Running for the Hills

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Extract

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I

In the Eye of the Sun

THEY MET AT the House of Tongue, at the tip of Scotland, near the furthest point north. As she walked into the room he was the only man to stand up. They exchanged bright smiles, the kind that come from shyness: neither was comfortable in the grand drawing room, under the glassy stare of shot stags and the crossed swords of long-conquered Scots.

Like a spy in a boys' adventure story, the young man's manners were too polished, his unaccented speech too English. Robert was born in Shanghai and raised in Kenya and South Africa. He was not at home in the chattering party which surrounded him; he was too quiet, too watchful, too polite.

Jenny was also self-conscious, but she flushed and bubbled with it, buried it under avalanches of enthusiasm and laughter until, in the middle of dinner, someone sneered something about a 'bloody homosexual' in Parliament. In a trice she reacts.

'But what on earth does it matter? I don't think it makes the slightest difference! So what if he's queer? So what?'

The other speaker halts. There is an embarrassed silence. Robert raises his head and for the first time looks beyond the pretty, skittish surface of the girl on the other side of the table. He says nothing, but she catches this sudden, steady look, and beyond the agreement in his spreading smile, she sees another thing: the assessment of another intelligence, another will.

'Hmmph!' she thinks, and reaches for her wine.

After dinner they spread out around a great fire with cigarettes, cigars and spirits. The host, Max, sat down with Robert to play

chess. They were friends and rivals; similarly ambitious, agitating young journalists. They had been in Nigeria together, covering the Biafran war. Most of those at the House of Tongue that night were journalists of some sort: Jenny was the *Standard*'s Assistant Literary Editor.

Max was following Winston Churchill's *My Early Life* as a manual for grand success. He liked to win his games, and he had played Robert before. Jenny sat nearby and watched. Her presence added an edge to the contest. Robert thought for a time, sometimes a long time, before shifting a piece. Max bit his fingernails, the effort of each bite clipping across his face. The game slowed and intensified, the pieces clotting on the board in gently bloody confrontation. Jenny sat watching the men, following the game, and at some point (she remembered, decades later) realised that she wanted Robert to win. On his turn Max moved quickly, defiantly; he pressed, he attacked. His game was good, aggressive and alert, but, in the end, Robert won.

The next day was misty, the grass as wet as the sky and the loch deep green below the pelt of bracken. After breakfast Max handed out rods, guns and bright cartridges. The women made jokes and mocked distaste and went along with it anyway. Jenny denounced it all and went for a walk. She may not have been as easily confident as the others, but she knew her own mind, and never concealed a conviction.

'I think it's disgusting. Foul!' she cried, over her shoulder, at Max and his laughing crew. She said of him later, 'I could never love anyone who insists on killing things the whole time.'

Robert walked too, he left before breakfast and went miles. He did not shoot or fish. He looked out to sea and put up grouse. There was nothing, not even a croft along the shore. He packed a meditative pipe and smoked, sitting on a cold rock.

Jenny went across the moor, slipping and sliding in high boots of inappropriate green leather which soon became blackened with peat slime. Every pop of the guns behind her confirmed her resistance to Max.

Later, in a warm evening with no wind, the loch dreamily still

and the old sandstone house glowing red, Max took her out in a rowing boat. The creak and drip of the slow oars seemed to amplify the glassy peace; Jenny felt that the herons and even the midges were listening. They moved out into the middle, drifting into the lacquered green reflection of the col. Max seemed calmer than he had been, not chasing her any more, thinking about other things. They eyed the water.

'My God, someone's coming in!'

Jenny stared at the pale figure, which was even then throwing itself forward in a shallow dive, a great fish flopping.

'Well, that is quite mad. It must be absolutely freezing.'

'It's Robert,' Max said, narrowing shooter's eyes.

Robert pulled towards them, breast stroke, gasping huge breaths. Ten yards away he took an extra deep one and plunged under, shimmering to the side of the boat and surfacing with a sputtered cloud of vapour. Jenny saw his shoulders were brown and flecked with sunspots and moles. Kicking beneath him, shrinking and growing, his feet were white.

'Isn't it freezing?' she cried, shivering.

'Very refreshing,' he said, exaggerating the shudder in his voice. He turned, ducked under, set off.

'Loopy,' said Max.

'I can't stand cold water! Ever since my mother used to make us swim in the freezing sea I just can't bear it. Being an adult is never having to get into the water,' Jenny said, watching Robert swim.

There was a girl there called Anne, another of Max's friends. Jenny noticed Anne looking at Robert. As she followed Anne's gaze Robert glanced up, not at Anne, but at her.

'I think I've fallen in love with Robert,' Anne announced.

'Have you? Golly. Do you know him then?'

'He's going to be my problem, ' said Anne, thoughtfully.

Jenny decided she would go back to London when she looked out of a window and saw the lawn covered with mackerel. Max was laying them out, dozens of bright silverblue fish.

'What are you going to do with so many, Max?' she demanded.

'Oh Lord, Jenny. Don't tell me you don't like fishing either! This is Scotland, for God's sake!'

'I think it's fine to kill things for the table. But how on earth are you going to eat all of these beautiful mackerel?'

It was a long way to the station and she called a taxi. She was waiting for it, saying goodbyes, when Robert appeared, carrying his bag.

'I'm going back too,' he announced. 'I'll come as far as Newcastle with you.'

This train journey fascinates me. For the first time they are alone together. Robert gives her to understand there is someone, a woman, in Newcastle. But when the great station arrives he does not get off. They cross the Tyne together. What do they see as they gaze across the compartment at the other? She looks on a beautiful young man. His hair is fair, his skin is browned, his face broad and handsome. The nose is straight, the jawline firm. His voice is authoritative, with that near-arrogant crispness that public schools and colonies breed, but he speaks softly, gently.

He has a habit of tilting his head back slightly as he listens, green eyes locked on hers, and nodding forward as he responds. His humour is quick and dry and never far away. He is not fixed; there is a fragility about his quickness, as if he believes in his own intelligence and is uncertain of all the rest.

He is familiar with the company of beautiful women but has never encountered anyone like Jenny. She leaps from her seat, crying out her delight at the dark magnificence of Durham cathedral. She snorts with giggles when he is witty. She rolls her eyes at the other passengers, responds to the stolid ticket inspector like a naughty schoolgirl performing for her class; she seems to find authority provocative and ridiculous. Her hair is fine and dark, her eyes are bright and light brown. She has the elfin air, smile and sass of the Chelsea girl she was not long ago. She smokes cigarettes carelessly and talks continuously, veering wildly between innocence, mischief and insight. Their fingers touch as

she hands back his matches, and he notices how cool hers are. I see them smiling across the compartment, charmed and laughing with nothing to lose in that blissful conspiracy of ignorance and curiosity with which love affairs begin.

They begin to unfold their lives to one another. Robert talks of his childhood, of following his father's postings to Kenya and South Africa, of being a student in Cape Town, of his marriage, of opposition to the regime, of friends imprisoned and murdered, of his flight to Britain with his young wife and their little daughter, of the failure of that marriage, of divorce.

Jenny listens, responds with sketches of her own upbringing in Shrewsbury, and her boarding school in Kent, where she was the only girl who was not the child of missionaries. She tells of her flight from what her mother always insisted was 'upper middle class' Shropshire, of her happiness at Cambridge; she mentions adventures in America and Thailand, teaching in the East End, of how much she hated working in television.

When the train reached London they separated, but in helping her with her bags Robert somehow kept hold of the one containing her soiled green leather boots. On the following Monday evening he finished earlier than usual and waited for her outside her office in Fleet Street. When she emerged, hurrying as usual, he gravely presented her with the boots. She barely recognised them. He had worked the leather for hours, with spit and rags and carefully chosen polish, and now they shone and gleamed.

'Heavens, Robert,' she cried, 'they're beautiful! How sweet of you!' He gave her a watch not long after that, saying 'I notice you never seem to know the time,' with one of the sidelong looks which always made her laugh, but nothing moved her like the polishing of the boots, which seemed to her a pure kindness.

Robert would not come out to play at lunchtimes or after work, he shunned the wine bar crowd in which she had many friends. He was never fond of the laughing Diary boys, the gossip and

booze. He was always working, and quiet in the company of men, except Max.

They were well matched to their jobs. Jenny was pretty and bright, and awkward and open all at once: the combination swept her past the wary fences of the writers and academics she interviewed. Her subjects trusted her immediately and talked freely as her tape recorder turned, and she missed nothing. At the office package after package of books arrived to be opened and considered. She sampled them, tested them against taste and instinct, read and re-read them, and – though it took her much longer to believe than to acquire it – developed an expert eye.

In the din and dinge of old Fleet Street she was an unlikely presence. 'You'll never make a journalist, dear girl, you're not nearly tough enough,' said one.

'It's not what you write,' grated her senior one day, 'it's not even how slowly you type it. It's the pauses while you search your keys for the right letter!'

Robert blazed at his work. He had a passion for it; he went for the heart of the story as if angry headlines and cool paragraphs could slay the tormentors of the world.

They saw each other often, and one day his kettle appeared in her kitchen, and she knew that he had moved in.

Then one night they went to a restaurant in Notting Hill. Red tablecloths, dark walls. Robert listened while Jenny, inspired, laid out her dream.

'I don't want to be stuck in London,' she declared. 'I think we should buy a house in the country. Imagine a lovely old place somewhere away from all the wretched fumes.'

'You're serious?'

'Yes, yes! Do you want to go to work on the tube for the rest of your life? Wouldn't you love to have mountains to climb?'

'We can do that at the weekends.'

'Yes, but we could have a house too. We could have a house and fields. I miss the country. I miss nature. Come on, Robert darling! Let's find somewhere beautiful.'

She picked at her food and giggled as he couched his objections in jokes, but she was glowing with something else, something impatient. Years later, when I asked him about it, he said, 'Oh, she was absolutely determined. She had made up her mind to do it. I loved her and she presented me with a decision she had already made.'

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So they began to hunt. They would hammer up the motorway on Friday nights to Jenny's sister Ursula, happily married to Geoff and living in the Forest of Dean, on the Welsh border. From there they launched themselves in every direction, and round and round they went, from estate agents' windows to cottages and farms, to small houses and to large, up hillsides and down muddy tracks, back to estate agents' windows, and they could not find it.

They combed the windy edge of Wales, dropping off the ridges into hidden valleys, winding down to villages ignored by everything but the weather. Years later Jenny would see signposts to places and say, 'I think we went there when we were looking for the farm. Yes, we did. Miserable place.'

The journeys back down the motorway were long exercises in resignation for her. She thought she would never find it, and mulled over what she had seen. Behind the wheel Robert wondered how long they would have to keep looking. He loved the country and walking, was glad of the missions for the space and the exercise; the way people lived on the border with the past seduced his reporter's eye. He looked for their means, their crops and flocks. He looked at what their livelihoods had made of them, and planned his next campaign at work.

One evening, following a fruitless day around Abergavenny, a small glum town in the rain, when they were just about to turn for London once more, Jenny remembered an estate agent they had missed. Robert waited while she ran back into town. Russell, Baldwin & Bright were about to close.

'I don't suppose you've got a little farm somewhere beautiful . . .'

'Something came in today, actually.'

The envelope contained an untidy summary of a place for sale, and detailed directions. Robert scanned it.

'Smallholding and outbuildings, seventy-two acres, hill rights. It's a working farm.'

'Where?'

'The other side of the Black Mountains. Blooming miles.'

'Oh! Real Wales!'

'Really faraway Wales.'

'We might as well look at it. It'll be an expedition.'

The vendors would expect them at three o'clock. The departure from London was delayed by a hunt for the car keys.

'I had them, I put them somewhere. I'm so sorry, darling, let me just think a minute. Oh, here they are! How did they get in there? In the grill!'

Robert rolled his eyes. 'Where else?'

As they crossed out of England, over the bridge, the sun drowned in veils of sky the same colour as the Severn mud. Making the turn at Newport the rain descended, netting them, rattling over the car. Forty minutes north they climbed the rise into a little town.

'Oh what a pretty place,' Jenny cried. 'Isn't it charming!' Georgian lines proportioned the little High Street, shops adjoined like ladies in their best, neatly lined up for tea. It seemed abandoned to the wind and rain.

Robert nodded, following Jenny's directions under the looming walls of an invisible manor, north up the tightening valley, right at a fork, into further hills. To the right the mountains vanished into the murk; in every direction cloud hung sullen over rising ground.

'Turn right there. Good. Now, right at house, steep pitch.' It was very quiet beyond the car; when it slowed they could sense the peace, almost hear it.

The car paused, gathered itself and assaulted the gradient in first gear. 'Crikey!' Robert laughed, as they were tilted back in their seats like fighter pilots, climbing straight up the side of the hill.

'My God, look at this. It's a pitch all right. Right at fork, through wood half mile.'

'My God, look at *this*,' Robert said calmly, hauling the car up and around a bend so steep it seemed to fill the windows on his side with wet road. The engine panted and gasped with relief at the top, flipping them over another rise into a soaking wood.

'My God, my vertigo,' Jenny cried. 'It's an abyss!'

The right side wheels spun over leaf litter banked against a straggle of rusted fence, which offered no protection from the cliffy drop into the trees. To the left the wood gathered in thick scribbles, tapping the roof above their heads and dropping sudden tears on the windscreen. The road proceeded on and up through a waving tunnel.

'Where is it taking us? We'll be swallowed in the mists like the Ninth Legion!'

'If we don't roll over backwards like a beetle. Hold on, it's another pitch.' Robert swung the car round and up, as to the right flickered fields, more wood, cloud and bracken.

They rose over the crest. Below, the fields sloped more gently and before them, across three meadows, the mountain, untamed and sudden, climbed into the sky. At its foot, nestling in the crook of a gully, was the house, sheltering under a stand of larch trees. They could see three descending roofs, white walls and dark windows. It was a longhouse dug into the curved flank of the mountain, a little tumbledown manor at the head of its own valley.

The track was a double path of stones and red earth separated by a block of grass which brushed the undercarriage menacingly, threatening to rear up and ground them. Robert took it slowly. Sheep stared with blank frankness from under the shelter of thorn trees and thin gasps of smoke blew away from one of the chimneys.

As they neared the house half the track became a stream, pooling muddily at the yard gate. They stopped beside a high barn wall. The yard was a rough cobble of mud, muck and protruding

stones sloping steeply up to the front door. The stone-tiled roofs were green with moss and rain. A huge midden slumped against the stable wall. Black cattle like buffalo hung around the lower end of the yard and the savage barking of dogs hesitated when Robert switched off the engine, then resumed with discouraging vigour. There were little orange cats running about in the mud.

'Ah-ha! The vendor . . .'

A short round figure in a soaked black tweed jacket, a mud-checked cap, red cheeks and bright eyes came down the yard to meet them. Robert shook his hand.

'How do you do? I'm Robert and this is Jenny.'

'Emrys,' said the vendor. 'How do you do? You've come a long way.'

'Yes, thank goodness,' said Jenny. 'Thank you for having us up your mountain.'

'Well. It's a pity you can't see the view.' Emrys shouted when he was shy. 'There's a good view there, when it's visible.'

'You're pretty high up, here?'

Emrys led them up the yard to the house.

'A thousand and something, I think it is. Geeyet outofit! Fly!' Emrys shouted at a white whiskered dog's nose, poking under the barn door and barking. He was smiling, though.

'There'll be tea in a minute. We've been watching the television. You can't get much signal except when it rains.'

The door opened to wet flagstones and a dim interior. The wall, Jenny noticed, was almost two feet thick. To the left a dark wooden screen hid the uphill end of the house. They went in. There was a tiny fire in a choked grate: the vast hearth Jenny looked for was blocked up. At the foot of a narrow flight of stairs, in a corner beside the fire, was a place out of the draughts where Emrys had his little daughter's cot. He led them through to the kitchen which was stuck on at the back. It was a big step down to huge flagstones resting on earth; there was no flooring, and the smell of damp was incredible, like nothing they had ever experienced, a wet dripping damp, wetter and damper and darker than any cellar.

Jenny loved it. Really: she fell passionately in love with it straightaway. Someone had told her that you can fall in love with a place as much as a person, and now she knew it to be true.

They rattled away along the track. It was bitterly cold at the far gate. Jenny opened and shut it and climbed back in, shivering.

'What an amazing place!'

'No bathroom. No water! Chemical lavatory in that shed in the yard . . .' Robert was thoughtful, but there was an excitement in the car.

'Think of the view, though. You'd do your business with a view across the whole valley.'

'Ye-es . . . dug into the hill at one end, terribly damp. We'd have to excavate it.'

'God, it was damp! We'd have to have washes with the kettle in a tub. There must be the most enormous fireplace just waiting. We'd have to put a bathroom in. We could put a big bathroom in over the stable, and another bedroom.'

'We'd have to put a water tank in first. Carrying those drums from the stream – you'd get pretty fit! And it needs a new roof.'

'Golly. That wouldn't be cheap.'

'I could get a book on it. It can't be that difficult.'

'Wasn't Emrys sweet? What a nice man! And isn't it amazing? It hasn't been touched. It must be 1600s.'

'You'd never manage these steep bits in the snow, even in a tractor.'

'You'd have to leave the car at the bottom and walk, with your supplies on a dog sled.'

'The fences are all falling down.'

'And the sheep are wild!'

'Would we keep the sheep?'

'Oh yes,' Jenny cried. 'We'd have to have a few sheep!'

'So we'd be farmers at the weekends, would we?'

'Well, darling, I don't know . . . let's come back and look at it again, when it's not raining.'

*

Jenny went to a lunch held by a small anti-establishment magazine. The entire establishment seemed to be present. She was seated next to an economist of high renown and low charm, a man with a bacon face who had always considered himself one of the best people. In a grand and public way, he was as sweet as possible to the girl sitting next to him, until she told him about her plans.

'Farming in Wales? What on earth do you want to do that for?'

'Oh well! It's so beautiful and wild! And I don't want to spend the rest of my life on the Central line, thank you very much. It just isn't me. And if I'm going to have children I don't want them to live on exhaust.'

'And how are you going to make any money?'

'I'll have a few sheep, and I can carry on reviewing books.'

'My dear girl, you'll never make any money out of sheep. I mean absolutely nothing. Farming's a dead duck.'

'Is it? I thought there were pots of money coming from Brussels.'

'Well, that's right. Without the subsidies the entire industry would collapse, certainly sheep farming, which is the lowest of the low in terms of yield, and as for hill farming in Wales you'd be better off going down a coal mine!' He swept a popping eye around his listeners. 'I mean it. In twenty years' time there won't be any sheep farming left, and the hill farmers will be the first to go. I can show you the figures if you like.'

'No thank you,' Jenny cried, loud enough to turn heads. 'You'll just have to come to the rescue. If it's all horrible, I hope someone will come and help me.'

— * —

'We're going to see the view this time,' Jenny said, to distract herself from the strain as the car wrenched itself around the cruel bend at the top of the first pitch. It was a clear August noon. London had been cool and still in anticipation of a hot day and Wales was bright and windy, cloud shadows bowling over the hills. After the wood came the second pitch. Topping it, they saw

the mountain for the first time, like a huge capsized sailing boat with its keel slicing the sky. The hillside was mauve and green and dark grey; great screes of stones in wild fields tumbled motionlessly down its high hull.

Jenny gasped and grabbed his arm as Robert slowed the car, the engine noise shrinking away in the sudden, vast space. They stared, thrilled. 'Look at that,' she breathed, 'just look at that!'

The land dropped away from them, fell into woods and levelled out far below in a patchwork valley of countless fields, ribboned with streams and hedges, scattered with stacked hay bales, barns, and here and there farms, little monarchies on the climbing slopes of the facing hills. Beyond them, rising out of the valley and into the further bowl of the sky were the mountains, great sweeping ridges, high crests, ice-cut shoulders and peaks, old dragons rolling across the horizon.

They found Emrys at the back of the house, scanning the mountain.

'What is it, Emrys?' Robert asked, hands on hips, chin lifted, searching the hillside.

'Fly – taking the sheep up.'

'What's she doing?'

There was a disturbance in the bracken a hundred yards above them and Jenny could see white bundles of sheep dashing suddenly through the dense fern.

'She's bringing them from the gully where it's steep. She'll push them along, then up over the tump, above the bracken, see.'

Clouds marched along the skyline and Jenny felt the foreign difference of Robert and herself, his old flares, her polished boots, up from London and proposing to buy all this, as though it could be bought, as though it could be owned.

Robert was thinking about walking up there, on an August day, pushing a few sheep ahead of him, with the whole of Wales below and views for miles and miles from the top. So much. He could see them there, his beautiful Jenny and him, on the mountain. He could just see them, far away but visible nonetheless.

*

The sale by auction was advertised in the *Express*; the Wellington Hotel, Brecon, custard yellow and pedimented, was the venue. The function room held a stout, curious crowd, elderly tweed jackets stretched across broad shoulders. Everyone wanted to know what the place would fetch, so high and far away from the road, cut off in the winter. Many had heard there were Londoners interested, and some didn't like the sound of that. Farms should go to farmers, young couples starting out. It wasn't the best land, but there were some tidy little fields up there, and plenty of water. It was a shame to think of it all being broken up and left empty most of the year. Mind, if that was how it was going to go, there were a few there who would rent the ground. And perhaps they'd sell? The speculators cawed and nodded, hands hooked in the belts of smart trousers, smiles on wind-red faces, winks and prices passed back and forth. There were a few with a beer, but the notorious thrift of the hill farmers wasn't going to put a real smile on the Wellington manager's face. Most of these men were Chapel, as were their wives, and their money was not meant for drinking.

Everyone knew who was going to bid, of course, and most had a fair idea of how far he would be able to go. Derwyn Norster had been born there. His parents had bought it during the war and he'd grown up there. They had moved round the hill and down to the other side of the wood for better land and better access. Derwyn was Emrys's neighbour and he and Ira had had their eye on the farm ever since they married. Derwyn never really felt he had left it, living so close, with adjoining fields, and as far as Ira was concerned they had a right to it. Their boys, Aled and Alwyn, knew nothing but farming. Aled was thirteen already and Alwyn was sixteen and he at least needed somewhere to live. If only they could have the farm back it would be like having the whole mountain. Derwyn had made Emrys an offer for it up by the hill gate only a couple of days after it went round that Emrys was planning to sell. Emrys had turned him down and there had been a row. Derwyn had a terrible temper. Emrys hadn't had reason to mention any of this to Robert and Jenny. When Robert asked him about the neighbours he'd merely said

Derwyn wasn't such a bad old boy. It was what anyone would have said.

Robert found a place to park outside the Wellington. He had timed it to the minute, as usual, which never ceased to amaze Jenny, who had spent much of her life in desperate and doomed attempts not to be late.

'Right then,' he grinned, collecting his pipe from the glove compartment and fitting it into the pocket of his jacket. He leaned over and gave Jenny a kiss.

She kissed him and peered distractedly at her reflection in the driver's mirror. 'Phew, I'm nervous,' she gasped, and laughed. He paused, reaching for the door handle, as the rain rilled on the windscreen and the roof.

'Oh, darling, it's very exciting but you don't have to be nervous.' He twisted back towards her and took her hand, stroking it slowly with his thumb.

'How far shall we go?' she said, slightly horrified at the uncertainty and the thought of money she did not have just running away with them.

'I don't think we should worry about that too much. The question is, do you really want this farm?'

'Yes! Yes I do!'

'Right then.'

He locked the car after them and took her arm. He was looking forward to it. Competition with other men was strong in his nature, and he relished it.

There were chairs set out in front of the auctioneer's table but most people were standing around the back and down the sides of the room. The auctioneer was already out, talking to Emrys. Emrys, his wife and their little daughter were all done up in their best and they had three seats in the first row. They looked beautifully smart, composed and very nervous. Little Anwyn's hair had been brushed so that it shone. Jenny smiled at everyone who looked at her. Robert kept his eyes down until he had found

somewhere for them to stand, in the middle, just to the right of centre, then he took one very careful look around. Emrys gave him a nod and a smile. Robert smiled back.

'Ladies and gentlemen, thank you,' called the auctioneer, an avuncular man with a shiny nose and tiepin, who looked at them all as though he had met them each personally, not so very long ago, in slightly disreputable circumstances.

'Thank you all.' He cast an eye around the room and it fell completely silent.

'Today as you all know we have a special sale for you, a very special sale indeed. Emrys Pryce has honoured us with the commission to sell his beautiful farmhouse and seventy-two acres of prime farm land. The commission includes the barn and stable, other outbuildings, grazing rights and hill rights for over two hundred stock, and as I said, seventy-two of the best acres you will find anywhere. The land is well drained and every field has access to one of two springs that have never been known to dry. The farm and land are of course within the protected area of the National Park. The situation is as perfect as anything we at Russell, Baldwin & Bright . . .'

'Russell, Baldwin and Not so Bright,' Robert hissed in Jenny's ear.

'. . . have ever seen in many years of working in this area. The stunning views are quite unsurpassed in my experience, and I have no hesitation in describing what we are selling today as a piece of heaven on earth, a house in the eye of the sun. I know you would all hope to see a good price for this farm, the right price.'

He paused. His assistant, a young man who aped his air, took the top off his fountain pen.

'And now without further ado I propose to get this sale under way. Please make your bids clear. I've got a pretty good view, but I don't want to miss anyone.'

Emrys looked over his shoulder. Jenny thought she understood and smiled comfortingly at him. But he kept looking anxiously back.

'So ladies and gentlemen, for the house, the buildings and seventy-two acres, let's not dally around. For the house and land I'll start at five thousand pounds, who'll give me five thousand pounds?

'Five thousand pounds on my right, five thousand I'm bid. Six thousand at the front? Six thousand five hundred, sir.'

Robert had not moved. Derwyn Norster was the man on the right, and he was looking at the rows of heads in front of him for the man who was bidding against him. He nodded again.

'Seven thousand on my right, seven thousand and it's with you, sir, do I have eight thousand?'

Robert nodded. The auctioneer was too smart to smile, but there was a distinct thickening of his voice. 'Eight thousand I'm bid, eight thousand to my left!' Heads turned. Robert's smooth face was almost expressionless, but his chin was tilted up expectantly. Derwyn nodded, making a sign with his right hand. The auctioneer turned fractionally towards him, 'Eight thousand five hundred – ' and Robert nodded sharply. 'Nine thousand!' Robert nodded again.

'It's still with you, sir,' the auctioneer told him, then looked at Derwyn, who twitched his head. 'Nine thousand five hundred! Nine thousand five hundred pounds. Do I see ten at the front?' Two heads, a man's, dark, and a woman's, grey, were leaning together in silent conference, then the man's head moved. 'Ten!' But instantly, emphatically, Robert nodded. 'Ten thousand five hundred and it's back with you, sir, ten thousand five hundred, who'll give me eleven?'

The heads at the front were staring at the floor. Ira Norster was glaring about her with bulgy eyes. Derwyn made his sign, and the auctioneer, grave now, looked at Robert, announcing, 'Ten seven fifty – ' before he was interrupted by another eager nod. Jenny's heart was pounding, Robert seemed to be bidding faster than the auctioneer could call.

'Eleven thousand pounds! Eleven thousand pounds I'm bid, eleven thousand pounds and it's with the gentleman on my left. Are we all finished at the front? Eleven thousand pounds?'

He switched from the seated couple to Ira, who stared back unblinking. Derwyn was very flushed. He hung his head.

'Are there any more bids?' the auctioneer demanded of the silent room. 'Then I'm going to sell this farm, I'm going once, for eleven thousand pounds, I'm going twice, going three times and SOLD! to Miss Williams, for eleven thousand pounds, sold to you, madam.'

Jenny screeched and flung her arms around Robert and he hugged her. Emrys had one arm round his wife, who was crying over her smiles, and with the other he shook the auctioneer by the hand.

Jenny squeezed Robert's hands with all her strength. 'Oh well done, well done! So quick!'

He smiled, pushed his nose against hers. 'You've got a farm on the mountain, Jenny.'

Legend had it that even as the auctioneer was going once, Ira had been digging her husband in the ribs for another bid, and even as he had been going twice Derwyn had decided to do it and even as he had been going three times Derwyn's hand had been going up – and then 'SOLD to Miss Williams!' Legend had it that the auctioneer had wanted her to have it.

And there was something else, too. Emrys had been looking over his shoulder for a reason. For Emrys had shown someone else around the farm, someone else who had fallen in love with it. She was an American lady, Emrys said, very classy, very rich. So rich she was going to buy the farm because she loved it, and visit when she could, and live in it in the summer time and at the end of her life. But the farm was sold on a Friday. On the preceding Monday, history says, President Richard Nixon devalued the US dollar, and the American lady was never seen in the valley again.

Emrys took Robert around the farm. The house sat at the top of its own narrow valley; the fields sloped up steeply from a deep stream and rolled over into two wide arms of land, which spread out, beneath the mountain, from the house. The acres fell into

two rough halves, and on each side their contours were similar: steep fields below the hill fence flattened into meadows, below which the ground fell sharply to the wooded stream. Each field was named. Emrys led Robert out behind the house, along a green lane to the Hill Fields. These ran for a quarter of a mile below the hill fence to a cluster of larch trees. From the larches the men worked their way down to thick woods, where there were badger setts and woodland birds, grey squirrels and fallen trees wrapped in moss thick as wool, growing fungus like great troll's ears. Below one mighty drop, tangled in giant bracken and crowds of nettles, was the wreckage of a vehicle, rounded blue panels smashed into the earth.

'That's my old Austin,' Emrys explained. 'Ran her off the top there.'

'Easier than the scrap heap?'

'Aye, and cheaper.'

There was something shocking about the shattered carcass of the car, a frozen explosion gradually sinking into the wood. They crossed the stream and climbed up the other side, to the foot of steep fields. Emrys told him the names as they went. Below the Hill Fields, the Rough Field was full of docks and burrs. Beside it, the L-Shape was in fact a stair-shape, and dropped into Pritchard's Wood, which would be full of bluebells in the spring. Climbing up the other side, they had passed the badger setts in the Horse Fields, and the rabbit warren, and the mighty steep bank where anything which slipped would fall to its death, except foxes. Then, circling back towards the house, they had come to the Lower Meadows, where they were now, which were the steepest of all. They trudged up to the top of them, and there were the meadows, the best pasture. Of these there were three: the First Meadow, nearest to the house; the Middle Meadow, and over towards the road where they had first seen the view, the Far Meadow. Along the top of them ran the track. Above the track, overlooking the meadows were 'the Quoikers', as Robert heard it, big sloping fields, southwest-facing, like the house, and wide open to the view. The Quoikers climbed up to the hill

fence. The far Quoiker had been divided across the middle into two; it had a line of oaks, alders and ash trees halfway up. The top half of it and the near Quoiker were prone to gorse. Emrys had ploughed it a couple of years before but the bushes had come back. (Robert checked and found the sound came from two words 'Coed Cae' – 'wood field'.) Last, they came to the Patch, which was nearest to the house, just below the yard, beyond the pens: it was flattish on the top, where the land rolled over to the track, and then it plunged down to the stream. Emrys kept a few old things in the Patch, and the pony, and there was a bright green sludgy bit in the middle where the run-off from the yard accumulated.

When they got back Robert went to Jenny and put his arm around her. 'You have absolutely no idea what a wonderful farm you've bought.'

Emrys understood but did not share their enthusiasm for the land; to a farmer it was 'banky': too steep and too thin-soiled. After the walk he said, 'Come with me, Robert,' and they went off into the big barn where Emrys had his cider.

As it got dark they stood underneath one bulb, which hung from a long flex stapled to a beam. The upper half of the barn was full of bales, the lower half was empty, the floor a bed of hay. In the middle was a race: great stone flags on their ends, staked and framed with posts to make a corridor four feet high across the width of the barn, where you could pack sheep in tight, or back a cow up, or make a pen for new lambs with a couple of bales. Emrys had the cider in great glass bell jars; it was roan-red and fizzy. With few words and many smiles he refilled their glasses. They had a couple and then a couple more. By the time they emerged their cheeks were flaming and they had to drop their shoulders to change course. Robert went down to the bottom of the yard and pissed a steaming arc, as one car, like a firefly, spun along the road far below.

Emrys sold them more than a hundred sheep. It was always done, he explained. When a farm changed hands some of the sheep

would stay behind. You needed a flock that knew the ground, that knew what was what, he informed them. Two thirds of their number were the Welsh Mountain breed; small, hardy, protected from the weather by their thick white fleeces, which would be shorn in the summer and sold. The remaining third were Suffolk Crosses; larger, black-faced animals with thinner coats. They would deliver bigger, more profitable lambs, but they were more likely to die in bad weather. Scattered among the flock were a few Badger Sheep, beautiful creatures which appeared to be wearing black make-up around their eyes and mouths; a few Radnors, which were russet-faced, and a few Speckles, their white faces flecked with grey. 'Welsh, Suffolks, Badgers, Radnors and Speckles,' Robert repeated. Straightforward enough.

'That's right,' Emrys smiled, 'and you've got thirty yearling theaves, and you'll want to buy another tup when Tommy gets too old.'

'Thirty what?'

Emrys was amazed and amused, but he was tactful about it. Ram lambs were tups, ewe lambs were theaves. A one year old was a yearling, and most yearlings would be theaves, as the tup lambs went to market in their first nine months, if possible before the winter, so they would not have to be fed. Yearlings were sold on as 'store' in their second autumn, to larger farms looking to replenish their stock.

'So what's a wether?'

'Castrated yearling tup that didn't go to market or didn't sell. That's a wether.'

'I see.'

Emrys was in no hurry to move out. His wife Thursa wasn't well. She had 'farmer's lung': silicosis caused by the dead brown dust of old hay. The farm up the valley Emrys had bought was not as comfortable as it should be for a baby and mother, and Emrys wondered if they could stay at the farm while he got the new place ready. He would keep an eye on it for them, and the sheep, until they were ready to move down from London.