Silent Tears

Prologue

Sir David Griffiths personally greeted his guest on the steps of Fairweather. The man had travelled a distance and the evening of August 21st 1968 was unseasonably cold and wet. Closing the door against the elements, Sir David led the way across the wide hall and into his study. A discreet bar stood in the corner of the large, warm, book-lined room.

'Whisky, Prime Minister?'

'Thank you, Griffiths.' The stockily built, grey haired PM waved his pipe briefly. 'Do you mind?'

'By all means.' Sir David poured two large malt whiskies and set down a small jug of water.

The PM ignored it, taking a mouthful of the peaty malt.

'So the Russians have invaded?'

Trust Griffiths to get straight to the point. 'Yes. We heard the news a few hours ago. Did you catch the BBC?'

'No. I was at a late supper and when we returned I went straight to bed. I'm not as young as I used to be.' An understatement by the eighty-seven year old.

The Prime Minister nodded distractedly. 'Hundreds of thousands of Russian troops invaded, led by hundreds of tanks and supported by a few token units from other Warsaw Pact countries. Damnation - those poor Czechs. Imagine how frightened and confused they must be. Soldiers in the street, tanks smashing through everything. Their frontiers crossed by the people they saw as their allies. I feel as though I've let them down. Particularly Dubcek. He was counting on us to support him.'

Sir David shook his head. 'There was nothing you could have done about it. Nobody could. We cannot go to war with Russia over Czechoslovakia. The die was cast in 1945 when we sold out eastern Europe to Stalin. Only time will undo the great harm that was done then. You mustn't blame yourself.'

Relief flooded into the PM's eyes as he looked up from inspecting the carpet and he set his gaze on the tall, slightly stooped, old man standing in front of him. The Prime Minister was aware he was in the presence of one of the greatest men of the century. Sir David Griffiths had helped to shape events on a world-wide scale. He had been, indeed still was, an advisor to Prime Ministers, Presidents and Kings. His knowledge of world affairs was encyclopaedic, his memory infallible. The PM permitted himself a small smile. Hearing Griffiths' words eased his conscience. Others, his Cabinet and his political advisors, had said as much, but hearing the same reassurances from Sir David Griffiths he could almost believe it.

'The Czechs are trying to stop armour with their bare hands. Arrests, abductions...the killing is horrendous. No trials, no mercy.'

Sir David nodded. 'Precisely as I forecast.'

'Dubcek was one of the first arrested. There was nothing we could have done about it. Was there?' The tone was pleading, hectoring, his Yorkshire accent rasping in its self-righteousness.

Sir David heaved a sigh, feeling genuinely sorry for the PM. 'Probably not,' he said heavily, knowing it was untrue. That was what galled him. A great deal could have been done but all efforts had been too little and far too late. Throughout his life he had been dealing with vain, self-seeking, stupid men and women who never saw beyond the next election. With few exceptions they were, at best, mediocre, at worst - he shuddered, banishing his thoughts. There was no point in going over the past. It was over. The PM had a thousand other burdens to shoulder, not least of all the appalling state of the British economy. To take one problem away might be a kindness, even though his instinct was to tell it the way it really was. Russia would never have invaded if the West had been prepared to back the Czechs properly. Every opportunity had been given to Johnson, the American President, but he was being dragged into southeast Asia. Vietnam was a war that could never be won. His advice to the President was that it would lead to grief. The fact that Johnson agreed with him was of little consolation. Sir David took a sip of whisky. It burnt its way down his throat and hit his stomach in an eruption of acid. He added a lot more soda and tried again. Old age, he thought, was hellish.

'Prime Minister, there is nothing to be done. We will make the usual noises in the United Nations and the Russians will ignore us. There will be crocodile tears, loud lamentations and gnashing of impotent teeth and when it's all over nothing will change. We have to move on.'

'That's all?'

'Certainly, that's all. You have other problems to cope with. Eastern Europe, I repeat, was sold out by an old man and a dying President two decades ago. It's too late now to do anything about it.'

'Hindsight says we should have heeded your advice,' said the PM.

Sir David waved a self-deprecating hand, realised that he was still standing, dominating the room, and sat down in a leather chair opposite his guest. 'That's history. The present and the future is what must concern us. What news of Africa?'

The two spoke for a few minutes about the meeting scheduled to take place on board *HMS Fearless* between the British Prime Minister and Ian Smith, the Prime Minister of Rhodesia. The meeting was to be held on September 9th, at Gibraltar.

A short while later Sir David saw his guest out. He was walking thoughtfully back to his study when he saw a figure standing on the stairs.

'It's a bit late to be wandering around the house, isn't it?' Sir David asked, pleasantly.

'Sorry, sir,' replied the reporter. 'I couldn't sleep and was coming down to look for something to read. I hope you don't mind?'

'Not at all. Well, now we're both awake, why not join me for a drink?'

'I'd like that, sir. Thanks.' Tim Hunter followed the older man into the study. He was a reporter for *Time* magazine and was staying at Fairweather, chronicling the history of the Griffiths family.

'Help yourself,' Sir David waved at the bar.

The reporter poured himself a bourbon and added ice and soda. 'Good health.' He raised a glass in salutation.

Sir David acknowledged the gesture and took a sip. 'How goes the work?'

'I'm wading through the latter part of the twenties. The miners' strike and the national strike intrigue me. Your attitude to them. Not one of, shall we say, a capitalist?'

Sir David chuckled. 'It was a dilemma, I can tell you. My heart said one thing and my brain another.'

'Is that why you went to South Wales? To try and solve the problem?'

'Solve it? No.' He shook his head. 'Solving the problem was way beyond me. The economics of the situation were so stark that it was useless. Either the taxpayers subsidised coal as a national requirement or...' he trailed off, the reporter waiting in anticipation. Sir David shook his head. 'Read it all and make up your own mind,' he said. 'To more important matters. What are your intentions with regards to my granddaughter?'

The unexpected question caused the reporter to pause with the glass halfway to his mouth. He gulped.

'Don't look so surprised,' said Sir David, kindly. 'I may be old but I'm neither blind, nor a fool.'

'No, sir. That's obvious. I take it that was the British Prime Minister I saw leaving?'

Sir David nodded. 'There's nothing wrong with *your* eyesight either.'

'Can you tell me what he wanted?' Hunter knew that he was pushing his luck.

'Just a chat. That's all. Just a chat,' Sir David replied, vaguely.

Hunter smiled, thinking he had moved the conversation away from dangerous waters. 'Like all the others who drop in for a "chat"? I've never seen so many dignitaries beating a path to one door before.'

'They come to sound off. To see...' he paused and smiled sadly. 'Maybe to see if the old man still has it in him? Let me tell you something about getting old, young man. Something nobody tells you. Up here,' he tapped the side of his head, 'you're stuck in a time warp. Somewhere in your twenties, maybe your thirties. The body grows old and decrepit while, if you're lucky, the brain stays as fit as ever. You think the same. Experience has shaped your thoughts but your head still says you can achieve all the things you used to be able to do. Then one day, suddenly, you realise it's not so. That's when you know you're old. The mind begins to catch up with the body. So now I dispense words of wisdom to anyone who thinks I have something useful to contribute.' He smiled, sadly. 'So? What's the answer?'

'Sir?'

'My granddaughter, damn it!'

Caught out, Hunter stuttered, 'S...strictly hon...honourable, sir.'

'Really?' Sir David raised a cynical eyebrow.

BOOK 1

David's Story

Chapter 1

Spring 1926

I stood on the platform and smiled at my wife. Although Richard was just over a year old, Madelaine had already regained her slim figure. Her hair was becoming more auburn than red, and the corners of her eyes carried a few more wrinkles but she was as lovely as ever.

‘I hope the visit is successful,’ she said.

‘We’ll see. I don’t hold out much hope but I’ll give it my best shot. A strike is in no one’s interest.’

Madelaine nodded towards a paper vendor. ‘He’s saying the strike is imminent.’

‘Bad news sells papers. Look after the baby.’

Madelaine smiled, her face transformed with an inner contentment. Motherhood suited her. ‘You always say that. Hurry back. We’ll both miss you. Good luck, darling.’

‘All aboard!’

‘I’d better go. The railways, like time and tide, wait for no man.’

I pecked her on the cheek, received a tight hug in response and climbed into the train. As it began to pull away I just had time to open the window and wave farewell. A cloud of smoke from the engine wafted towards me and I hurriedly closed it again and went in search of my seat. It seemed to me I was always saying goodbye for one reason or another.

As a weapon of the working class, the rallying cry of “General Strike” is highly effective and puts fear into the hearts and minds of the government. My task was to secure a peaceful settlement with the miners of South Wales but I had very little hope.

In truth, I did not want to go back. Llanbeddas, the village where I was born, was in turmoil and I was expected to help pour oil on troubled waters. I had left the valley behind in time and soul nearly three decades earlier. My return in 1911 had been little short of a fiasco. Now, fifteen years later, the government hoped I might be able to help improve the worsening situation. If South Wales could be brought to heel, the fonts of wisdom in Whitehall spouted, then so could the remainder of the coalfields. I disagreed. Furthermore, in spite of being born and brought up there, I had little influence with the place and its people.

I was travelling first class, all expenses paid by the government. Not that I needed the money, of course, simply as a matter of principle. If they wanted me to haul their chestnuts out of the fire then they could pay me to do it.

Initially I had rebuffed all attempts to coerce me to travel to Wales. However, the guarantee of a safe seat in Kent at a by-election due in nine months convinced me otherwise. It was Churchill, in his usual fashion, who had finally persuaded me.

‘Listen, Griffiths, I can assure you of the seat. If the miners don’t return then no matter. The seat is still yours. I give you my word.’

‘How can you be so certain?’ I asked.

He frowned, looking up at me from under a wrinkled brow, a fat cigar clamped in his right hand. ‘Certain of what?’

‘That there’ll be a by-election,’ I replied, frowning in turn.

‘Silvers is being given a peerage and kicked into another place. In the New Year’s Honours list. Hence the by-election in nine months.’

‘And if another seat comes up in the meantime?’

‘Ah! An interesting question.’ Churchill looked uncomfortable for a moment but then answered truthfully. ‘Fact is, another one or two seats are already spoken for. Favours have to be repaid,’ he added, puffing contentedly on his cigar.

His words didn’t surprise me. That was the way of the political world. Utterly corrupt in an almost honest fashion. Part of me loathed the system, but powerful forces were dragging me inexorably into a political career.

I was fully briefed for Wales but nothing could have prepared me for the emotions the valleys would unleash within me when I arrived.

It had been noon when the train pulled out of Paddington. Civilisation in the form of a dining car had been added to the trains a few years earlier and I was booked for the early sitting. I took my briefcase with me. Settling at the white-clothed table with a sea of silver laid out before me, I opened my case and lifted out my papers. These were not the official memoranda and inter-office notes of the government, but a stack of newspaper clippings. I had instructed my staff to acquire newspaper articles

from all over the country. Local newspapers that formed a part of the mining community reflected the miners' views. Those in other regions were, on the whole, against them. Nationally the press was split down the middle, the Labour newspapers supportive, the Tory against. Two facts did not surprise me. The first, the total bias of the reporting and the second, its inaccuracy. Newspapers sold, not through facts but emotions. They could arouse such fierce passions that arguments spilled over into violence. *It was my job to stop it happening*.

Whilst reading the various papers I absent-mindedly broke a bread roll and ate it. As a steward took my order I became aware of the three men sitting directly across the aisle from me and looked over. I was surprised to recognise Arthur Cook, the secretary of the Miners' Federation and two of his cohorts. Cook was a rabid left-winger and a syndicalist - his aim was to amalgamate the miners across Britain under one union. A short, heavily built man, nattily dressed in tweeds, his waistcoat pulled taut across his bulging stomach and a watch chain of gold dangling from the button hole to his left hand pocket, Cook's neat, grey moustache bristled with anger.

'The men will never accept the recommendations,' he said angrily, leaning across the table to make his point.

I looked out the window, not wishing to draw attention to myself. I was sitting diagonally, about six feet away. Cook spoke in a loud undertone to the two men opposite him. I could hear everything that he had to say and, as I took no notice of him, he ignored me. The other two, with their profiles to me, were difficult to hear and understand but I did catch the odd word and phrase.

I guessed they were George Barker and Noah Ablett who, more than a decade earlier, had formed the Unofficial Reform Committee advocating one, all-inclusive national union for mineworkers. 'The Royal Commission want to abolish the minimum wage set in 1924. Right?' Cook continued. There were nods from the other two. 'They also want to reduce wages. Well, it's not on. The lads won't accept it.'

I was listening intently. Cook, as usual, was being selective with the Commission's findings. What he said was true, but there was also a great deal of good contained in the report. Cook was failing to mention the compulsory profit sharing for miners and paid annual holidays of two full weeks a year. Far from perfect, but I knew it was the best deal available. If Cook wouldn't buy into it then I saw no chance of avoiding a strike.

The steward came and served me an indifferent game soup which I ate distractedly, still tuned into the conversation taking place across the aisle.

'So we push for a general strike,' said Cook. 'We have no choice. We've got nearly a million men working in the coalfields. If we call an all out strike we'll be able to drag the rest of the unions with us. The TUC will have to follow.' Cook pugnaciously prodded his forefinger on the table in front of him. He stopped talking when the steward appeared and placed soup in front of the three men. His tirade was replaced with the slurping of soup and I stopped listening for a few moments deep in thought. A general strike was the last thing the country needed. Europe was a mess, India was being rocked by riots between Hindus and Moslems and the African continent lurched from crisis to crisis. In the Middle East our troops faced skirmishes across vast areas of land from the Sudan to Iraq. We were already having problems paying our soldiers and seamen. On-going subsidies to the railways and the mining industry were bleeding the country dry and other industries had begun demanding financial support from the government.

I picked listlessly at a piece of beef while the conversation opposite resumed. 'We aim for a general strike in six weeks,' said Cook, 'if we don't get the government to back down. Agreed?' Barker and Ablett hesitated. 'Agreed?' he said, angrily. The two men nodded. 'Good. That's settled. Now we can enjoy the rest of our meal in peace.'

I tuned out once more and concentrated on my food. I needn't have bothered. It didn't improve just because I was now thinking about what I was tasting. A half bottle of claret was the meal's only saving grace. That, and what I'd learnt.

The three men left the carriage a short while later and after an interval, I followed. Standing in the corridor outside my compartment I realised we were pulling into Temple Mead station, Bristol. I entered my compartment and sat down , in deep thought. Cook was an honest man, fighting for what he passionately believed in. The problem was, in essence, very simple. Cook was wrong. If I ran the Griffiths empire in the way the country was being run then we would be bankrupt in no time. It was impossible for the government to continue to cross-subsidise failing industries. The figures whirled through my head as I considered my mission. Eventually, as the train pulled out of Bristol, I fell into a fitful doze. I was aware of the train going through the tunnel under the River Severn but took no notice of the Monmouthshire countryside as we drew out the other side. Newport came and went and I finally awoke when the train pulled into Cardiff station.

The platform was bustling with crowds yelling cheerfully, people climbing on and off the train. Good natured shoving and jostling were the order of the day. I felt a pressure on my hip and swung round just in time to grab a small hand with my wallet.

'Let me go!' The hand belonged to a runt of a boy who squirmed in my grasp. His face and hands were grubby, as were the tattered clothes he wore. As I snatched my wallet back, he twisted and escaped my clutches, darting through the crowds. I thought fleetingly of giving chase but what was the point? I was hardly going to have him arrested.

In the huge open space in front of the station I hailed a taxi and gave the Angel Hotel as my destination. The city owed its existence to one thing - coal. The coal dust-ridden rivers Rhondda and Taff met at Pontypridd as thick, black sludge that poured down to Cardiff. The rivers Rhymney to the east and the Ely to the west washed millions of tons of coal every year. The valleys, with their rich seams of coal, spread across South Wales like tentacles, whose head and brain were located at Cardiff. The docks which had grown up over the previous three hundred years were a massive complex of locks, wharves and warehousing. Huge quantities of coal were piled high in open, rat-infested compounds and the grime of coal dust lay everywhere. When a north wind blew it wasn't too bad, but when it became a southerly, the dust spread across the city. Coal fires added to the smog and filth. Like most industrialised cities across Britain there was abject poverty and great wealth. I found it a depressing thought, more than two decades into the twentieth century.

Our roots were here. But of my father's four brothers only Uncle William was still alive. I was looking forward to spending some time in his company. He lived in Rhiwbina with his wife, Nancy. I had last seen him at Mam's wedding to John Buchanan, my step-father. The other relatives I had rarely seen in thirty years. David and William had become partners in a shop they had opened in Rhiwbina. They had prospered and, on Uncle David's death, they had owned seven stores in the city and a further eight across South Wales.

My dear step-father, John Buchanan, had been under the impression that my uncles had combined their resources and were all in partnership together. That had been far from the case. My Uncle Albert had stayed in Llanbeddas and worked in the mine. He had died there in a pit accident. Uncle Huw had become a union representative and had ended his working life working in an office and attending miners' rallies. Between them I had fifteen or sixteen cousins, none of whom I would recognise if they passed me in the street. I felt guilty at the thought.

The Angel Hotel was a large, Victorian building on the outskirts of the city, on the road to Rhiwbina. Recently, a new rugby ground had opened nearby, called Cardiff Arms Park. Being Saturday, a game was in progress. I could hear the cheering and yelling as I alighted from the taxi.

'Cardiff are playing Port Talbot,' the taxi driver said when I enquired.

I paid the fare and thanked him. As I hefted my portmanteau, singing broke out in the stadium and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. For Scots the world over the sound of the bagpipes has that effect. For me it was the harmonious sound of tens of thousands of Welsh voices raised in song. I recognised the battle hymn, *Men of Harlech.*

I was humming it to myself when I stepped through the swing doors into the opulent foyer of the hotel. The two men standing just inside the door had a certain familiarity I couldn't place.