*” Victoriano finally bawled out with a grin, as he waved on the rider and his steed. Nelson took the strain and dug his hoofs into the sodden ground and the going was slow but steady. The word soon spread that Manzana was riding Nelson and every youth rushed out to see, but many were too late to witness the glorious sight, as once they had left the leafy lane and were on to the harder road surface, the going was much

easier and he kneed his mount into a gentle trot, but the most arduous task was yet to come.

The river was still flowing fast, and before anyone could stop him, Manzana was waist deep and coaxing Nelson to drag the first unshackled tram into the river. He was soon joined by a hoard of men who filled it with boulders from the river bed. Nelson soon got over his nervousness of the river with the loud praise and encouragement from Manzana. He stamped firmly into the swift current, and soon the string of trams were butted end to end and loaded with rocks. When the work was completed a cheer rang out for Manzana, and Dai Bach, especially, was full of admiration. His parents expected him to arrive home soaked to the skin and had a glowing fire in readiness, but were surprised to see the tall, gawky Spaniard dripping and shivering at his side.

“Poor dab.” Dai’s mam drew him over to the fire and brought out her bottle of medicinal brandy. They rung out his clothes and wrapped him in a blanket. Manzana remained seated there for hours, gazing contentedly into the flames. When the old clock struck midnight, Dai tried to prize him out of the chair. He took ages to dress, as if he were delaying his departure, as he was reluctant to leave the warm hospitality shown him by Dai and his parents, to confront Ramona’s frosty face and biting tongue.

Paco Returns

Paco's return to the village was as sudden, if not as dramatic, as his departure. He flung open the Inn door and stood there erect and defiant, not knowing what to expect, be it hostility or comradeship. The Welsh there had almost forgotten him, but a compatriot immediately spoke up, "*Hola, Paco. Que tal?*" Although the greeting was brief and lacked enthusiasm, it pleased him, and he called everyone to the bar to drink to his safe return. He lent on the bar with the air of a Duke and the elegance of one, but some must have reflected on the time when his clothes were tatty and threadbare and the elbows and knees of his working clothes heavily patched, and he had walked with the stoop of a burdened miner. This made it all the more baffling why the most alluring and exciting woman in the village, and possibly the whole valley, had lost her heart to him. The little tuft of hair was now gone and his wide forehead shone like burnt ocre. When the ale had been flowing freely for an hour or so, Paco became more talkative and they caught a glimpse of the Paco of old, who was inclined to be boastful. The word *contrabandista* was passed from mouth to mouth and soon all knew the source of his new found wealth, or ill-gotten gains, which was the landlady's interpretation, but none would ever know the full extent of his deceit or debasement.

Before being enticed to the Welsh coalfields, Paco had often dabbled in a spot of smuggling, as had almost everyone in his mountain village, to supplement the pittance scraped from the impoverished land, but when he returned there with the vivacious Margarita on his arm he knew that she would expect and deserved more than the simple basics in her fun-loving life.

He had counted out and sped off with exactly half of the savings in his wife's tin box, and had decided to invest all the capital he possessed in the purchase of contraband. He made several crossings into France, purchasing from legitimate dealers, and continued to build up a steady trade and income. He had no difficulty in recruiting couriers, but Margarita objected strongly to one, named Miguel,

whom they had met on the boat in which they had eloped. "He'll bring us nothing but trouble," she had warned.

Paco had carried out each expedition across to France with the utmost caution and cunning, taking every precaution against the remotest possibility of himself being caught in possession of contraband. He would split the consignment and send it along separate mountain tracks and follow hours later carrying provisions only, and not a single illicit item to discriminate against him. Much of the French food he carried home was distributed amongst his underlings, and soon found its way secretly to the homes of the local police. His profit increased considerably when he was tempted to deal in stolen property, but his biggest financial breakthrough was brought about by accident, when he literally stumbled upon it.

He had been on the French side of the border when he had been served short by a crafty Frenchman, and it was not until the goods were being loaded that they discovered the empty boxes at the bottom of the stack.

"I'm not leaving until I've found that French swine." They called in at the many bars and circulated his description, but the reply was always an unhesitant no, except for one loathsome looking brute who sent Paco in the direction of a cluster of dilapidated buildings, and then slipped out after him. Still in a vile temper he forged on well ahead of the others, muttering what he was going to do to the dirty swindler. Two drunks slumped on a stone step in the dimly lit street, one with his legs outstretched on the road. Paco cursed and gave the feet a vicious kick, but before he could advance a step further he was knocked down and pinned to the ground with two knives pricking his throat. There was much snarling in French and the knives pricked deeper, but Miguel was soon upon them clubbing them with his bludgeon. They were barely conscious when he heaved them to a sitting position and Paco went through their pockets. The haul he found in those grubby jackets would have financed many an expedition. Miguel questioned them gruffly in French, but they

remained silent, and one, whose skull must have been thicker, made a dash for freedom, but Miguel went bounding after him, his heavy boots thundering in the narrow passage. An agonising scream pierced the night air and then a brief chilling silence as they awaited his return. His companion began to babble excitedly in French and then Spanish, and pointed to the top of a partly demolished tenement. Paco sent his men ahead and he and Miguel followed stealthily in the shadows. It was a hazardous ascent as nearly every other step was missing or rotten and the open doors on either side creaked in that draughty stairway.

They reached the top floor where the landing had been reasonably patched. The door was locked but the frightened man produced a key from his boot. Paco pushed him in and signalled for his men to follow while he returned to the top of the stairs to peer down through the dismal gloom, but there was no-one following. When he caught up with them they were all in an ecstatic mood. Miguel had again clubbed the Frenchman and they were all eagerly rummaging through piles of glittering loot, much of which was made of gold. Paco stood agape and then took swift command. He warned that there was much work to be done and no time to waste. He sent young Tomas to fetch the mules and put two men on guard in the street below. "There are sure to be more men in the gang, so keep out of sight and just give a signal if any appear."

They worked feverishly and what they could not carry that night, they hid in the woods. "*Que suerte!*" They were all delighted with their good luck at not being intercepted. The ruthless Miguel was all for silencing the only witness, but Paco stopped him. "If you do, we shall never know from where it all came."

Paco realized that on this occasion his men expected a greater share, and when they returned home he called Margarita down to the cellar, where they all eagerly helped to compile an inventory in a large black ledger. They respected and trusted her and when she explained that caution and patience were the essence of a successful outcome,

they agreed wholeheartedly and each went their way; that was all except the Frenchman who had surprisingly contributed to the proceedings by putting names to some unusual objects. He flashed them a broad grin of gold and nicotine, overjoyed that his life had been spared. He had shown no remorse at the loss of his bullying partner or of the accumulated plunder. Paco sent Margarita for some blankets and food and they bolted the door. Each day Paco became more suspicious at the Frenchman's readiness to co-operate and warned everyone to be wary, but he turned out to be an invaluable accomplice and guided them inside the premises of nearly every goldsmith for miles around, and at times the haul was staggering, and he seemed happy simply to feel the crispness of the franc notes he was handed from time to time.

Paco became obsessed with his power of domination over his men, and there appeared in his stride a pronounced swagger. He was anxious to seek and exploit pastures new and linked up with ever petty thief from Bayonne to Perpignan, and was away for days and sometimes weeks on end. Margarita became irritable and restless. "What's the good of money, if you can't go out and spend it." Rather than while away the time in utter monotony among the toothless aged and bleating goats, she insisted that they drop her off at the small French hotel they often used, and collect her on their way home.

He flatly refused. "Don't you know that a back room is reserved for *putanas*, or is that the reason for wanting to go?" He realised that he had gone too far, and her jewelled hand smote him in the mouth.

She skulked and scowled for days until he finally succumbed. "You're more stubborn than all my mules." While she was away on one of her jaunts she took a shine to a French Basque who sometimes sold his spoils to Paco. The thief had gained access to every chateau in the region and it was beneath his dignity to be associated with the smaller fry. During the weeks that followed they were both intensely involved in an intrigue of secret messages, but the sweeping power of passion became so overwhelming that he was prepared to forsake his

beloved homeland and seek his fortune in distant Morocco where, he had been told, was a lucrative trade, especially with the Sea Captains who plied the many ports. He had but little choice as he was aware that a fistful of gold could seal his fate on either side of the frontier.

When Paco called at the hotel to collect her, his jubilation at such a successful encounter with the rogues of Oloron, was soon shattered when he discovered that his unpredictable bird of passion had flown. He delayed his departure for two days as he scoured the countryside, but the elopers had covered their tracks with the cunning of a fox.

It was on his homeward journey that he had his first serious setback. Luckily, he was travelling free of any contraband, and as an extra precaution, now that his merchandise was of infinite value, he sent Tomas ahead. The four French policemen lurking in the bushes, ignored the young peasant who carried only his wine bota over his shoulder. He took a swig and held it out to them but they declined, "*No gracias, muchacho.*" Once around the bend, he quickly dismounted and climbed the steep rocky cliff like a monkey. He dared not shout, so rolled a small rock down the other side to warn Miguel just as they were about to turn into the straight stretch of track towards the ambush. The mules were reined up quickly and pulled off the rocky path on to one more perilous, which required the strength of all to assist in the steep climb. Some hours later the police came out, tired of their long vigil, and started to walk along the track. Tomas had continued on his journey, not unduly worried for his master, as he had helped that day to load the perishable goods.

"Are you Paco Ramirez?"

"*Si, si*, what news have you? Have you found my Margarita?" He spoke humbly and started to dismount. They did not answer him, and dragged everything off the mule, and tore off the wrappings until the ground was strewn with ripe fruit, poultry and smashed eggs. They then took off his jacket and felt in his pockets and linings.

"You wait, we'll get you yet. One day we'll catch you," and they

pushed him into the gorse.

He rode his mule home that night, feeling dejected, his head bowed low in deep thought. "No, surely not. Margarita could not have told them." He knew he had given her a hard time of late, and she had especially deeply resented being relegated to the roll of courier on one of the return trips, to keep a eye on the devious ambitious Miguel. "Have you no more love or respect for me?" she wailed, "than to let me travel within a mile of that ravisher. We had to carry him blind drunk from the brothel and tie him onto his mule."

"He couldn't have had his money's worth then," interjected Paco with a supercilious grin, and had to step back quickly to avoid a torrent of flying objects and abuse.

"The filthy beast must be poked up to his eyeballs," she continued.

"Shut up, you gibbering gipsy, and don't tell me you're not one."

Her father had always strenuously denied being one, but Paco suspected that he must have spilled much blood in his uncontrollable temper, and had either fled or been banished from some distant encampment. She had stood before him that day, shaking with rage, her white teeth flashing in the darkness of the shuttered room. Hours of blinding, unshaded sunshine on the high mountain passes had burned her once olive skin almost as black as her long raven hair.

The look of hatred and contempt in the eyes of the gendarmes had unnerved him, and long before he crossed into Spain, his mind was made up. If Margarita could disappear without trace, then so could he. His thoughts went out to the tranquility of the little Welsh village and was glad he had been persuaded to keep in touch with his family. Margarita had never been entirely free of the feeling of guilt, and had insisted from the outset that he was to provide for them. A reliable seaman had been found, whom they paid handsomely to deliver goods and money to Garcia's shop in Swansea, who in turn took them up the valley on his weekly round. She had also taken great

pains to find the whereabouts of her impetuous father, who had left the lush green Welsh valley for an arid Spanish plain because, as he had said, he missed the bray of the ass and the heat of the sun, but it was the loss of his precious daughter which had determined his departure. This was good news as he would not have stopped short of murder had he caught up with the elusive Paco.

He was now determined to leave Spain as soon as possible, and disposed of his goods and chattels at give away prices, and was pleased that the news had got round of his encounter with the law, as it provided a good excuse for his haste.

"I will come back when things quieten down." He feared that any further enquiries or harassment from the police would mean an admission of failure, and destroy his credibility as an astute leader of men. He avoided Bilbao and Santander, where he was well known, and after leaving several false trails, travelled to a small northern French port and embarked on a fishing trawler.

He was more than pleased to be back at the place he had once thought would have killed him of boredom. He glanced around the low rafted bar, and through the haze of smoke he scrutinized each face in turn, and for the first time in his life he felt compassion for these, his fellow men, and was determined to lift them, if only momentarily from their drudgery and hopelessness. "I'll give them a party," he said to himself. "That will boost their moral for a day and a night."

His eyes were shining brightly when he bade them all *adios*, and he felt a glowing warmth inside him, even for the acid tongued wife he had deserted. He walked in through the back door and called out, unabashed, the same greeting as of old, "I'm Paco. I'm Paco the King of Morrocco."

"And I wish you were back there," would have been the start of her ceaseless contemptuous scorn, but not so on this occasion. There was a stony silence as he looked down on the sombre gathering before him. His wife and three daughters were seated straight backed, and

there was an array of cake stands and silver basins, and a glossy floral tea set on an exquisitely laced tablecloth, and they were sipping tea as sedately as in a vicarage tea party. The daughters stared wide eyed and then jumped to their feet with squeals of glee as they rushed to meet their father. He tossed them each a packet and one for his wife, and sat back in the strange leather chair which reeked of pipe tobacco, and for the first time stared across at the ginger headed man fidgeting nervously at the head of the table.

His presence in the household had come about just by chance two years earlier. He had looked over the garden fence and saw her swinging the heavy garden hoe, brought over by the imigrants to till the soil as Spanish peasants had done for generations. "That is far too heavy for a lady. I'll show you how to use a fork." The next day and the next, the meek and gentle Caerog could be seen digging and weeding and planting, and the garden flourished as never before.

He had lived alone and his windows had sparkled and his curtains had hung crisp and fresh, and he could cook and bake as good as any woman, and better than most. His job as colliery pay clerk qualified him for a cottage and his influence with the Management prevented his neighbour being evicted. As he became more accustomed to taking his place at her table, he gradually introduced them to a more genteel way of life, hence the gleaming crockery and crystal paraphenalia.

Paco sank well back in his chair with his eyes still fixed on Caerog. He flicked out the slim blade of his gem encrusted penknife and started to clean out his nails while the children were excitedly opening their packets, but his wife remained rigid and had left hers where it landed, between the wobbling jelly and the dainty triangles of bread and butter. Her slightly hooked nose twitched, and her bright beady eyes darted to his every move, like a bird of prey about to swoop. Paco then jerked his head sharply towards the door. "You pig," she screeched, "he's a nice man."

"Yes I can see he's very *simpatico*." Caerog started towards the

stairs. "No! No! My Pilar, she will pack your nightdress." His last caustic words were drowned in shrieks of delight as the girls displayed their jewellery. There was enough gold distributed amongst them to buy up the street.

"Come on girls, I could do with some help for the job I've got in hand." On the way to the village hall, he revealed that he was going to give the biggest party the village had ever known.

"But you should have told Mama."

"Your Mama will know soon enough when she gets over the shock of seeing me." He booked and paid for the hall for a Saturday, three weeks hence, and made it known that every miner and his family were invited.

One stiff necked woman sniffed the air and slipped out hurriedly. "And there's a job for you, my beautiful daughters, to spread the good word and invite the good folk."

"But Papa, they don't all live in the village. Why not ask Uncle Caerog to pin a notice on the notice board."

"Let's have no more talk of uncles, but it's good thinking, Angelita, very good thinking. I must also get in touch with our good friend, *Señor Garcia*." The girls called on many families, but it soon became obvious that the staid chapel goers could not forget or forgive, and made trivial excuses for declining.

The scheming Paco was not deterred and struck on a brainwave. He made straight for the Rugby Secretary's house. His wife eyed him coldly but Seth saw him from over her shoulder and welcomed him in like an old friend. Paco had been a keen supporter and seldom missed a game, but his sole interest was in the Spanish youth who had outshone them at their own game.

"Sad about Ramon. It's been disastrous for the club." He had wondered if the club had prospered, but did not expect such a forthright admission of adversity. After a few minutes of polite exchange, he decided to strike home his suggestion. Paco began cautiously, explaining that he had worked hard to build up a

successful business abroad, and, in view of his past happy relationship with the club, would like to offer a substantial donation. Seth walked to the sideboard, having heard enough to merit a celebration drink. They supped their ale and Paco, although he apologised repeatedly about his poor English, made himself perfectly clear. Instead of throwing a party for miners only, he would like to extend it to members of the Club and their families but, as he had so little knowledge of arranging social functions, would like the Club to organize it as they did it so well. He assured the astounded secretary that, in addition to their own wealth of talent, he would pay for the hire of professional entertainers from as far afield as Swansea and Cardiff. Seth took too big a gulp of his ale and coughed until the tears ran.

Although he had less than three weeks, Seth was confident that, without the need for manipulating funds, it would be a cake-walk and readily accepted, as he knew he would have no difficulty in swaying his beer-swilling Committee.

Within days he had contacted the Agencies and collected Paco's cheque to pay in advance for some formidable bookings of dancers, jugglers and a ventriloquist. The club was not short of good singers, especially one, Rees Watkins, who was considered to be better than many professionals. There was also the talented Warbling Willy, as no programme would be complete without his name.

On the night before the grand event, Garcia turned up hot and fatigued after the worst drive he had ever experienced. On realizing that his own van was far too small, the only vehicle he was able to borrow at that late hour was an oil burning wreck of a lorry on solid tyres. It steamed and spluttered the whole way, and the heat from the engine was overpowering and had to be constantly topped up with water to prevent it from exploding.

It seemed that every woman in the village was lending a hand, and they worked and fussed no less than if they were preparing a royal banquet. When they thought they had finished, Jaco turned up with his cart laden with flowers, but instead of receiving praise for his

magnificent blooms, he was reproached for leaving things so late as they had to rush around to find containers to put them all in. He looked on incredulously as the flowers were crammed into any available pot or vase. Eventually he raised his arms in anguish. "Stop that! They're delicate blooms, not powder shot!" He sniffed at an unblemished wax-like pompom dahlia and an earwig dropped into a jug of fresh cream. He glanced around but no one had noticed and he carried on with his tale of woe. "Hope they don't smell smoky, but it's that fire maniac next door. However, I think I've found a solution."

He started to explain but the women were too busy to listen. It transpired however, that his Spanish neighbour, also a keen gardener, burned every bit of rubbish he could lay his hands on, which included old boots and rubber tyres, as he held a firm belief that the ash would not only nurture the soil but also kill or ward off pests and disease. Poor Jacko did not smoke, but when he worked in his garden he coughed more than sixty-a-day puffers, and his greenhouse was frequently shrouded in an acrid blanket of smoke. He, on the other hand, was a very considerate neighbour and always lit a piece of paper to see which way his own bonfire would blow. This gave him an idea, and he trotted next door and waited until Bernardo got up off his knees from blowing a sparking piece of hessian which he was trying to ignite. It had been hard going for Jacko, as the old codger simply smiled and said "*Si, Si,*" when he had not the foggiest idea what was being said. Jacko was about to give up when he saw Nico racing along the back lane. "Come here my little blacksmith. Just the fellow I want to see." He explained his idea and Nico jabbered it back in Spanish. The greenfingered Spaniard was reluctant at first, but when he was told that he could light up in the prevailing winds which did not blow across Jacko's garden, he agreed to comply with the request.

"Is you're daddy at home?"

"Should be by now, Mr Beamish."

"Hang on. Don't run. I want to come with you."

He sat drawing a sketch, and the moment the blacksmith finished mopping his plate with a chunk of bread, he quickly moved up and placed his sketch down in front of him. "Now this is what I want Victor." They found some suitable iron, and Jacko, with the tenacity of a perfectionist, supervised every detail right under the nose of the blacksmith.

When it was finally finished, the exasperated man threw it on the bench. "Go away and no come back."

The delighted Jacko took his precious possession home and spent hours filing down the rough edges before giving it a coat of paint. There was quite a gathering at his fence as he bolted the long pole to his wife's line post, and all stood and admired the gleaming red weathercock as it thrust its proud head due west in the stiff breeze. Peace prevailed thereafter, and the dapper little man remained true to his word and glanced up at the ever watchful bird before setting fire to his pile of oily rags.

The early arrivals at the hall walked alongside the heavily laden tables, and the Spaniards who were unable to express themselves in English, gesticulated dramatically and kept uttering words like '*magnifico*' and '*estupendo*' which the Welsh easily understood, and which they repeated whenever they met a Spanish friend or acquaintance. A few were of the opinion that any word simply necessitated the addition of the letter 'o' to convert it to its Spanish equivalent and ingeniously constructed a new vocabulary.

The Committee had enjoyed its orgy of spending, especially those with friends and relatives in the hill farms. There were suckling pigs, displayed exquisitely by Mari Lewis who had been in service in London, and there were gasps of appreciation at the exotic Spanish dishes, so artistically and intricately arranged to resemble a pattern of colourful mosaic.

When all were seated and the gastric juices were starting to flow, Seth got up and made a long tedious speech of welcome and a plea for greater support for his rugby team, but long before he had finished,

fingers could be seen reaching out to the nearest dishes. When they finally saw him seated, amidst the deafening clamour and chatter, the food disappeared as if before a swarm of locusts.

“Order! Order! One man one voice!”

“Shush, it’s Rees Watkins.”

Rees sang a sentimental song, his eyes closed and still clutching his glass of ale. He swayed emotionally from side to side, the ale spilling down on the glossy head of the pianist, who continued to play as if mesmerized by the flawless, delightful rendering. There followed enthusiastic clapping and cheering and calls for an encore, but when the dancing girls spilled out from the cramped wings, the shouts changed to whistles, and goggling eyes were focussed on the strip of tantalizing white flesh between the tops of their fishnet stockings and shiny black briefs.

The dancers were half way through their high kicking number when the double doors crashed open and in burst Religious Maggie and her band of disciples. Their placards carried the boldly worded ADULTERER, and their sole objective was Paco, but when they saw the scantily dressed dancers they charged the stage, thrashing out unmercifully. By the time the inebriated Organising Committee were able to react, the girls had fled screaming from the stage and Maggie was heading straight for Paco who was seated at the head of a long trestle table. Just as she was about to crack down her battered placard, she was grabbed from behind by two Committee men, who tried their best to calm her.

“To the river. To the river,” went up the chant around the hall. A gang of young hot-heads, fuddled with wine, and resentful of her tedious damnation of all infidels, rushed forward and half carried and half dragged the struggling, dishevelled woman through the door towards the river, but before they got to the bridge, the entire Committee was in hot pursuit. Seth the Sec aimed a kick at the seat of his wayward son who was gripping tightly to her ankles. There followed a scrummage, which almost suffocated the terrified woman,

but they managed to extricate her, bruised and battered.

By the time they got back to the hall sanity prevailed once more. The tables had been cleared away and the chairs were lined up in neat rows facing the stage and Top up Tommy, the ventriloquist, was about to make his appearance. He was soon in true husky form with a larger than usual Toby Jug at his side. Now, Tom Shelton was a very crafty man. Before accepting an engagement he would stipulate that he could not perform without an adequate supply of ale. "It's my throat, you see. Damaged beyond repair after twenty years on stage."

The idea of his Dutch Boy dummy was conceived, he often related, while observing his sister indulge in her skilful hobby of patchwork quilt making, and the neatly patched suit she made was a work of art. The first jug had been drained down at an amazing rate during a boisterous bout of bullying and ranting between man and dummy. He then threw his voice into the empty outstretched vessel and cried out squeakily, "Top me up. Top me up," and his pretty little niece would trip on daintily with his replenishment, but the biggest laugh came at the very end when, after being forced to drink some ale, the cheeky little Hans pulled out his tiny tinkle and weed in Tommy's eye.

The social event was talked about for years and considered a huge success, in spite of the many convictions which followed. "Such unseemly behaviour in such a respectable community," was how the Magistrate summed up before pronouncing judgement.

Miguel's Dilemma

Since Paco's hasty departure from Spain, Miguel appeared to be in no great hurry to take over command, and many thought that his days of thieving and thuggery were over. Most of the day he would spend sleeping or lounging around, but at night he drank heavily. One by one his band of hopefuls returned to tend stock and till land in distant remote mountain hamlets, until there remained only Tomas, who followed him like a devoted terrier, and was always on hand with a mule to carry him home when helplessly drunk. One evening when he was returning to the village, leading a herd of goats, he saw a man heading his way. There was no mistaking the slouching amble of Miguel, and was about to wave a greeting, when he turned on him savagely. "If you follow me tonight, I'll skin you alive," and, kicking his way through the bleating animals, he continued his way along the mountain track.

When the goats had been tethered and milked, Tomas harnessed his favourite mule, Pablo, and, slinging a coil of rope over his shoulder, travelled along the same path to the next village. It had been an exceptionally long vigil outside the primitive *taberna*, which gave the impression of it having been hurriedly constructed with little attempt at uniformity in the assortment of brick and stone, and the crudely moulded roof tiles dipped and rose to follow the contour of the bowed oak beams.

He had watched the last of the locals leave, the agitated voices of one group echoing loudly as they continued their heated discussion, but the landlord was reluctant to close his bar while he had a customer who was so crazed for drink that he cared not what he paid. When the door was eventually opened, Miguel was dragged out by the ankles and dumped in the corner of the yard. Pablo snorted loudly and, shaking his harness, made his way without bidding to the helpless drunk. Tomas kicked at his boots and shook him by the hair. When that failed to rouse him he drew water from the well and doused him, in an attempt to revive him sufficiently to mount the mule.

A sudden fierce blast of icy wind swept down the mountain, and freakish black strands of cloud streaked across the skyline like demon outriders heralding the cumbersome thunder clouds which drifted ominously over the mountain top to obliterate the craggy peaks, and then rumble and roll, black and menacing, to unleash its first whipping rain. In desperation, Tomas banged on the door to summon help, but the light had been carried upstairs, and the rest of the village was in total darkness, being securely shuttered. A door of a roofless outbuilding was swinging noisily on one hinge and he managed to lift it clear and drag it over to the sodden drunk, but however hard he tried he could not move him an inch. He then remembered the rope, and with the help of the mule was able to roll him over on to the heavy oak door. There followed the most gruelling and frightening journey he had ever made, and the only light to shine their way was the continuous flashes of lightening. At times he feared that the buffeting wind would fling them off the narrow path into the inky blackness of a ravine, but he fought against the elements with strength he never knew he possessed. He was thankful that he had brought Pablo as no other mule he knew would have remained so calm and sure-footed on that treacherous track. Many would have bolted when deafening claps of thunder shook the mountain side. It was not until they were entering the comparative calm of their own sheltered village that Miguel showed any sign of life. He moaned loudly and was violently sick, and the wine he had paid tenfold for, joined the gushing water as it trenched deeply through the gravelly road. He felt the rope which bound him, and like a raving madman struggled to be free. There was no time to loosen the tightening knots and Tomas swiftly cut him free and yelled Paco into a gallop, still dragging the bouncing door, but now free of its hideous load.

Miguel's first encounter with Tomas had been in the streets of San Sebastian one wintry morning. He had crossed the road in idle curiosity to see what held the attention of a group of onlookers, and had been impressed with the knife-throwing skill of a bare foot

urchin. A shapely display dummy had been tied to a wooden frame propped against a warehouse wall. Six knives had already been thrown, and some were still quivering on either side of the slim neck and waist. He had just been in time to see the last two flash to the target with amazing speed and accuracy, missing the white thighs by a hair's breadth. A woman shuddered and clutched her coat, but the appreciative audience had started tossing coins into the torn cap, when a warning cry rang out, "*La Policia!*" The boy scooped up his cap and grabbed the dummy before disappearing down a nearby alley. Unfortunately, when he thought he was safely clear, a policeman stepped out from a doorway. He turned quickly but to his dismay another blocked his retreat. Miguel had watched them walk back into the wide thoroughfare, one policeman holding the skinny youth by the scruff of his neck, while the other carried the dummy, complete with the knives firmly embedded in the wood. There had been so much abuse hurled at them, especially from one of the women present. "Why don't you go off and catch criminals. He was doing no harm. Can't you see he's half starved, the *pobrecito*."

"If you don't be quiet, we'll take you in too."

Miguel had found himself following from a safe distance. There was little he could have done to help, but the episode had conjured up so vividly in his mind a scene in his early childhood and had stirred within him the fierce hatred he had felt towards his father who had driven him from home at a very tender age, and he saw himself in the tragic waif. Even the knives had been symbolic as he too had been obsessed with them, and which had been the cause of his father's final outburst.

He had been withdrawing them from the twisted trunk of the old almond tree nearest the window when a chair came hurling through the glass, followed by a thunderous roar as his father's mountainous flab got wedged in the splintered frame, against which he had collapsed, his red-streaked, bulging eyes glaring at the boy with such intensity of hatred, the wine still dripped revoltingly from the thick

entanglement of beard. A final ear-splitting scream had then pierced the tranquility of that orchard as the jagged edges tore deeply into his arms, and he almost fell into the patio, streaming with blood. As he lurched forward, struggling to regain his balance, he aimed a swinging blow at his son which sent him reeling. He had stopped only momentarily to glance down stupified before aiming a kick at the boy's head, but luckily the exertion toppled him sideways and he fell crashing against the tree. "I'll give you knives," he ranted as he reached for one above his head. He would no doubt have killed his son, had not his wife been returning from the vegetable plot. She had heard the commotion and quickened her steps, believing it to be yet another of her husband's tantrums, but when she saw him crawling towards the limp form with a knife held high she rushed forward and brought down the heavy hoe with all her might.

"My boy! My poor boy!" She gathered up her son in her arms and ran up the steep hill behind their house collapsing on the stone steps of a large grey building. A nun heard her cry and called out urgently for assistance. Soon many footsteps were heard echoing along that bleak lofty corridor.

The large rambling old building had recently been bequeathed to the nuns by an eccentric land owner who had allowed his land to become overgrown and the buildings to fall into an acute state of decay. Its use, he stressed, was to provide a home for the mentally ill in the locality, some of whom he had befriended and had tried to help by providing food and shelter, but this charitable act led to his untimely death at the hands of one, mad Manuel.

They took the boy indoors, and when they were carrying him through the gloom to an inner room he jerked up his head and screamed out in terror, almost jolting himself free of their gentle hold, but once in the light of the window he looked up at the kindly faces and was reassured.

They examined him carefully, and although they could find nothing wrong with him they agreed to look after him for two days, but

the next morning, well before light, he crept through the silent building and managed to open the kitchen window. From then on, each day increased the distance between himself and his loathesome father.

Miguel had stood on the corner of the street in San Sebastian within sight of the police station. He had often been able to bribe officials in remote outposts, but this was a thriving town and was swarming with police. He was pondering his next move when he saw the boy spring to life just as they were opening the door of the police station. He struggled and twisted free and fled like a hare down a market side street thronged with shoppers. He did not follow as he was suddenly drawn to the knives so hastily abandoned, and quickly climbed the steps to remove them from the dummy. As he pulled them out he wondered what had possessed the boy to embark on such a bizzare adventure, but it was several months later that he was able to piece together the boy's sorrowful background. He then learned that his passionate involvement with knives began when, as a homeless urchin of ten, he had crawled under the canvas of a big top for a free view of the circus. He had sat spell bound, but his greatest fascination had been the knife-throwing act, and had been overwhelmingly convinced that the bravest person in the world had been the petite assistant who had stood unflinching before the barrage of heavy knives, and he did not miss a single performance until the circus left town.

With the knives in his possession, Miguel had been determined to seek out the lad and return them to him, but where could he start? He walked through the old quarters, Parte Vieja, and along the fishing harbour, and then decided to retrace his steps to the warehouse against which the target had been placed, but his enquiries met with a sullen silence and suspicion. A shrug of the shoulders or an emphatic shake of the head was their only response.

The morning was chilly and the big man fancied a snack of hot chocolate and *churos* at the cafe he had passed earlier. He had just

started to dip in his first *churo* when a gang of ragged boys passed the window and he instantly recognised the young lad who had that morning yelled out the warning. There was no time to waste, so he crammed the food into his mouth almost choking as he washed it down with the scalding chocolate, but when he reached the door they had vanished. He ran to the corner and was just in time to see them enter a wooden building encircled by tall iron railings. He was peering through the window when two nuns came out carrying a portmanteau. He apologised for his impudent curiosity, but they smiled and explained that, regretfully, it was the only building available to cater for the homeless children of the town, and they were on their way to collect food so generously donated by one of the many benefactors. As they spoke two more nuns approached struggling with a laden hamper, its lid half open and resting on some loaves of bread. He went to assist them. "Allow me," and lifted it with ease and followed them inside, his massive frame filling the doorway. He chatted with the nuns and complimented them on the homely atmosphere they had created. The exterior had been treated with a thick tarry substance, but the interior was clad in a shiny pitch pine and glowed in the light of the fire.

"It is just a start, but we will soon be needing larger premises."

"Well, allow me to contribute a trifle to your good cause." In front of the eager waifs he produced a bulging wallet and emptied almost its entire contents on to the bench on which they were preparing a meal. They thanked him graciously and invited him to eat with them. He readily accepted as he had at that moment observed the knife thrower in the building. He waited until the boy was seated at the table and went over to sit next to him, and with difficulty managed to cram his long legs under it. All eyes were on the nun carrying a steaming saucepan of red beans and *chorizos*, when the door opened and the two policemen entered. Miguel immediately put his hand on the boy's head and pushed him down under the table and tucked him behind his legs. An elderly nun went to meet them and scolded them for

interrupting their meal, addressing them by their christian names. They started to walk towards the table but she complained bitterly and showed them the door. As they were leaving, they stopped briefly to scrutinize each face staring back at them innocently. When they had gone, Miguel reached down and hauled the boy back on to his seat, but waited until the meal was over before inviting him to peer inside his coat pocket. When the boy saw the knives he looked alarmed and tried to run off, but was held back firmly.

“Don’t be scared. I’m not a policeman,” but he did not believe him and tried to wrench free. “Just listen to what I have to say.”

He explained to the boy that he had removed the knives while the police were chasing him, and that he had been so impressed with his performance that he was prepared to offer him a job. The boy’s eyes lit up, believing it to be connected in some way with the circus, but when the stranger mentioned that he was about to leave that day for his *pueblo* in the mountain and that there was a job there for him looking after the mules, he looked up suspiciously at the hard, leathery face and politely declined. Miguel shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, it’s up to you, but if you should change your mind this is where you’ll find me,” and he sketched the boy a rough map.

It was more than a year later when a weary, hungry youth set foot in the hot, dusty mountain village. Even at that altitude there was not a breath of air to rustle the scorched foliage and it needed but a spark to ignite the parched hillside.

“Could you please tell me where I can find *Señor Miguel Cortes*?”

“Up to no good, you can be sure.” The peasant woman was wrapped in a thick black shawl in spite of the heat, and she spat into the dust before proceeding on her way.

“Just my luck to stop a crackpot,” thought Tomas as he looked along the deserted street. He reached the end without seeing a soul and then, from out of a thicket of gorse, emerged an old woman, so heavily laden with fire wood strapped to her back that she was almost

bent double and could not possibly see where she was going. The boy's voice must have startled her and she stumbled and fell forward, the weight of her load pinning her to the ground. She lay there motionless, not attempting to move, and waited for him to remove her load. As she scrambled to her feet she glared at Tomas.

"Now see what you've done. Don't stand there like a mute. Who did you say you were looking for?" She listened impatiently. "Speak up! Speak up! I can tell you this much. You won't find him here today, tomorrow or the day after, so make yourself useful."

Tomas helped her to carry the wood the short distance to her home, which was quite spacious with much land and many outbuildings, a mountain of wood being already stacked against one of them.

"Bring some indoors," she ordered. "It's time we ate."

He brushed past an evil smelling billy goat tethered near the back door as it lurched forward to nip his shirt.

"*Afuera! Afuera!*" She shrieked at the chickens and sent them squawking from the kitchen. The old woman proceeded to push some twigs under the black saucepan which had been simmering for hours, and with a few puffs of her bellows there was quite a blaze. She dipped her ladle into the *cocido* and filled two deep dishes with the steaming yellow chick peas and boiled chicken. She did not speak until she was half-way through their meal when she stopped to watch him intently as if she had never seen food eaten so quickly before.

"When did you last eat? Was it last year or the year before?" She spoke biting as if she resented his huge appetite, and then, to his astonishment, she slapped her knee and rocked with laughter. The young lad looked on wide eyed and wondered if the village was full of such people, but he was soon to learn that there was an immense reservoir of humour bubbling beneath the parchment. She did not question him too thoroughly, but gleaned sufficient to learn that he was alone in the world, and it worried her why one so young should seek the company of such a feared, heartless rogue. Although he

called several times to buy mules for Paco, she had ignored his glib talk and kept her gate securely padlocked until payment had been made in full.

“You are welcome to stay until your friend returns, but you must be prepared to work. Come, this is where you can sleep.” She took him over to a long low building which reeked of goat manure, and pointed up to the loft which covered only half the floor space below. “Your first job today will be to bring in the goats and help with the milking.”

That night, when all the work was done, he stretched out on the clean blankets she had given him, but although he was tired he was kept awake with the rustling and squeaking of the hungry rats in the empty goat stalls below. He waved his arm to scare them off, but to his surprise they ignored him and continued to squeal and clammour feverishly for food. Tomas got up on his knees and waved both arms, and it suddenly occurred to him that, as long as he remained silent, they did not look up. He groped inside his leather bag and very quietly took out his knives and set them along the edge of the loft. He had noticed that the rats entered and left the building along a narrow plank and he decided to aim for this in order to protect the sharp point of the blades. He raised himself to a crouching position and a quick flick of the wrist sent the first knife flashing through the bright moonlight with deadly accuracy, pinning the luckless victim firmly to the wood. The rats stopped, momentarily startled, but soon resumed their activities, and it was not until the fifth victim squealed in pain that the entire floor was cleared in one frantic stampede.

When Miguel returned to the village he had much difficulty in explaining to Paco and Margarita the presence of Tomas in their midst.

“He’s far too young to be of any use. You’d better take him back where you found him.” It was not until the old woman mentioned that he was a real gem with the mules and had got some work out of Monolo, that they decided to allow him on their next mission. They had needed no further recommendation as the black faced devil

they had purchased from her had been both stubborn and spiteful, causing much damage to limb and property with his bucking and biting. Miguel had thrashed him unmercifully, but had to admit defeat and return him to the paddock.

A year had passed since he bade goodbye to Paco and he felt he could stand no more of the desolate, slumberous retreat, and even the drink no longer relieved the agonising stabbing pain of depression which at times overwhelmed him, and which, even in the street, would cause him to roar like a wild beast, clutching his head. For days he did not drink, his sole craving was to escape, yet he dare not leave as he knew Tomas was sure to follow. The only soft spot in his black heart was for the young orphan and he did not wish to corrupt him further. During the past plundering raids under Paco's command he had protected him by insisting that he remained hidden with the mules until they returned.

He knew that Tomas was never happier than when he was with the animals, especially mules, and so he went to see the old woman and offered to pay her well if she would take on the boy permanently. She angrily scorned the offer of payment but said she would do so only if he left the village and promised never to return. They called Tomas in from the goats and she told him that Miguel would soon be leaving to look after a sick friend and didn't know when he would be back. If she had mentioned it was at any place on earth other than San Sebastian, from where he had fled, it would have been futile even to attempt persuasion.

A miraculous change had come over Miguel as he left that house. He paused for a moment in the doorway and stretched himself to his full height and extended his barrel chest as he inhaled the obnoxious smell of the stamping, straining goat which stopped briefly to drink its own jet of urine. He laughed aloud and gave it a playful swipe across his dribbling snout. The few peasants who had ventured out in the oppressive heat looked twice at the man striding towards them, and they saw in him the same erect, swaggering bully who had entered

their village some years past to disrupt their tranquil life, and not the pathetic drunkard they had known of late.

He had felt free at last, and refreshed from his siesta, Miguel strapped his bulging money bag under his flannel shirt and slung a bag of provisions over his shoulder to start the long trek up the same eerie mule track he loathed, and which he had crossed so often with the old gang. The air became cooler and, with spirits raised, was prepared to travel through the night, but when he had crossed the French border he kept well clear of the old haunts lest he be recognized. He was still uncertain what to do with his life or where to go, and after spending several leisurely days in Tarbes he decided to make his way to the very familiar Toulouse, where, as a runaway lad, he had spent several years.

The first four years away from home Miguel had spent in the large towns where there were many homeless to teach him the art of survival, and he soon learned that stealth and cunning were the two main ingredients for a full stomach, but he found to his regret, that in the town of Santander the police were far more vigilant and he was kept constantly on the move. One day, cold and hungry, he had been looking through the open door of a cafe when a customer called out *aurevoir* as he was leaving. He watched him climb in the cab of his cattle truck and was moving away when he decided there and then to get right away from the town, and even the country. He ran after the chugging lorry and climbed the wooden slats, and a sudden jolt pitched him forward on to the back of a calf, which collapsed under his weight, causing more to topple over. He was appalled at the cramped and filthy conditions in which they were being transported, and struggled frantically to prevent a very frail one being suffocated. He had intended to jump off before the lorry reached its destination, but he had been so preoccupied in trying to keep the pitiful animals alive during the long frightening journey that they were inside the concrete yard of the slaughterhouse before he realised where he was. He had tried to flee through the quickly narrowing gap of the closing

iron gate, but a blood stained hand grabbed him. A voice had boomed out in French from the open office window and he was led firmly towards the beckoning finger. The man spoke angrily to Miguel, who raised his arms apologetically, "*No comprendo, Señor,*" He then irritably waved them inside and drew the phone towards him. He spoke into it for a while and handed it to the boy who backed away too scared to touch it. He was pulled roughly up to the desk and the ear piece was held tightly against his ear, and he heard a voice come through clearly in Spanish. She sounded so friendly and motherly that he had felt immediately at ease, and after answering several questions was asked to hand back the phone. Her husband ended the conversation curtly and shouted something to the youngest of the office girls.

She giggled as she led Miguel to a large sink in the next room and handed him a bar of soap. He quickly washed his hands and the front of his face and was reaching for the towel when she snatched it away. "*Non! Non!*" She peeled off his shirt and pinched her nose as she threw it under the sink. She then gave him a good lathering from his head to his waist before rinsing it off and rubbing him down so energetically that his skin turned pink. Fearing that she was about to start on the bottom half, he shied away from the sink, tightening his trouser belt, but she grinned mischievously as she rummaged about in a cupboard, stacked high with white jackets. She must have selected the largest as it reached to his ankles and his hands were lost half way up the sleeves. There had been much merriment when they returned to the office, and even the grumpy boss had to force a smile as he glanced over at the thick mop of black hair which she had deliberately twisted into two great horns. The laughter continued until one of them felt in her bag for her comb to make it into some kind of order.

A large car drew up at the gate, sounding its rasping horn and an apprentice ran up to open it. The boss got up to meet his Spanish wife at the door, but she brushed passed him and went directly over to Miguel and put her arms round him. "*Pobrecito, pobrecito,*" and she

kept fussing over him as she led him out, still draped in white.

She travelled along the main road and then turned slowly into a dilapidated side street which had washing draped over balconies and pegged on lines spanning the narrow street. She had sounded her horn impatiently to disperse a group of women gossiping in the middle of the road. When they emerged from the gloom of the long dismal row, the dazzling sunlight flashed blindingly through the windscreen. The car pulled up within a foot of a massive iron gate and she had difficulty in opening the heavy padlock.

The pollarded trees which lined the sandy drive accentuated the austerity of the grey stoned villa which loomed aloof and defiant over less fortunate mortals.

The slaughterman had worked hard to develop his business, but as he amassed much wealth it did not occur to him to move to a more affluent neighbourhood, but instead he bought up the properties surrounding his humble abode and demolished them to make room for one with ample space but of simple design, which he had been able to build with the help of two workmen.

“Welcome to our home.” The stark exterior had offered little promise of welcome, but the moment the front door was opened they were greeted with a shrill twittering and chirping of scores of exotic birds from the narrow aviary which reached from floor to ceiling on either side of the spacious hall. As the *señora* walked past, two of the largest and most beautiful flew towards her and clung to the wire front, their wings extended as if to display their exquisite plumage. “Aren’t they gorgeous? I do believe my husband loves his birds more than his own family, as they are the first he wishes to greet when he returns home,” she smiled, as she stroked the nearest beak.

She filled the bath and put some clothes, belonging to the eldest of her three sons, outside the bathroom door. “Now my dear boy, go and enjoy a good soak while I prepare you a meal.” He stretched out with the hot water right up to his chin and lay there drowsily, not attempting to wash, but when he caught a whiff of the cooking from

the kitchen below, he leapt out, almost flooding the floor. He grabbed a towel, but when he looked down and saw his feet were still caked in dirt, jumped back in again and had to scrub them almost raw.

After squeezing into the heavily scented clothes he went downstairs and was put at the head of a grand polished table. A large thick rump steak with crispy golden potato scallops was put before him and he had greedily eaten his way through half of it when the three sons burst into the room. They had followed the delicious smell, anticipating the rarest of treats, in spite of the abundance of meat which passed through the family business. Their mother came in and introduced them but they looked on glumly as they watched his knife cut in and the juices seep out. "Now, outside all of you and let the boy finish his meal. Yours is in the kitchen." They picked sullenly at the boiled fish, swamped in tomatoes, their usual Tuesday meal.

The brothers did not take kindly to Miguel and their only attempt at civility was when their strict father had been present, but he too had shown no affection and had constantly reminded his wife of the gravity of the situation.

"His mother must be out of her mind with worry, if not the father. We should take him home without delay."

At last, under pressure, she finally succumbed and it was agreed to take him home on the following day. Miguel would have been unaware of their decision had not the eldest son spoken to him sarcastically in Spanish.

"I'll be sorry to see you go home tomorrow. It will break my heart."

He waited that night until they were all asleep, and for the second time, felt compelled to forsake home comforts, regretting that he had been unable to thank the gracious *dueña*. He climbed over the gate and almost ran into two gendarmes on their beat, but they had been so engrossed in conversation that they did not see him dive into a doorway and crouch there until they had passed. He heard a train shunting in the distance and headed in that direction, knowing from

experience that there would be shelter in the empty coaches in the sidings, if not in the station.

The grape harvest was at its peak and the next day he climbed aboard a farm trailer sent out by an enterprising farmer to round up any willing waives and delinquents roaming the streets. He worked hard and ate well, and was the last to be dismissed when all the grapes were harvested. "Sorry to see you go, my boy. Wish I could afford to keep you on. "

He started the long walk along the farm lane when the kitchen door flew open and he recognised the voice of the farmer's wife call his name as she ran out after him. She tugged him back towards the house, explaining slowly and loudly that he had worked like a man and should join the men in their annual thanksgiving celebration for the safe gathering in of the grapes. He followed her indoors and when he saw the tables so heavily laden with such an enormous variety of choice foods, it had puzzled him why they could not afford to keep on one extra hand.

They had gorged and drank through the night, and one humourist thought it a huge joke to make Miguel drunk, and kept forcing drinks on him until the hostess remonstrated angrily, but by that time he had taken more than a liking to it, and it proved the start of its gradual slippery slide to its dependence in deadening the pain of his tormenting homesickness, and blurring the clear picture in his mind of his home, the large straggling garden, and the stream where he spent such happy times, and most important to him was the ever present mental image of his mother which had given him the greatest pain.

His insecure youth had followed the same pattern for several years, that of exploited land-slave and then to the shelter of the town to seek employment during the winter months, and as the main preoccupation of the growing lad had been to eat, he had not found it too difficult, as many had been more inclined to offer food and accommodation than to part with money.

The years had passed quickly, the last two he had spent felling and sawing up trees, and as he seldom met another Spaniard he spoke French fluently and had grown to love the country, but incessantly he worried and wondered about his parents. One morning, above the deafening screams of the saw, he yelled across to the foreman that he had had enough and he packed his few belongings and set off to return to Spain. A succession of lifts took him across France to Biarritz and then to within a few miles of San Sebastian. He walked the country roads towards his village and the nearer he got to his home the more apprehensive he became, and deeply regretted not having written, at least to his mother. He stopped a while to look through the gates of his old school and the memories came flooding back. He trudged along the hills and dales and when he climbed the last ridge, he stopped and looked down in amazement at the changes which had taken place. There was no sign of his home or of the three others which had once nestled in that sheltered dell, and he noticed that the large grey stones of the demolished buildings had been used in the construction of a boundary wall. Every tree and hedge had been torn out, and in their place were endless straight rows of grape vine, their dark distorted stubs manifesting the first signs of life with a shimmer of greenery. Two peasants were churning up the soil between the rows and Miguel walked across to them. They had their backs to him, and when he called out a greeting, only the younger man stopped and turned. He asked him what had happened to the couple who had lived in the house at the end of the vineyard.

“What house? I can’t see a house. You too think I’m loco. Well, let me tell you, *señor*, I’m saner than King Alfonso.”

With which, the simpleton continued his hoeing.

“Why don’t you ask *El Viejo*?” he said, pointing his hoe in the direction of the old man who had now gained considerably along the next row. Miguel called after him but he ignored him and kept on stabbing at the ground. Suddenly a stone whizzed over Miguel’s head and missed the old man by inches.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

“Because he’s deaf, *señor*, as deaf as a post.”

He caught up with him, and, tapping him on the shoulder, shouted in his ear.

“*Si. Si.* I remember them. The man ended his life tragically but his widow, I understand, is still up there with the nuns.”

He pointed to the plantation of conifers which had grown so tall that they now hid the old majestic building which had once been the focal point for miles around. He thanked the old man, and with a sad heart climbed the hill, fearing the worst. As he entered the massive open door he saw a tall, gaunt woman walking towards him. She was dressed from head to foot in black and appeared to be in earnest conversation with an imaginary companion. He did not expect much response, but as there were no nuns in sight he spoke to her.

“I’ve come to visit *la Señora Felipa Cortes.*”

The woman stopped her chatter and her saddened eyes began to sparkle deep down in the sunken sockets, and with an excited squeal she took his hand and led him quickly to the same room into which he had been carried in terror so long ago. She pointed at the forlorn solitary figure standing at the window and then ran off, eager to spread the news of his visit. “Mama! mama!” he called out, blinded by the surge of hot, burning tears as he rushed over to her.

“It’s your son, Miguel. Mama, dear mama, I’m your son.”

He held her tightly, his tears falling down on the white hair, gripped loosely by the same shiny combs which had once held up every strand so severely. She turned her head again slowly towards the window to which she had been drawn by an unyielding compulsion in her disordered mind, and remarked blandly about the heat of the day as she patted her brow with a lace handkerchief.

“*Es suficando.*”

He released his hold and, feeling so full of remorse, ran from the room, almost colliding with two nuns about to enter. He ran blindly through the trees and threw himself down on the bed of cones and

cried like a child, releasing years of pent up torment and anguish. The sun had long ceased to diffuse its warm rays into the dark silent glade when he got to his feet, and he had walked aimlessly, too drained and shattered to care where, his head bowed low in unbearable shame and loathing. He began to tremble feverishly and his whole being burned with grief for his parents, one of whom had lost her mind, and the other, so tragically, his life and all because of his callous insensibility and cowardice.

The weeks that followed had been a futile chapter lost for ever in his life, and he could recollect little of the torment or the haunting terror which had almost driven him insane. He had lost track of time and it was not until his money ran out and, consequently, his supply of drink, that his head cleared sufficiently to realise the state he had got into. He remembered vaguely being thrown out of several *tabernas*, and on one occasion, into a police cell, and he felt that it was time that he took stock of himself.

He had awakened from a fitful sleep on the road side, and as he lay on his back on the scorched grass verge he blinked into the bright sun light and saw two pairs of eyes peering down at him. The faces were black but the lips shone red, washed clean of coal dust with the wine from the *botas* each carried. One dangled within a foot of his face and his bleary eyes fixed on it as if in a state of hypnosis. Without speaking, one of the miners unhooked the leather strap from around his neck and handed it to him, but the first squirt of the pungent wine splashed his chin. They steadied his hand to guide the thin jet and they watched him gulp long and greedily before he handed it back.

“*Gracias,*” he gasped. “*Muchisimas gracias.*”

The young men stared at him with disgust. “What the hell are you doing to yourself? You look a mess, no mistake.”

Miguel felt his stubbled chin and glanced down at his filthy clothes, but before he could answer they grabbed his arms and heaved him to his feet.

“We saw you last night slobbering into your *copa*. Sorrow will kill you if you let it. Come with us. Our house is quite near.” The brothers walked on either side of him, first scolding him for his folly, and then they spoke to him encouragingly. A woman who had been waiting in the distance, waved to them and walked sprightly in the middle of the quiet road to meet them. She eyed the stranger with interest and guessed he was the grief stricken young man her sons had spoken of. They walked to the back of the tiny house, and under an arbour of sprouting grape vines, two bowls of steaming water had been placed on two backless chairs.

“I think your friend needs a bath more than you two, in spite of your coal grime. I’ll put some more on later.” She brought out a rough towel and an old blanket. “I’m afraid you will have to wrap this around you while I wash your clothes, as nothing in this house will fit you.” She poured the two bowls into a tin bath and then disappeared indoors.

He stood in the bath and rubbed and scrubbed, and when he was well lathered a bucket of water was poured over him. One of the brothers hung his strop on to a hook in the wall and began to sharpen his razor as he grinned at Miguel. “The state you’re in, you’ll cut your own throat, but if I shave you you’ll probably lose only one ear.” He rubbed the soap vigourously with his fingers into the tough bristles and then carefully scraped away, wiping the blackened suds on a sheet of newspaper.

“It can’t be. No, it can’t possibly be the same man.” The mother beamed with approval as she called them in to eat. “Now, sit at the table while I try to salvage what is left of your clothes.”

It was the first real meal he had had for weeks and he soon cleared the heaped plate of *garvanzos* and fatty bacon. He had finished long before the brothers who grinned happily and called out for their mother to dish him up some more. Still wrapped in his blanket, he watched drowsily as her strong fingers sewed and patched the many tears. While she was rethreading her needle, she asked him his plans,

and was distressed to learn that he had neither home nor money. "And work?"

"No," he replied sheepishly, "but that will be my first priority. You have been so kind and I must not prevail further on your hospitality."

"And where will you sleep if you have no money?"

"I'll be alright. It's a warm evening and I'm used to sleeping under the stars."

One of the brothers who was stretched out on the floor with his eyes closed, suddenly lifted his head. "Have you ever worked down a mine?"

Miguel shook his head. "But I'll have a go at anything."

"It's tough work, but you're a tough looking fellow, and they've been crying out for men since so many left to work in England."

"Wales," interrupted his brother, "and they left because the pay was so pitifully low here and conditions so atrocious, and if you've any sense you'll steer well clear of that hell-hole."

While they were in deep discussion, the mother climbed the narrow stairs and returned carrying a straw-filled mattress which she threw down against the wall. "You'll be more comfortable on that. My knee tells me that it is going to rain."

The next day he busied himself tidying the garden and repairing or replacing much of the rotton timbers supporting the vines. "They've hardly been touched since my husband died as my sons hate gardening. It must be because he was so strict with them and made them work when they were so young and their minds were on play." She was thanking him and admiring the skilful joints in the repaired woodwork, when the brothers returned home from the pit.

The younger grinned joyfully, his black face lending intensity to the whiteness of his strong teeth, as he blabbered out his news. "You can start on Monday. I've spoken to the boss."

His brother scowled, "I wouldn't send my worst enemy down there," but Miguel was not put off and embraced him excitedly.

“This calls for a little celebration. Miguel, you must sample our own wine, but only one *copa* and no more,” and she bustled indoors and carefully wiped the bottle with so much reverence. “Yes, from our own grapes which I have tended with no help from my sons, shame on them.” She filled their glasses, but before drinking a toast, she again caressed the bottle and looked up at the sun. “Without your heavenly rays my labour would have been in vain.”

It was Saturday, a day for heavy drinking at the *taberna*, but the mother persuaded her sons to stay at home and help Miguel recover from his ordeal. They played cards for much of the time, and on Sunday evening they decided to go for a walk, and insisted that the mother came too. They were walking through the village when a voice shrilled out from a balcony, which was bedecked with cascading scarlet geraniums.

“Simona Zamora, are you too proud to call on your poor relation? Wait there, I’ll join you in a moment.”

“Heaven protect us. Let us hope that you are a good listener, Miguel, because that is all we’ll be able to do, and it won’t take you long to realize why her husband ran off to sea.”

“How do I look?” She had thrown a gaily coloured shawl over her shoulders, but her toes were poking through holes in her *zapatillas*, and her skirt was in tatters. She looked up at her house, which was the only one in the street which was freshly painted or adorned with so many flowers. “When he comes home I want him to find a cheerful home to welcome him.” She then turned to Miguel. “In some corner of this cruel world there is a lost soul, but one day I know in my heart that his memory will be restored and he will be rid of the wretched amnesia.” She rattled on, hardly stopping for breath. “I’ve heard, Simona, that you have taken in a *borracho*,” and she stopped to look over Miguel closely from head to toe.

“He’s not a *borracho*. The poor lad was drowning his sorrows. Let’s go back. My feet are throbbing like African drums.”

On their way home they stopped at her door and she again

scrutinized Miguel's clothing "I've still got his working clothes and he won't be needing them at his time of life. I'll make you some coffee and we can fit up this strapping lad for his new job."

It was a pleasant, cheerful room with lots of potted plants and many cut flowers jammed tightly into an assortment of jars and vases. She stoked up the fire before fetching a bundle of clothing from a cupboard and tossed it over to Miguel. "Try these for size and if they need altering, my cousin there is good with the needle."

He carried them outside the door and put on the trousers, and when the brothers saw him they shrieked with laughter. "If you wear that belt tomorrow they'll hitch you on to a coal tram. *Burro! Burro!*" and they pretended to whip him into action.

"You can laugh, you stupid hyenas, but it supported his weak back, poor man." The leather belt must have been six inches wide and the large loops on the trousers had been especially made to take it, and the heavy steel harness buckle was strong enough to support an ox cart.

The next morning, before light, there was much activity in the Zamora household as they climbed into their well-patched working clothes while the mother prepared breakfast and filled their lunch baskets. She had cut a large loaf of home-baked bread into thick slices and, after skinning the sizzling black *morzilla* sausages, she spread on their greasy contents. The *morzilla* had been made the previous day by a neighbour who had killed one of her pigs. These, together with the other tasty morsels she had brought in, had to be eaten fairly quickly during the hot weather, but not so the highly spiced red *chorizos* which hung on the rafters for months.

They stepped out onto the road and were soon joined by a throng of slouching miners, many of whom looked too sleepy and weary to speak as they climbed the winding hill to the coal mine. "This is where we part company, Miguel. There's your gang over there, and don't let the miserable sods get you down."

"*Buenos dias*. I understand I am to work with you."

They glanced over their shoulders and the nearest smirked as they closed ranks to shut him out. He dropped back, not altogether surprised as he had been forewarned of their boorish behavior. He had learned that they had been recruited from such an isolated village that their way of life was almost medieval, and where they guarded their meagre possessions as if they were jewels of the Spanish Crown. Any stranger to their village, they considered to be a potential pillager and was not even given the time of day. He followed them to a hill on the far side of the pit head where a trial digging had uncovered a wide seam of good quality coal. To make the incline to the proposed new shaft more gradual, a deep gorge had been excavated by the gang, and now the actual tunnelling was about to commence. Piles of pit props were stacked on either side, but with such a solid rock formation, there would be little need of roof support for the moment.

The sun was just peeping over a distant slag heap, emitting the first glimmer of dawn, to cast eerie shadows of the slowly moving men and mules against the almost vertical rock face. There were ten men in the gang and they lounged sullenly against the redish subsoil of the steep bank. No one was inclined to start work but all eyes were fixed along the track. Suddenly a loud bout of coughing echoed and the wheezing grew louder, and in the cold grey light appeared a short stocky man dragging one leg, and his left arm hung limp and swung as he walked as if he had little or no control over it. He stopped to thump his chest to stop a loud bronchial rumbling, and cleared his throat noisily before yelling out his first command. "*Vamos! Vamos!* Get stuck in, you lazy layabouts."

He was a bitter man, whose days at the coal face had ended when the inadequate roof timbers had cracked like the report of a rifle, giving little warning to those beneath, and he was dug out hours later more dead than alive. The coal seam had been petering out and the Management had deemed it uneconomical to spend but the basic essentials to complete the dwindling output, and the safety of the men had been of no consequence. They had, however, considered it viable

to continue to employ the man for a pittance to supervise unskilled labour in the construction of a new tunnel.

“What are you waiting for?”

He suddenly realised that the stranger looming over him must be the extra hand he had asked for. He hobbled closer to inspect the belt and then took the shovel from Miguel's hand and held it up to the light. He read aloud and with astonishment the initials carved on the handle.

“How did you come by this, and that belt? In fact, everything you are wearing belongs to my friend, Lomas. Tell me, are you related? You are not unlike him. Any news of him?” He fired the questions in rapid succession and was impatient for a reply.

“No *señor*, I called on the *señora* with the Zamora boys last night and she kindly gave them to me.”

“I see, I see, and there's still no news? I often wonder about that poor man, but I'll say no more. Let's get started.”

A few of the men had stopped work to watch and listen. Never had they seen the ganger behave with such civility and they resented the stranger's familiarity, but the ganger's behaviour soon reverted to form.

“What are you gaping at? Get on with your work or I'll sack the lot of you.”

Miguel swung his pick and hacked and heaved with all his might, ignoring the jibes from the rest of the gang who had been geared to a more leisurely pace. A burly youth took advantage of the ganger's brief absence and threw a shovel of rubble over him.

“So sorry, it slipped,” and the others joined in with their taunts. Miguel began to boil with rage, but he could hear the coughing in the distance and he attacked the wall of rock with even more ferocity.

In spite of the brave face he put on with the Zamora family, he was still stricken with grief and despair and the ever nagging guilt was foremost in his mind, but he was discovering that his fits of rage relieved his torment, converting pain to anger, which he could ease

unashamedly. The ganger called out for them to stop work. "Time to eat."

Miguel was hewing a chunk of rock which he was trying to dislodge, and did not hear him. A stone struck him on the back of his head and he jumped up off his knees, wet with sweat and fuming with rage. The boss had gone limping off to eat with more congenial company and Miguel lashed out with the back of his hand with such force that the grinning youth was sent reeling against his mates. The man they called Sancho, the meanest looking of them all, drew a knife.

"For that I'm going to give you half an inch." He crouched low, his thumb covering all but half an inch of the pointed end. Half an inch could cause much blood letting and an inch could kill, and often did.

Miguel knew better than to grapple with a man holding a knife and swung his leg with such agility that his boot struck Sancho under the chin, hurling him backwards. He then rushed at him and wrenched the knife from his grasp and turned sharply to face the rest who were closing in cautiously. He had never used a knife in self-defence or for any other purpose, except in childish games of target practice, and had not carried one since. A bulging wine *bota* was hanging from a pit prop and he aimed at this. The men ducked as the knife flashed through the air, piercing the centre of the *bota* and causing a stream of red wine to spurt out like blood from a stuck pig. He then placed his hand inside his leather belt.

"If I have to draw out my own knife, one of you will surely die."

After witnessing such a spectacular throw, no one suspected that he was bluffing and each in turn went back sullenly to probe inside his food basket.

The work progressed steadily, and although they showed no sign of friendship towards him, they did nothing to antagonize him. One day when he was working himself into a frenzy trying to lever out

a monster of a rock, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"This is your last day here, Miguel."

The lad was shattered.

"Why? What have I done wrong? Haven't I worked hard for you?"

The ganger laughed. "Too hard. You'll serve the mine owners better, and also yourself, if you worked at the coalface." Miguel whooped with joy, hugging the nearest worker who, months earlier, would gleefully have plunged his knife into him.

He was delighted to find himself working alongside the two brothers and a host of other good natured miners, and he was soon acknowledged in the village as one of the strong men at the face, whose daily output was well above average. The work was arduous but his leisure time was relaxed and pleasant. Most nights were spent at the *taberna* but he did not drink excessively, there being so much to laugh and talk about. He was treated as the third brother in the household and for the first time in his life was happy and carefree, but on one wet wintry Sunday morning the laughter and merriment ended abruptly when the village received the devastating news that the mine was closed, and without prior warning they found themselves locked out from the only source of income for several miles around. The owners claimed that the old seams were exhausted and the new tunnel did not produce the quantity of coal anticipated. The shock soon turned to bitterness and anger, and the villagers first helped themselves to the coal and then to the sheep from the vast *haciendas*. The police entered the village in force and searched each house for the remains of a carcass or traces of wool, but the evidence had been deposited down the various mountain chasms, and every scrap of meat had been stripped off the bones before entering the village, for all were aware of the tremendous risk.

One morning Miguel suddenly made up his mind that he could not impose any longer on the hospitality of the good family and walked out into the garden to tell them. The mother clung to him,

sobbing loudly as she pleaded with him to stay.

“We’ll manage. We’ve got a roof over our heads and no rent to pay, I implore you to stay.”

But his mind was made up and he stepped once more into the world of loneliness and uncertainty. Within days the terrible brooding returned and within weeks he began to seek refuge in drink. During one such heavy bout he searched in his pockets but there was no longer the rustle of notes or the rattle of coins. The landlord snatched back the *copa* of wine and led him firmly to the door. He staggered along the street, cursing the landlord and craving more drink. His head swam and he sat on a stone step with his head in his hands, wallowing in self-pity. He was moaning and groaning and blaming everybody but himself when he heard footsteps approach. He lifted his head and spat in the air. The man walked jauntily, his immaculate dark serge suit was well pressed and his polished shoes sparkled in the gas light. As the wealthy Spaniard drew nearer, a sudden surge of resentment and loathing came over him, as he saw in the Spaniard the same callous mineowner who had thrown a once happy village into a place of doom and despair.

There was no mistaking this privileged *rico*, as he had avoided the sun like the plague. His skin was white and sallow and he stood out from the sun blackened peasants, the glaring division between the haves and the havenots, all too apparent. He waited for him to pass and then struck him a vicious blow on the back of his head which sent him sprawling. He felt shakily into the inside jacket pocket of the unconscious man, and grasping the bulging wallet he stumbled along the narrow street until he was out on to the wind swept deserted sea front. The lapping tide seemed to calm him a little as he walked along the water’s edge, the blustering wind billowing his jacket and swirling his lank hair over his eyes. The sand ran out against a wall of hefty boulders and he managed to climb over one, and soon sank into a hideous world of fantasy. After several hours of groaning and arm flaying he awoke with a start, grasping at the air like a drowning

soul, his head pounding painfully. He became panic stricken when the garish light of day showed up the expensive embossed leather wallet, half buried in the sand at his feet. His first impulse was to throw it over the boulders, to be washed away by the waves as he felt revulsion for what he had done, but the tide had receded and he was high and dry. He stared at it, not daring to touch it. His tongue felt like glue and his throat was parched. If it contained money he would take out sufficient for a bottle of wine and throw the rest away. His hands trembled as he snapped open the fastener and he stared unbelievably at the fortune in new notes crammed into each silken compartment. He lay back and closed his eyes. There in the palm of his hand was a new life. He could leave Spain and all its bitter memories, and he thought of the exodus of miners to the Welsh pits.

His immediate problem was to get away as he dared not show his head above the rocky shore as the police would no doubt be searching the area. He crawled from boulder to boulder until he came to a foot path leading to a sheltered cove, and on a bank of shingle well above the tide mark, was a small rowing boat. The nearest house was more than a mile away and the cove was deserted but for two gulls perched on one of the oars. He was less than a stone's throw away when they spread their wings and let the strong breeze carry them gracefully, wheeling and soaring magnificently over the sparkling bay. The bank dropped steeply and he had little difficulty in dragging the boat down to the water. After a final thrust he was in deep water, rowing out strongly and skilfully. The little boat reeked of fish and his thoughts dwelled back on happier days, to the several fishing trips with his father, who had then been as lean as a shaft, his wit and humour razor sharp and spontaneous. He stopped rowing and took a long deep breath of the saline air. It was but an hour since dawn and a sense of peace pervaded the expanse of water, now rolling and swelling in the freshening wind. He glanced across at the cove he had just left, marked by a feathery border of bobbing creamy foam. He could just make out the roof of the distant cottage and he was suddenly

overcome with forebodement, conjuring up in his mind the despair of a solitary, destitute old fisherman.

A gentle mantle of cloud had thinly veiled the morning sun, allowing but a few shafts of dazzling, stabbing beams to escape and throw an unearthly glow around him. At his feet, the pool of scaly fish oil reflected a pomp of sparkling colour. He shielded his eyes from the awesome, phenominal glare and shrieked into the wind, a cry so full of heartbreak and sorrow, that each lament became more poignant and despairing, and as his muddled mind strove to comprehend, he was petrified.

A strong gust of wind shook the boat and a band of thunder clouds swept the bay. He churned the water with one oar in a desperate attempt to swing the boat around and return it to its owner. He began to lose his steady rhythm as the boat tossed and rocked in the mounting, rearing waves. A silver streak of lightening split the sky, illuminating the diving, screaming gulls. It thundered, and the rain sluiced off his head and down his neck. He pressed harder on the oars and was nearly flung overboard as one snapped, with a frightening crack. He flung himself forward and gripped both sides of the boat in an attempt to steady the boat, but it spun like a cork and he was at the mercy of the treacherous current. He dared not look up until it was on a more even keel and found that he was drifting helplessly away from the bay, out into the open sea, and then, as suddenly as it had erupted, the gale waned and his clothing began to steam in the heat of the burning sun. It was not long before the horizon was specked with several boats racing for shelter, having been battered by gigantic waves in the terrific storm. Miguel stripped off his shirt and tied it to the remaining oar and soon, through the black, belching smoke, he saw several hands wave from the deck of a rusty cargo boat. As they hauled him aboard, he looked down at the tiny bobbing boat, hoping it would return with the turning tide to the peaceful cove. He pressed some soggy notes into the captain's hand and said he had not eaten for days, but it was a drink which was more prevalent in his mind as he

was taken below to the galley. The cook was in a foul mood, still clearing up after the storm. He tossed a garlic sausage on the table and told Miguel to help himself to some bread, and then carried on collecting up the strewn pots and pans. He picked up his wife's portrait from under the table, and pulled out the splinters of glass from the frame before he hung it back among the greasy pans, her smouldering eyes imploring a speedy return. There was a sudden jolt, followed by the deafening bellow of the boat's fog horn, although the day was now bright and clear.

"Like me, the captain is impatient to be away."

The cook's voice was drowned by the shrieking of the siren, as the battle of the quayside flared, alternating between the deep bellow and piercing wail.

By the time Miguel had finished his snack and climbed on deck, there was complete calm, only a mere trace of crimson remaining on the captain's bulging neck, the offending vessel having slipped by, leaving behind a scraping of her fresh paint on the rusty hull.

This was not the time to ask a favour, but Miguel had already gleaned much information from the cook. The seamen who lived locally, he had told him, were allowed to go home but were to return in the morning to assist with the painting of the boat before she was allowed to sail to a Welsh port with a cargo of iron ore. To be delayed at the dock for so long, was a risk Miguel dare not take.

"*Adios Capitan,*" he called out above the rattle of chains and squealing of cranes, "*y muchas gracias*" and the captain waved back as he hurried below.

After walking the full length of the quay, Miguel began to feel dejected as most of the boats were destined for distant lands which were of no interest to him, but his spirit was raised when a seaman called from the deck of the *San Anselmo* that they were leaving the following day for Cardiff. Miguel sought out the captain, but no amount of pleading or bribery would entice him to take a passenger with no luggage or papers. His only remaining course, if he was to

achieve his aim, was to go back to the intrepid captain and hope he was in a calmer mood. He was climbing aboard when he had to step aside quickly to avoid a lithe young man racing down the gangway with a large parcel under his arm, but when he saw Miguel he slid to a halt.

“*Hola!* If you’re looking for the Captain, you’ve just missed him. Try the first Bar on the right,” and he pointed along the road to the town. He made a flying leap onto the quay and Miguel suddenly realized that the smartly dressed man was the cook, but gone was the pallid look which had been depressed further by the greasy shirt and the appalling squalor of the dingy claustrophobic galley. Now his gaiety and the glint in his eye indicated promise of a pursuit far more harmonious in a setting far more congenial.

He left the noisy docks and walked with his back stooped and his left leg swinging stiffly in the belief that any prying policeman could not possibly link him to a runaway thief.

The Bar was gloomy and he was just able to make out the Captain seated at a corner table. He was laughing heartily with a plump, blowzy woman who was revealing more than enough to lure the customers in. “He’s a fast worker,” thought Miguel and was about to leave when she got up from the table and went behind the bar to serve a waiting seaman.

“*Buenas tardes, Señor Capitan.* Can I get you a drink?”

“No, I’ve got one.”

He resented the intrusion but he was curious. “What brings you here? Thought you’d be home and tucked up in bed after your adventure, or misadventure,” he laughed cynically.

“It’s a long story.” He went to the bar and asked the barmaid what the Captain was drinking. “It looks like *coñac.*”

“It is *coñac, Señor.* Would you like a *copa?*”

“No, I’ll take a bottle; I’ve a terrible thirst.” He filled his glass and the Captain allowed him to top up his. He then explained about the sudden closure of the colliery and then lied that he had been doing a

spot of fishing when the storm broke.

"I've neither home nor family and have decided to start a new life abroad."

"No use coming to me. I can't help you."

Miguel held out a thick wad of notes. "I'll pay you well."

"No, no," he snapped irritably, and was distracted by the barmaid bending over the next table. When she saw that his eyes were feasting on her plunging neck line, she chuckled and wriggled her shoulders so that her unfettered breasts swung low and tormenting. He gulped down his *coñac* and Miguel quickly refilled his glass.

He did not pursue the matter further and sat back, quietly observing the Captain, who hardly took his eyes off the woman as she mopped the stained and pitted oak tops of the narrow cast iron tables with a soapy cloth, and when a drunk staggered in and began to maul her, he tried to jump to his feet, but need not have worried for her safety. The wet cloth whipped his face and he was out through the door and on his face in the road before he could extricate his fat legs from the ornate iron work.

A tall skinny girl was about to start work behind the bar when she spotted the Captain. "Manolo! Manolo! She shrieked as she rushed over to him. There was a passionate embrace with much kissing and fondling, and Miguel looked across to see what reaction this had on the other barmaid, but a gang of dockworkers had just walked in and blocked his view. She must have been less than half the age of the Captain and, whereas her colleague carried all proudly before her, she was as flat as a board and her bony hatchet face was not one that would instil a flood of passion, but the Captain was not as other men and the pleasure showed on his face as he kissed her ardently. Some customers were voicing displeasure at the delay in being served and she managed to break away, and as she pushed her way to the bar there was a light in her eyes and a deep flush on her cheeks. Miguel wondered what other attributes were possessed by this square-built sea dog who had earlier threatened to board a boat and slay the entire

crew, when he himself was entirely to blame for the mishap, in his haste to join his infamous friends.

Miguel had resigned himself to a long wait in that dismal bar and was displaying a tremendous will-power, reserving most of the drink for the Captain in the hope that he would eventually relent and grant him his passage to freedom. He was contemplating what life would be like in the Welsh valleys when the Captain consulted his watch and prepared to leave, waving goodbye to the barmaids.

“*Hasta mañana.*” Miguel was taken by surprise but managed to blurt out that there was still a drop in the bottle.

The Captain hesitated, “Why not, the old wreck can wait. I doubt if anyone has turned up yet.”

“*Capitan*, let me help with the painting. I have no bed to go to and I need a job desperately.”

“You’re not the only one who’s desperate. I’ve been instructed to sail within a week. *Bueno!* I’ll give you a try and if you’re worth your keep, you can stay till the job is done.”

Miguel gripped his hand. “you won’t regret it.”

“We’ll see. We’ll see,” and they strode out together.

The boat had a depressed look in the twilight, fit only for scrap, but the Captain was full of optimism. “She’ll soon be shining like new.” The deck was deserted and he bellowed below, “Where the hell is everyone?” He had hardly spoken when there was a babble of voices along the quay. “Here they come, the lazy oafs.”

But they proved to be anything but that. The moment they were aboard, they moved with speed and determination, and soon formed a human chain to pass the tools and equipment from the hold. The Captain took advantage of the brightness of the moon and set them to work on deck with wire brushes and hammers, and soon clouds of rust particles polluted the clear night air. Miguel lowered himself over the side on a crudely made cradle and started to chip away at the hull. Two policemen on dock patrol heard the noise and came over to investigate, so he pulled his cap well down over his eyes and

hammered away like fury, not daring to look up. They all worked tirelessly until the Captain called a halt.

“Can’t you smell my cooking? I thought you’d break your necks to get to it.”

There were many guffaws as they had on more than one occasion suffered at his hands. He was marking out the number of wedges he would need to cut out of the massive *tortilla*, when someone realized that the constant distant rapping was coming from the hull.

“Throw a bucket of slops over the silly sod, Alfonso, and tell him to hurry before these vultures scoff the lot.”

Next morning they were relieved to see the cook arrive early to prepare the breakfast, and after they had eaten, two of the new arrivals took their places on either side of Miguel and the plank dipped dangerously. “Not so hard, Miguel, or you’ll make a hole in the old tub.” They cheerfully showed him how to chip away lightly, saving his energy as well as the boat from total destruction.

In spite of the urgency to complete the work, the Captain went missing for several hours each day and always returned loaded with cheap wine which he served generously with the many light snacks. When someone complained of the lack of hot meals, he topped up his glass and made vague promises that he would soon be releasing the cook from the paint pot, but who was by now grossly involved in the lengthy process of outlining the almost obliterated name of the boat, ‘La Rosita’. Being of an artistic nature, he preferred the more intricate brush work to the slap-happy paint rendering of the bulkhead.

Miguel was anxious to show off his prowess as an untiring worker and was always the first to start and the last to finish, and was artful enough to exceed even further when the Captain was near, but as the transformation of the boat neared completion, he was motivated by genuine pride in his work.

On the fifth day, the Captain called him to his cabin to thank him for his effort. “You have been an inspiration to us all, and without your help we would still be struggling. I’ve worked out your wages but

you truly deserve double.”

“I don’t want your money, *Capitan*. I would much prefer if you change your mind and take me to Wales.” Again he produced the wad of notes. “I’m offering you my entire savings.”

The Captain eyed the money and pondered a while. It had been an expensive week as he had paid dearly for his sensuous delights and could ill afford to ignore the offer in spite of the risk involved.

“*Bueno! Bueno!* Hand it over before I change my mind.”

Miguel was so delighted that, although he had paid him well for the voyage, he helped to finish the painting and with the loading. The Captain watched his paint-speckled passenger stir vigorously at a drum of paint. “Now I know you’re mad.”

The last hours in dock were chaotic, but *La Rosita* steamed out proudly in calm waters and on time. The Captain passed his hand over the smooth paint and, as he had predicted, she shone like new.

“But for how long?” He knew that the rust within and the salt spray without would eat through ravenously to cruelly strip her of her brief reign of resplendent glory.

As they neared the Welsh port a shower of rain slashed across the bow, yet the sky seemed cloudless and the sun shone brightly. The sharp shower soaked Miguel’s cotton shirt as he was straining to catch his first glimps of the distant shore, but it was not a cold rain and he looked up in sheer wonderment at the miraculous formation of the ever enchanting rainbow straddle mystically across the bay as if to herald a new beginning to his traumatic life. He continued to gaze with eyes partly closed to allow the sunlight and colour to flicker through his moist eyelashes and marvel at the dancing sunbeams flashing with gold. He suddenly felt an icy coldness on his brow and the moments of magic ended abruptly. Dark clouds appeared from nowhere and one raced spitefully to cloak the glowing warmth and colour to shatter his dream. By the time they put in at the sheltered dock a gale was raging.

“You’d better hang on a while, Miguel.”

But a stronger force was driving him to venture out into his new world. He shook hands with the Captain and crew and stepped out into the driving rain. He raised his head and squared his shoulders to face the wind full on. He heard voices behind and waited to join a group of Welsh dockers, almost bent double, their shiny tarred coats gusting and flapping noisily around them. They left the docks together and when they turned into a narrow side street they met a full westerly blast. One raised his hand and, without looking up, yelled out his goodbyes before disappearing through the door of a long low building.

Miguel glanced up at the creaking sign and peered through the tiny panes at the hard weather-beaten faces, and he noticed that the drinking vessels before them were large enough to hold a bottle of wine, and there was not a single wine glass in sight. "What drinkers!" and he pushed open the door. He stood dripping in the doorway, not knowing which way to go as there was no sign of a counter or serving bar, when the phenomenal sight in the form of Blodwen the barmaid met his eyes. He first saw her huge mop of black curls brush the ceiling high above a flimsy partition, and as she came out, the make-shift bar shook violently. She made straight for him.

"Poor dab, it's soaked through you are. Let me dry your coat or it's pneumonia for you, right enough," she unbuttoned his jacket her eyes gleaming as she surveyed with relish the way the clinging, sodden shirt displayed a physique of such explosive vitality. She held the coat at arm's length to drip some more and with her free hand she pulled his head down firmly and buried his nose in her cavernous cleavage. "Poor dab, I'd like to keep you warm I would, my *cariad*."

She gave the coat a final shake and was disappearing with it down a passage to the kitchen stove, when he realized that his worldly wealth was in the pocket, and rushed after her to snatch it back.

"There's gratitude for you now. Keep your silly coat and all the wet."

He returned to the bar, with it's babble of voices of several

nations, some shrill, others grating like granite rollers. At one table were seated two swarthy men wearing dark berets in the true Basque tradition. He crossed over to them and they pointed to an empty chair.

“You look as if you’ve swam across.”

He put the soggy jacket over his shoulders and his body steamed out a powerful cocktail of imported aromas.

“What is that you’re drinking? It doesn’t look like wine.”

“No, it’s beer.”

“It’s the cheapest drink to get drunk on.”

Miguel stood up to beckon the barmaid, but she tossed her head indignantly and attended to three others before she stood at his table with a pout on her lips. It seemed inconceivable that one so enormous in stature could display such childlike petulance. He smiled and slapped her bulging bare arm, which quivered like a jelly.

“Oh, its friends is it now we are. Well you mind your manners,” and she swung her hip, nearly knocking him off his chair. He raised the drink to his nose and then tasted it.

“It’s putrid,” he spluttered, but he was thirsty and closed his eyes and gulped until there was little left. He was about to make a further comment when his stomach heaved and the gasses errupted like explosive blasts from a ship’s boiler.

He despised himself for drinking so heavily and had on many sober moments tried, to no lasting effect, to find a solution to his predicament, but the enormity and utter hopelessness would engulf him and the bottle was always too readily at hand. He made a vow, however, that his new life in Wales would not be tainted or corrupted by senseless orgies of drinking and debauchery, but he had seen little yet to raise himself to any feeling remotely akin to ecstasy, and there was the atrocious weather. Surely, he justified, no man alive would condemn him for seeking shelter.

They chatted and drank steadily and the Basques continued to look out through the window, but finally had to give up the waiting as

there was no sign of the rain abating and they were anxious to flee from the gloom and despondency of a land without sun. Before leaving, they warned Miguel that the beer was potent for one not used to it, but he grinned and rapped the table for another drink. His head was beginning to swim, and after several more he was floating on air, a sensation never experienced when drinking wine. Even Blodwin appeared to him in a new light and he craved to be smothered with her love and to sink deeper and deeper into the comforting folds and protruberant bosom, and he found himself floundering in a sea of emotional confusion. Her head appeared to have invaded the only corner of the ceiling where her bobbing curls had not flushed out the dust and cobwebs, and the one remaining now veiled her hair like a lace mantilla, enhancing her enchantment and increasing his fervour to breaking point. She had tolerated his intimate squeezing and groping in the hope that he would still be around when she went off duty.

The landlord paid little heed but had a sneaking admiration for his bravery, and more so for the power of his ale. Miguel watched her climb the stairs and her warm smile, he thought, was an invitation to follow. He held on tightly to the handrail and got to the top of the staircase just as she was returning to the bar. His eyes, hot with passion, he lunged forward to hold her but only managed to reach her ankles and she fell screaming over his shoulder, her sheer weight flattening him like a sapling beneath a falling oak. They both tumbled down the stairs, arms flying, and struck the hard floor in a tangled undignified heap. Blodwin's head was completely hidden beneath her draping skirt, and she displayed a pair of gigantic bare legs and scantily clad voluminous buttocks that gleamed white and awesome as a flash of lightening pierced the gloom. Miguel tried to span her mammoth waist in an attempt to help her to her feet, but the Landlord, mistaking it for another lecherous attack, brought a bottle crashing down on his head, and still holding the neck, was about to thrust the jagged end into Miguel's face, but Miguel charged him like

a wounded bull and the pot-bellied landlord was hurled back, gasping for breath. He then lifted him up above his head and tottered across the room before heaving him against the window frame. The crashing of the glass and splintering of wood coincided with a terrific clap of thunder and was more reminiscent of a battle field.

“You’ve killed him. Fetch the police.”

The word ‘police’ which was the only one he understood, rang in his ears as he fled to the door, swinging his fist viciously at the only man who had tried to assist the landlord. The downpour revived him a little and washed the blood from his eyes. By the time he got to the docks, it had stopped raining and there was a miraculous change in the weather. The hot sun which ensued congealed the blood which had matted his hair, but his head was still pounding and his senses reeling.

A couple carrying suitcases were about to climb the gangway, and the girl stepped aside in alarm. The captain was on deck awaiting them and Miguel collapsed at his feet.

“*La policia! La policia!*” Miguel gasped.

The Captain wasted no time, and with Paco’s help, hauled him to his feet. They then steered him over to a lifeboat and lifted the tarpaulin. “I know nothing of this, you understand?”

He called a seaman over to assist the new passengers with their luggage, and was about to see them to their cabin, when a voice called up from the quay

“Seen a man running this way?”

“No, I no see,” but they came aboard and searched the hold and the cabins. They returned on deck, but when they saw the dusky *señorita* reclining on a coil of rope with her eyes closed and her blouse unbuttoned, as if to savour fully the new found sun, they lost interest in the search and did not wander far from her. When they eventually left the boat, she buttoned her blouse and pulled down her skirt and returned to her lover to explain her behavior.

“It’s the least I could do for a compatriot in trouble.”

On the first day the elopers were seldom seen outside their cabin, and when they reappeared for their evening meal, and the conversation turned to bullfights and politics, the seamen pretended not to notice her tug persistently at Paco's coat. The moment they returned to their cabin, she would climb eagerly on to the bunk, imploring him to hurry, but the balding adulterer increasingly failed dismally to rise to the occasion.

"You think more of that drunken slob than you do of me."

She had earlier heard the captain reprimand the cook for using his galley as a lucrative wine bar, and had insisted he account for the money thrust upon him by Miguel in his desperation, but the drunkard had found a new ally in Paco who would join him on deck to escape her lamenting protest and frustration. They shared the wine and talked earnestly, so were sown the seeds for the long and turbulent association which had ended abruptly years later when Paco returned to Wales, but on that occasion it was he who was escaping the law, leaving Miguel behind to pillage and plunder like a man with no soul.

Margarita at that time was concerned only with her own survival in the distant land of Spanish Morocco, where the sun reigned supreme in unyielding dominance over the rain which she had always deplored. Her life of bliss with her handsome French beau ended the moment he discovered, by chance, from the trawler skipper that he had transported a total stranger in the dead of night to the Swansea docks. To his delight, the description was unmistakably that of Paco and he wasted no time in returning to that square mile, of his idea of paradise, in the mountain hamlet to rejoin his kith and kin.

Although she had been discarded, she was far from destitute and had amassed quite a fortune with her scheming and wheedling. She had discovered that her lover did not possess the drive or ruthlessness of Paco, and so she sent him out each day among the thieves and vagabonds, of which there were many, to value their spoils and report

back to her. Her astuteness in concealing her identity by not dealing directly with the criminal fraternity, enabled her to assume the role of respectability in the community. She invested in a property comprising a shop, which she rented to an acquaintance, Abdulla, and a spacious apartment above overlooking the heart of the throbbing teeming Casbah. The perpetual tap, tap of Abdulla's tools of trade did not upset her, and she had spent many idle hours watching him inscribe the most intricate Arabic designs on brass jugs and trays, a skill passed down from father to son, nor did she mind the endless haggling and wailing in the street below. Her Bohemian temperament was more in tune with the environment than the ghostly silence of a mountain hamlet, and she was content. Her sole aim was to live out her life in that heavenly enchantment, bounded by a blue cloudless sky, and to wake each day into a red-gold dawn. Although she did not relish the thought of growing old, to be able to toast ones brittle bones whilst rocking to and fro above an everchanging colourful street theatre, would compensate enough.

Legend has it, and records show, that the original building had been razed to the ground more than two centuries past. The town that day had been throbbing with religious fervour and the long chanting procession had weaved slowly through the intriguing maze of streets, so steeped in legend and history. They had stopped to rest and had looked up in wonder as the radiance of the spring twilight flickered on the imposing domed temple, carved like a giant, shimmering opal out of the sheer rock wall. They had been shielding their eyes from the glare when the air was filled with blood curdling shrieks echoing through the crags and crannies, and there were agonizing screams, as a barrage of rocks came hurling down. Soon the various religious factions were at each others throats like fiendish maniacs bent on death and destruction.

The town was also refuge for desparate men of bold spirit from Damascus to Tangier, who lived by war, and whose main attribute for survival was a strong arm and a ready wit. They too revelled in the

carnage, and there followed an orgy of burning and looting which lasted through the night, but when the smouldering dawn was penetrated by the sun's strong rays, the awesome widespread devastation was slowly and dramatically unveiled, displaying the bitter scars so cruelly inflicted.

One irate and defiant landlord, impatient to commence rebuilding, set his new premises well back beyond the charred embers, and Margarita's subsequent ownership provided her with a spacious forecourt as a stage setting so rich in life and colour. On either side was a panoramic display of glaze which had defied the rigours of time and war to depict serene scenes of biblical times. At the far side of the plaza was an unbroken line of massive, but intricate, ornate scrolls of lattice work in the wrought iron balconies, fashioned by the toil and sweat of the early ironsmith in his swealtering charcoal furnace, to satisfy the aspirations of zealous Spanish *Conquedistas*, anxious to stamp their own devout will and architectural influence. Most of the craftsmanship and artistry was now cloaked in tropical colour as flowers cascaded in profusion, their balmy, heady scent wafting down in the warm gentle breeze.

Margarita had been gazing down drowsily at the fire eaters, snake charmers and a host of wild and weird performers, when she saw a youth creep stealthily behind an unsuspecting American tourist. She tore down the stairs and through the cluttered shop, her flaying arms dislodging a tall stack of Abdulla's finished products. He cried out, an Arabic oath, and he tried in vain to stop the pillar of brass collapsing with a deafening crash and rolling out onto the crowded pavement, causing a wavering snake to hiss loudly and retreat into the sanctuary of its wicker basket. She caught up with the boy and swung him such a vicious blow that it set her jewellery jangling like the bells of San Jose. The bewildered tourist held out his hand to retrieve his bulging gold-edged wallet, and before he could register anger or gratitude, the thief and his attacker had slipped quickly out of sight into the seeming mass of humanity. Keeping close behind the boy,

and still shaking with rage, she was determined that no weasly pickpocket was going to jeopardize her future by connecting her, however remotely, in any transgression of the strict laws on thieving, and this sudden violation of her tranquility was too great a threat to be ignored.

They came to a clearing in the crowd and she shook him violently by his skinny shoulders.

“You imbecile! You brainless baboon! Haven’t I told you to keep away from my *balcon*?”

Her long slim arm flashed to his head with the speed of a whiplash, and a heavily veiled woman in black waved her arms and screeched in protestation. “Be merciful on your frail son.”

“Son. Did you say son? You silly old woman. If I had nurtured this monstrosity within my womb, I would most certainly have perished.”

In spite of the brutal attack, Abdulla’s nephew still held her in the highest esteem, and as he grovelled at her feet he solemnly vowed, in the name of Allah, that he would not pick another pocket within a kilometer of her abode.

The red glow of the tropical sun filtered through the swaying palms to lighten up the bright yellow plumage of two slim, sleek canaries in their gilded cages, causing them to burst forth simultaneously into a song of sheer undiluted exultation. Passers-by stopped to listen and smile up at the heart-rendering duet, which seemed to fill the square with the contagious happiness the birds radiated, but there was no one who was not so appreciative. An elegantly dressed, majestic looking sheik, who could best be described as a shark, was masquerading in the robes of a Sultan, although he was but a street trader. He thrust his gaudy carpet under the nose of a cigar smoking tourist who showed immediate interest. He felt the weave and carefully inspected the finish of the underside.

“How much?”

“Velly cheap, velly cheap, Sahib.”

The exorbitant price quoted was more than three times its value and he could hardly contain his excitement when, without any inclination to barter, he pulled out his wallet and began to count the notes, but, whether he saw the wicked gleam in the vendor's eye or had been irritated by his high-pitched screech of abuse at the deafening crescendo from the cages above, he suddenly snapped shut his note case and strode briskly away. In a fit of rage he spat and yelled after him what must have been a tirade of vulgar Arabic. He then flung his carpet up against the balcony, and if the songsters had been within reach he would have gleefully decapitated them with one of his jewelled knives.

He was looking up and down the street for the most likely prospect when he spotted Margarita returning home, still simmering from her explosive encounter. He had tried on several occasions to lure her down from her balcony but, apart from knowing of his corrupt reputation, she had resolved to steer well clear of men, be they saints or sinners. He barged through the crowd, prodding the unwary with his roll of carpet and cursing those too slow to move, and stopped so suddenly in front of her that her face struck the bronze medallion which buckled his cloak. He towered over her, his exquisite robes blotting out the sun and she stood speechless in his evil shadow, her body shaking and her eyes closed into slits. Such a spirited vixen he likened to a proud unbroken Arab colt, and he stroked her long black hair as he would the mane of his favourite mount. She tried to speak, but for the first time in her life her eloquence had failed her and could splutter no more than an incoherent garble, so overcome was she with wrath. His turbaned head seemed to hover in the sky well out of her reach and she selected a lower target, and her bony knee shot up with devastating force and the flamboyant charlatan collapsed with a scream. She felt a hand grip her arm, and her blood froze in terror.

This was the moment she had always dreaded, when her dreams were to be shattered. A sordid scene of a jail cell was flashing

torturously through her mind, when she heard the voice of her dear friend, Lolita, and sobbed with relief.

“Vamos! Vamos! Before that waster recovers and cuts you to ribbons.” The huge Spanish Moroccan cleared the way, using her enormous stomach and festooning breasts as the gentlest of battering rams, her ebony skin glistening in the searing heat. They forced their way towards the narrower streets of the poor quarters, where the overhanging terra cotta pan tiles served to mitigate the fierce glare, but trap in the odour of decay. The streets were thronged with proud nomadic herdsmen in their flowing indigo robes who had drifted in, some on a curiosity visit from the waterless wastes of the Sahara, to this the westernmost link with Islam.

“Make way! Make way!” It was yet one more cry of anguish from a tourist who had been over-indulgent when savouring the gastronomical delights of the sizzling, mouth-watering succulent lamb, and had learned to his folly that his metabolism lacked the immunity of the impregnable carbonic stomach lining of the local inhabitants. There was a look of desperation in his eyes as he thrashed his way in the impossible pursuit of the minimum of privacy only to end in a state of catastrophe.

The two women passed through streets of diabolical poverty and squalor, where the depth of deprivation spilled out from every pavement. In many doorways squatted wizened old Arabs who still retained the dignity of manner, but few had held belief in the dignity of labour. They deemed it more consistent with their masculinity to languish in reticent indolence, drawing in the soothing influence of their hookah set and watch the meaningless activities of the endless droves swarm by. Through a gap in the crowd they saw Lolita’s sister waiting in their shop doorway. Although almost identical in shape and stature, a mutation of genes had produced a lighter skin, but both had inherited the same sharp features, as did many of Spanish origin, refugees from the persecution of the inquisition. They sidled through to the back of the shop, their heads brushing against a row of leather

bags and purses, setting them swinging against parallel rows of baskets and woven trays, and soon the tiny shop seemed alive with the rhythmic momentum of its variant handicrafts.

Passing through, one would expect to come upon a living quarter equally restrictive but, surprisingly, it spread out luxuriously, the Spanish influence dominating every corner, from the blackened-oak fittings to the geometrical designs of inlaid mosaic glowing with colour. The ingeniously constructed stained-glass domed skylight, as well as imparting strong contrast of light and shade, transformed a further dazzling kaleidoscopic beauty reflected on the coarse textured white walls.

Lolita fussed over Margarita, lifting her legs to rest on a multi-coloured leather-bound stool. She then opened the deeply carved doors of a massive sideboard and took out a bottle of *coñac* and held up a glass to Margarita's lips, coaxing her to take a sip, but she grabbed it with both hands and drained it in one gasping swallow. The sisters laughed aloud, taking turns to slap her back as she coughed and spluttered, swearing vengeance on the illustrious carpet knave. After the second glass, which she sipped sedately, she felt fortified and ready once more to face the world, and would have stepped out alone into the jostling crowd had not the sisters locked up shop and insisted on escorting her home.

"You never know where that reptile will be lurking," but only the foolhardy would have dared intercept the two Amazons looming above the seething masses.

As they neared the shop, the sisters noticed Abdulla jumping up and down on the pavement and craning his neck anxiously. They waved to him and, with little effort, lifted Margarita so that he could see that she was with them. Leaving the shop unattended, he pushed his way towards them and breathlessly warned Margarita that two policemen were waiting to see her. She instinctively turned to flee but her two friends grabbed her and spoke to her sharply.

"This is not the Margarita we know. We'll go in together. That evil

snake would not dare report you.”

She entered the room nervously, dwarfed by her giant escorts, and the two Frenchmen turned from the balcony, where they had been soaking up the sun and tropical splendour, and greeted the ladies amiably, beaming at Margarita as if they had found a long lost friend, and came straight to the point. “We are looking for Paco Ramirez and have reason to believe that you are aware of his whereabouts.”

“Why come to me? I haven’t seen the son of a bitch for years, and when I do I shall tear out his *tripas*,” she blurted out crudely, her gypsy temperament rising once more to the fore.

They then suggested that he could have returned to Wales, but she laughed cynically. “What! Return to that old goat; to that evil-eyed witch. Never in a million years.”

They had travelled far and it had been a fruitless journey, but they thanked her, nevertheless, and prepared to leave, declining politely her offer of her special firebrand of fullproof anis. When they had gone, to Adbulla’s consternation below, they danced merrily around the room before partaking of a good measure by way of celebration.

Not only was Paco reconciled with his wife in the Welsh valley, but he had found happiness and contentment. The success of his memorable party in the Welfare Hall had given him an exhilarating feeling of well-being, and when the French police finally caught up with him, he was involved yet again in one of his philanthropic endeavours. It had been a boiling day and he had organized a charabanc excursion to Swansea Bay for the mums and ailing toddlers of the village. He had also invited Brachi with his freezer of icecream. At mid-day the sun was sizzling and the mothers and children were seated on the sand watching Brachi remove the wet sacking from around the wooden barrel which held the crushed ice. There was a look of horror in his eyes when he saw that the ice had melted, and when he removed the lid from the freezer, so had the

icecream. He danced around as if in a daze, snapping his braces against his chest and uttering terrible oaths in Italian, and then he suddenly stopped to face the women.

“No icecream! No icecream!”

Their faces dropped and some kiddies began to bawl. Melancholily, he dipped in and passed a cupful to a parched infant. “It’s freezing,” she cried, and when they all queued up, cup in hand, they agreed that it had been even more refreshing in liquid form.

Unbeknown to Paco, two French police, accompanied by Inspector Daniels, were observing them from over the wall on the Mumbles Road. The Police Inspector had tried to assure them that Paco was not their man as, while the burglaries and atrocities were being committed in France, he had been in Wales and very much in the public eye. They insisted, however, on a closer look and took off their shoes and socks to mingle with the sun worshippers brazenly displaying bare knees and frilled pantalettes. They sat and watched him intently and soon realized that, if there was any truth in a witness account, the man who they should be seeking would make more than two of Paco, and the only time he showed the remotest suspicion of being a desperado was when he eagerly spurred-on the beach donkey.

The French police had become desperate and frustrated at their lack of success, but they were dealing with a morose, calculating man who would hide away alone for weeks after each audacious raid, and would order his men to disperse until he contacted them. He had banded together the most evil, barbaric thugs outside the city jails, yet they all feared him. He was still a drunkard but had learned to partly control his drinking and quit before he became paralytic and vulnerable, and he disciplined the gang also to restrict their drinking for their own safety. Many of the burglaries had been committed with little or no interception, but any token of resistance, he considered an affront to his dignity, and he would terrorize his victim with sardonic brutality. His mind had become warped with bitterness and he had

resolved to avenge society which had wronged and callously forsaken him, yet a surge of benevolence would assail his conscience whenever his thoughts dwelled back on the warmth and kindness the Zamora family had bestowed on him. As each day passed he spent more and more time day-dreaming nostalgically of the village and his many friends. He relived the happy moments he had spent in the small *taberna* where a drink was enjoyed socially and leisurely, cementing a genuine bond of comradeship. He slowly began to visualize a future devoid of retribution and hatred. He had, hitherto, placed little real value on the fortune he had accrued, but now it held a new significance and created a stimulus far in excess of drink or destruction. The sudden realization of its means to repay the village and its people, sent his pulse racing, and he could think of little else.

His hideout, miles from the nearest town, was a closely guarded secret as he feared the treachery of his men more so than its discovery by the police. For days he planned his escape, plotting a route well into the interior and avoiding major roads which linked the large towns. He felt a sense of security when he finally crossed the frontier into Spain, but even then he had to embark on an arduous detour. He was nearing the village and his heart leapt with excitement, and he vowed that if he found the same peace and tranquility he had once known there, he would not again step one foot outside the village as long as he lived. He walked along the deserted road and around to the back of the tiny cottage. The old lady looked up from the chicken she had been busily plucking and called out to her sons, who were in the next garden, to come to see the stranger.

Miguel had expected to see a greater change after so many years, but her face, although wrinkled, had the same warmth and alertness, but he could see that her sight was failing as she blinked unseeingly in his direction.

"*Señora Zamora,*" he began, but before he could utter another word, she dropped the chicken and held out her arms to greet him.

“Miguel, my son. My long lost son.” A welcome more heartfelt and sincere he could not have foreseen and they were both clasped together when the brothers appeared, and they too were overcome and cried unashamedly as they embraced him.

Miguel had expected to find the village still in a grip of doom and despair. The youngest inhabitants had pulled up roots and departed in search of a fuller life, but those remaining had worked diligently to make the place self sufficient. Every square foot of land had been cultivated, and even the once desolate hill side had been tiered and topped up with soil carried up from the fertile valley, and now bore fruit and vegetables in abundance. The remote village shared in a flourishing barter system, discarding the need for hard currency.

“Let us show you around our vast estate,” the brothers joked with mock hauteur. Their neighbours had moved away many years past, but before leaving, had offered them the use of the house and garden. As they did not require more living accommodation the doors and windows were boarded up until such time they chanced to return. The pig-sty and chicken sheds were filled to capacity and the brothers, who once hated gardening, now brimmed with pride and enthusiasm as they pointed out each carefully tended row.

“I’m home. I’m home,” Miguel almost blurted out aloud.

“We’ve still got your mattress,” the old lady chuckled, “and tomorrow we will open up the grand *castillo*,” and she pointed triumphantly to the empty house next door.

MORE EXCITING AND HUMOROUS THAN FICTION COULD EVER BE

Industrial, turn-of-the-century, Wales was invaded by several hundred immigrants, recruited in Northern Spain and Portugal for the South Wales coalfields.

There was much resentment and hostility in the Valleys and it was a slow process of acceptance, but the Welsh miners were appreciative of their sheer physical strength at the coal face and their mastery of mining technique.

The rift narrowed gradually, except among the young hotheads who continued to fight over the pretty Welsh girls.

The author depicts, with graphic clarity, several moving and traumatic episodes during their painful absorption into the village community and the ultimate reconciliation.

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