

Late one October afternoon in the year 1921, a shabby young man gazed with fixed intensity through the window of a third-class compartment in the almost empty train laboring up the Penowell valley from Swansea. All that day Manson had travelled from the North, changing at Carlisle and Shrewsbury, yet the final stage of his tedious journey to South Wales found him strung to a still greater excitement by the prospects of his post, the first of his medical career, in this strange, disfigured country.

Outside, a heavy rainstorm came blinding down between the mountains which rose on either side of the single railway track. The mountain tops were hidden in a grey waste of sky, but their sides, scarred by ore workings, fell black and desolate, blemished by great heaps of slag on which a few dirty wandered in vain hope of pasture. No bush, no blade of vegetation was visible. The trees, seen in the fading light, were gaunt and stunted spectres. At a bend of the line the red glare of a foundry flashed into sight, illuminating a score of workmen stripped to the waist, their torsos straining, arms upraised to strike. Though the scene was swiftly lost behind the huddled top gear of a mine, a sense of power persisted, tense and vivid. Manson drew a long breath. He felt an answering surge of effort, a sudden overwhelming exhilaration springing from the hope and promise of the future.

Darkness had fallen, emphasizing the strangeness and remoteness of the scene when, half an hour later, the engine panted into Blaenelly, the end township of the Valley, and the terminus of the line. He had arrived at last. Gripping his bag, Manson leaped from the train and walk quickly down the platform, searching eagerly for some sign of welcome. At the station exit, beneath a wind-blown lamp, a yellow faced old man in a square hat and a long nightshirt of a mackintosh stood waiting. He inspected Manson with a jaundiced eye and his voice, when it came, was reluctant.

“You Doctor Page’s new assistant?”

“That’s right, Manson. Andrew Manson is the name.”

“Huh! Mine’s Thomas; ‘Old Thomas’ they mostly call me, dang ‘em! I got the gig here. Set in – unless you’d rayther swim”.

Manson slung his bag up und climbed into the battered gig behind a tall, angular black horse. Thomas followed, took the reins and addresses the horse.

“Hue-up, Taffy!” he said.

They drove off through the town, which, though Andrew tried keenly to discern its outline, presented in the slashing rain no more than a blurred huddle of

low grey houses ranged beneath the high and ever-present mountains. For several minutes the old groom did not speak, but continued to dart pessimistic glances at Andrew from beneath the dripping brim of his hat. He bore no resemblance to the smart coachman of a successful doctor. but was, on the contrary, wizened and slovenly, and all the time he gave off peculiar yet powerful odour of stale cooking-fat.

At last he said: "Only jest got your parchment, eh?"

Andrew nodded.

"I knowed it." Old Thomas spat. His triumph made him more gravely communicative. Last assistant went ten days ago. Mostly they don't stop."

"Why?" Despite his nervousness, Andrew smiled.

"Works's too hard for one thing, I reckon."

"And for another?"

"You'll find out!" A moment later, as a guide might indicate fine cathedral, Thomas lifted his whip and pointed to the end of a row of houses where, from a small lighted doorway, a cloud of steam was emerging. "See that! That there's the missus and my chip petato shop. We fry twice a week. Wet fish." A secret amusement twitched his long upper lip. "Reckon you might want to know, shortly".

Here the main street ended and, turning up a short uneven side road, they boggled across a piece of waste ground, and entered the narrow drive of a house which stood isolated from the adjacent rows behind three monkey-puzzle trees. On the gate was name BRYNGOWER.