

RHYS DAVIES

THE WAGES OF LOVE

It was a wet early November evening when Olga, after twelve years' disgraceful absence, arrived home again. The rusty mountains wept, the bobbing chrysanthemums in the back-gardens were running with liquid coal-dust. A wind whipped through the dirty valley and rubbed stingingly at her silken legs. Above her ginger fur coat her sick done-in face peered like someone in awful woe.

She found no welcome. No one to meet her. Leaving her bags at the station, she climbed a steep road among sullen stony dwellings flung down like sneers on the world. At one of these, the nineteenth in a long row, she knocked timidly, her tongue licking over her dry lips. Wagons clanked under the slope below, backing out of the colliery yard. A woman in a shawl and man's cap hurried past, carrying a jug. After a long interval, the door opened and a bulky woman stood there, on her face a frown ready to develop into active hostility. The two were sisters.

"Sara," murmured Olga timidly, "you got my telegram?"

"Yes, I did. Telegram indeed! A fit I nearly had. Thought someone was dead. 'Stead of which," she added in great grievance, "you it is." After blocking the doorway during this and narrowly scrutinizing her sister and the fur coat, she stood aside grudgingly. "I s'pose you'd better come in. But I wonder you didn't go to Mary Ann's house, not come here. . . . I hope the neighbours haven't seen you," she went on in aversion.

Falteringly Olga entered. From the ajar doorway down the dark passage came subdued murmurs. "There's some of the family," Sara said, adding jeeringly: "Come to have a look at you. Go in."

Olga shrank. But hadn't she come back to seek forgive-

ness! And to mortify her wicked flesh! Entering the kitchen, she made an effort to strengthen her sagging neck, that was still lovely, but once had been proud as a swan's. Around the family hearth of her childhood a ring of hostile faces looked up in the red firelight. Red angry faces.

This was the Prodigal Daughter: the Black Sheep: the Family Disgrace. Whose tricks (they declared, in spite of an operation for gall-stones) had sent her mother to the grave, her father following not long afterwards. This was she who had wounded irreparably the family honour, stained its chaste history. Her sisters never sat in chapel now but with deflated seats.

"Fur coat, ha!" Blodwen, her other sister, screeched. "Come down here to show-off, has she!"

"More likely," Sara barked, "down and out she is, and come to live on our poor backs. They got to dress up. Strumpet!"

"Light a lamp," called Twmos, Blodwen's husband, "and let us see her plain." The lamp was lit. They saw her pinched defeated face, her sunken eyes, and their power rose.

"What you come back for?" cried Blodwen, blue with rage. "Don't the men look at you no more?"

"Hush, the neighbours will hear," exclaimed Sara. "And she must be hid."

"Only a coffin'll ever hide the same as her," groaned Blodwen.

Sara's husband Evan, with his face like a pious goat, sharpened his two front teeth on his lip. He had never seen the famous sister before. The two men were dominated by their bellicose wives, and looked at her bleakly down their noses. She stood mute and haggard amid the jabbering abuse. It was her punishment and she accepted it. After a while she sank into a chair and bowed her head. Desolate silence was in her broken eyes. She looked like one who bled from some awful secret agony.

"What's come of that elderly brush-manufacturer that kept you?" taunted Sara. "Left you in the gutter, no

doubt."

"And the grand foreigner with the diamonds," sneered Blod. "Looking for someone younger now, eh?"

"And the big stockbroker with the gouty feet, ha? And the fifty more! Hussy!" screamed Sara, forgetting the neighbours in her wrath. "She comes back like a bag of bad old 'tatoes."

Evan lifted his two teeth: "Miss Olga, sloppy it is to come back here tail between legs. Foreign to us you are now."

At last Olga whimpered: "I want to come back and rest; I want, I want—" The hot kitchen swirled round her, she flopped off the chair to the floor. They stared at her in anger.

"Damme, ill she is," said Twmos.

"A glass of cold water chuck in her painted face," sang Blod.

"Put her to bed here I shall be obliged to!" wailed Sara. "In my clean sheets! What's the matter with the duffer."

They had planned to send her flying, after they had unloaded their opinions of her, up to Mary Ann's cottage hidden in the mountains. Mary Ann was the fourth sister and not quite right in the head. She was to keep the trollop where no one would see her. But what did the disgrace want to come back for! Was she greedily after her share of goods left by poor mam and dad that she had sent to the grave? She shouldn't have it, the bad ape.

"Her fine feathers been plucked proper, plain it is," declared Blod. "Something bad's the matter with her. Best to put her to bed, Sara," she added, gratified that the baggage wouldn't be sullyng *her* house, down the valley. "And throw her out soon as she's got her legs back."

It had to be done. But for some days Olga tossed in a fever. No doctor was called, and the presence of the disgrace was kept secret from the district. All the family were great members of Salem, the Baptist chapel on the hill: Blod's husband was even a deacon. Horrible if it was found that

the outcast had come back. But more horrible still if she died on them, so that her sinful carcase would have to be buried from Sara's clean house. The provoked Sara nursed her with malign art, not wanting her to die and yet wanting it. She said presently to the wan thin woman: "Broth you want, and poultry—for out of my house you must get, quick. Haven't you got no money? Only a few shillings there is in your purse. Coming back here," she began to rage, "and expecting hard-working persons to feed your useless flesh. Ach, you bitch, get better."

"I'm thirsty," Olga whimpered.

"Well," jeered Sara, "think I've got champagne for you!"

Olga then whispered this: "I've got over five hundred pounds in the bank."

Sara laid down the cup of cold water she was bringing and excitedly called downstairs to the kitchen: "Evan, put the kettle on. Poor Olga would like a cup of tea. Fetch nice cakes from the shop and a pot of bloater paste." To Olga she said: "There now, there now, very upset I've been, and my tongue running away with me. But nursing you I've been like a hospital. See, there's better you are! Let me comb your hair and wash your face tidy now."

And she freshened the room. The dusty ewer on the washstand she cleaned and filled with water, brought a tablet of scented soap and a new pink towel; she plucked chrysanthemums from the back-garden. Then, after feeding the trollop, she took shawl and umbrella and rushed down to her sister Blod's house.

Olga didn't get well, however. Some days she opened her empty eyes and whimpered that she wanted to go to chapel, other days she cowered down in the sheets and wouldn't speak. Something awful was consuming her. But visitors began to fill her room, including cousins and aunts and uncles from right down the valley, who used to declare that never would they go near her—no, not even to attend her funeral. Only Mary Ann, being in her head but fourteen ounces to the pound, was kept out of the news

The first visitor was Blodwen, who brought a tapioca pudding and wheedled:

"Olga, you never seen my son Ivor! Growing up he is now and wants to be a Baptist Minister. But there's expensive are the college fees! 'Oh dear me,' I said to him, 'no, Ivor, you must go and work in the pits like your father, for poor as dirt are your hard-working parents.' But wouldn't it be grand for our family, Olga, if we had a chapel minister in it! Our sister Sara was saying it would wipe out a lot, indeed."

Cousin Margiad appeared and said: "Well, Olga! When better you are a visit you must pay me. But very poor my house is—my Willie John hasn't been working for two years. I been praying a long time for a suite of furniture for the parlour, then I could take a school-teacher lodger—"

Sara asked with loving bullying: "Your will you've made, Olga? Better you're getting, but best it is to be on the safe side, and if you go before me I'll bury you first-class, I promise. To go on with, shall I borrow ten quid off you at once? Wages been dropping in the pit," she groaned, "and if I don't find money soon, bums will be knocking on the door and turn us all out."

Aunt Gwen boldly asked for a piano and a pair of tortoiseshell glasses to replace her old pince-nez. Evan asked for a motor-bike and Twmos wanted a pair of greyhounds.

They walked in and out of her room daily, waiting till she was well enough to grant their requests. Sara got her bags up from the station and was astonished at the silks and satins therein: she tucked them away in her cupboards. Carefully she fed Olga with broths, to keep her a while from Jordan's brink. Not that Olga would eat much. Her great hollow eyes stared emptily, her wrinkling flesh had no more life than tissue paper.

At last Sara cried out in curbed exasperation: "What's the matter with you? Repenting too much you are. Bad you've been, but others in this world have been badder. Tell me now when you're ready for that cheque book out

of your bag."

Olga babbled strangely: "I want to go to chapel next Sunday." She wanted to go to Salem, the chapel of her childhood, where she had been pure!

"No, no," said Sara hurriedly, "not yet. Very cold it is there, the heating system's broken down." And downstairs she said to the family: "Is she going daft like our Mary Ann! Wants to go to chapel, if you please, like we do!"

"She started to go wrong," Blod mused, "after Johnny Williams got killed." Johnny had courted Olga long, long ago, till he got caught under a fall of roof in the pit. In the far-away days of her chaste girlhood.

Sara said: "There's a lesson to us all she is! No kick in her now. Falling apart she is like a rotten old cask."

"Yes," Blod began to screech, "but she's been dancing her jigs plenty in London while we stayed by here respectable and working our fingers to the bone."

They resumed their wheedling of the ailing slut: they put pen into her yellow hand and promised visits to chapel when she was better. And before long Blod got two hundred pounds for the education of her son Ivor: the rest of the family, desirous of the glory of a minister therein, agreed she had first claim. But all the others too, except Mary Ann, got their advantages from her repentance, the purchases ranging in size from a suite of furniture down to a hymn-book in soft black leather. Sara paid off the mortgage she had raised on the house: times had been bad in the pits. Then, all this done, she went bustling upstairs one dark evening.

"Get up, Olga. Arranged we have for you to go and stay with Mary Ann. Very healthy up there in the mountains, you will get well quicker. Come now." Olga wept and moaned. But her sister pulled the thin, shrinking body out of the bed and shoved old garments on it. In the deserted lane back of the house was Evan with his new motor-bike. Olga, shivering and dazed in the winter damp, was strapped to him behind.

Off they went. Up the valley and bumping across a naked

mountain by the Old Roman road: down to a vale where there was only a little pit and a couple of farms. Then up the side of a dark mountain, sour in the winter, where sheep coughed. Mary Ann's cottage clung to its side like a pimple. The cottage smelt of the dozen cats that she worshipped. She squinted down dubiously at her panting sister as the bike whizzed away, and said: "Drat me, Olga, don't know I do how there's room for you and the cats in my bed. But we'll manage."

Mary Ann was good-hearted: her mind had never opened properly, and it purred like her cats. The damp cottage was small as a hen-house: every day she walked two miles to work at a farm, earning seven shillings a week and milk for the cats. She was strong, chewed shag, and spat on the floor like a man. Olga's past life was vague in her mind.

"Let me sleep," whimpered Olga; "I want to sleep. Then when I'm better we must go to chapel. I want to sing and pray." Her quenched face had gone stiff as a dead sparrow. The cats jumped about her, frisky: some were wild as the mountain wind gnawing at the cottage.

Picking her nose, Mary Ann cogitated. "Where's your husband?" she said at length.

Moaning, Olga wept in misery and repentance: "I've been a bad woman."

"All of us are bad women," said Mary Ann comfortably, "here below." But her mind couldn't stay fixed for long on anything and she said, "Let me see if I can spare a drop of milk from the cats' suppers. There's hungry the little angels are always! Cold in the face you look." She spared a small cup of the bluish mountain milk.

Olga did not get well up in the mountain cottage. And even Mary Ann began to grumble at the tossings and weepings beside her in the bed: the cats were disturbed. Sometimes Olga cried out loud in her agony of spirit. During the day she tried to read the Bible, but there was little strength in her arms to hold up the stout book. One cat there was who became enamoured of her and leapt on her shoulders continually. Her soul began to gutter out

completely. One night she panted for a minister to be brought her.

"Hush," scolded Mary Ann gently, "past ten o'clock it is and Mr. Isaac Rowlands is cosy in bed by the side of his wife with her red hair."

"I want to confess," moaned Olga.

Mary Ann soothed: "Old he is and never climbs mountains. You tell me the confess tomorrow and I will deliver it with his milk on the way home. There now, go to sleep."

The next day Olga, alone in the cottage, wandered out in a daze, her nightshift flapping about her bony body. All around the mountains spread gleaming white and pure as the mountains of heaven. Crying for God's minister, she was found by a shepherd in the vale and shoved into the policeman's cottage. Delivered back to Mary Ann, in a week she was dead.

Mary Ann, excited, stayed away from the farm and walked over the mountain to Sara, who called a conference. And the purring Mary Ann was told: "Buried from your cottage she must be, quiet by there. A grand coffin will be sent up to you, and one hearse."

"And carriages too," said Mary Ann placidly, "for the mourners." She was proud to have a funeral start from her house.

"No mourners," shouted Sara, who was wearing a fine silk blouse. "She don't deserve it, the life she led. Good people don't sit behind a Jezebel, alive or dead."

The cheapest coffin in Undertaker Jenkins' price-list arrived in Mary Ann's cottage. But she said to the bringer: "The day of the funeral send one carriage up to follow the hearse. For me, and cost to be paid by me, Mary Ann." The funeral day, however, Sara took it into her head to come over, in a tight ginger fur coat, and when she saw the carriage drive up with the hearse and Mary Ann ready in black, she pushed the shocking woman into a chair and hissed: "You want to disgrace the family, you stupid rabbit!" For ten minutes she forced into Mary Ann's mind knowledge of Olga's wickedness: in the end Mary Ann sat

with dropped jaw and popping eyes.

So it was that an empty carriage went behind the thin narrow coffin that had no varnish on its wood, no flower on its breast.

The disgrace safely underground, not long afterwards Blod brought up to Sara's house the first letter from her college boy and, settling her new glasses, read it out to the assembled family. He was doing fine and asked for a new black suit.

"That'll be a day," sighed Sara, "when we hear his first sermon."

Evan lifted his goat's teeth: "Perhaps a comfort it'll be to Olga too, where the mare is, down in the hot."

"Do not speak disrespectful of the dead, Evan," admonished Blod prudently. She folded the letter away into her new leather handbag. "Poor Olga!" she mused. "And she so pretty at one time. I used to brag about her in Sunday-school, long ago. Her face was bright as a daisy and her bosoms like spicy fairy-cakes." She shook her new gay earrings. "But too soft she was, too loving."

"Yes, indeed," sighed Sara, who was altering a pink silk petticoat that was too small for her, "and no head for business. A softie like our Mary Ann. Not a diamond ring on her finger, and there's paltry in the bank, when you come to think of all those years!"

GEORGE ORWELL

THE LESSONS OF WAR

Warfare by Ludwig Renn (Faber & Faber 8/6). *Prelude to Victory* by Brig.-Gen. E. L. Spears (Cape 18/-).

We shall never know just how many books entitled *Storm over Blank* were scrapped on that fatal morning when the Russo-German pact was announced, but a glance at the publishers' lists suggests that it must have been a good number. Ludwig Renn's *Warfare*—a study of war throughout the ages, from a Marxist angle—is one of those unlucky books that happened to be finished just a few weeks too early. In spite of some interesting passages dealing with warfare in ancient and medieval times, it is very largely vitiated by being written with one eye on the approaching world-war, which Renn assumes as a matter of course to be a war of “the democracies” against all three of the Axis powers. No doubt it is hardly necessary to point out in what way this colours his theories. But what is intellectually contemptible is that if Renn were writing the book now, and if he has remained a “good party man”, as I assume he has, he would be saying almost the exact opposite of what he said only a few months ago. The pity is that at bottom he has by no means the “good party man's” stamp of mind. Underneath the emigré Marxist there is still the Prussian soldier, tough, realistic and interested in such things as the marching-speeds of armies and the effective range of Roman catapults. He would be qualified to write a truly interesting history of the art of war. But not to the tune of “When Stalin turns we all turn”, a motto which practically guarantees that a book will be out of date three months after it is written.

Brigadier-General Spears's book is something completely different from this. It is a detailed account of the events leading up to the unsuccessful French offensive of 1917