

BARBARA PONTIN



MERLYS

Prologue

Not so long ago, a most horrific thing happened to an exceptionally nice gentleman. It all started in the Holly Bush Inn – a respectable drinking tavern where miscreants, highwayman and burglars were not to be found.

The fire at the inn burned brightly, with the local customers chattering to each other over bowls of cawl, a rich lamb broth and cubes of dry bread piled upon a wooden platter. Their spoons clattered as they slurped their broth with bowed heads. In the corner a gentleman sat with a more expensive meal before him; roast lamb washed down with the inn's finest wine.

The door opened and the wind roared in, making the fire leap and shadows dance on the walls. Two men entered. The first was tall and well-dressed, but his face was expressionless with thick black eyebrows that almost met over his grey eyes. He carried an air of suppressed anger. The other man was small and thin with neat grey hair. He smiled repulsively at the gathered throng. The two men seated themselves at the same table as the gentleman. The small man called out for some rum, as the well-dressed man leant over to the gentleman.

“Some say there's a storm coming,” he said. The gentleman nodded, half chewing his lamb, trying not to look into the eyes of these new arrivals.

“If you want my advice, I'd leave early to miss the inclement weather,” said the well-dressed man feigning a smile. The gentleman wiped his gravy with some bread and quickly finished his wine.

“I'm sorry...” began the gentleman. “I'm going to have to bid you farewell. I have a prior engagement.” He tossed a coin on to

the bar and grabbed his coat. The two strangers momentarily exchanged a fear-provoking smile.

“Have a good journey,” croaked the man with grey hair.

Outside the inn, as the gentleman tended to his horse, a terrific sheet of lightening shattered the black sky. He turned to see two bloodcurdling figures coming towards him.

“Grab him!” shouted the first.

Within a few moments the poor man was laid down on the path, battered, bruised and begging for mercy. The well-dressed man took all his money, fob watch and rings. Then he nodded to the man with grey hair, who produced a razor sharp knife, and with a smile he cut the poor man’s face to ribbons. Slicing at his body in a frenzied bloodlust, he drew his knife slowly across the gentleman’s throat. The well-dressed man watched all this with an air of indifference. Tipping the gentleman’s mutilated body into the ditch, the two ‘packmen’ walked on nonchalantly down the road.

Chapter One

The pale spring sunshine streamed through the mullioned windows of the sixteenth century mansion house. Ivy had crept up the walls and the roof tiles were covered in moss. It was very pleasing to the eye and amid all the greenery it looked as if it was part of the mountainside. There was a smooth green lawn sloping down to a sparkling brook with a stone bridge arched over it. Inside many of the rooms were panelled in local oak that shone from many vigorous applications of beeswax. Some rooms were furnished with oak chests carved by local craftsmen, whilst other pieces had been used for generations and were still sturdy and usable. There were tapestries hung in the great room and paintings of long dead ancestors adorned the walls. The white limed thatched roofed cottages looked very cosy as their chimneys sent white smoke up into the still air.

Many generations of the Lewis family had lived in the venerable old house. The current occupants were Mostyn and Ruth Lewis of Merthyr Tydfil and their three children, Merlys, Jeremy and Jenny. Some of the villagers worked directly for the family whilst others worked on the land. All of them had a small strip of earth for growing vegetables and keeping pigs or chickens. There was even a tiny schoolhouse funded by the Lewis's, which taught local children to read and write.

In the big house a small thin girl in cap and apron climbed carefully up the creaking stairs. She was holding a tray laden with three cups of steaming hot chocolate. She knocked on the bedroom door.

“Letty, is our chocolate ready yet?” asked a sleepy voice from inside the room. “Are we to die of thirst?”

Letty entered the room.

“I’m sorry, Miss Merlys,” she said in her singsong Welsh. “Cook can’t get the fire to light properly. The wood is still wet, and no wonder with all the rain we had yesterday.” Going to the window, she pulled back the heavy curtains to let in the light.

“It’s not raining again is it?” said a complaining voice from behind the bed curtains. A red haired girl poked her head out.

“It’s already May and no sign of a warm spring yet.” Letty passed the cups to Merlys and the other occupant of the bedroom. This was Merlys’s foster sister, Jenny. She was a quiet, gentle girl with a sweet face and shining dark hair.

Letty left the two girls chatting together and took the third cup of chocolate to the next bedroom where Merlys’ brother, Jeremy was just yawning his way out of sleep. A year separated the siblings. They looked like twins with their dark red hair, but that was where the resemblance ended. Their dispositions were diametrically opposite. Jeremy was careless and lazy, whereas Merlys was methodical, energetic and very impatient at the laziness and lack of ambition of her brother.

Jeremy was seventeen and Merlys a precocious sixteen-year-old. Jeremy took everything that came his way as if it were his right, from material things to affection, but despite this everybody liked Jeremy. He was a charmer and all the maids spoiled him outrageously.

Jenny was a foundling girl. Her parents had been passengers in a coach that had crashed into the sea. One minute the occupants were riding along the coastline talking excitedly about their daughter’s future. The next they were hurtling towards the cliff edge. Some say that the poor mother, realising that they were doomed had wrapped the baby up tightly in a shawl, and thrust her out of the window praying for a miracle to save the child. The baby was later discovered hanging on a bush by two boys collecting seagull eggs. The boys, knowing their parents could not afford to take in another child, left the wailing infant on the doorstep of the richest people they knew – the Lewis family. The remains of a coach

were later found on the rocky shore, but no bodies were ever washed up.

Merlys, the youngest Lewis child was only one-year-old when the baby came into the family home. All the children had grown up together, with Jenny accepted and loved as part of the family.

“Thank you, Letty,” Jeremy murmured, in a voice thick with sleep. “Come a little nearer and give me a kiss.” Letty giggled and skipped nimbly out of his way and out of his reach. This was their usual game every morning and, still chuckling, she whisked out of the dark bedroom.

The three young people sat up in their respective beds and eyed the sunny windows. Merlys, with a frown wrinkling her white brow, wondered if Mama would let her off lessons today. She was sick to death of writing, ciphering and learning to run a home. Of course, she would have to manage her own home some day. Until then, she wanted to study Latin, Greek, History and Geography – the kind of subjects that Jeremy was taught by his tutor, Mr Tudor Morgans. Unfortunately her parents considered such subjects to be wasted on a mere girl. She fumed at the thought of Jeremy idling his life away, while poor Mr Morgans vainly tried to cram some facts into his careless head.

Jeremy, on the other hand, was plotting how he could dodge lessons. He would pretend to be ill, and then escape into the sunshine for a day with the Thomas brothers. They were going to Brecon Fair, and even if it ‘snowed ink’ he was determined to go. Merlys knew her brother too well. It would take more than a head cold to keep him in bed and away from breakfast. He was up to something.

Merlys helped herself to bacon, egg and kidneys from the silver dishes on the sideboard. Her brow furrowed in thought as she tried to imagine what mischief her brother was plotting.

“Merlys,” her mother chided her. “You really shouldn’t eat so much. You’ll get fat my girl, and then you will never catch a husband.” Merlys eyed her mother’s ample curves and sniffed. Both

girls commented on the non-appearance of the ever-hungry Jeremy. Their Mama, a buxom figure in a lacy morning gown and beribboned boudoir cap, looked down at the well-filled table, then at her two daughters and informed them that their brother was in bed with a severe head cold.

At that moment, the subject of Merlys' preoccupation was dressing himself in his oldest clothes. Jeremy looked carefree and comfortable in faded breeches, a shirt with the throat lacings undone, a shabby hunting coat and stout boots. He was ready to go. He stole quietly down the stairs. Good, he thought. No one is about. He tiptoed into the large stone flagged larder, with its cool slate shelves, and helped himself to bread and cheese, cramming the food into his pockets. He silently let himself out into the quiet morning.

"Can you go and check on Jeremy please Jenny?" asked their mother.

"Yes Mama," Jenny murmured, as she sped away on her errand. Moments later, they heard a cry as Jenny found the bed empty and her brother gone.

"He's away Mama," she panted. "Maybe his fever has left him light-headed. He could be wandering around in a daze somewhere."

"Light-headed indeed," said Merlys scornfully. "He's sneaked off with some louts from the village!"

Mrs Lewis's bosom swelled with a series of deep breaths.

"Mr Lewis!"

Her spouse looked over the top of his spectacles, his usually mild eyes gleaming with displeasure – he hated strife at breakfast time.

"My dear... are you listening to me?" continued his wife. "That boy is getting out of hand. He is already seventeen and has shown no interest in anything sensible. What are you going to do about him?" Mr Lewis put down his paper.

"If he *has* sneaked off with some boys from the village he will be in deep trouble when he returns. I shall buy him a commission in the army!" He thumped the table with his clenched fist. "If that

doesn't make a man of him, nothing will!"

Mr Lewis's normally red face purpled with rage, his close-cropped greying hair bristled, and his portly figure strained the buttons of his embroidered waistcoat until the buttons creaked. With his jaw clamped shut, the cleft in his chin looked as if someone had placed a finger there and left a dent. It was a bad sign; his father had reached the limit of his patience.

"I shall want to see that boy in my study the minute he gets home. Is that understood?" he thundered, and stumped off in high dudgeon.

When the air had cleared a little, Merlys asked her mother coaxingly if she and Jenny had to stay in again this morning.

"The rain has stopped at last Mama and the sun is breaking through. I'm longing for some fresh air, aren't you Jen?" said Merlys. Jenny nodded.

"Certainly not," said her mother sternly. "I have one disobedient child already and that has upset me dreadfully. I have a migraine coming on and I am going to lie down. Send Letty to me and tell her to bring my hartshorn. I have a task for you girls this morning. I want you to go through all your summer dresses from last year. Both of you have shot up in the most unladylike way. I declare you are getting quite gawky, Merlys. There is some sprigged muslin in a chest in my bedroom. The seamstress can make some pretty dresses for you. It won't do for you two girls to be seen in dresses that are too short and too tight. Now let us have no more trouble this morning."

With that she swept out of the room clutching her temples.

The bedroom was warm and drowsy when the two girls returned to start sorting through the dresses. It was a charming picture, a shaft of watery sunlight slanting in. It made Merlys' dark red hair glow with an inner fire, as it softly touched each careful ringlet. She was a colourful sight dressed in a green gown that matched her eyes. Its low neckline was modestly swathed in a lacy fichu, whereas Jenny in dark blue, with her rosy cheeks and gleaming black hair, was her opposite in every way.

Thoughtfully, Merlys looked at her foster sister and wondered for the thousandth time what Jenny's real parents had been like. Jenny was very timid and shy. It was very unsettling for her to not know anything about herself. She was so meek that Merlys longed to shake her. She believed that a little bit of spirit was good for a young lady. Merlys knew that, in any other house, Jenny certainly wouldn't have been brought up with the owner's own children.

The truth was that Jenny had stolen Ruth Lewis's heart. She had been a truly beautiful baby with silky black hair and large blue eyes. Merlys loved her much more than just a sister – she was a true friend. She flung her arms around her and Jenny smiled and returned the embrace. With arms entwined the two girls sat on the edge of the bed, each busy with their own thoughts.

Jenny started to bring out all their crumpled old day gowns. Merlys was finding the job tiresome. Why should Jeremy have all the fun just because he was a boy? She wished that she had been born a boy too, with all the freedom that being a boy gave. Making sure that Jenny's back was turned, she ducked out of the room. Perhaps Jenny would think she had gone to fetch the muslin. She knew it was no good asking Jenny to disobey. She was far too gentle to risk upsetting her foster mother. Merlys helped herself to a dark cloak and hood, changed into stout shoes, and quietly let herself out into the soft damp air of a spring morning.

It was lovely after the rain, the sky a misty blue. Birdsong filled the air and the spring flowers opened their petals to the bright sky. Although the rutted track was muddy, Merlys did not mind. She was out of the house at last and she was not going to go far. Only to the end of the lane to see if the violets had bloomed. But the unaccustomed freedom went to her head like wine. She forgot Mama's stern words and her brother's disgrace. Spring had finally come. She turned from the familiar lane and, revelling in the feel of soft grass under her feet, she ran until she was hot and breathless. Under the trees, wood anemones starred the sheltered glades and celandines opened their shining petals to the sun. The air was fragrant and Merlys stood still and let the peace and beauty wash

over her. Her thick cloak dropped unheeded to the ground. She walked slowly on through the glistening grass and sat down on a log to rest.

Jeremy, meanwhile, was on the crest of the hill, overlooking Brecon Fair, together with five unruly companions. They were the five sons of a local sheep farmer. With their father's permission, they were having a day's holiday as they worked very hard all the year round. They were handsome lads, dark-eyed and stocky, ranging from fourteen to twenty. There was Gwylm the oldest in charge of the party, then Thomas (Twm to his brothers), Joe and Shwn (no one called him John), and the baby of the group fourteen-year-old William. They were all dressed alike in thick breeches, short jackets, hand knitted stockings and strong boots. They strode excitedly along with Jeremy in their midst, chattering in Welsh like a flock of starlings. Jeremy had learned Welsh at his nurse's knee and had no difficulty in joining in the spirited conversation, but he lagged behind as he always did to look at the magnificent mountain scenery that spread out before him.

On his left lacy waterfalls cascaded down the rocky crags, and at his feet lay the great green bowl of the valley. Pen-y-Fan soared into the limpid blue sky and almost took his breath away. The world around them got greener and damper as they rapidly descended mile after mile towards Brecon.

Twm, the youngest of the brothers shouted, "Look lads, the gorse is in bloom and you know what the old saying is? Kissing is in season when the gorse blooms. Look out Brecon girls!" Grinning broadly, they went contentedly on their way.