ALEXANDER CORDELL

The Fire People

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Born in Ceylon, Alexander Cordell was educated mainly in China. He went on to serve as an officer in the Royal Engineers during World War II and then established a career in the Civil Service, retiring in 1968 to become a full-time writer.

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For Richard Lewis,
whom they called Dic Penderyn,
unjustly hanged.

... As to the men I accuse, I do not know them, I have never seen them, I have no resentment or animosity towards them. They are for me merely entities, spirits of social maleficence. And the act which I perform here is only a revolutionary means of hastening the revelation of truth and justice. I have but one passion—that of light. This I crave for the sake of humanity, which has suffered so much ...

Zola

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Certain vital papers have come to light during my research which, lost for a hundred and forty years, are valuable evidence concerning the life and times of Dic Penderyn; these new facts have a direct bearing on the Merthyr Rising and are important enough to be included as an appendix to the book.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance given by the Departmental Record Officer of the Home Office in tracing these documents.

1

THERE was more commotion going on than a Tipperary bath night.

Big Bonce was clogging around with Lady Godiva; Curly Hayloft, as bald as an egg, was doing a bull-fight with Tilly; Skin-Crone, the cook, was beating time to the shriek of the fiddle, and the navvy hut was alive with dancers of Kerry and County Mayo.

And as Gideon played he saw in his near-blind stare the twenty beds, the labour-dead sleepers straight off shift and the dark eyes of the Welsh girl who watched him from a seat in the corner. Someone turned up the lamps and he now saw more clearly as he fiddled out the old Irish reel: the coloured waistcoats of the navvies he saw, the violent disorder of the blankets, the mud-stained jerkins and hobnail boots, the soaked dresses of the wives hung up to dry: all this he saw partly by vision and partly by memory, from the days before he was blind. And he knew that in a shadow by the table old Peg Jarrotty, the wake corpse, would be hanging by a rope under his arm-pits, a broom under his chin, and a pint of home-brew slopping in his fist. Hooked on his chest would be the coffin plate—'Peg Jarrotty, Wexford: died June 14th, 1830.'

'There's me wee darling!' cried Tilly, dancing up in a sweeping of skirts. 'Won't you raise us a smile, Peg Jarrotty, for the look on your face makes me miserable to death!' and she tipped him under the chin.

Vaguely, Gideon wondered if it was respectful to the dead, but he played on, smiling: this is what they wanted, he reflected; this was their religion.

Belcher Big Tum came up, all sixteen stones of him. 'Sure, hasn't he drained that pint yet? It's the same stuff he used to sink down the Somerset Arms, isn't it?'

'It is not!' shouted Lady Godiva. 'He never touched that dish-water without a two-inch livener, isn't that right, me lovely dead fella? Shall I lace it up with a drop o' hard stuff?' And she stroked his face.

'Can't you show some respect for the dead?' asked Jobina, the Welsh girl in the corner, and she rose, her dark eyes sweeping around the dancers.

Gideon lowered his fiddle; the noise of the hut faded.

Jobina said: 'I can stand the randies and the heathen language, but I can't abide the wakes. Do you have to act like animals?'

'She's asking for a filling up again,' said Moll Maguire.

'You leave the Irish to the Irish, woman!' shouted Tilly.

'And the Welsh to the Welsh, and remember it!' Jobina put her hands on her hips. 'Irish, you call yourselves? Dancing around a corpse, and him hanging from the ceiling with a broom under his chin? Don't tell me they do that in Kerry.' She strolled the room, looking them up and down. 'You've got him like a pig on hooks. Have him down tonight before I'm back off shift or I'm taking it to Foreman. It's bad enough having to eat with live Irish without sleeping with dead ones.'

'Heavens above!' gasped Tilly. 'Did you hear that? She's asking for a doin' . . .'

'Ach,' said Belcher testily, 'we're not after woman-fighting. If the wee Welsh bitch wants old Jarrotty down, I say let's give it.'

'Why give her anything? She's a foreigner here,' cried Tilly, breasting up.

'You're the foreigners,' replied Jobina, 'or isn't this the county of Glamorgan?'

Big Bonce swung to Gideon, crying, 'What do you say, fiddler—you're Welsh, too, aren't you?'

'The fella's as Irish as me, aren't ye, son?' Moll Maguire now, with her arm around Gideon's waist; she was tall for a woman, yet only inches above his shoulder. Gideon smiled

with slow charm, saying:

'It's no odds to me, Irish—I'm only the fiddler, and you pay well.'

'You should be ashamed of yourself!' said Jobina, turning away.

'And why should he?' demanded Skin-Crone, the cook from the other end of the hut: she was sitting astride a chair stirring up a cauldron for the midnight supper, and the steam was going up like a witch's brew. 'When are we putting wee Jarrotty down, then?' she asked.

'He's having a decent Catholic service the moment we find his leg.'

'Haven't ye found it yet, then? Wasn't it buried under the fall?'

'How did it happen?' asked Gideon, and Belcher said:

'He was barrowing the big stuff on the dram-road slope, with the mule wagging along the line as if tomorrow would do, but little Jarrotty slipped, ye see, and the dram came down. The dram came down, then the mule and then the muck, and he was under six tons of the stuff when we dug him out.'

'And he'd only got one leg,' said Moll.

'Where did the other one get to?' asked Lady Godiva, scratching.

'Search me—the mule must have eaten it.'

The talk went on, the drinking was heavy. Gideon leaned against the hut wall and imagined the stars above Taibach, for this was his country. The wind moved over the heath and he smelled the heather and a tang of sulphur from the works, and he raised his face instantly to the salt of the sea-drift, which he loved.

'Here's your pay, fiddler, the dancing's stopped,' said Belcher, and pressed a shilling into his hand; Gideon took it, and did not reply. Instead, he lifted his head higher to taste the sea-drift, and Jobina followed his sightless gaze to the open window, threw her red shawl over her shoulders for the cropping and wandered towards him.

'What's your name?'

He straightened to her. 'Gideon Davies.'

Bending, she pulled at a red stocking. 'What the hell are ye doing in a place like this?'

'What are any of us doing?' he asked.

'You local?'

He said evenly: 'I used to be—Taibach.'

'Welsh, eh?'

He smiled at her, and she added: 'It's a pleasure to be civilised, even if ye have to live with the heathen.'

'They're not so bad,' he said. 'Give me Irish in preference to the foreigners.'

Beyond the vision of her unseen face he saw the windows of Aberafon winking at the moon, the square thatch of Rhigos where he stole from the orchard: he smelled again the sulphur of the night wind coming up from Briton Ferry and saw the baying brilliance of the night when the molten iron flashed on the bungs of Dowlais. The white-hot bucketings of Skewen and Swansea were in his bedroom of childhood, and he would lie awake listening to the cries of the mules under the whips in the stack-yards and along the dram-roads of Morriston. There was the black shine of the cassocks in the C. of E. the bearded thunderings of Ianto Nonconform in the little red-brick chapel off the Vernon Arms, and the brown arms in summer of the girl he knew but whose name he had forgotten.

'You play good,' said the Welsh girl, watching him.

'Thanks.'

'Where did you catch it, then?'

'Taibach Copper Works.'

'That bloody place, cauldrons and chopped colliers.'

The navvies had stopped carousing now and were feeding on the bench: the pot Skin-Crone was serving from contained many different foods: vegetables which she had stolen from Taibach market made the slush. The meats were attached by strings, and each portion she pulled out with care and gave it to the owner: half a hare for Belcher, a born poacher; two pig's trotters tied together for Curly Hayloft, a sheep's head between Mercy Merriman and Betsy Paul, Dick of the Iron Hand's woman, who was visiting. Crone and Moll shared an ox-tail they had blackmailed from a butcher with two wives;

Blackbird feasted on a pound of ribs of beef, which he had bought, being honest. All had wooden spoons, and these they dipped excitedly into the pot, blowing and gasping at the steam and elbowing each other for room.

'B'ant you eating, fiddler?' asked Belcher.

'No, I'm just off to Mamie Goldie,' replied Gideon.

'Who's Mamie Goldie?' asked Moll. 'She don't sound decent.'

'She is clean,' said Gideon instantly.

'By God, that's a change. You lodge with her?' asked the Welsh girl.

He nodded and she looked again into his face, seeing the telltale tattoo of the furnace grit, yet his eyes appeared untouched by the blast: bright blue, they shone in his brown face.

'How did you collect it?'

He could have gone into the detail, but the wounds were too new to his soul. He could have told her how the copper exploded in a damp mould; that Mike Halloran had just come into the casting-house and stopped for a ladle in front of him, so he took most of it. Also, Popo Hopkin, aged seventy, due to retire in three weeks, took some, too; and screamed and went in circles with his body on fire as the copper bit deep. Halloran died in shrieks they heard as far up as the Brombil dram-road. Strangely, for all his age, Popo did not die, but lived on the black shadows of his forge-sided cottage, nurtured by Company respectability—come in, boys, see what we're doing for Popo Hopkin. Maintained by a devoted wife on four and six a week pension, Popo lived where the children could not see him. And a disability like this do have a bit of compensation—apart from the four and six—he used to say to the Quakers who visited, faces averted—for you can't appear shocking in a two-ale bar and you eat that much less with only half a mouth.

In his two years of blindness Gideon had bred great shafts of hope that wounded despair. The comradeship of ear and nose had constructed a new world in his darkness: and touch, a vital sense left to him, completed the resurrection from self-pity. Now he said lightly:

'There is nothing to tell—the mould was wet, and it spat.'

The navvies quarrelled at the table in good-natured banter and oaths, and Betsy Paul shouted: 'You'm a fine fiddle, boy. You tried us up in Pontstorehouse?'

'He do not play in cellars,' said Jobina.

'The money's right in Merthyr, mind—we got fiddlers and organ-grinders, and my Dick Llaw-Haearn is right fond of music. You like to play for silver some time?' She tore at the sheep's head, grinning above it with strong white teeth, and swept back her matted hair with a greasy hand.

'Some time,' said Gideon. 'But it's a Derry fiddle and it sings that much sweeter to the Irish.'

'You Irish?' asked Jobina. 'You said you were Welsh.'

'Welsh parents and born in Galway.'

'It makes no difference, there's still the business of eating. I'm cropping night shift up on Brombil—you going that way?'

Gideon nodded. 'Miners' Row.'

'Bloody good for you—right on top of the mill.'

'I am not there all the time,' he said.

Reaching the door of the hut, he turned and bowed to the room. The navvies, now clustered around the wake of Jarrotty, shouted rough goodbyes.

'The heathen lot of bastards,' said Jobina.

Gideon touched his hair. 'Good night, and thank you.'

'You pay 'em too much respect,' said she.

As she opened the door the night swept in; the wake candles fluttered and the room was alight with the flashing of the Taibach vents. In the sulphurous stink that enveloped them, Gideon said reflectively, 'Once, in a hall in Tredegar, I played first violin in *Judas Maccabaeus*, and I bowed to people then.'

'Who's Judas Maccabaeus?'

He smiled as they went down the steps of the hut. 'It doesn't matter now.'

'You staying on here?' asked Jobina.

'No. I'm on the road in the morning.'

'And you blind . . . ?'

'It makes no difference. Every year I do the round to Merthyr and the Top Towns—on the fiddle with political