And a Spoonful of Grief to Taste

Gwyn Thomas

You know how it is in our part of the valley. They are mad for singing in choirs. If you can sing a bit, you get roped into a choir and if you can keep your voice somewhere near the note and your morals facing due north where the cold is, someone with pull is bound to notice you and before you know it you are doing a nice steady job between the choir pieces. If you sound like a raven and cause the hair of the choir leader to drop out like hail when you go for a hearing, you mope about in the outer darkness acting as foot-warmer for the boys in the Exchange.

I couldn't sing at all. As a kid I was handy enough and did very well as one of a party at school that did a lot of songs about war and storms at sea, with plenty of actions showing how wind and death are when they are on the job. I must have sung and acted myself out with that group. I was good. I sounded like an agent for doom. I put the fear of hell up my father who was a sensitive man, often in touch with terror. He shook like a leaf and supplied most of the draughts he shook in. When I sang that very horrible part-song 'There'll be blood on the capstan tonight', he averaged two faints a verse, and his head went up and down so often with the faints I could almost keep the time by him. That didn't last long. When I was about fourteen I went bathing

in that deep, smooth part of the river they call the Neck or the Nack. I dived in. When I came out my voice was broken, broken as if somebody had been after the thing with a hammer. At first I thought my father had dived in after me and arranged some submarine antic that would keep me away from part-songs for a couple of years. Then I was told nature works in this fashion, although some people get more warning. I could hardly talk till I was eighteen, let alone sing. I tried to get into a few of the local choirs as a background noise. I got nowhere near except when the conductor was giving a talk on why his choristers should keep away from rivers when an eisteddfod was coming up. It was only my father who had any use for me. He put me to stand behind the front door to frighten off the bum bailiffs. We had plenty of them coming to our place. It was like a training centre for them. There were new brands of debt that were named after my father. My job was to watch out for them and say in this funny croak I had that there was death in the house, much death, and didn't they know that there was some respect due even to the poor. It always worked. I sounded just like death, gone rusty with the boredom of always pushing people in the same direction and hearing no more of them. Between my long experience with those churchyard chants I had learned in the part-song group and the ten-foot drop my voice had done, I bet those bailiff boys could almost see my scythe as I stood there mooing at them through the door. They would flee, wondering, no doubt, how much my old man still owed on the scythe.

But here I am now, busily engaged in the building trade, driving towards the New Jerusalem at so many bricks a day, putting fresh heart into people in this town of Meadow Prospect who have been living in furnished rooms or sharing a belfry with the bats since the Rebecca Riots. I am the only man in our part of the valley who has found a place in such a tidy and dignified traffic without once having sung the *Messiah* or recited the whole body of Psalms backwards and

forwards with an apple in my mouth or done a salaam before the wealthy.

I didn't want to be a builder. At the time I'd have been anything. I'd have gone around the roads collecting fertiliser for the Allotment Union if my father had managed to get me a permanent bucket. But I wanted to get away from behind that door. I was sick of being posted there as a scarecrow for the bum bailiffs. I croaked that statement about death being in the house so often and with such passion it wouldn't have surprised me to see death sitting down with us at meals, chatting cosily and complaining about the quality of the grub, which it would have had every right to do, for the grub we had was rough. When I was about nineteen, my Uncle Cadwallader came to stay with us. He was great on doing jerks to get strong. It was a treat just to sit down and watch Cadwallader on these jerks, wondering what part of him you were likely to see next. He had the biggest chest ever seen in or around Meadow Prospect. At rest, the kitchen walls just about fitted it. But when he had the thing filled to the brim with air, and that was a favourite caper with him, someone or something had to be moved, fast. He was always jerking and practising to get bigger and stronger, and sometimes he looked so much like life's final answer to death I thought he would keep it up until his muscles began to glow like lamp posts with a sense of perfection and eternity, and then Cadwallader would float off the earth and look for larger stamping grounds among the planets. Sometimes, when he came in from a night's drinking at that pub, The Crossed Harps, he'd lift my old man clean off the ground and jerk him up and down. First of all, my father didn't like this, and thought of laying the poker on Cadwallader. But after a while he said that he had grown to like this motion and that it made quite a nice change from just standing still doing nothing much at all except keep from falling. But I think he laid aside the poker idea because at the speed he went up and down in Cadwallader's grasp, Cadwallader made much too

blurred a target for any good work with a short weapon. On top of that, Cadwallader was working and paid well for his place. He never lost his job. This was a very rare thing in Meadow Prospect, and he was often regarded as a miracle or a mirage by those freethinking boys who gather in the draughts room at the Library and Institute and talk about life and do a good job between them of burying all hope. Cadwallader was dull as a bat and with his strength he could have picked up a colliery and shaken the thing hard to see if there was any coal left inside. He was a great comfort to all the wealthy and to the coal-owning wealthy in particular. We often had the womenfolk of the mighty come along to see Cadwallader, offer him sugar from their hands or a soft vegetable, coo names at him, stroke him, and generally treat him as a horse. If he could have got into the way of talking in sentences and praising the state of things as they were, he would have been taken up by the Government and made into a prince or a mayor or a rent bloke or something. But all he was was strong and daft, and that, they say, is not enough. He didn't talk much at all, and he had a way of moving the muscles of his chest to show when he wanted something. We had to tell him to open the front of his shirt wider whenever we didn't get the full gist of what he was saying. And Cadwallader got tired of having my father peering in to get the exact intonation.

Anyway, he stopped lodging with us. He went up to the Terraces to live in what they call sin with a very big woman called Agnes who had thick red hair and a fine record in sin. This Agnes had worn out about forty blokes without getting any paler herself and she cottoned on to my Uncle Cadwallader when she saw him throwing a cart at a horse that had nearly run him over. She said here was a man who would see her through to old age without going on the Lloyd George every whip stitch. The old chopping and changing had started to get on her nerves and give her religious thoughts.

This was a big blow to my old man. He had actually begun to pay back some debts that had been going about for a long time past in short shrouds, with the money he got from Cadwallader. His manner with the bum bailiffs had become quite cheerful, opening the door to them four inches instead of three and calling them bastards once and with a smile instead of twice with a meaning frown. The only thing he could think of doing to keep hope alive was to take out a threepenny insurance policy on Cadwallader, with an eye on Agnes' past record, and to keep away from that group in the Library and Institute whose forebodings filled him as full of shadow as a mountain of dirt. I told him openly that from what I had seen of Cadwallader, I would say that if there was to be any passing out, both parties would reach the door together.

After a spell my father got the idea that if I went up to the Terraces where Cadwallader was living and pleaded with him, he might come back to us. I could talk in short simple phrases that Cadwallader could follow without going mad with nervous worry. That is why I was picked to do this pleading. I had also made up a short poem about his tremendous chest expansion that filled him with pleasure. But I could not shift him an inch from the side of Agnes. There was something like the hot middle of the earth in the thick redness of that woman's hair, and I could get the feel of the grip she had on Cadwallader. I made no headway with him and one Tuesday afternoon I made my way up the Terraces for my very last bout of supplication with Cadwallader. By that time I was sick of the sight and sound of my uncle. He was a friendly enough man when he was not twirling you over his head like a club and praising toil, but it wore me down trying to argue him out of his desire for this Agnes, and to move him to pity with stories of my father worrying himself thinner than the poker that he had once thought of crowning Cadwallader with. The only thing that lit a light in his eyes when I talked, was my poem about his

chest. He liked that, especially an easy couplet in the middle that got best rhymed off with chest. That notion was near enough to the ground for Cadwallader to see it plain without having to stand on tiptoe. But once off the poem and he dropped into a coma as fast as a stone. He rested in these comas. He got part of his strength from them.

When I reached the Terraces I saw great crowds of people. This was not common. Usually the people in the Terraces were asleep, working, sitting in a stupor on the doorsteps, or stroking their rabbits, pigeons or despair in the backyards. The crowd was thickest in Cadwallader's street, and at first I thought his passion and his strength had carried his lust for exercise to a peak where he had thrust Agnes through the roof without thought for her or the tiles. The people were excited. One voter told me that the colliery company which owned the streets around, and most of the people in them, had put up the rent of twelve of the houses, and the tenants in these houses had refused to pay any more rent until the company saw sense. I found that Agnes' house was one of the twelve. I saw Agnes standing on the pavement talking loudly, swinging her arms and flouncing her hair in great crimson waves upon her neck, and giving an outline of the sort of sense she was waiting for the company to see. I felt sorry for all these tenants who were being put on the wheel, but I could not see the company seeing anything but the company even with someone like Agnes dragging their eyes towards the target. Agnes had persuaded the tenants and their friends to resist. I could see a small group of listless and pallid men standing near her and taking in her commands. The man who was giving me the news of these developments told me that these boys were those lovers of Agnes who had blazed the trail before Cadwallader, the few who could still stand at all. People were building a barricade in the street made out of furniture that nobody wanted any more. Most of the furniture in the Terraces looks as if no one wants it any more, so there was a very poor quality about this barricade

altogether. The idea of it was to keep out the band of policemen and bailiffs and so on who were shortly to come in the name of the company and drag out these people who had buried their rent books ahead of themselves, which is not legal. I thought this made my job with Cadwallader all the easier. If he was going to be evicted it would be better all round if he just came down to the bed of the valley with me and took his old lodgings with us straightaway, but I found him in a harsh and brutal frame of mind, his mind all stoked up to a high flame by the speeches and antics of Agnes, his heart full of impatient hatred for the evictors and their assistants. Agnes must have been talking to him in signs to make him understand so much. He seemed really to have grasped the issue neatly, and was now waiting for the action to start which would allow him to lay down the issue and transfer his fingers to some unfriendly neck. I began my pleading, orating hard about the condition of my father, his gloom and hunger, lacing the whole with some selections from that poem. But he would not listen. I got down on my knees, conjuring him to have done with this tomfoolery of conflict and let himself be evicted like a decent citizen. I didn't even give up when Agnes, hearing the drift of my talk, began kicking at me from the rear and Cadwallader, to follow suit and to pander to this Agnes, who was the moontug upon the broad yearning waters of him, started to push my head off my shoulders with his thumb which was about the size of your leg. He kept the effort to this thumb to show me this was only a caution, given without malice even though it might end up with me walking about the Terraces wondering why I stopped so short at my shoulders. Then Agnes said I was probably a spy, sent up there after a lot of coaching by the bailiffs to do this pleading and get just one party to evict himself and set the ball rolling in favour of the law and the coal owners. She quickened her kicks and said she could now see through my game, and if it was that she was kicking I was not surprised. She suggested to Cadwallader that I should be

reduced to eight parts and served up raw to the bums when they should start peering over the barricade. She opened her mouth so wide when she said this that she got it full of red hair, and that gave her words an old, flaming, dangerous look. Cadwallader started after me, holding up one finger as if measuring me up roughly for the rending. I gave up and began pelting down the Terrace with him after me. I could hear Agnes tally-hoing after him like a mistress of the wolfhounds. I got to the barricade. I climbed up it like a monkey. As soon as I got to the top a policeman spotted me. He did not look very bright. He had probably come fresh from a long talk by the Chief Constable on the disasters, ranging from a terrible crumbling of the nation's brickwork to the organised ravishing of his womenfolk, if these Terraces were allowed to get away with this defiance. I could see his mouth drooping with concern, ripening into panic as he saw me. He yelled, 'Here they come, boys,' and reached up and gave me a hard clip with his baton that stretched me out cold on some sort of sofa number than the millpuff that came staggering out in armfuls from the torn upholstery. This did not please Cadwallader who remembered, Agnes notwithstanding, that I was his nephew. So he went over the barricade and dealt that policeman a lot harder clip than the one the policeman had given me. The policeman joined me across the sofa and we were both full of nothingness, tickled by millpuff. Then a lot of other people followed Cadwallader on his wild way and the policemen and bailiffs were driven to the bottom of the valley. But not for long.

When I came properly to myself, I found myself being marched by an army of policemen down to the police station. With me were about eighteen other men, Cadwallader among them, looking as dazed as I was but walking significantly in the centre of the group, like a kingpin. At the station we were charged with rioting, and I was still so boss-eyed with the fetcher I had from the baton that I could not even ask them what the hell they were talking about.

Everybody made a great fuss of me as we were waiting for the trial. I came right out from behind the front door when the bailiffs called about my father's debts and there was no need to make a single statement about death or calling next week. They were off. Some of the wisest voters in our part of the valley, boys suckled on grief and unrest, told me that I had struck a fine blow for tenants all over the world. I started to go to those classes at the Library and Institute that my friend, Milton Nicholas, used to run on the 'History of Our Times', giving the light to such subjects as the workers' struggle for lower rents, longer lives, higher ceilings, sweeter kids, and kinder days. Milton, though young and on the frail side, shone like a little sun on the gloom and wilderness of these topics. I started, with a thawed and astonished brain, to understand that it is a very bad thing, a very wrong thing, for colliery companies to go slapping extra rent on voters who don't get enough to eat most of the time, and to send bodies of policemen and bailiffs to evict these voters whenever the landlord is in a mood to disagree. And Milton showed me how I personally fitted into all this. He likened me to that Wat the Tyler who had put a hammer to the head of some tax collector or nark who was eyeing Wat's daughter and taking Wat's mind off the tiles. The boys in Milton Nicholas' class clubbed in and bought me a strong hammer, and Milton, when it was handed over, made a short speech in which he said that sooner or later the world, in its endless devising of discomfort and evil, would yield me some nark or collector who would give just the right kind of lip and have just the right kind of head to send me racing for the hammer. This gave me a proud feeling and I began to hope that when the trial came along the judge would order me to be kept in jail for ever like that poor bloke who was all beard and fish bones in that picture *Monte Cristo*, so that Milton could say something about me from week to week as an example of those who were giving their lives for freedom. My father was very worried when I told him about this hope,

especially the part about the beard, because he hates hair on the face in any shape or form and thinks a man should be neat even in the County Jail.

The trial came and I could see that the judge, who was dressed in a way I had never seen before except in carnivals, believed in rent and was stern towards all people who rioted and played hell with bailiffs. Every time he opened his mouth I got to feel more and more like Monte Cristo. But the man who was defending us made out that I should never have been in that street at all, and mentioned that Cadwallader had been clearly seen chasing me, with a promise of murder right across his face, towards the barricade, and that the fetcher I got from the policeman which put me across the sofa as cold as one of the legs, was simply a practice swing let off by the policeman by way of getting his muscles loose and ready to help the landlords lose their chains. It had nothing to do with my head at all. It had come along at the wrong moment. The judge was impressed by this and peered at me and muttered something a few times about me being young, as if I was Cadwallader's father and keeping very fresh for my age. He said, 'Let us separate the chaff from the grain.' The chaff was such personalities as Cadwallader, at whom the judge didn't bother even to peer. 'This boy,' went on the judge, 'has no doubt been seduced by the rash Bolshevik elements who mar this valley. He has been corrupted by idleness. The thing here is to nurse this bent sapling back to mental health. We will have him taught a trade. What trade would you like to be taught, my boy?' At first I was too busy playing up to the judge by looking bent and corrupted and explaining this programme in mutters to my puzzled comrades to make an answer. He asked me again. I remembered that Milton Nicholas had told me that moneylending was a very secure line of business where you didn't have to change and bath every time you came home. It sounded to me just the thing for people who were not in it. I mumbled something about having a strong fancy for

moneylending if I could find something to lend. 'Excellent,' said the judge, laughing with pleasure. 'An excellent choice. A bricklayer. A wise choice. I judged rightly. This boy has the right stuff. Let him be taught to lay bricks.' I hadn't said a word about bricks but that is how it happened. They sent me on a six-months' course to a Government Training Centre, and the night I went away Hicks the Bricks, the contractor I've worked with ever since, had a piece in the paper giving his views about the problem of the young, to which Hicks seemed to give even more thought than he gave to bricks, and saying that when I returned he would provide me with a job. Cadwallader and the other boys went to jail for a few weeks, and when he came out he found two other voters going in and out of Agnes' house. He noticed that, put together, these two were just about his weight, and Agnes pleaded that she was only keeping them about the place as mementoes of fuller times and to keep the mats in place until Cadwallader's return. But he had read passages from the large printed Bible he had found in his cell, and he told Agnes she was the sort of woman they had set dogs on in the days when print was larger. And he came back to the house of my father trying his best not to bark, and to pour the rain of his new resolution on the hot ache of his longing body.

That is how I came into the building trade. I was too sorrowful at having fallen so far below the golden hills of a striving martyrdom on which I had been sent briefly to walk by the words of Milton Nicholas to feel gratitude or gladness. The only thing I learned to the depths at that centre was to stay right away from all fish that looked like whale, because I had a poisoned stomach from eating fish that looked like that. Our foreman says I am so bad a hand with bricks I ought to sign articles with the Eskimos and specialise in igloos where the walls are supposed to be curved in just the way I curve them and not meant to outlast a good warm spring. So that is the way to do it. When a man of power, like that judge, asks you to choose your path out of hell,

mumble your reply and let him put the pattern out of his own wisdom upon your blur of sound, for in the end it is his choice it will be and the hell of your beginning will face you at the end and the heat of hell grows no less hot; only you and your fibres, with weariness and understanding and the laughter that will ooze from the dampest blankest wall of knowing and feeling, will grow less swift to smart at the pain of its burning. That, and helping a boy like Hicks the Bricks to get his name in the paper. That sets you up and eases the cold, whatever the great distance one's eyes must cross before they light once more upon the golden hills.