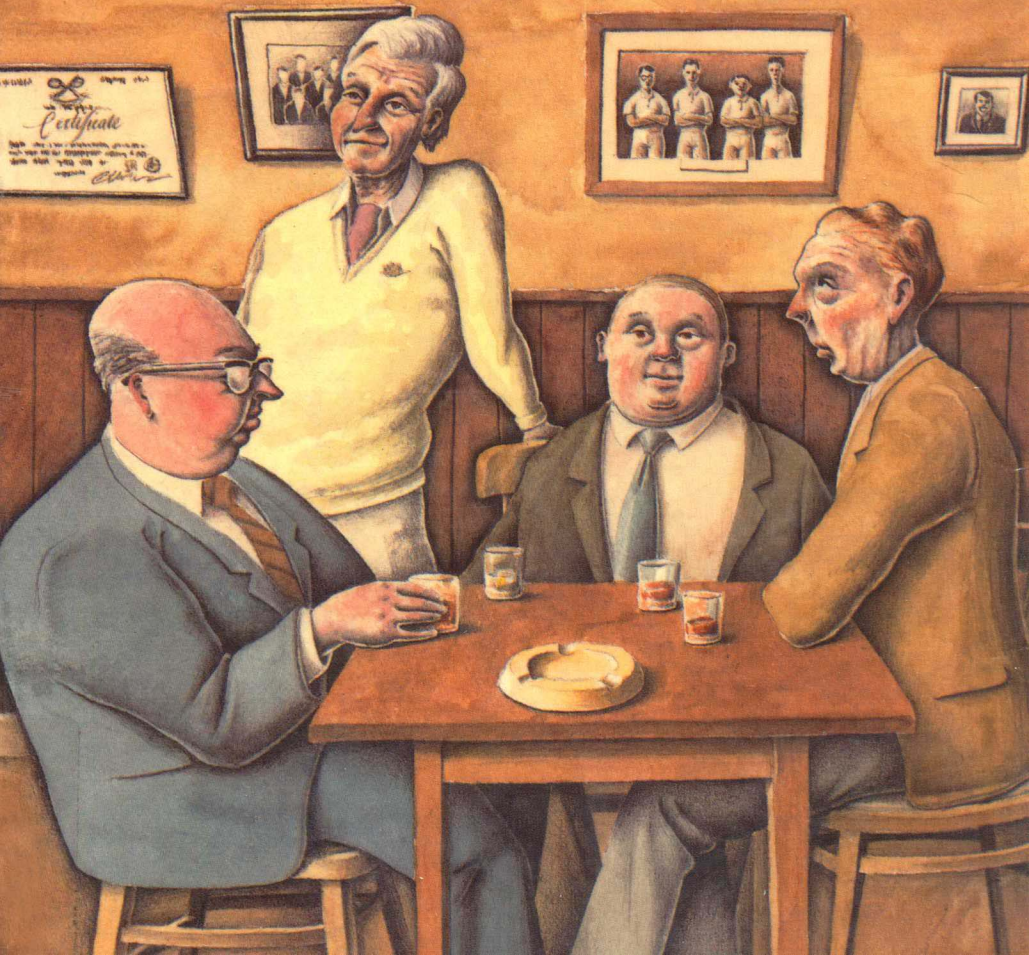
Kingsley Amis

THE OLD DEVILS



KINGSLEY AMIS

The Old Devils

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Fiction

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Take a Girl Like You
One Fat Englishman
The Anti-Death League
I Want It Now
The Green Man
Girl, 20
The Riverside Villas Murder
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Harold's Years (editor)
Every Day Drinking
How's Your Glass?

With Robert Conquest

Spectrum I, II, III, IV, V (editor)
The Egyptologists

Author's Note

Many real places are referred to in this novel (Carmarthen, Cowbridge) and many fictitious ones too (Birdarthur, Caerhays). Lower Glamorgan corresponds to no county division. The fictitious places are not real ones in disguise or under pseudonyms: anybody trying to go from the coast of South Wales to Courcey Island, for instance, would soon find himself in the Bristol Channel. Courcey and the others have no more actual existence than any of the characters here portrayed.

K.A.
Swansea: London

To Louis and Jacob.

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One – Malcolm, Charlie, Peter and Others

1

'If you want my opinion,' said Gwen Cellan-Davies, 'the old boy's a terrifically distinguished citizen of Wales. Or at any rate what passes for one these days.'

Her husband was cutting the crusts off a slice of toast. 'Well, I should say that's generally accepted.'

'And Reg Burroughs is another after his thirty years of pen-pushing in first City Hall and later County Hall, for which he was duly honoured.'

'That's altogether too dismissive a view. By any reckoning Alun has done some good things. Come on now, fair play.'

'Good things for himself certainly: *Brydan's Wales* and that selection, whatever it's called. Both still selling nicely after all these years. Without Brydan and the Brydan industry, Alun would be nothing. Including especially his own work – those poems are all sub-Brydan.'

'Following that trail isn't such a bad – '

'Goes down a treat with the Americans and the English, you bet. But . . .' Gwen put her head on one side and gave the little frowning smile she used when she was putting something to someone, often a possible negative view of a third party; 'wouldn't you have to agree that he follows Brydan at, er, an altogether lower level of imagination and craftsmanship?'

'I agree that compared with Brydan at his best, he doesn't – '

'You know what I mean.'

In this case Malcolm Cellan-Davies did indeed know. He got up and refilled the teapot, then his cup, adding a touch of skimmed milk and one of the new sweeteners that were

supposed to leave no aftertaste. Back in his seat at the breakfast-table he placed between his left molars a small prepared triangle of toast and diabetic honey and began crunching it gently but firmly. He had not bitten anything with his front teeth since losing a top middle crown on a slice of liver-sausage six years earlier, and the right-hand side of his mouth was a no-go area, what with a hole in the lower lot where stuff was always apt to stick and a funny piece of gum that seemed to have got detached from something and waved disconcertingly about whenever it saw the chance. As his jaws operated, his eyes slid off to the *Western Mail* and a report of the Neath-Llanelli game.

After lighting a cigarette Gwen went on in the same quirky style as before, 'I don't remember you as a great believer in the integrity of Alun Weaver as an embodiment of the Welsh consciousness?'

'Well, I suppose in some ways, all the television and so on, he is a bit of a charlatan, yes, maybe.'

'Maybe! Christ Almighty. Of course he's a charlatan and good luck to him. Who cares? He's good fun and he's unstuffy. We could do with a dozen like him in these parts to strike the fear of God into them. We need a few fakes to put a dent in all that bloody authenticity.'

'Not everybody's going to be glad to have him around,' said Malcolm, giving another section of toast the standard treatment.

'Well, that's splendid news. Who are you thinking of?'

'Peter for one. Funnily enough the subject came up yesterday. He was very bitter, I was quite surprised. Very bitter.'

Malcolm spoke not in any regretful way but as if he understood the bitterness, even perhaps felt a touch of it on his own part. Gwen looked at him assessingly through the light-brownish lenses of her square-topped glasses. Then she made a series of small noises and movements of the kind that meant it was time to be up and away. But she sat on and, perhaps idly, reached out to the letter that had started their conversation and fingered it as it lay in front of her.

'It'll be, er, fun seeing Rhiannon again,' she said.

'M'm.'

'Been a long time, hasn't it? What, ten years?'

'At least that. More like fifteen.'

'She never came down with Alun on any of his trips after whenever it was. Just that once, or twice was it?'

'She used to come down to see her mother at Broughton, and then the old girl died about that long ago, so she probably . . .'

'I dare say you'd remember. I just thought it was funny she never really kept up with her college friends or anyone else as far as I know.'

Malcolm said nothing to that. He swayed from side to side in his chair as a way of suggesting that life held many such small puzzles.

'Well, she'll have plenty of time from now on, or rather from next month. I hope she doesn't find it too slow for her in these parts after London.'

'A lot of the people she knew will still be here.'

'That's the whole trouble,' said Gwen, laughing slightly. She looked at her husband for a moment, smiling and lowering her eyelids, and went on, 'It must have come as a bit of a shock, the idea of, er, Rhiannon coming and settling down here after everything.'

'Call it a surprise. I haven't thought of her since God knows when. It's a long time ago.'

'Plenty of that, isn't there, nowadays? Well, this won't do. All right if I take first crack at the bathroom?'

'You go ahead,' he said, as he said every morning.

He waited till he heard a creak or so from the floor above, then gave a deep sigh with a sniff in the middle. When you thought about it, Gwen had given him an easy ride over Rhiannon, not forgetting naturally that it had been no more than Instalment 1 (a). A bit of luck he had been down first and had had a couple of minutes to recover from some of the shock – rightly so called – of seeing that handwriting on the envelope, unchanged and unmistakable after thirty-five years. Gwen had left the letter on the table. With a brief glance towards the ceiling he picked it up and re-read it, or parts of it. 'Much love to you both' seemed not a hell of a lot to brag about in the way of a reference to himself, but there being no other he would have to make the best of it. Perhaps she had simply forgotten. After all, plenty had happened to her in between.

Finishing his tea, he lit his first and only cigarette of the day. He had never greatly enjoyed smoking, and it was well over the five years since he had followed his doctor's advice and given it up, all but this solitary one after breakfast which could do no measurable harm and which, so he believed, helped to get

his insides going. Again as always he filled in time by clearing the table; it was good for him to be on the move. His bran flakes and Gwen's chunky marmalade enriched with whisky went into the wall-cupboard, the stones of his unsweetened stewed plums and the shells of her two boiled eggs into the black bag inside the bin. He thought briefly of eggs, the soft explosion as spoon penetrated yolk, the way its flavour spread over your mouth in a second. His last egg, certainly his last boiled egg, went back at least as far as his last full smoking day. By common knowledge the things tended to be binding, not very of course, perhaps only a shade, but still enough to steer clear of. Finally the crocks went into the dishwasher and at the touch of a button a red light came on, flickering rather, and a savage humming immediately filled the kitchen.

It was not a very grand or efficient dishwasher and not at all a nice kitchen. At Werneth Avenue, more precisely at the house there that the Cellan-Davieses had lived in until 1978, the kitchen had been quite splendid, with a long oak table you could get fourteen round with no trouble at all and a fine Welsh dresser hung with colourful mugs and jugs. Here there was nothing that could not have been found in a million cramped little places up and down the country, lino tiles, plastic tops, metal sink and, instead of the massive Rayburn that had warmed the whole ground floor at Werneth Avenue, an oval-shaped two-bar electric fire hanging on the wall. Most mornings at about this time Malcolm wondered if he had not cut down a bit too far by moving out here, but no point in fretting about that now, or later either.

There came a faint stirring in his entrails. He picked up the *Western Mail* and without hurrying – quite important as a matter of fact – made his way to the slant-ceilinged lavatory or cloakroom under the stairs. The old sequence duly extended itself: not trying at all because that was the healthy, natural way, trying a certain amount because that could have no real adverse effect, trying like a lunatic because why? – because that was all there was to do. Success was finally attained, though of a limited degree. No blood to speak of, to be conscientiously classified as between slight and very slight. This was the signal for him to sit to attention and snap a salute.

In the bedroom Gwen was at her dressing-table putting the foundation on her face. Malcolm came round the door in his

silent, looming way and caught sight of her in the glass. Something about the angle or the light made him look at her more closely than usual. She had always been a soft, rounded, fluffy sort of creature, not ineffectual but yielding in her appearance and movements. That had not changed; at sixty-one – his age too – her cheeks and jaws held their shape and the skin under her eyes was remarkably supple. But now those deep-set eyes of hers had an expression he thought he had not noticed before, intent, almost hard, and her mouth likewise was firmly set as she smoothed the sides of her nose. Probably just the concentration – in a second she saw him and relaxed, a comfortable young-elderly woman with gently-tinted light-brown hair and wearing a blue-and-white check trouser-suit you might have expected on someone slightly more juvenile, but not at all ridiculous on her.

To get her voice as much as anything he said, 'More social life? No letting up?'

'Just coffee at Sophie's,' she said in her tone of innocent animation.

'Just coffee, eh? There's a change now. You know it's extraordinary, I've just realised I haven't seen Sophie for almost a year. One just doesn't. Well. You'll be taking the car, will you?'

'If that's okay. You going along to the Bible?'

'I thought I might sort of look in.' He went along to the Bible every day of his life. 'Don't worry, I'll get the bus.'

A pause followed. Gwen spread blusher – called rouge once upon a time – over her cheekbones. After a moment she dropped her hands into her lap and just sat. Then she speeded up. 'Well, and how are you this morning, good boy?'

'Perfectly all right, thank you.' Malcolm spoke more abruptly than he meant. He had prepared himself for a return to the topic of Rhiannon and the query about his bodily functions, though usual and expressed much as usual, caught him off balance. 'Quite all right,' he added on a milder note.

'Nothing . . .'

'No. Absolutely not.'

As he had known she would, she shook her head slowly. 'Why you just can't deal with it, an intelligent man like you. The stuff that's on the market nowdays.'

'I don't hold with laxatives. Never have. As you very well know.'

'Laxatives. Christ, I'm not talking about senna pods, California Syrup of Figs. Carefully-prepared formulae, tried and tested. It's not gunpowder drops any more.'

'Anything like that, it interferes with the body's equilibrium. Distorts the existing picture. With chemicals.'

'I thought that was what you were after, Malcolm, honestly, distorting what you've got. And what about all those plums you go in for? Aren't they meant to distort you?'

'They're natural. Obviously.'

'How do you think they work? Just chemicals in another form.'

'Natural chemicals. Chemicals naturally occurring.'

'How do you think your guts distinguish betweeen a bit of chemical in a plum and a bit of the same chemical in a pill or a capsule?'

'I don't know, love,' said Malcolm rather helplessly. He thought it was a bit thick for a man not to be able to win an argument about his own insides, even one with his wife. 'But then I haven't got to know.'

'Don't take my word for it – fix up to see Dewi. Yes yes, you don't hold with doctors either, and why do I have to go on at you. Because you're foolish, that's why, you won't help yourself. Unteachable. You know sometimes I'd almost take you for a bloody Welshman?'

'There's nothing to see Dewi about. There's nothing wrong with me. No sign, no sign of anything.'

'Just ask him for a prescription, that's all. Two minutes.'

Malcolm shook his head and there was more silence. In a moment he said, 'Can I go now?'

They embraced lightly and carefully while Gwen made another set of little sounds. This lot meant that although she still thought her husband was silly about himself she would let it go for the time being. There was affection there as well, if not of an over-respectful order.

As often before, Malcolm could see strength in the case against ever having mentioned his defecations in the first place. He had never intended more than an occasional appeal for reassurance and so on. As an apparently irremovable part of the daily agenda the subject had its drawbacks, while remaining streets ahead of his shortcomings as a man, a husband, an

understander of women, a provider and other popular items dimly remembered from the past.

In the bathroom across the landing he cleaned his teeth, first the twenty or so surviving in his head in one form or another and then the seven on his upper-jaw partial. This was such a tight fit that putting it back was always a tense moment; bending his knees and moving them in and out seemed to help. What with the five crowns in front, of varying manufacture and recency, the ensemble was a bit of a colour atlas, but at least no one was going to mistake it for snappers top and bottom. They would have to come some day – which meant not now, bless it. The thought of having a tooth extracted, loose as nearly all of his had become, bothered him in a way he thought he had outgrown many years before.

The face surrounding these teeth was in fair trim, considering. In shape it was rather long, especially between the end of the nose and the point of the chin, but the features themselves were good and he was aware without vanity that, with his height and erect bearing and his thatch of what had become reddish-grey hair, people usually found him presentable enough. At the same time he had noticed that now and then a stranger, usually a man, would glance at him in a way that always puzzled him rather, not quite hostile but with something unfavourable about it, something cold.

He had seen a good deal of that sort of glance at school, where he had been bullied more than his fair share for a boy not undersized, foreign or feeble, and he remembered asking Fatty Watkins, one of his leading persecutors, why this was so. Without thinking about it, Fatty had told him that he looked the type, whatever that might have meant. Twice in later life, once down Street's End on a Saturday night and then again on a train coming back from an international at Cardiff Arms Park, just minding his own business both times, he had been picked out of a group of mates and set upon without preamble by an unknown ruffian. Perhaps without intending it he sometimes took on an expression people misinterpreted as snooty or something.

Whatever the ins and outs of his face he was going to have to shave it. He hated the whole caboodle – teeth, shave, bath, hair, clothes – so much that he often felt he was approaching the point of jacking it all in completely and going round in just

pyjamas and dressing-gown all day. But for Gwen he would probably have got there long ago. She kept on at him to play himself through with the portable wireless and he still tried it occasionally, but he cared for chatter about as much as he cared for modern music, and that was about all there seemed to be apart from Radio Cymru, which was obviously just the thing if you were set on improving your Welsh. The trouble was they talked so fast.

Welsh came up again and in a more substantial form when, having heard Gwen drive away, he settled in his study to put in a bit of time there before going along to the Bible. This, the study, was on the first floor, a small, smudgy room where water-pipes clanked. Its dominant feature was a walnut bookcase that had not looked oversized at Werneth Avenue but had needed the window taking out to be installed here. One shelf was all poetry: a fair selection of the English classics, some rather battered, a few Welsh texts, all in excellent condition, and a couple of dozen volumes of English verse by twentieth-century Welshmen. One of these, not painfully slim, had on it Malcolm's name and the imprint of a small press in what was now Upper Glamorgan. On taking early retirement from the Royal Cambrian he had intended to set about a successor, completing poems left half-done for years and years, writing others that had only been in his head or nowhere at all. He ought to have had the sense to know that intentions alone were no good in a case like this. Not a line had turned up in all that time. But some day one might, and meanwhile he must practise, exercise, try to get his hand back in. Hence the Welsh.

Among the books on his table there was a publication of the Early Welsh Text Society – to give its English designation: the poems and poetical fragments of Llywelyn Bach ab yr Ynad Coch (*fl.* 1310), open at his funeral-song for Cadwaladr, quite a substantial affair, three hundred lines odd. Malcolm's translation of the first two sections was there too, a lightly-corrected manuscript, also a pamphlet containing the only other translation he knew of, done and published by a Carmarthen schoolmaster in the Twenties but in the style of fifty years earlier. Never mind – whatever it lacked as a piece of poetry it came in bloody handy as a crib.

Moving at half speed, Malcolm opened the pamphlet now at the beginning. His glance shifted to and fro between the Welsh

original of this passage and the two English versions, picking out words and phrases in either language that he felt he had never seen before: the tomb of the regal chieftain . . . red stallions . . . ye warriors of Gwynedd . . . I the singer, the minstrel . . . heaps of Saxon slain . . . chaplet . . . hart . . . buckler . . . mead . . .

Malcolm jerked upright at the table. A great God-given flood of boredom and hatred went coursing through him. That, that stuff, fiddling about with stuff like that was not living, was not life, was nothing at all. Not after today's news. No indeed, poems were not made out of intentions. But perhaps they could come from hope.

He made to tear up his manuscript, but held his hand at the thought of the hours that had gone into it, and the other thought that he would go back to it another day and transform it, make something wonderful of it. For now, he could not sit still. Yet if he left the house now he would be much too early, or rather a good deal, a certain amount too early. Well, he could get off the bus at Beaufoy and walk the rest of the way. On more of the same reasoning he went and gave his shoes a thorough polish; not much point hereabouts, agreed, but virtuous.

When he finally went out it was overcast with a bit of black, damp already, mild though, with a gentle breeze clearing the mist, typical Welsh weather. If you can see Cil Point it means rain later; if not, rain now. As he started down the hill he could see it, just, a dark-grey snout between the ranks of black slate roofs shining with moisture. Soon the bay began to open out below him, the sweep round to the west where coal had once been mined on the shore and inland along the coastal plain, and steel and tin-plate were still worked and oil refined, for the moment anyway, and behind all this, indistinct through the murk, the squarish mass of Mynydd Tywyll, second-highest peak in South Wales.

It was mid-morning in the week, and yet the pavements were crowded with people darting in and out of shops or just strolling along like holiday-makers – here, in February? Children and dogs ran from side to side almost underfoot. Crossing the road was no joke with all the cars and the motor-cycles nipping about. There was a queue at the 24 stop but, even so, nothing showed for a long time. Staff shortages, they said, recruitment down since the automatic-payment system had meant good-bye

to days of plenty, when the conductor fiddled half the fare-money on the out-of-town part of the route and handed over half of it, or nearly, to the driver when they got to the garage. To save going round the end of the queue, youngsters on their way to the opposite corner kept breaking through it, always as if by pre-arrangement just in front of Malcolm.

The bus came. While he was climbing the litter-strewn steps his left ball gave a sharp twinge, on and off like a light-switch, then again after he had sat down. Nothing. Just one of the aches and pains that come and go. No significance. He would not always have taken such a summary line, in fact at one stage cancer of them, or one of them, had been among his leading special dreads, distinguished as it was by its very personal site and alleged virulence. There had even been the time when, after a day and most of a night of just about unremitting twinges on both sides, he had spent the dawn hours compiling in his head a draft list of books to take into hospital: mainly English poetry with one or two descriptive works about Wales, in English naturally. The following morning, by one of the most rapid and complete recoveries in medical history, the affection had vanished. So far so good, no further. But then he had read in the *Guardian* that recent advances had put the survival rate for testicular tumours up to or above ninety per cent, and for the rest of that day he had felt twenty, thirty years younger, and something of that had never been quite lost.

Reflecting on this and related matters took him past his stop and almost into Dinedor itself. With an air of transparent innocence that luckily escaped remark he got off by Paolo's Trattoria. Just round the corner was the Bible, more fully the Bible and Crown, the only pub of that name in the whole of Wales. According to local antiquarians the reference was to a Cavalier toast, though research had failed to come up with a date earlier than 1920, some time after it had become safe to proclaim loyalty to the King's party in any or all of his dominions, even this one.

On the way in Malcolm's spirits lifted, as they always did at the prospect of an hour or more spent not thinking about being ill and things to do with being ill. It was still early, but not enough to notice.