

## **POET DYING**

The hard ground rumbled and drummed long before the drovers emerged from that swirling mist. They had dropped down from the old Anchor Inn and ridden the Clun forest, and all Cunedda's cantreds now lay behind them as they took their beef across the March, the line and the dyke that....

"You want another one, Ger?"

He pushed the glass along the bar for Maddy to take. There was a twisting skein of creamed foam on the inside. He watched as she filled the glass from the cold Guinness tap. His thoughts were still internalised. The words came to him as he sat there in the afternoon. They would not be forgotten. The girl looked at him. She knew.

"You're in your head again aren't you?"

"Think in drink. Write in the light." His mantra.

"But do you?"

No he did not. He kept silent. One day the words so carefully composed and arranged in his head would come tumbling on to the page, or maybe the screen. Never mind which for now.

All Cunedda's cantreds stretched out like tablecloths in the morning sun. Tablecloth, was that a good word? He took a preliminary slurp. The noisy suction and the residue of cream that made his moustache look like a plaster cast attracted the attention of his fellow drinkers. Hilda looked up quickly before returning to her paper but the boys kept looking.

"You all right, Ger?" Not a medical question that one.

He had not at first taken to being called Ger. It sounded too Irish, not fitting for a Welsh poet such as he, but it had stuck. He lifted his glass to signify he was, that he was all right, though not everyone there including himself was too sure on that point. Maddy, bubbly, round and kind, had taken Brendan aside.

“Is he all right?” That was medical.

“He’s just chunnering.”

“No I don’t mean that.”

But her father had returned to the delivery notes he was riffling through.

“Be a good match Saturday won’t it?”

Harry, the first of the boys, to Digger. The two of them were called “the boys” though they were now in their forties, regular afternoon drinkers. There were not many others to confuse them with. Ger and the boys and Hilda were the only regulars at the dead hour, four o’clock of an afternoon. There was another younger fellow in too who was just starting to turn a pleasure into a habit.

Ger was back in the cantreds. He knew the “match” was a football match and some big West Midlands club was involved. It was not his code. These people were mongrels, hopelessly infected with Englishness.

“Polka pattern on summer cloth found in launderette. 3 and 6.”

Hilda did not even look up. She had her pen poised.

“What letters have you got?” asked Brendan. He did not look up from his delivery notes either.

“Something O something. Something something something something O something.”

Maddy was polishing a brandy glass as if it was the finest, proudest occupation in the world. Harry was looking at the young man.

“Who do you support, fella?” Ger noticed the inbuilt assumption.

“The Lambs.”

“Who are they when they are at home?” asked Digger

“They probably are when they are away too”, said Brendan. He still did not look up.

Tamworth. That’s where I’m from.”

Ger did look up. His eyes narrowed. He had had too many Guinnesses to let that pass.

“Tamworth. A pox on Tamworth.”

Maddy smiled and looked at the young man. She shook her head still smiling. Men in pubs eh. The young man looked taken aback at the vehemence of it.

“What’s wrong with Tamworth, you old git?” That was Harry not the youngster.

“The home of Offa the Mercian, the suppressor of my people. A dyke builder with a glittering palace in Tamworth furnished with Welsh spoils.”

The words rolled off the tongue of an orator

“She spoke of her honour and refused his offer. So he raised his offer and was on her and off her and off her and on her all night. Isn’t that right, Maddy?”

“All right, Harry,” said Brendan “Don’t bring my daughter into it.”

Ger looked at Maddy. He liked looking at her in profile. A pretty, shapely girl, and kind too. But she was all askew, diagonal to his vision. He closed his eyes. That made things worse.

“Dot Cotton”, said Maddy.

She said it loudly and authoritatively so that everyone looked up. She was looking at Hilda. Hilda looked back to her crossword. She was a thin woman made heavy with fake fur and make-up. She had as many layers as Troy.

“Which?”

“Polka dot. Summer cotton wear. She ran the launderette in *East Enders*.”

“Cunedda. Cunedda. Cunedda.” Another mantra from Ger who still had his eyes closed.

“Dad,” hissed Maddy, “He’s not well. Look at his complexion.”

“When did he last go out in the sun?”

“It’s yellow.”

“I’m his drinks waiter not his bleeding doctor.” Brendan ticked off another delivery note.

Ger was trying to get the words in order but they were collapsing into each other. He opened his eyes. He saw Maddy staring at him. She looked big and everything around her was fuzzed. He looked down to avoid her gaze. He felt accused of something but he didn’t know what. He manfully drank his Guinness.

“Who’s Cunedda?” asked the young man.

Ger was past answering anything.

“Another Welsh git” said Harry.

And past responding too.

He finished off his drink. He stood up and let his limbs and his head settle before trying a further move. Then he put his cap on. Maddy continued to stare at him.

“Be good”, he said

She usually said that if not she would be careful, but that afternoon she could not bring herself to.

“Take care, Ger,” she said.

He shuffled outside and zipped up his coat. He walked away. Something was happening around his neck and the back of his head. Blood stopped or maybe it was flowing the wrong way like that old Severn Bore. His head and his heart were taking their leave of each other separated by some terminal obstruction. He crumpled to the ground. He lay alone in that deserted little town in the dead of afternoon. The mist that had inspired his words swirled around his body.

Back in the pub the young man, earnest and interested in things, which made him the polar opposite of everyone else there, was not letting go.

“Can someone tell me who Cunedda is?”

“Cunedda, Cunedda, Cunedda.”

Maddy was affectionately imitating Ger, stressing the first syllable, giving the *dd* its hard Welsh *th* sound.

“Don’t you see?”

“That’s all nonsense,” said Brendan

“He’s King Arthur,” said Maddy ignoring her father.

“How very interesting,” said the young fellow, “I’d like to talk with that old man”.

“He’ll be in again tomorrow” said Maddy.

And perhaps he would. Perhaps even then, as the mist played around the windows, thin and tenuous, the soul of Geraint ap Ellis, poet, was permeating the dirty cobwebbed glass and heading for his corner stool. Perhaps he would never leave the pub again.