Boys of Gold

George Brinley Evans

The steamer was a small, thirty year old, coal-burning cargo/passenger boat, that until Pearl Harbour had plied her trade quietly between the ports on the shores of the Bay of Bengal. Now with a number in place of a name, painted fleet grey, she was steaming as part of a battle group.

He had been brought back from Akyab with the rest; a week in Calcutta and Captain Belton had asked for volunteers. Two trucks took them to a hot empty plain, miles from anywhere, just seven tents set alongside a sparkling river. Most of the next day was spent swimming, until the medics arrived, along with the ammunition. It was jabs all round.

The evening was spent charging Bren magazines with ball, tracer and incendiary bullets. The following morning they were aboard ship, on their way. Two days out, under the bluest of blue skies, they were ordered to check their kit. They had handed their pay books to the QM before embarking. He had handed them proxy forms, for the coming parliamentary elections, back home. Not one of them had been old enough to sign. Belton's kindergarten, someone mocked. He felt for his dog tags; they were there, one red, one black, strung on his army issue cord necklace. Thomas Samuel. 11741178. C of E. The armourer at Brecon had punched on the information. He had stopped thinking of himself as a Samuel. Now, when people called his name,

he automatically answered to Taff. He sat down on the deck next to Bagley, closed his eyes and listened to the rhythmic slap-slap of the bow wave; not long now.

The Afon Pyrddin gleamed and shimmered as it slid over the smooth stones, swirled, spun, and turned, then bent itself over the Sgwd Fach, the first of its three waterfalls. On and over, headlong down the one hundred foot drop of the Horseshoe Falls, into a dark, dank gorge, filled with the sound of angry, hissing water, breaking and splitting itself into a grey boiling mist; only to fall back into the iron grip of the millstone grit. Raging in its narrow channel, it rushed for the freedom of the smooth, wide shelf above the Lady Falls, to billow out like clouds of white silk, into the sun-filled pool below.

What a wonderful place for a body to live, he thought. He looked over Mrs Strong's garden to Ianto the Farm's big field. It shone a warm buttercup yellow in the morning sun. Almost in the centre stood a nursery, a stand of some thirty to forty full-grown Scots firs. A hideaway place that could turn into a steaming jungle, if you wanted it to. Where every shadow was an envelope for some new terror and so frightening, warned Billy Whitticker, 'It would give you lockjaw right enough! Right!'

Or if you held your head on one side and looked through the cobweb of your eyelashes, it would become a desert fort. Standing in the long shadow of an Arabian sunset, with white capped legionnaires standing sentinel. Once it was the Metz Wood they had read about in *The Wizard*. They had become the heroic, defiant men of the Welch Regiment. Up from their young souls had surged the craving of an ancient inherited valour; through their milk white teeth they had cried the cry, 'Stick it the Welsh!' and they had meant it.

'Sammy! Sammy! Sa…mmy!' His mother's voice sang out. He hated people calling him Sammy, except his mother, and

that best of all when they two were alone together. He liked everyone else to call him just plain Sam.

'Come on then, if you're going with Owen to pick whinberries. Sit in your place.' He looked at his brother, two years older than himself, who said without malice, 'Won't wait for you mind, if you can't keep up.'

'Mammy! Owen's going to leave Sammy on the mountain,' his sister piped up. She was sat in their father's chair, still in her nightdress; her hair tied up in rag curlers. She was the youngest and only girl, so could do and say what she liked.

'If they only dare!' his mother had said. The clean scent of her skin close to him, a wisp of her hair brushed his cheek and a small voice inside him whispered, 'I love you, and I'll bring you back more whinberries than anybody's ever seen.'

She gave him one of his father's old tommy boxes, burnished to a bright pewter by the emery rough hands of a collier. To Owen she gave the Christmas biscuit tin and the bottle with the home-made pop. They bought the ginger pop off a girl called Dolly, who brought it around, on a Friday, in a handcart, that ran on an old set of pram wheels and bore on its sides the words 'Polar Ajax Explosive', from the days when it was a box that carried gelignite to the colliery.

Alan was ready and came around.

'You mind Sammy, now!' their mother called after them.

The sound of her voice made Mr Gay, the Frenchman who lived opposite, lift his head from the storm of colour that was his flower garden. The tough old peasant from the Ardennes raised his hand in greeting to the boys.

'Good morning, Mr Gay!' they shouted back respectfully. He was the only foreigner they knew and hadn't he shown them the merry-go-round he had made for his grandson, with its painted, prancing horse?

'Takes a Frenchman to make something like that,' Alan had said.

'And where are you away to, Sam?'

'Hello, Mrs Strong,' he smiled at the kind eyes that looked

down on him. 'Going to pick whinberries, I am,' he announced his impending venture to the tall figure leaning against the gate. 'I'll bring you some if you like,' realising that perhaps he had found a way of repaying the soft-spoken lady for all the sprigs of mint she'd passed over the fence to little Mrs Thomas, as she called his mother, every time they had lamb for dinner. And every St David's Day since he had started school she'd brought him the best leek in her garden, the one with the greenest leaves and the whitest root, to pin on his coat; and one for Owen.

Mrs Strong laughed. Her life had begun in a small village outside Whitehaven that stood right in the way of the North Atlantic wind as it came in like ice off the Solway Firth and took its spite out on the half a dozen cottages that some insolent Cumberland miners had built right in its path. She accepted and forgave his extravagances with the natural compassion bred into those born in such places.

When they reached the bridge by the Pant, Rafferty was waiting for them.

'Got money for your permits? MacDermitt the shepherd is up by the Bwthin,' warned Rafferty.

He felt in his pocket for the silver thrupence his mother had given him. MacDermitt lived alone in a small valley hidden high on Mynydd Cefn Hir, tending a flock of sheep and guarding that part of the estate that belonged to the Williams family of Aberpergwm. He had only ever seen MacDermitt once, when the man had been making his monthly trip down to the village to shop. The memory of him came flooding back, as he lengthened his stride to keep up with the others. How could such a small pony carry such a big man? He was as wide as a piano.

They went down over the quoit pitch and behind Hopkins' shop. He looked across the colliery horse's field to Banwen colliery, the world's biggest anthracite mine. Owned by David Martin Evans Bevan, one thousand, two hundred men worked there. His father was one and he would be another.

'Do you know how MacDermitt do disbaddy young rams?' Rafferty was asking 'Just tips them up and bites their balls off!' Liar, he thought. But winced all the same.

The Bwthin was nothing more than a ruin. When David Thomas, a fireman at Banwen colliery, lived there with his family, it was called Ty-yr-heol (The Road House), for this was no ordinary road. The road they walked on was Sarn Helen, built on the orders of the Emperor Maximus and the road, it was said, along which St Patrick was led to slavery by Irish raiders, from his home at Banwen.

This time the raider was a massive Scot, sat on a pile of stones. And although the sun had already made the stones warm to the touch, MacDermitt was wearing a heavy tweed shepherd's coat, a tweed hat, leggings and half-sprung boots. The hair that showed from under his hat was snow white, as were his bushy eyebrows and the stubble of his moustache and beard. His eyes were light blue and clear like a boy's and shone out over the weather-raw skin that covered his cheekbones.

'Can my brother and me pick on the same permit, Mister?' asked Owen.

'No. One picker, one permit, laddie.'

He gave his brother his thrupence. Owen handed over the sixpence. 'Thrupence each,' Owen said.

'What do you call the wee boy?'

He stepped out from behind Owen to show himself. MacDermitt smiled at him. At the sight of those long tobacco-stained teeth, he stepped back, and was sorry he had thought Rafferty a liar.

The second part of the climb up Cefn Hir was steep and could only be made on hands and knees. Owen kept looking back at him; he was sorry he was making Owen feel guilty. But the windburnt grass was making the bottoms of his boots shine and chafing the skin between his fingers.

'Not much further now, Sam,' Owen encouraged from a

little higher up. The tone of his voice regretting the earlier hard looks.

Alan got to the wall first, and was standing on top of it. They had reached the top of the mountain. Owen held out his hand.

'Come on, Sam. The Roman Wall!' He scorned the helping hand and ran on to the wall. The wall stretched for as far as the eye could see, along the topmost ridge of the mountain, held together by nothing more than the builder's ability to balance one stone on top of another.

'Get up on it, Sam!' his brother urged. 'Take a look.'

It was like looking over the edge of the world. Below him lay MacDermitt's domain. The beautiful landlocked valley of Blaen Pergwm. Its shape reminded him of the fans the girls had carried in the school play, *Princess Chrysanthemum*. Tucked down, hundreds of feet below, MacDermitt's cottage was the thumb that drew the centre folds together. The lovely golden fabric of the fan rippled like a summer sea, as the tall mountain grass bent its head to the soft breeze. Dotted out like painted flowers were the pickers, their heads bowed and deft fingers urgently plucking the ripe fruit from its stalk.

'Come on, mark your name on the wall,' shouted Rafferty. Alan had already finished scraping his name through the powder-dry moss. It was as well; two summers away lurked the consumption.

'You have a rest, Sam. I'll do your name for you,' offered Owen. 'Samuel Thomas 1932', Owen finished off his name and the date neatly. He was glad Owen was his brother.

'No good picking on top by here, better go down a bit,' organised Rafferty.

When they reached the first group of pickers, Owen warned, 'Mind where you're putting your feet now, in case you step into one of their baskets.'

Mrs Morgan and her children made up the first group, all picking into helpers, old teacups, that when full were tipped into two fourteen-pound wicker baskets. The whinberries,

still in their powdered bloom, lay like a purple cushion against the shining brown wicker walls. If there was such a thing as professional whinberry pickers in Banwen, then this family was it. When a basket would become full, one of the children would take it down the mountain and give it to Shurry, the bus conductor. At Neath he would give the basket to the man who kept the centre stall at the market.

Four or five pence a pound, Mrs Morgan got for her whinberries. A full day's work brought them in seven or eight shillings, if they were lucky. They found a place to pick, but only after religiously observing the laws of 'Bara-y-cwtch'. This was a custom that designated territorial rights to the picker already on the spot. The size of the allotment was nowhere stated but usually the bigger and more ferocious the picker on the spot was, the larger the area of his preserve became.

There were whinberries everywhere; how he wished he had brought two of his father's old tommy boxes, or a bigger tin. The first whinberry he picked burst between his fingers. Never mind, he thought, there's plenty more. The next one dropped into a tangle of stalks and leaves. Then the insects, that until then had been busy feeding on the long grass, found him. They buzzed their inquiries around his head, in his hair, into his ears and nostrils, along his bare legs and down his shirtfront. The others picked diligently, insects or no insects.

'All right, Sam?' Owen called.

'Yes, all right.' He looked down at the few badly mauled whinberries that rattled around the bottom of the tin. And about two hours later, he could have done without Rafferty announcing to the world, 'Hey! Look lads, poor old Sammy hasn't covered the bottom of his tin yet.'

They stopped to eat. Owen gave him the sandwiches from the bottom of the pack, because they had stayed the freshest. But not even the banana sandwiches and the ginger pop improved his efficiency. Then it was time to go home. The

bottom of his tommy box was covered by about two inches of whinberries, no more; and that included squashed whinberries, red whinberries, not to mention the bits of grass and pieces of stalk.

The pledges he had so readily made weighed on him. His feet dragged themselves through the bracken, not wanting to carry him to where he would have to confess that those pledges would not be kept. In the evening light, he was frightened by the massiveness of the mountain's dark curves. He would never come after whinberries again, never. Nor would he, he was going to think, ever come on this ugly mountain again, but stopped himself, thinking that perhaps he'd better wait until he got home first.

At the side of the house, Owen took the lid of his tin: 'Tip yours in here, Sam.'

He opened his tin and looked at the jammy mess.

'Go on. Never mind, tip 'em in, Sam.'

Their father was in the back yard, legging a mandrill. He looked up and smiled, 'How's it going, Owen-Sam?'

He grinned back at the smiling man and the fear of the mountain flew from him.

The table was laid for supper, and the kitchen full of the smell of newly-pressed linen their mother was folding on to the airer.

'Well then?' She stood there, with a snow-white pillow slip over her hands, like a muff.

Owen lifted the lid of his tin; the Christmas biscuit tin was full to within an inch from the top.

'Sam and me managed this much between us, Mam.' He looked at Owen; Owen was looking at their mother, looking at her eyes. Looking for what only a son can see in the eyes of his mother. And no man ever born has seen it in any other place. In that instant of light, you bask, you bathe; you become the boy of pure gold.

* * *

'Come on, Taff, move!'

The bump against the jetty brought him to his feet. He waited to follow Bagley up the rope ladder. The loop he had made in the cotton bandolier slipped. He fastened it to the 'D' buckle of his pack and shinned up the ladder after Bagley. Bagley bent to help him over the edge of the jetty. He saw it coming through the air towards him. For a moment, he thought it was a bundle of rags. Until it thumped down heavily on the deck in front of him. The mouth wide open, showing strong white teeth bloodstained from having almost bitten the tongue in half. He rose to his feet and his eyes met the eyes of the Indian sepoy, who had booted the head at them. The sepoy stopped grinning.

'Taffy!' Bagley's voice was a mixture of impatience and concern, something the young Englishman often felt at his comrade's seemingly unending ability to wander into trouble. They ran across the jetty, over the road and jumped through the window of a bank. They landed up to the tops of their boots in money. They picked it up by the armful, useless paper money. They kicked it around.

'Bagley! Thomas!' They ran out into the street to where the captain's shout had come from and formed into Indian file with the rest. Now they had to make their way through the city to the main railway station. He looked down and let the worthless paper money, still in his hand, slip through his fingers. And thought of the death head, the matted blood-soaked hair a mother had once washed and gently brushed into curls. The eyes, so full of the terror of death, a father had looked into to see the reflection of his own dream. Of the torn and bruised lips, pressing and receiving loving kisses.

The sun blazed down, turning the green of their shirts to black with rivers of sweat and scattering the stench of death to every corner of this once shining city.

'Right! Everybody got one up the spout! And check your safety catches!' Sergeant Hopper's voice banged around the empty street.

The soft, gentle breath of a mountain breeze passed across his face, his feet were on mountain bracken and his mouth filled with the clean, clean scent of his mother. He stepped off along the road behind Bagley.

Thirty yards away, crouched behind a pile of rubble that not long ago had been a shop of sorts, a twenty year old Japanese infantryman felt a pulse racing in his finger as he bent it around the trigger. Knowing the moment he pressed that trigger, his life would end in minutes. His strong, young body smashed to pulp in a hail of tracer, ball and incendiary bullets.

Carefully, he framed the face of the British soldier in the aperture of his rifle sight, felt the soft warmth of the palms of his mother's hands against his temples, sucked in a deep sigh and pressed the trigger.