

Elizabeth Cunningham
**The Bootleggers of
Pontydilwenn**

It was the talking point of the village post office and the chief topic of conversation in Evan's butcher's shop: the shattering decision of the Misses Watkins not to make any more elderberry cordial 'cough and cold cure' for the bazaar – the popular annual event organised by the Baptist Congregational Chapel.

A maelstrom of consternation engulfed the whole village. Hughie Davies, the chairman of the local Temperance League, was the most vociferous. 'Duw, Duw, I rely on that to settle my usual coughs and colds. Magic it is.'

Mabel, Evan's wife, added to the dismal chorus, 'My husband says it helps his asthma.'

It was all to no avail. Violet and Daisy Watkins were adamant. As a sop they told the bazaar's organisers that they would make strawberry jam instead.

The fog of gloom seemed to linger long after the bazaar. Trefor the Milk did not improve the situation by telling Hughie Davies of his mother's cold cure. 'Tell the missus to rub your chest with goose grease, Hughie.'

No, the despondency was not fading. Evan went on wheezing and Hughie carried on coughing.

But in time the absence of the bazaar miracle medicine was not questioned. In fact, it was almost forgotten. That

is, until it was casually mentioned at Daisy's funeral.

Violet had died the year before, a few months after their treasured little Yorkshire terrier Ben. It was one of the elderly mourners who remembered the Watkins sisters' cold cure. 'My cousin Lizzie always bought it. She was a regular customer, said it made her sleep. Wonder why they stopped making it?'

It was Hilda Pugh, the chapel organist, who had the answer. 'I can now tell you the reason. Remember that nice Mr Morgan, the vet? I was his receptionist. It was my first job. One morning, even before I put the light on in the surgery, there was a loud banging at the door. I opened it to find two very distressed old ladies, Violet and Daisy Watkins. Daisy was cuddling their beloved little Yorkie. I could just see the tip of his ear sticking out from the shawl. She couldn't speak for crying and sobbing. Violet just moaned the words 'We think our little Ben is dying.'

A few of the older members at the funeral service were now listening attentively as Hilda, wiping her eyes, went on.

'Violet was bawling, 'He didn't come and call us as usual. We found him in the kitchen, unconscious, in a sea of elderberry mash, sick and worse. His blanket is in the corner, see, and we'd put the residue of the mash we'd used for the bazaar 'cold cure' at the side of the gas stove. Ben must have discovered it and liked what he saw and smelled.'

'Well, what could I do? I just eased Ben out of Daisy's arms and carried him into the treatment room to wait for Mr Morgan. I then asked the sisters to return later that evening. Even though they were much calmer when they returned, I didn't have the heart to tell them exactly what had upset poor Ben. But Mr Morgan offered his diagnosis

straight away.

‘Well, ladies, Ben was drunk with the remains of that elderberry mash you make, the famous cold cure. He’s as fit as a fiddle now.’

‘There was no need for Mr Morgan to tell them the good news. Ben had come frisking out of the treatment room and hurled himself into Violet’s outstretched arms. Violet just stood there, clutching him, stunned by the news they had been making intoxicating liquor. I thought she was going to collapse.

‘It was the white-faced Daisy who reminded Mr Morgan that Violet was the secretary of the Temperance League. ‘We never, NEVER touch alcohol or have it in the house,’ she reminded us. Poor thing, she must have been running through the nightmare of Hughie Davies ever finding out his devoted helper had a dog who had been drunk.

‘At long last, reassured with Mr Morgan’s promise that Ben’s indisposition would never be divulged to anyone, they left, Violet tightly nursing their precious Ben.

‘Poor little dears, they did not realise their ‘cure’ was alcoholic, and I’m sure no-one else did. They left this old world content they were still custodians of the temperance life of Pontydilwenn.’

