

RICHARD LLEWELLYN

How Green
was my
Valley



MICHAEL JOSEPH LTD.
26 Bloomsbury St., London, W.C.1

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TO
MY FATHER
AND
THE LAND OF MY FATHERS

X

Chapter One

I AM going to pack my two shirts with my other socks and my best suit in the little blue cloth my mother used to tie round her hair when she did the house, and I am going from the Valley.

This cloth is much too good to pack things in and I would keep it in my pocket only there is nothing else in the house that will serve, and the lace straw basket is over at Mrs. Tom Harries, over the mountain. If I went down to Tossall the Shop for a cardboard box I would have to tell him why I wanted it, then everybody would know I was going. That is not what I want, so it is the old blue cloth, and I have promised it a good wash and iron when I have settled down, wherever that is going to be.

It has always seemed to me that there is something big to be felt by a man who has made up his mind to leave the things he knows and go off to strange places. I felt the same for the rose cuttings I took from the garden down to the cemetery. But men are different from flowers for they are able to make up their own minds about things. And that should make the feeling bigger, I think.

But all I have felt this past hour since I made up my mind is an itch between my shoulders where a piece of wood got threaded in my shirt while it was blowing on

the fence to dry. I felt very badly just now, mind, when I said good-bye to Olwen, but since I did not actually say good-bye to her, and she has no notion I am going, it does not seem the same as saying good-bye properly, so I am feeling perhaps better than I should in false pretences.

This old blue cloth is a worry to me now, for I keep having thoughts that it might be torn or lost and I would have it on my conscience for the rest of my life. Even when I was very small I can remember my mother wearing it. Her hair was fair and curly, thick to choke the teeth of the comb and always very pretty even when it turned white.

My father met her when she was sixteen and he was twenty. He came off a farm to make his way in the iron works here, and as he came singing up the street one night he saw my mother drawing the curtains upstairs in the house where she was working. He stopped singing and looked up at her, and I suppose she looked down to see why he had stopped. Well, they looked and fell in love.

Mind, if you had said that to my mother she would have laughed it off and told you to go on with you, but I know because I had it from my father. They were married in six weeks after that in the worst winter for years. We have had terrible winters since, but my father always said there would never be another winter like that one when my mother and him were married. They used to get up in the morning and find their breath had frozen to thin ice on the bedclothes.

Things were very rough in those days. There were no houses built for the men and married people were forced to live in barns and old sheds until enough houses

were built. There was a lot of money made over houses, too. My father was paying rent on this one for more than twenty years before he bought it outright. I am glad that he did, because if he had not, my mother would have had nowhere these past few years.

But in those days money was easily earnt and plenty of it. And not in pieces of paper either. Solid gold sovereigns like my grandfather wore on his watch-chain. Little round pieces, yellow as summer daffodils, and wrinkled round the edges like shillings, with a head cut off in front, and a dragon and a man with a pole on the back. And they rang when he hit them on something solid. It must be a fine feeling to put your hand in your pocket and shake together ten or fifteen of them, not that it will ever happen to anybody again, in my time, anyway. But I wonder did the last man, the very last man who had a pocketful of them, stop to think that he was the last man to be able to jingle sovereigns.

There is a record for you.

It is nothing to fly at hundreds of miles an hour, for indeed I think there is something to laugh about when a fuss is made of such nonsense. But only let me see a man with a pocketful of sovereigns to spend. And yet everybody had them here once.

When the men finished working on Saturday dinner-time, my mother would hear the whistle and run to put the old stool outside the front door to wait for my father and my brothers coming up the Hill.

I have often stood outside the door looking down the Valley, seeing in my mind all the men coming up black with dust, and laughing in groups, walking bent-backed because the street is steep and in those days it was not cobbled.

The houses, of course, are the same now as they were then, made of stone from the quarries. There is a job they must have had carting all those blocks all those miles in carts and wains and not one road that you could call really good, because the land was all farms, then.

All the women used to dress up specially in their second best with starched stiff aprons on a Saturday morning, for then the men were paid when they came off the midday shift.

As soon as the whistle went they put chairs outside their front doors and sat there waiting till the men came up the Hill and home. Then as the men came up to their front doors they threw their wages, sovereign by sovereign, into the shining laps, fathers first and sons or lodgers in a line behind. My mother often had forty of them, with my father and five brothers working. And up and down the street you would hear them singing and laughing and in among it all the pelting jingle of gold. A good day was Saturday, then, indeed.

My father and my brothers used to go out in the back to the shed to bath in summer, but in winter they came into the kitchen. My mother filled the casks with hot water and left wooden buckets full of hot and cold for sluicing. When they had finished and put on their best clothes they came in the kitchen for the Saturday dinner, which was always special.

Sunday, of course, there was no cooking allowed unless my father was going down to the pit to see into some matter or other, and even then my mother was very careful.

But Saturday was always good with us. Even I can remember that, but only when I was small, mind.

We always had hams in the kitchen to start with, all

the year round, and not just one ham, but a dozen at a time. Two whole pigs hanging up in one kitchen, ready to be sliced for anybody who walked through the door, known or stranger. We had a hen house for years in the back yard, here. Fine white and brown hens, and you should have seen the eggs they laid. Brown, and dark speckly brown, and some almost pink, and all as big as your fist. I can just remember going out and crawling in the straw to the nests while the hen was shouting and flapping her old wings at me, and laying hold of one, very warm, and so big for my little hands that I had to hold it to my chest to carry it back to Mama in the kitchen. Hens have got a funny smell with them, one that comes, I think, from their feathers, just as a man will have his own smell about him. That smell of hens is one of the homeliest smells it is possible to put your nose to. It makes you think of so much that was good that has gone.

But when we used to sit down to dinner on Saturday, it was lovely to look at the table. Mind, in those days, nobody thought of looking at the table to keep the memory of it living in their minds.

There was always a baron of beef and a shoulder or leg of lamb on the dishes by my father. In front of him were the chickens, either boiled or roast, or ducks, or turkey or goose, whatever was the time of the year. Then potatoes, mashed, boiled and roast, and cabbage and cauliflower, or peas or beans and sometimes when the weather was good, all of them together.

We used to start with Grace, all standing up and Mama holding me in the crook of her arm. My father used to close his eyes tight and look up at the stain on the ceiling, holding his hands out across the table. Some-

times when he opened his eyes he would catch me looking at him and shake his fist at me and say I would come to a bad end, in play, of course. Then Mama would tell him to go on with him and leave me alone.

But indeed, so far my poor old father has been so right I have long thought he must have been a prophet.

When we sat down, with me in Mama's lap, my father would ladle out of the cauldron thin leek soup with a big lump of ham in it, that showed its rind as it turned over through the steam when the ladle came out brimming over. There was a smell with that soup. It is in my nostrils now. There was everything in it that was good, and because of that, the smell alone was enough to make you feel so warm and comfortable it was pleasure to be sitting there, for you knew of the pleasure to come.

It comes to me now, round and gracious and vital with herbs fresh from the untroubled ground, a peaceful smell of home and happy people. Indeed, if happiness has a smell, I know it well, for our kitchen has always had it faintly, but in those days it was all over the house.

After my mother had taken out the plates with my eldest sister, my father carved the chickens or whatever was there. My mother was always on the run from the table to the stove to cover the plates with gravy and she was always the last to start her dinner.

✓ "Eat plenty, now," my father used to say, "eat plenty, my sons. Your mother is an awful cook, indeed, but no matter. Eat."

There was never any talk while we were eating. Even I was told to hush if I made a noise. And that way, I think, you will get more from your food, for I never met anybody whose talk was better than good food.

After the plates had been polished clean with bread that my mother used to cut holding the flat, four-pound loaf against her chest, the pudding came out, and let me tell you my mother's puddings would make you hold your breath to eat. Sometimes it was a pie or stewed fruit with thick cream from the farm that morning, but whatever it was, it was always good.

And after that, then, a good cup of tea.

My father never smoked his pipe at table, so while my sister was washing in the back, he and my brothers went in the next room, and sometimes I was allowed to sit on his knee.

If he and the boys were going in to Town to buy something, there was a wait while my mother got ready to share out the spending money.

My mother kept all the money in the tin box on the mantelpiece over the fire-place in the kitchen. Every Saturday for years she put her little pile of sovereigns in with the others, until the box was so heavy, they had jokes helping her to carry it, and sometimes my biggest brother, Ivor, carried her and the box and all.

When she had it on the table, she would open the lid and sit back, looking at my father.

"Well, Gwilym?" she would say, in her deep voice.

"Well," my father would say, and take the pipe out of his mouth to sit up and blow his nose. That was always how it was when there was money to be spent over the usual housekeeping.

My father always said that money was made to be spent just as men spend their strength and brains in earning it and as willingly. But just as they work with a purpose, so the results of that work should be spent with a purpose and not wasted. So in our family, since

all the grown-ups were earning except my sisters and my mother and me, there was always thought before the tin was taken out of the kitchen.

If my father and the boys were going over the Mountain to see a rugby match, they would want a few shillings extra between them and my father would take half a sovereign and share it out. Their spending money was fixed because there was little to spend money on.

They had their beer down at the Three Bells at the bottom of the Hill, and my father paid all the dues once a fortnight. Sometimes there were outings with the choir and now and again a visit to a match over in the next valley or an International in Town. But when that happened the whole Valley, you might say, except those in bed or on crutches, would be going. Very few of them ever saw the match, mind, but they would all go to Town, and that was the main thing. They would know about the match from their friends on the way home, so they could argue as well as the next. So what was the odds if they saw the match or not.

I had my Saturday penny when I was quite small, and I used to buy toffee with it from Mrs. Rhys the Glasfryn. She made the toffee in pans and then rolled it all up and threw it soft at a nail behind the door, where it stuck. Then she took a handful with both hands and pulled it towards her, then threw the slack back on the nail again. That went on for half an hour or more until she was satisfied it was hard enough, and then she let it lie to flatten out. Hours I have waited in her front room with my penny in my hand, and my mouth full of spit, thinking of the toffee, and sniffing the smell of sugar and cream and eggs. You could chew that toffee for hours, it seems to me now, and never lose the taste

of it, and even after it had gone down, you could swallow and still find the taste hiding behind your tongue.

The first time I had real spending money was when Ivor got married. Bronwen came from over the mountain where her father was a grocer. Ivor met her when he went over there to a choir competition and went in the shop for some eggs for his voice. Bronwen served him and I suppose they started talking about one thing and another, but whatever it was, it must have been very interesting because he missed the competition by hours, and he was well cursed for it. A grand tenor he had from my father, see, and trained beautiful. So he was a sad loss.

Dai Ellis the Stable, who took the choir over and back in the brake, told my father about it. Ivor must have walked every step of the way over the mountain home because he only got in about an hour before my mother got up to get the breakfasts. My father only laughed.

"Beth," he said, "we will be losing Ivor before long now, you will see. He will be the first."

"Well," my mother said, and she was not exactly smiling, but as though she was wrapping a smile inside a thought, "it is quite time, indeed. I wondered how long. Who is she?"

Nobody knew, then. And nobody would dare to ask, even my father. He said everybody had their own thoughts and likings, and it was the business of nobody else to go about asking questions and poking their snouts. He never did.

Poor Ivor had it very badly too. He was off his food for days. Coming in after the shift, he had his bath and went up on the mountain-side to lie in the grass and

think. At least, he said he was thinking, when I went up there one day to him.

"Thinking," he said to me. "Go from here, now, before I will sling you head first in the river."

He used to go over the mountain twice a week after that, week in and week out, in snow and all, and if he missed Dai Ellis, he walked back all those miles over the mountain in the pitch black. It must be real love that will have a man like Ivor doing all that just to see a girl for a few minutes with her father and mother in the room.

One Saturday afternoon after dinner when Ivor had almost driven my father silly with walking up and down and sighing and going out to the door to look down the Hill, and coming back to pick up the *Christian Herald* and give it a shaking and put it down, we heard a trap pull up outside the door.

My father got up knowing he had a visitor, and my brothers stood up too. Ivor was at the door being very polite to the father of Bronwen who had come over to see the family. My father sent me from the room as they passed in.

"Dada," said Ivor, as white as lilies, "this is Bronwen's father."

"O," said my father. "How are you, sir?"

"I am very well, indeed," Bronwen's father said, looking at all of them and the room too in one single look. "There is cold it is."

From then, of course, they got on fine, and by the time my mother had made the tea, they were like old friends indeed, and Bronwen's father got drunk as a lord down in the Three Bells before he went home that night. My father had had a couple, too, mind, but he always