

The Fisherman

He first saw him from Bwlch Gwyn. The turnpike to the mines turned northwards a few miles back to ford the river at Rhyd Goch. There would have been very little water to hinder him at the ford that led to town, but the telegram noted that they would meet him at Craig Ddu. The farm at Blaen-plwyf belonged to his uncle and had of late, he had read, become a home for both his mother and his sister. He had left the turnpike to enter an unsown field and then followed the heaving hedgerows westwards for a few miles. The reaping parties and hay-carts had long since lumbered homewards and left a long sleeve of fields stripped bare and white. Others still laboured in the distance, their pitchforks and scythes visible against a clover-clad backdrop. The land before him slowly began to rise as the hayfields gave way to grazing meadows and dark outcrops of trees. He had crossed a stile at the foot of a small rise from which a sheep path lead across to a gate. It stood open in the dry earth and afforded a good view of Cefn Hywel.

From Bwlch Gwyn he paused to look for the Blaen-plwyf turnpike. Across to his left a black clump of trees on the crest of Cefn Hywel stood out against a pale blue sky. Their thick trunks framed what looked from afar like an arching bough and spindly branches, likely the result of a longforgotten winter storm. He followed the path that skirted the hill and wound downwards into a bed of fern. As he neared the underside of the trees he looked up and realised that what he had seen was not in fact a bough. He stopped and waited for a while on the slope. Leaving the narrowing path

he climbed warily to the top and slowly laid his coat and package on the grass. A speckled sheepdog moved suddenly in the shadow of the trees. It barked once and took a step towards him, then panted and paced in a circle over the bare roots. Occasionally it paused and peered towards him before glancing upwards. Its paws and underbelly were dusty and its long tongue lolled continuously.

Taking his penknife out of his pocket he glanced upwards. Before him hung the body of a small man whose weight had nonetheless gradually bent the bough above him and stretched the rope until his feet dangled only four feet from the ground. The man wore work clothes not unsimilar to his own and seemed to be roughly the same age. The rope had dug into the dark brown skin on his neck and his tongue lolled lifelessly down onto his chin.

His shirtsleeves were rolled up past his elbows and exposed two deeply tanned forearms whose thickness seemed to drag the rest of his frame down towards the ground. The body hardly swayed, for there was no breeze.

As he stepped forward the dog stood alert but did not growl. It seemed to be too wary to protest. It simply panted in the humid air and sniffed his shoes and trousers. He took hold of the man by his belt and gently pulled his body downwards, the rope bracing under the strain. The bough gave way enough for him to reach the rope with his blade, and soon it swayed back upwards and rustled momentarily as the weight of the dead body fell into his arms. It was surprisingly heavy, a cumbersome mass of muscle and bone held together by clothes that gave off a slight smell of sweat and smoke. He felt the man's cold skin on his arm. Beneath him the dog sniffed its master's clothes and whined softly, then licked his face as he was laid upon the ground. He closed the man's mouth and noticed his weatherbeaten

face, slightly pale in the shadow of the trees yet bronzed on the temple and pocketed with a little character around his sunken cheeks and eye-sockets. He cut the rest of the rope free from the man's neck and used it to secure his packaged belongings to his belt. After tying his coat around his waist he lifted the body in his arms again and began to edge his way down the slope. The dog barked once and followed.

The road to Soar lay a short distance south of his route at the bottom of a thickly wooded coomb. He could not remember there being any farms nor smallholdings near Cefn Hywel, therefore he lumbered towards the small village where little more than a handful of houses lay clustered around a small bridge and a chapel. The lane lay silent yet the chapel door stood ajar. Luckily the minister was inside tending to his books. Together they laid the body on a loose pew in the vestry and the minister said that he recognised the dead man.

'Hardly ever left his farm, hardly ever, nobody hardly saw him after he heard about his brother, a pity it is, a great pity.'

The minister avidly shook his head and thanked the stranger for cutting and carrying the body down. The stranger left it on the pew in the cool air of the vestry and loosened the package and coat from his waist. As he turned northwards on the crossroad he saw the dog sitting nearby in the shadow of the bridge's stone wall. Loose bits of hay clung to the wet fur underneath its open mouth. It peered towards him as he walked away, its ears rising briefly before dropping down along with its head onto its paws.

The land began to rise again and the trees petered out into stooping

windbreakers and overgrown thickets propped up by gate-posts and rickety fences. Soon the long line of roofs and chimney-pots of Blaen-plwyf became visible on the horizon beneath a reddening sky. Craig Ddu lay in open fields a short distance from the village in the shadow of a weathered ash tree. A chorus of barking greeted him in the yard and his sister embraced him in the lighted doorway. His uncle greeted him in the kitchen and his mother wept and refused to let go of his hand. She told him that she had expected to see him in his uniform. Outside beneath the tree in a field in front of the house the dead man's dog sat down and slept.

He stayed at Craig Ddu for four days. He was told that Daniel had a place for him on the boat, although his uncle assured him there would be work enough at Craig Ddu if he was so inclined. His sister saw the sheepdog loitering in the lane one morning and started to shoo it away before she noticed that the other dogs were unperturbed by its presence. He told them of the body that he had found on Cefn Hywel. His mother said that she did not know the man and remarked that it was strange that he had not mentioned it sooner. As she gave the dog some food scraps with the others he warned her not to befriend it if she did not want another mouth to feed, but she simply muttered that there would be work enough for it at Craig Ddu.

On his fifth morning he departed for town and promised to return the following Sunday. The dog peered at him as he walked down the lane to the turnpike, its tongue lapping dew from its jowls. It glanced towards the yard and then back down the lane, then began to trundle gently towards the turnpike. At the end of the lane and twice further down the turnpike he

paused and turned around to contemplate his precarious follower.

Each time the dog would also pause a short distance away, only to pant diligently and return his inquisitive glance. At Chancery he acquired a place on a cart that was making for town and sat quietly as the turnpike crossed the river and laboured its way up a steep hill. Other carts, some laden with hay or churns, passed occasionally and he lost sight of the shadowy form of the dog in the distance. At the top of the hill the cart stopped on a wide crossroads from where he could see the small town to the west baking beneath a hazy blue sky. Beyond it the vast sea lay glimmering, its glistening surface peppered with a handful of cream sails.

As he walked down to the harbour in Trefechan he noticed that the dog was still following him, its gait laboured slightly yet its features alert. It stopped again as they both saw each other, a little nearer now in the gravelly edge of a busying road. He continued to walk and soon arrived at a row of houses that skirted a lane and branched out towards the water. He knocked on a door marked number nine and enquired about a room for the night, but was told that Jim's family did not live there now and that he should try Spring Gardens instead. But there was no one at Spring Gardens either who knew of Jim so he decided to go straight to Daniel's house in the old town, the dog following some ten yards behind. Daniel was not at home, as he had expected, and he left his belongings in the kitchen. He found a few familiar faces in the dock and some news of Daniel. Jim, he was told with a shake of the head, had not come home. He stayed by the moorings for a few hours and helped some boats dock until The Three Sisters swayed into the harbour with the tide. He greeted Daniel and helped him and his young nephew secure the boat and unload the catch. His freshwater fingers quickly became bruised and scratched in the salty nets and knots.

The dog sat and peered at him nearby and quietly observed the harbour's comings and goings.

The following weeks brought very little rain and kept the harbour busy almost every day from the early hours until dusk. Mounds of lobster pots were stacked and unstacked and stacked again along the quay and young boys sat on the warm walls all day picking and mending swathes of corroded nets. The Three Sisters would leave at seven and return to the harbour with varying amounts of fish by mid-afternoon, where the dog lay silently waiting by the water's edge. It had followed him back to Daniel's house and then to a small shared house in Tan-y-cae, eventually making a corner below the worn doorstep its home. He conceded that it would take some effort to get rid of the dog now, so he gave it his scraps and encouraged a kindly old woman who lived opposite to do the same.

The other fishermen soon realised that it was his dog that was waiting on the quay and some would laugh and ask if he had caught any sheep for it in his nets. Yet he became content to let the dog stand on the quayside as the boat trudged out to sea and sit amongst the pots and ropes until his daily return. The local boys would play with it and run to Trefechan and the old town to fight, yet the dog never left the harbour and always found a place to sit on the quay come afternoon, peering patiently out to sea.

Eventually as late summer waned he occasionally allowed the dog into the house. At night it would watch him silently from the fireside as he silently watched the burning fire. Sometimes he would peer at the dog and notice its inquisitive eyebrows and a streak of red fur on its ears, neck and coat. Once he wondered whether the dog had ever understood that his master

had died. He hoped not.