

## A Welsh Maid's Tale

Carys Williams, 9P

This is no tale of exciting adventure, nor daring escape from the clutches of evil. Instead, it is a story of defiance against society, of secrecy and learning. This is my story.

I'll start at the beginning. I am Angharad, a maid at Manorbier Castle in Pembrokeshire, West Wales, to Gerald de Barri. My life is privileged for a peasant, as luckily I live in good care and company. I also lead a harsh life away from service. You see, I am the co-founder of a secret society, Llais Merched, meaning 'voice for girls', that teaches ordinary girls like me to read and write. Gerald and I founded Llais Merched together. We were only children when it started.

Gerald and I grew up together. My mother had worked in the service of the de Barris, and her mother before that. Our families go back generations, and we have always been treated as equals within the de Barri family, despite being merely servants. As children, Gerald and I had many adventures. One was that we thought it would be fun to start up a secret society where Gerald could teach me to read and write. You see it was forbidden for girls, particularly servant girls, to be educated.

Later, Gerald, with one of his inspirational ideas, told me to gather some of the servant girls from the castle, and bring them along to the meetings with me. That was when the society as it is today began. When he left to be educated in Paris, he left me in charge of teaching the girls, but I'm always eager for him to come back from his trips and teach me some new things that he learned during his travels. I get so much joy from learning, and teaching the girls things that I know. It makes me realise how much power is held in knowledge. Every new morsel of information I gather makes me wonder more and more why the privilege of education is denied to so many. I think Gerald feels the same way, otherwise he wouldn't have taught me everything he did.

Since its foundation, Llais Merched has grown into something that is so important for the future. We have 8 members, including myself and Gerald, and we meet once a week. It includes common girls of a range of ages from all over the area. We meet on the beach near Manorbier Castle, in the grassy sand dunes. It was my favourite spot when we were growing up, and it is also enclosed, which means it is the perfect spot to host a secret society. Llais Merched could change the world, but it also endangers every living person that is involved in it. If somebody finds out about our secret society, and they tell the Barons for a meagre amount of money, probably just enough to pay for a few meals for the family, who knows what might happen to us? We could be imprisoned, flogged in public, or tortured in some other way, depending on how the Barons are feeling.

The dangers were never more apparent than one morning in June, when I walked down to the beach. The sun streamed down, reflecting off the unusually motionless sea. I started to run down the path, blissfully ignorant of what was to happen. As I reached the beach, the sand tickled my toes, welcoming me. A single ripple embraced my feet. I was home. I heard footsteps behind me, so I turned around. It was only Ceridwen, my best friend and another member of Llais Merched. I signalled to her to come and join me by the sea. She came and stood by me, and we both watched the water, entranced.

"I need to tell you something," Ceridwen said. "I think we are being watched. A couple of the other servants at the castle have been acting suspiciously around me and the other girls. There's nothing else any of us are doing to get attention. It's the same ones, Angharad."

At this, I shuddered. If somebody knew about the secret society, then they would speak up to the Barons. This would mean that all the girls were doomed. I couldn't let this happen. At once, I hurried into the grasses with Ceridwen and arranged an emergency secret meeting. I told Ceridwen to fetch the girls, one by one, so that it wasn't suspicious. The first people to come were Mair and Gwen, the youngest two of the group. I beckoned them over to the grasses and explained in a hushed voice that we needed to stay in the dunes and be as quiet as possible because somebody had found out about Llais Merched. They understood, and were both angels until the end. Next to arrive was Seren, a confident and noisy girl from Tenby, a nearby town. I had trouble keeping her quiet, as she was always trying to talk to the little ones. Finally, Eleri and Nia came with Ceridwen. Eleri and Nia were my apprentice maids. Eleri was learning really quickly, but poor Nia was always dropping everything. I really did feel sorry for her sometimes, as the wrath of Gerald's father was always targeted at her. I explained to everyone why I had called an emergency meeting, and that we needed to gather as much information as possible about the other servants in the castle.

"We will hold the next meeting here at the usual time. Are you all ok with that?"

"What will happen to us, Angharad?" Nia asked me.

"I don't know, Nia. But what I do know is that we need to be very careful around the other servants. We don't know who has found out about us yet. I'll find out soon enough. Just hold on until next Wednesday - then we can discuss everything properly." I made out that I wasn't worried, but inside, I was petrified. I really had no idea what would happen. "We need to go back one by one, so as not to look suspicious. Ceridwen, you can go with Mair. Then Seren can go, and Eleri and Nia can go together. I'll go last with Gwen. Stay strong, girls!" At that, the meeting ended. Soon, I remembered that Gerald was due back that day. That really cheered me up. I couldn't wait to see him. Gwen and I waited, until everyone was back safely, and then we walked up towards the castle.

When we arrived at the castle, I had a huge fright. I heard the sound of a whip, and screaming. I ran across the drawbridge and through the gate, with Gwen clutching my hand. The sight I saw was unbearable. Ceridwen was covered with whip marks, and was being held up by Eleri and Nia. Mair was being flogged. I told Gwen to go to Eleri and Nia, and I shouted at the man with the whip to stop. Then, I saw that the man with the whip was Gerald's father, William de Barri. He was shocked that I was betraying him.

"Why should I stop? These girls have been teaching themselves to read, and you know very well, Angharad, that that is forbidden."

"But it's not their fault. I was teaching them. These girls are innocent!"

"And who taught you?" he inquired angrily.

I couldn't possibly betray Gerald. Who knows what his father would do to him? I had to think of an answer, and fast, before he got too angry. Then, I heard someone say, "Stop. These girls are innocent, and so is Angharad." I turned around to see Gerald standing behind me. I was so pleased that I hugged him. He whispered in my ear, "It's good to see you, Angharad." Then, he stepped away and walked up to his father. "I taught Angharad to read, and told her to pass on that knowledge to the girls. Nobody should be deprived of the privilege of knowledge, so if she is guilty, then I am too, and you'll have to flog me first." I was astounded and elated. His father stopped flogging Mair and let her go. He couldn't bear the thought of whipping his own son. Mair ran to the other girls, while I stood by Gerald proudly. When he had finished with his father, he turned to me.

"Angharad, come with me. I am to go on a trip around Wales. Who knows what we could learn, and how many people we could teach?" I didn't answer, but just nodded and smiled. I could learn about the world for myself, rather than just hearing everything from Gerald. I couldn't wait to get started. But first, I went to the girls.

"Ceridwen, the girls will look after you. I am going with Gerald on a tour around Wales. I leave you in charge of Llais Merched. Nobody can stop you now. Thank you for everything." And with that, Llais Merched, the no-longer-secret society, saw a new chapter in its life, but that's Ceridwen's story, not mine.