PROLOGUE

After much thought and many calculations, I have come to the conclusion that I was born in the year 530. I may be wrong by a year or two either way; the Lord's blessed providence, of which Caradog is always preaching to me, did not extend to equipping His wretched servants with more than an inconveniently small number of fingers for the purpose of reckoning ages. Caradog insists that we all use this new system of dating the years, which he informs us has been recently invented by a monk like us, who bears the improbable name of Dionysius Exiguus.

I presume, then, that I am eighty-five years old on the 14th. day of September, 615, which is the formal title of this warm grey afternoon dampened with languid rain. Here in the monastery at Ynys Witrin, several of the younger monks have placed their immortal souls at risk by laying illicit bets on my true age. Local legend in the marshes around our island has me a hundred years old. Many of the peasants have told their children that I used to be bard to Arthur, although he was dead before I was born. I hear that they now say I sang for Ambrosius, although I am sure they have little idea who he was.

Caradog is watching over my shoulder, frowning at the jerky path of my fingers across the page. He is perhaps cautiously watching my writing to check that I am not putting down a scurrilous attack on his conduct as abbot of Ynys Witrin and my link with God. He may only be making sure of the quality of my Latin. (Why does nobody ever write down the British language, I wonder? Even the Saxons have men who can write down their rough barking speech in a beautiful script.)

Now that the tip of my pen has been properly pressed into shape by writing the preceding lines, I can make a true start on the task which abbot Caradog has set for me. I have told the abbot that I seek salvation. He says that I must first have my sins forgiven, and to have them forgiven I must first repent.

"But how can I tell," I asked him, "which of my acts to repent of, since I'm not sure how many of them were sins?"

"Tell me everything you have done in your life, and I will point out your sins for you."

So here I sit and write, in the exasperatingly bad light of a wet day, preparing myself to remember all the incidents of my life so that Caradog can read them over and pick out all the evil acts which I have committed. He also thinks that this confession may have some value as a record of my times, but I fear that no man will know how to read Latin by the time this young century has ended.

I shall now begin my account of how I, Taliesin, son of the Lord Hywel, sometime bard to the kings Maelgwn of Gwynedd and Urien of Rheged, passed through eighty-five years to my present state as the oldest monk in the monastery of Ynys Witrin, not far from the place of my birth in a village whose condition was so dejected that it did not even have a name.

CHAPTER ONE

The year 530 was, by the standards of our time, a good one in which to be born. We Britons of the south-west were still enjoying the peace which Arthur had won for us at the battle of Badon in 515, and I suppose my generation was the first in many years not to be brought up in a country fractured by war.

My home village was one of those little agricultural communities set in what was really a large clearing cut out of the forest and close to the marshlands. We were hardly aware that we were subjects of king Constantinus of Dumnonia, the kingdom which occupies the westerly peninsula of Britain. I have since learnt that the Romans called our district Aestiva Regio, the Summer Country. Perhaps there were better summers under the Romans. Whenever I recall my early youth, I can see only dull skies, the grubby snow of listless winters, and rainwater trickling down the pointed thatched roofs of our cottages. The cold and wet penetrated easily through the walls, because the experience of our ancestors through a thousand changes of season has still not found a way of keeping the weather out of houses made only of wickerwork daubed with mud. The Romans built in stone; surely they must have taught at least a few Britons how to do it? If they did, the art has been lost, along with all the other marks of civilisation in this country.

I was about seven or eight years old when I first discovered my unusual social status. It came about when I asked my mother why my father only came to see us two or three times a year, instead of living with her in the village.

“He lives in a faraway place with his wife,” my mother told me.

"Then you aren't his wife?"

"Oh no! Look at me! Do you think the Lord Hywel would marry someone like me?"

At the time I could see no reason why not. Looking back now, of course, I can see my mother as the ragged peasant girl she was, so thin, and with those terrible sores on her face which never healed themselves. You must understand that I had never been outside our village, and so I knew nothing of the world beyond the marshes and the dark curtain of the forest.

I did realise, in spite of this innocence, that my father was a person of some importance. He always arrived riding a horse, which, along with the horses of his companions, provided me with my only sights of horses until I left the village several years later. The entire population of the village, which was around eighty people, would turn out to meet him, joined by cows, goats, chickens, and anything else which had legs to carry it. My father could be relied upon to make an impressive show whenever he came, and it was my mother who would deliver our formal greeting to him, while we all knelt in the mud.

"Welcome Lord Hywel."

"My thanks to you all," he would reply.

Then, if the season was winter, he and his attendants would briskly dismount, and lead their horses into our house, where everyone would settle down in a tight circle around the open fire in the centre of the floor. Since I was too young to take part in the conversation, I would sit cross-legged on the hard earth floor, enthralled by the tales of my elders and by the

snortings behind my back from the horses, one of whom would from time to time lean his head over me and give me a strangely pleasurable nuzzle just behind the ear.

If it was summer, the men would let their horses trot down to our village meadow, which was brilliantly green and soft beneath one's step, because of the water which it soaked up from the little stream which bubbled fussily past it. Everyone would lie down on the grass except the women, who would be fetching a meal of boiled vegetables or some loaves of rich bitter bread to bring out to us. Indoors or out, winter or summer, we would always hear what my father and his men had done since we had last seen them several months before.

What stories they would come with! My father served a chief named Bran, whom I thought to be a great king ruling over vast dominions. Even though I now know him to have been only a petty warlord of the forest whose power to bully extended no further than fifty miles from the marshes, the recollection of those tales sill moves me to a thrill of pride and admiration. I know that the distant cities of which they spoke were only stinking villages cowering a day's ride away in another part of the forest, and that the tumultuous wars and noble heroes were only wayside skirmishes and common brigands. We had not yet seen real wars and heroes.

I would take care to remember all the details of the warriors' stories, and after they had ridden away again and left us to our ordinary dull lives I would take those tales and retell them to myself. For years all I could add to them was colour from my wayward imagination. In the year that I become sixteen, I first put in something else: music, from the only object in the world which I could call my own personal possession.

This had come to me in the course of one of my father's visits. Those who came with him included not only the usual roughened fighting men, but also a thin, shambling fellow whom I saw to be very elderly: at least forty years old, I guessed. I never spoke to him, and I suppose he never noticed me, but I asked my father what kind of a soldier the frail man was.

“No kind at all,” my father replied, while battering out a dent in his shield with a rock the size of a cow's head. “He's a bard, Gwion.”

Here I must pause to make another confession to Caradog. Having already admitted to bring born out of wedlock, I must now reveal, after keeping the secret from everyone I have known in the last seventy years, that my real name is not Taliesin. I was born Gwion. I hope Caradog will be more tolerant of my deception when I explain, a little further on in these writings, why I was forced to adopt an alias.

To return to my conversation with my father: I proceeded to ask him what a bard was.

“Oh, he makes up poems about us and Bran, or dead people like Arthur, and sings them or recites them while playing a harp.”

I have been an earnest reader of the lives of the saints, and so I know what a vocation is. With that flat sentence in a bored voice, my father summoned me to my fate, but the call was not to the monastery or hermitage. I knew I must become a bard.

“Father,” I exclaimed, “I'm going to be a bard too!”

I swear that no more than half a heartbeat passed between the clang as my father dropped the rock onto his shield and the crack hit the side of my face. While I howled and squirmed upon the ground, covering myself with dirt, my father kicked me again and again,

and then gripped my thin neck hard enough to have choked me as he dragged me up. For a moment or two, he glared at me, and I remember how he looked oddly young in that instant. Then he took hold of my hair with one hand so that I could not escape from the blows which he struck to each side of my face in turn.

"I should never have let you be brought up by women," he hissed. "A bard! Are you really my son?"

I was too frightened and hurt to speak or even cry.

"You will not be a bard. You're going to be a warrior, if I have to drive us both close to death in order to train you. When I come back here next spring, I'll take you away with me."

He relaxed his grip on my hair, and I twisted out of his hold and ran away, through the mud and stones and dung, between the thatched huts and startled cows, until I was out of the village and among the outer trees of the forest, where I lay down to explore my cuts and bruises. My father had decided two things for me, against his own will: I knew that I was not going to let my father take me off to be trained as a warrior, and that instead I was going to be a bard.

I stayed in the forest until just before sunset, when I walked back to the village in the last of the day's light. My apprehension mounted when I came to our house, as I expected to be given a further helping of insults and a fresh beating. I was surprised at the quiet I found everywhere. People were walking about with their eyes down, not speaking to each other, and they all ignored me. I realised that someone in the village must be dying, and when I saw the

flaring torches set up at the door of our house I knew that whoever it was had been carried in there.

I entered nervously, not being able to see anything in the dimness except a tiny smoking candle. Someone took my arm and pulled me aside.

“Your great bard is about to leave us,” my father said. “Go and sleep in the byre tonight.”

Next morning the bard was brought out and buried. I never discovered his name. It may be that some of the compositions I heard during the years were his, but if he had to attach himself to lords as lowly as Bran for a living he cannot have been very illustrious.

That was certainly the impression given when his possessions were shared out among his companions. My father took the best of what little there was to be had, a slender golden torque. It looked cheap, compared to the thick one which my father wore around his neck, and which had a twisting pattern formed by the coiled wires of which it had been made, with ferocious great dragons' heads at its ends. The other men had even less to choose from: an iron amulet, a worn dagger, a patched cape. They buried him in the clothes he had been wearing, and into the pit they threw the objects which were not worth claiming. I watched as my father tossed down rags, a leather satchel, and the bard's shabby harp, which cried out in a last broken chord as it landed on its owner's still chest. Then the grave was shovelled full, as the sun hovered at noon.

All that afternoon I could not turn my thoughts away from the harp. Because of the note it had sung when it tumbled into the grave, it seemed to have been buried alive, calling

to me. Of course, I speak now in the language of a lifelong poet. Before Caradog accuses me of pagan tendencies, I had better make it clear that even at such a young age my thinking was as literal as any good Christian could wish.

The day before, it had been revealed to me that I was to be a bard. That same night, a bard had died in my house, struck down as suddenly as I had been struck to the ground by my father. The following morning, the bard and his now masterless harp had gone into the earth.

After I had harried the pigs out of the forest, where they had spent the day snuffling about for acorns under the trees, I drove them back to the village and went to my mother's house for supper. I found that my father and his soldiers had left during the afternoon. My mother and I were left alone in the house, and she sat and gazed at me from her diseased eyes as I munched my lump of bread and dipped it into the bowl of dark broth which was the other half of the meal. When I had finished, and thrown the empty bowl outside for the dogs to lick clean, I started to gather the straw together to make up my bed, but my mother reached from behind me and gently took the straw out of my hand.

"I hear you annoyed your father," she said softly.

"I didn't mean to," I protested. "I didn't know he would be angry."

"Just what did you say?"

This surprised me; I had been thinking that she already knew.

"I told him I wanted to be a bard."

My mother sighed, and slowly shook her head.

"You don't know your place in the world," she said, and she sounded as if she was going to cry. "A village boy can't become a bard."

That was true, if one meant an eminent bard at a king's hall. The trick is either not to let anyone suspect that you are a village boy, or else to proclaim it so brazenly that you will be given a chance just because people want to see you fail.

"Father says he'll come back next year to make me a soldier."

"If you call him a soldier, you can be a soldier. You can't be a real soldier any more than you can be a real bard."

"What's a real soldier, then?" I asked in indignation.

"Like the men Arthur had."

"I don't want to hear about Arthur!" I shouted. "That's stale history. All you older people ever talk about is Arthur."

"If it weren't for Arthur, the Saxons would have been here fifty years ago. Would you have wanted2 that?"

"No, I conceded. I knew very little about the Saxons, but like all good young Britons I knew that I did not want them to rule over us.

"If I can't be a bard, and I don't want to be the kind of soldier my father is, what can I be? Do I have to stay in this village for the rest of my life, driving the pigs to the forest every morning and driving them back every night?"

"That is your destiny," my mother answered.

"No!" I shouted, running out of the door.

I nearly tripped over the bowl which I had thrown out earlier, and I picked it up and flung it back into the house without caring where it might land. I ran away through the cottages, knowing each stone so well that I had no fear of colliding with anything in the darkness. When I came to a place where the hard earth beneath me gave way to a soft patch, I knew I had come to the bard's grave.

I could hardly see it, even with the help of the half-moon which was creeping up the sky. The piled soil was soft when I tested it with my hands, so I set to work, committing the greatest sin of my life.

It took perhaps an hour for me to make the narrow, deep hole I wanted. I reached down, and slid my stiff fingers about in the dirt. Once they brushed against the dead man's hand, and I nearly sprang away in shock. Finally, I touched a wooden surface, and then strings. Slowly, I tugged out the treasure I had dug for, and set it aside while I filled the hole up again. Nobody was likely to come that way soon enough to notice the disturbance to the grave, and if they did, it would probably be blamed on wild pigs.

In the darkness I could not judge what state the harp was in, but it was, of course, covered in damp soil, and I rightly guessed that it needed to be kept dry. The best I could do was to wipe it with the hem of my smock, and to hide it under some leaves until I could come back for it later.

I was nervous as I ducked my head under the eaves of our house and went in. Before my eyes could adjust to the blackness inside, my mother silently clutched me and held me

against her for a long time. I was afraid that something had happened while I was gone, but she spoke first.

"I thought you'd run away," she whispered.

"I'm sorry," I said, It was one of those moments when one needs to say something very simple, but it will not come. "I know it's true what you told me, and I know how lowly we are, but I won't stay here all my life."

"But you've never been anywhere. You don't know what it's like outside this little place."

"That's why I'll go. But not yet. I know I'm not ready. I'll stay until my father comes back next year."

"And then he'll take you away."

I decided not to hurt my mother any more by telling her that I would leave alone instead of letting my father take me.

My mother let me go. I heard her fumbling about in the dark until she found a rushlight and lit it. The walls and roof appeared with such suddenness that they seemed to have sprung up out of the ground around us. My mother poured me out a mug of milk, and while I drank it she made up the straw pile for my bed.

I will say little about my daily life in the year which followed, in spite of the danger of missing out some sins for Caradog to absolve me from, because life in remote British villages does not change except, as the bitter old joke says, that it sometimes gets worse. The one new experience for me came from outside our ordinary life.

That was the harp. I kept it hidden in the bushes of the forest, and as I had a genuine reason to go there nearly every day to let the pigs feed, I spent many hours with it. I stole enough pieces of rag to keep it clean and dry, and experimented with the many sounds which it could produce.

Now of course I had little idea of how it should be played. With supreme confidence, I did not let that problem inhibit me from developing my own way with it. All I knew about music was what pleased me and what did not. I learnt the effects of plucking the strings singly and in groups, and established a pattern of playing which I practised over and over.

I remembered from my father's description that a bard was required to supply words as well as music. My knowledge of poetry was not much better than my knowledge of music. I did not compose poems, in the formal sense, to begin with. All I worked on was supplying words.

I did not make up any poems about Arthur, loftily considering him to be an outdated subject, and I thought then that enough stories had already been made about the regular characters of our folklore. I chose my subjects from the tales my father and his notably unpoetical men had told us. In my first efforts, the great king Bran, supported by his brave and noble lieutenant Hywel (I felt I owed at least this to my father), roamed through fabulous lands the length and breadth of Britain.

I pictured myself as a grown man, a renowned bard, but I could not make my own name of Gwion sound impressive when sung. I had stumbled upon a sequence of four notes from the harp, the second one rising above the first, the third rising even higher, and then the

fourth falling again. Suddenly I thought of a name: Tal-i-e-sin, a name to be sung to those four notes. It seemed both meaningful and meaningless: “radiant brow”.

I put them into many adventures which I believed to be original, not having yet learnt that there are no new stories either in legend or in life. I sang my preposterous epics to the trees, who bowed their branches in respectful concentration, and to the pigs, who grunted and trotted away to look for more beech-nuts.

When the winter came, I was forced to leave the harp in its hiding-place, because I would be able to explain frequent visits to the forest, and I did not dare run the risks involved in keeping the harp concealed in our house, let alone playing it.

There is no man who does not greet the spring with relief, but no spring was ever more welcome than in the year 547, when I reached the age of seventeen. On the first warm day, I rushed to the forest and lifted out my harp to see whether the winter had made it suffer as cruelly as we had. Its finish was not much rougher, and although the strings at first felt dangerously brittle, they soon became supple again.

My voice had improved during the months in which I had been forced to rest it, and I began my practice again in the exhilarating belief that I was now quite an accomplished bard.

No event is more surprising than one which has been long forewarned. I was thus no more than curious when two men of the type who rode with my father arrived in the village, slid down from their horses, and began shouting all around for food and drink. Everyone scurried about meeting their demands. When my mother came out, they beckoned to her, and

I thought they were asking for something to eat. My mother called me over, and I realised that they had wanted me. She introduced me to them.

"These lords" (circumstances forced her to give that grotesquely inappropriate title to those filthy bandits), "have brought a message from your father".

One of the men interrupted her.

"The lord Hywel greets his son Gwion, and commands him to make himself ready to leave two days from now. Hywel will be here by sunset tomorrow."

My mother spoke to me quite casually.

"Gwion, you must make up a pack for your journey."

She and I went into the house together, and she put food, a knife, and a rough cloak into a piece of sacking.

I did not wait for my father to arrive. Without warning my mother, I left before dawn the next morning, and made my way to the forest. I collected the harp and put it into my pack. Slinging my possessions across my shoulder and setting off in a direction a little north of east, I threw off the name of Gwion the peasant boy and made a vow to myself that I was going to be known to all men as Taliesin the bard, as I had imagined myself in my callow dreams. I had no idea where or to what my solitary march would lead me.