

TO THE WHITE GATE

By

Robert Philip Bolton

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Preview file information

This preview file of *To The White Gate* contains the first five chapters of the book. The complete book comprises fifty-two chapters and 225 pages. This preview file and the complete text are protected by copyright owned by the author, Robert Philip Bolton.

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For the real Archie McGeoch

1. The park

IT IS PLEASANT beyond description to lie here in a soft bed in the light and warm sun-porch overlooking the glade. It is late afternoon now – winter has passed and it is early spring – and I am awake again having been kissed by the angel of sleep who now visits me often. She must have prescribed a therapeutic sleep for I feel calm, utterly relaxed, refreshed and alert. I can hear Helen at work in the kitchen making a brew so I know it must be about four o'clock. A cuppa will be nice.

I woke slowly to the chitter-chatter of the small birds. Oddly, I hear them more loudly now than I did when they were my constant companions in the park. The tough, sturdy but nervous sparrows are the most numerous, and the noisiest. My old friend Archie McGeoch called them his little Franciscans although I suspect that allusion has no meaning today; the brown-robed brethren of Saint Francis and their Poor Clare sisters are now rarely seen. Nevertheless, I liked the idea and have called them my little Franciscans ever since.

I wonder how they find time to sit and bicker when their very survival, and the survival of their coming broods, depends on their industry. Those I hear now have survived the winter but food is still hard to find – even picnickers in the park are few – and yet the softly-feathered trembling little things must nourish themselves and gather all their strength for collecting the odds and ends necessary for building and repairing their nests in the season which is about to open. Winter would have reduced their number somewhat, as she does each year. Those who remain must provide the next generation; it is their duty to nature which I know they will not shirk.

Now, suddenly, above the noisy prattle of the Franciscans, I hear the raucous squawk of a blackbird. It's probably the familiar fellow with the unusual white tuft on his head; he has established a territory here over the past three years. His alarm means old Phoebus, Helen's magnificent orange Persian, as old as I am in his cat years, having just awoken from his long afternoon sleep, as I have, is prowling hopefully across the garden, sniffing at the stale crusts of bread Helen tossed onto the lawn this morning. But Phoebus is driven by instinct not hunger and the clever and vigilant

blackbird cock and his bigger brown hen, who must feed on the ground, in the open, seeking out hapless slugs, worms and snails, miss nothing; and the cock's urgent cry alerts all his winged brothers and sisters including the hopping thrushes and the strutting mynahs, the slender and speckled starlings on the ground, and of course the nervous little Franciscans, who all immediately fly to the trees as one. I can hear the whrrrr they make together. And I can imagine Phoebus now washing himself nonchalantly in the middle of the garden, feigning boredom and disinterest.

I lift myself to sit higher in the bed. I can't see the small lawn but the trees – my miniature orchard of apples, pears, plums, peaches and nectarines – look fresh with the hint of palest pink, white and bright green; their branches filter the late afternoon light which is slanting in from the west, from my left, and their gentle, silent movement in the stirring breeze causes soft-edged shapes of light and shade to dance wildly around the room across the pale furniture, the white ceiling and the cream wall behind upon which is hung a small gallery of framed photos, fading somewhat in this sunny room. They are of course mostly of Helen, from kindergarten to high school – taken as she grew up in Te Awamutu – as well as a few of her with Aggie and Harry, one taken in her cap and gown on graduation day, and others of her with Stan and Blanche in Manchester, and with Barbara Hepworth at her studio in Saint Ives; there's even one taken with the Queen in the gardens of Buckingham Palace. Helen had a grand life before this.

From my raised position I can see across the yard, past the shed on the left, through the fruit trees and into the gloom of the glade which is made dark by the ragged rank of macrocarpas which marks its edges. And although I cannot see it I know that the park, my beloved park, spreads out vastly to the north, west and east of the glade. To stroll through it, as I did countless times over so many years, observing, and absorbing everything I saw, is now possible only in my mind. But I know my park so well – every tree, every shrub, The Drive, Pepi, the fountain, the playground, the aviary, the Jamieson pond, the rose garden, the cricket oval, the Pavilion, the bandstand, every corner, every path, every gate – that my imaginary tour is almost as good as the real thing.

I see that the ladies-in-waiting have arrived, at the appointed time, as they have done at this time every year surely since well before I was born. They stand at the edge of The Drive, deep in the park, far from here, in small groups, like women at a wedding or a funeral, waiting for something

to happen. They all wear the same robes of dull green – this sisterhood of daffodils – and they sway about, and bob their yellow bonnets, as they gossip away the lengthening days. There are some white jonquils too, tall and elegant, and their small cousins, the cream freesias, all heavy with a fragrance freely produced, without effort, and yet more enchanting than anything man can squeeze into a bottle. A few scattered parties of snowdrops and bluebells stand looking confused and somewhat lost in the crowd.

I know the park so well you see because I lived and worked there for so long. Indeed I was the gate-keeper for many years when I was young. In those early days I occupied the gate-house flat – which is now a visitor centre from which guided walks depart and park souvenirs are sold – and so had to walk only a few steps to the main gates. At this time of year, early spring, I would rise in time to open them to motor traffic at six o'clock; in the winter the opening was delayed until seven. I surrendered my gate-keeping duties when I moved out of the gate-house but I still walked and cycled around the park, in all weathers, down the glade path, around Pepi and down The Drive, and so, year after year, I saw the spring flowers arrive in their thousands. I saw them many times again in the course of my working day and I was always delighted by their beauty. Of course they faded away at last and before long their dry and empty robes were returned to the earth by the mowing machine. But I knew they would return, and they always did, and I was always pleased to greet them.

But as soon as Ra stretched himself above the distant harbour – even before I opened the gates, which gave motor cars access to The Drive – the park was busy with people. They would come and go all day, young and old, cycling, strolling, walking briskly, jogging, or in the case of the very old or the lame, hobbling along slowly and perhaps with great effort. With experience, in the beginning, when I was new at the park, I came to recognize the legless and armless men who were victims of the bombs, shrapnel and mines of the first world war. After the second war there seemed to be fewer such casualties; but there were then many stroke victims, mostly men but some women, and some quite young, and I was always moved by their brave attempts to get the fresh air and exercise which no doubt their therapists had recommended and which they pursued mostly, and sadly, with a joyless and sometimes pitiful earnestness. I saw them in the park every day as I worked, coming to know some of them, seeing many of them later at the white gate, which alarmed me at first. But I

knew there were many more like them who never ventured outside their own homes let alone into the broad openness of the park whose tranquil beauty surely would have lifted their spirits as it lifted mine and those of hundreds of others every day.

Many early-morning visitors brought their dogs and the dogs were even more varied in age, size, colour and shape than their owners. In recent years – even after I retired I spent as much time in the park as I could – there were many people from China, and elsewhere in Asia, who enjoyed the park in all weathers, in their own way, by standing in one place, perhaps in the shelter of the bandstand, and moving their body, their head, their limbs, slowly and gracefully through the air. No doubt their habits arose in crowded cities where the lack of space and a dearth of public parks might have modified their movements but could not check the urge to exercise in the open air. Some got their exercise by walking backwards down the long north path or across the green.

But however many our visitors, and whomever they may have been, the gathering sisterhood of spring had nothing to fear from them, unless they could be damaged by admiration of which there was plenty. Passers-by always paused to gaze on the lovely scene; even cyclists and joggers would be compelled to slow down. Some people stopped; many kneeled on the damp earth the better to see or smell, or to take photographs. But they never touched or picked or removed the sisters.

It was wonderful and I thanked them silently every day.

2. In the beginning

HELEN HAS BROUGHT in a brew and sits with me now as she does each afternoon. Dear, kind and gentle Helen; she tends my few needs with a generosity I have done nothing to deserve. The house – in which I have lived in comfort and contentment for more than fifty years and have shared with Helen since she came back from England – will soon be hers.

We drink our tea in silence. The peace of the warm afternoon is broken only by the sound of the birds in the garden and the distant shouting, laughter and squealing of children released from school and joyfully making their way home. Coming home after school is perhaps the happiest time of a child's day.

Sometimes we talk, Helen and I; indeed, it is surprising that we still have so much to talk about. But we do. She always asks about the book and sometimes I read a new passage to her. But we are not compelled to talk; after so much shared history, so many years, we can commune without talking. Today we simply look out to the edge of the park in which I have spent most of my life and to which she is irresistibly drawn, as I was and am, by its mysterious beauty.

But long ago, when my father took me from school and started me working, I didn't know the park existed. I knew nothing of gardening and horticulture, of flowers, shrubs and trees. My childhood was spent in the middle of town where my parents owned and ran a large boarding house at the Wellington street end of Nelson street. There were no motorways then and Nelson street was a quiet and largely residential street of grand two-storey wooden houses – small mansions in fact – of the late nineteenth century. Actually it was mother who ran the boarding house, cooking meals for eight bachelor boarders seven days a week, with a cut lunch on workdays, doing their washing, making their beds and cleaning up after them. At that time, before the second world war, single men who for some reason didn't live at home, or didn't have a home, had no choice but to board as there were few flats to rent to single men. Even if there were the

rents would have been prohibitive and they would have had to provide their own food and do their own cooking, cleaning and laundry; it's true that men at that time were incapable of looking after themselves.

While there were many such men there were also many widowed women – needy but healthy, energetic and active – willing to take them in as boarders. Because while getting a job would have been anathema to any woman of that generation, even if jobs were available to women who had never worked outside the home, making a small living from taking in a male boarder was socially acceptable. Many women said they took a boarder as much for the company and security as for the small amount of money he brought; and most said they liked “having a man about the house again” and “having someone to look after”. But a bachelor – young or old – who preferred his privacy and didn't want to be a sole boarder, obliged to provide “company” to a lonely woman, would prefer to stop at a boarding house such as mother's where, for a few shillings a week, he could have his own room, regular meals, a laundry service, and no moral obligation to provide security or companionship.

Except for the evening meal we had together – which in those days was always referred to as “tea” – I didn't see much of our boarders during the week but usually some of them were about on the weekends and they were always friendly and kind to me. They ranged in age from a lad called Mickey O'Rourke, who was only a little older than I and was apprenticed to a blacksmith in Federal street, to Mister Reardon who worked on the waterfront for the customs department; I thought he was an old man but he was then probably only in his late forties.

Even as a lad I sensed the almost visible miasma of melancholy which each of these men unwittingly wrapped around himself like a soft blanket. In fact they were – each of our boarders in his own way – downright sad although I had no way of knowing why and no way of relieving their sadness; but I knew without question that they were all lonely and unhappy men.

Things changed dramatically when war came in nineteen thirty-nine. A couple of the boarders enlisted immediately and by the middle of nineteen forty all the others had registered for military service and most were soon called up as they were all single with no dependents. As a result by the middle of nineteen forty-one mother was left with only three boarders: two of the men who were too old to go to war – Mister Reardon and another

cross old man who had only one leg but whose name escapes me – and pimply Mickey O'Rourke who was still too young.

Mickey later joined the navy and was killed on the *Achilles* at Guadalcanal when it was struck by a Japanese bomb. Mickey's boss from the blacksmith shop came and told mother about it. When he was gone I sat with her on the back porch steps. She was weeping quietly into her apron. She hugged me with one arm and said only: 'War, eh, Tommy.' She shook her head, slowly and sadly. 'I hope you never have to go, son,' she said.

'I might have to one day,' I said, bravely but realistically.

'But not yet, Tommy,' she said sadly. 'Not yet, eh.'

'No. Not yet,' I said.

That was in January nineteen forty-three and even then mother was poorly informed about the war and the involvement of the men of Aotearoa. I, however, read the news closely and was acutely aware of my coming duty. I was eighteen then, just, and had joined the home guard. I was also registered under emergency precautions – all men were – and knew that if the war continued, and there was then no doubt it would, perhaps for many years, I would almost certainly be called up and sent away somewhere. By then the war had spread to the Pacific to include the Japanese and the Americans, and so many young men like Mickey were being sent there.

'Poor Mickey,' said mother, wiping her eyes again. She hugged me again and I knew what she was thinking.

My father was too old for war. 'Too young for the first bastard and too old for the second,' he told me. 'But you. You might have to go, Tommy.'

Other boarders came and went during the war but everything was unsettled and uncertain and mother's income was severely reduced. But war seemed to suit my father. If anything, his income increased.

'Yanks, boy,' he used to say. 'They spend money like bloody water.'

For my entire childhood, and until he died, suddenly and prematurely, my father leased and managed the Roxy billiard saloon in Karangahape road. Somehow, during the war, he had avoided the manpower regulations under which he could have been assigned to work considered essential to the country's security, in a job made vacant by a serving soldier, by arguing, evidently with success, that his work was indeed "essential". He said the Roxy provided entertainment for the thousands of American troops who were by then stationed in Auckland. This clever evasion of duty might have

earned him the contempt of friends and colleagues but, unlike most men, who worked in an office or factory, my father had no colleagues and few friends. He seldom mixed socially and was rarely seen on the streets in daylight; he slept late every morning and moped around the house until it was time, after lunch, to go to work. It was only a short walk to Karangahape road. He then remained upstairs, in the smoky gloom of his workplace, not getting home until the early hours of the following morning, well after mother and I and all the boarders were asleep.

That was his routine, Monday to Saturday; but not Sunday. Mother went to Saint Matthew's every Sunday morning, taking me when I was young. I loved that building – still do – and I enjoyed the singing, but I became bored with the talking and sermonising. My father though was an atheist with nothing but contempt for religious sentiment although he firmly believed that Sunday was a day of rest. And so on that day – the only day he was free to do any work or maintenance around the house, and there was much to be done, or take mother and me on an outing, which we both would have enjoyed – he rested; that is to say he did nothing all day but smoke, drink beer and read a sports newspaper called the *8 o'clock*.

3. Learning to work

AS A RESULT of my father's domestic idleness mother depended on me to help out with many chores including small bits of carpentry, plumbing and electrical repairs. And so even as a lad of ten or eleven, well before the war, I formed the habit of work; of keeping busy and productive. And I learned from mother the value of a job well done.

Her motto, oft repeated, was:

Good, better, best,
Never let it rest,
Till your good is better,
And your better best.

'You're a good boy, Tommy,' mother used to say when I finished a job to her satisfaction. 'I don't know what I'd do without you.'

Sometimes one of the resident men would help me, or advise me, but as a rule I had to find out for myself how things worked, how to use and maintain tools, and so how to repair almost anything. Indeed being always busy at something became a useful habit that lasted a lifetime.

'Hard work is love made visible, Tommy,' mother used to say.

I've never forgotten that.

Because I worked physically hard at home I found schoolwork easy. I enjoyed the mental exercise, never resented doing homework, and, unlike most of my classmates, enjoyed exams and the satisfaction I received from getting good although never excellent marks. I often played sports for the school with practice after hours and matches on Saturdays: rugby in the winter, cricket in the summer. And once a week during school terms I went to Miss York's house in Beresford street for my piano lesson.

Evidently the ancient Broadwood upright, which stood in the Nelson street dining room, had been left there, unwanted by the previous owner, when my father and mother moved in. Thanks to mother's frequent dusting and polishing it always looked better than it sounded but its

existence prompted mother, a dedicated music lover and a competent pianist, to arrange piano and music lessons for me as soon as I started school. My teacher, Miss York, whom I then thought to be an old lady but probably wasn't, gave lessons in the front room of her house in Beresford street. She was a dear, kind and patient lady – not at all the mean and spiteful piano teacher many people report from their childhood – but for all her time, patience, effort and coaching skills she was unable to extend me beyond my modest playing ability. But she did help me pass my music exams and, more importantly, taught me to *understand* music and to love and admire the symmetry and pure beauty of its mathematical principals and equations, scales and modes. I love it still and have never ceased to be amazed by how its underlying calculated precision can be used to move and manipulate the emotions.

I stopped my lessons when I turned fourteen; payment for the next term in the new year was due but Miss York confessed to mother that she could no longer promise any improvement in my playing, that I had probably reached the limit of my ability, and that to accept further payment would therefore be unfair if not dishonest.

I continued playing for my own enjoyment, and mother's, whenever I could which was usually after school, before the boarders came home wanting their tea. Mother played too, sometimes, during the day when she was the only one in. I rarely heard her but often found her music on the stand.

We weren't the only piano players in the house: Mister Mountford, who was a staff pianist and music arranger at 1YA, a radio station, and played the organ at the Pitt Street Methodist church, sometimes played on Sunday evenings after tea while the other boarders stood around him singing old music hall songs; but he complained that the piano was out of tune and said that the soundboard was faulty.

Thus with school, sport and music, and helping out mother with chores and errands, of which there were plenty, I was always busy with something. And then, when I was in the third form, my busy life became even busier thanks to Auntie Madie.

Auntie Madie, whose real name was Madelaine, wasn't my real aunt; she was married to my Uncle Brian who wasn't my uncle either. Like me, mother and my father were both only children so I had no aunts or uncles, and thus no cousins, and was destined to grow up alone. Auntie Madie and

Uncle Brian had no children either which meant I didn't even have any make-believe cousins.

Auntie Madie frequently called in for a brew in the afternoon, for what she called "a good natter", which mother found somewhat inconvenient. While she always stopped working when Auntie Madie arrived, sharing a cuppa and a scone or a Chelsea bun, and said she welcomed the company of her dear friend, she found it hard to relax and gossip when she knew she had to get on with preparing tea for her boarders, who would soon be home, tired and hungry, as well as for me and herself.

'Your Auntie Madie's got no idea how busy I am,' she said. 'She's only got to think of herself and Uncle Brian.'

Mother did have a lot to think about every day, and a lot to do for tea every night. That main meal usually comprised a big joint or a hearty stew, with lots of vegetables, roasted or boiled, plenty of thickly-sliced and buttered bread, hot milky tea for everyone, all followed by a hot pudding in the winter, or fruit, jelly and ice cream in the summer, or perhaps a trifle, junket or blancmange. Mother and I ate with the boarders, and there was always plenty of conversation between the men, which I enjoyed, but mother rarely joined in as she was always up and down, from the kitchen to the table, as much a servant as a landlady.

One afternoon I came into the kitchen after school – I was at Seddon Tech then, more properly Seddon Memorial Technical College, the big high school at the top of Wellesley street near Symonds street – and found Auntie Madie sitting at the table with her tea and Chelsea bun while mother stood at the sink peeling potatoes.

'You're becoming a big lad, Tommy Fyfe,' she said to me. 'Strong looking. How old are you now?'

'Thirteen,' I said. 'Just.'

'And tall, too. Like a couple of yards of pump water.'

There was nothing I could say to that. I never knew what to say to Auntie Madie; I was only there to get a glass of milk.

'I was just now telling your mother, Tommy,' she said. 'Your Uncle Brian's not well again.'

Uncle Brian was always "not well" although I never knew what was wrong with him and I couldn't see what it had to do with me.

'That's no good, auntie,' I said. I stood, patiently and politely, my schoolbag heavy on my shoulder, wanting only to take my milk to my room and start my homework.

'Would you do Uncle Brian's lawns for him, Tommy?' she blurted out suddenly. 'It'd be such a relief.'

I was somewhat shy as a boy and really didn't know what to say.

'What do you say, Tommy?' said mother sharply, pushing me in the back.

'We'll pay you of course,' said Auntie Madie. 'Two bob he said. He told me to ask you. Two shillings a fortnight. He's got the mower and all the tools and that.'

'Well?' prompted mother, pushing me in the back again. 'Two shillings, Tommy. Not to be sneezed at.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'All right.'

'You know our place, Tommy,' said Auntie Madie. They lived in Saint Mary's Bay. 'Only a wee section, front and back, but Uncle Brian does like to keep it looking nice. Roses and that. Likes to see it looking nice from the front room.'

I liked the idea of earning my own money. Even a couple of shillings a fortnight would be better than nothing. And I knew I could bike to Auntie Madie's after school. Up to Karangahape road and down Ponsonby road. Easy.

'Yeah, All right, auntie,' I said. 'When shall I start? Tomorrow? After school?'

'Tomorrow will be fine, Tommy,' said Auntie Madie. 'Uncle Brian will be so pleased. You're a good lad, Tommy Fyfe. A good lad he is, Doris.' She always called mother Doris although her name was Dorothy.

And that was the beginning of my working life. Auntie Madie soon recommended me to neighbours and friends, from Saint Mary's to Westmere, and before long I had plenty of other regular customers. I did everything after school, biking everywhere. I charged my later customers two-and-six, to which nobody objected, or three shillings for a big lawn in Herne Bay, an extra shilling for trimming edges and tidying up, and another half crown for cutting a big hedge. I worked hard for that entire summer and the next – the lawns didn't grow much in the winter and the ground got too heavy and boggy – and made a pound a week, sometimes more. Spurred on by the pleasure of work, and my accumulating savings, I got a Saturday morning job at the Yates shop at the bottom of Albert street. I had to bring the seedling trays from the roof nursery down the stairs and into the shop. I was paid seven-and-six a week.

Life was good. I was doing well at school. I passed all my school tests easily, played rugby in the winter, cricket in the summer and had a few special friends. I had plenty to do helping mother, my lawn-mowing business and my job at Yates, and even though my father insisted that as a wage earner I should give mother a tenth of everything I earned – and I didn't mind – by the end of nineteen thirty-nine I had saved eighty pounds.

And I had found a wonderful new girlfriend from school: little Aggie Benedict.

4. Suddenly into adulthood

CAN A FIFTEEN-year-old boy fall in love? Can a thirteen-year-old girl? Shakespeare thought they could and so did I. I truly loved Aggie with all my young heart, and I thought she loved me. Like me she was an only child and so we enjoyed each other's company and managed to get together every day after school during the last term of that year – nineteen thirty-nine – and most weekends. In our innocence we did nothing more than hold hands, look lovingly into each other's eyes, and kiss gently and tenderly on the lips. When we were apart I thought only of her and so spent many lonely hours at night, in my small attic bedroom high over Nelson street, staring into the dark and sighing deeply and longingly. It felt wonderful to love Aggie and be loved by her. I was so happy. And so young.

But then suddenly, without warning, just after my fifteenth birthday, my father told me I would not be going back to school in nineteen-forty. He told me I was going to work with the nurserymen at the park, a place I had never heard of. He took me there on the tram that morning, to show me the way, and introduced me to Percy Peacock – I had to call him *Mister* Peacock – who was to be my boss. On the way home we stopped at Gordon Black's, my father's friend the tobacconist, where he bought me a weekly concession card for the tram – concession cards were based on twelve trips assuming that people worked six days a week which indeed they did and which I did in the beginning – and told me that from then on I would have to pay for my own tram ticket from my wages and pay mother two-and-six a week for board.

I don't know how my father managed to get me that job; he knew plenty of men from the Roxy so I thought perhaps he knew Mister Peacock – although I soon learned that Mister Peacock wasn't the type to go to a billiard saloon in town – or the curator Mister Barber, or one of the park governors none of whom I knew. He didn't say and no one at the park ever told me and I never found out.

Nor did I ever know exactly *why* he got me that job. I assumed I would be going on to sixth form and then to Auckland university – I knew mother wanted me to – but perhaps he couldn't afford to send me. Perhaps because I enjoyed my lawn-mowing jobs and my Saturday morning job at the Yates shop he thought I had an aptitude for gardening. He himself had no interest in gardening or the open-air life in general. He worked most nights and slept most days so even if he were interested he had no time for it. Mother, however, who was more busy than he, especially during the day, did cultivate a good garden plot in the back yard in which she managed year-round to grow potatoes, silver beet, rhubarb, carrots and beetroot, and tomatoes, peas, beans, pumpkin and cucumbers in season, and a few other simple low-maintenance crops, all of which went to the table and must have saved some money although for a lot of effort.

But to be a nurseryman? Me? It didn't make sense.

All at once, then, at the beginning of nineteen-forty, without any preparation on my part, my life changed. From being a busy but carefree schoolboy, in charge of my own affairs, I suddenly became a man with a job, a boss, and responsibilities. At first I had to travel on the tram to and from a place at which I worked physically harder than I had ever worked before – sometimes, at first, to the point of exhaustion – for nine hours a day, five-and-a-half days a week. The hours were long and I ended each day ready only for my tea and my bed. No more school friends; no more after-school sport; no more lawn-mowing and Yates. No time to see Aggie. Just work.

Mister Peacock had sole authority over the park's nursery and workshop and its extensive network of glass-houses and shade-houses. He was responsible for maintaining all the machinery and equipment, the buying in and harvesting of seed, sowing and raising all the annuals for the park as well as raising shrubs and trees for the future from seeds and cuttings. However, he had no particular authority or power outside the nursery precincts nor over any of the staff other than his own of whom I was the newest and youngest.

I didn't realise it at the time but working alongside Mister Peacock was a privilege. I learned in the manner apprentices of centuries past learned crafts from their masters: by exposure to a vast and accumulated reservoir of knowledge and experience. There were no lessons from Mister Peacock, no books, no lecturing, no theory, no examinations, no apparent teaching or learning at all; for the three years I was with him I learned by watching,

listening, and doing what I was told, and in the process, and unconsciously, I absorbed everything he successfully transferred from his mind to mine.

Sowing fine seeds and caring for delicate seedlings is exacting work, not easy for large, rough and calloused hands, but Mister Peacock was patient and painstaking in everything he did and managed the meticulous work easily; and so did I. Working in the glass-houses and shade-houses, preparing our own seed-raising mix from our own compost combined with pumice and factory-made fertilisers, selecting seeds, working to Mister Peacock's own calendar for sowing, pinching and pricking out – while also managing the tree and shrub nursery where sowing and growing were measured in years not weeks – and then preparing hundreds of flower seedlings for planting out by the gardeners at just the right time, gave me a respect for the unknown, unknowable and unstoppable spirit of life sleeping patiently in even the tiniest seeds, some as fine as dust.

I know Mister Peacock had respect too; he never spoke of it but it showed in the almost saintly reverence he had for all living things, animal and vegetable. He went to extreme lengths to physically exclude all the common garden pests – caterpillars, butterflies and moths, slugs and snails – so that he wouldn't have to kill them. He abjured the use of chemical herbicides too and believed that clean gardening produced sturdy, healthy plants which would have a natural resistance to parasites and disease. Those which showed weakness were destroyed by fire before they succumbed. 'No point nursing the weak, lad,' he said. 'It's not natural.'

Mister Peacock always treated me fairly and with respect, being neither kind nor cruel, but he never asked me about my life outside the park and never told me anything of his. After three years in his care he retired and I never heard from or of him again. And yet in his company I learned without trying and never forgot what he taught.

I didn't like travelling on the tram every day – even though there was a tram stop at the park gates – but after only a few months working in the nursery I had more than enough money, when combined with my savings from my lawn mowing and Yates's job, to buy a motor car and still have plenty over.

Having the motor car made it easier to get to and from work but it was still almost impossible to see Aggie whom I thought of as my girlfriend; I was working when she got out of school, she was not allowed out at night, and I worked Saturday mornings, so we could meet properly only on Sundays. But I loved her still and we continued to see each other regularly,

whenever we could, for the next three years. It wasn't ideal but it was the best we could do.

I loved my new motor car too. It was a nineteen thirty-one Austin Seven, bottle green with a black steel roof and black mudguards, and it cost me fifty pounds. It was in pretty good going condition but unfortunately its tyres were completely worn through to the canvas; early wartime restrictions meant that the previous owner – I bought it from a country doctor in Cornwallis – was not able to easily replace them and so he had, in effect, given up and bought a new model. I suppose as a country doctor he couldn't afford to be without a motor car and could afford a new one more easily than most.

At first a lack of good tyres didn't worry me as Alfie Flynn, a rough-and-ready chap who was full of fun and mischief and was notorious as the park's practical joker, who worked in the park but earned far more from his various and nefarious "business" activities outside of it, told me he could get as many good tyres as I wanted. And so late one Saturday night, dressed all in black, I went with him, in his own Vauxhall, out to Penrose. There, on a vacant section near the railway station, in a wide and deep pit which had long ago been quarried out for scoria, surrounded by a high barbed wire fence, all nature of old and unwanted rubber goods and scraps – including old but reasonably decent tyres – were stored for remanufacturing into unknown rubber products for use in the war. And so, holding a torch in my mouth, feeling like a criminal, which indeed I was, I nervously scrambled under the barbed wire with Alfie and easily found four tyres for my Baby Austin – they were a common size and in those days there were only a few standard-sized tyres used by all motor car makers – while Alfie collected a good dozen or more of a much larger size to be sold on his own black market. We carried them away in the back seat and boot of his Vauxhall and although I was pleased to have a good set of tyres at no cost I was also relieved to be away from that place. I felt guilty for years about that night and those tyres.

My Austin Seven was small – considered tiny even then – but small motor cars with lightly-powered engines were exceedingly economical and were therefore favoured by wartime petrol rationing. At first a seven-horsepower motor car like mine was entitled to eight gallons of rationed petrol a month which was just enough to get me to and from the park each day and, if I were lucky, to see Aggie on Sundays.

5. A little old car, a big old horse

THE ARRIVAL OF my little motor car, which at first I parked in the nursery yard, in the open, coincided with a poignant event hardly remembered today. But it was never forgotten by me and, as I discovered much later, never forgotten by Mister Barber's then-young children. And the tree which was planted at the time to mark the sad event, and which has since grown to a massive spread, was to be the scene of the most important day of my life.

But that was much later.

The cobbled and unroofed nursery yard in which I parked my motor car on that first day of ownership was surrounded by important connected buildings which created a private and sheltered space. On one side, running along the park's eastern boundary wall, north of the gate-house, were the interconnected buildings of the canteen, the nursery, and the long narrow shade-houses and glass-houses together with all the associated storage, shelving and work benches. Along the entire opposite length of the yard were the garages, implement sheds and a large mechanical workshop. Standing alone, at the end, looking south down the long cobbled yard, with more than a kilometre of parkland at its back, stood the curator's grand double-storied mansion – so called but in fact just a large house typical of nineteenth century Auckland – in its own private garden.

At that time I had never been to the curator's mansion and had never met him or his wife as they rarely ventured into the nursery, but I had befriended their children, or rather they had befriended me, as they often visited the nursery after school. I sensed that they avoided most of the men but chatted to me as an equal; they probably saw me as one of them, a mere boy, as I was only a few years older than the eldest girl who told me her name was Margaret but whom everyone called Marjorie.

Mister Barber's private motor car – a stately-looking Humber Imperial – was stored in the only lock-up garage, nearest the mansion, while all the park equipment, including a new Fordson tractor, a large trailer, a small

trailer, digger, mowing- and hoeing-machines, the bicycles, and all the hand tools, were stored in the long line of open garages. Even with all this equipment there was still room in the long building to accommodate the staff's own motor cars during the day. Like Mister Barber's Humber they were all of English manufacture – heavy, lumbering, unmanoeuvrable and grossly underpowered compared with modern standards – but unlike the Humber they were small and so could be squeezed together into the remaining garage space. But by the time I came along with my Austin Seven there was no garage room for even one more tiny motor car. The only remaining space was a spacious stall adjacent to Mister Barber's garage which was filled daily with fresh straw and hay by the Barber children; it was home to Glorietta, an old shire horse and the last of a long line of working horses descended from the park's own family of resident mares served for years by a stallion called Hippo. Of all Hippo's mares and descendants only Glorietta remained.

The whole complex of garages, sheds and workshops, of which Glorietta's stall was only a small part, had been converted from what was once the park stables and blacksmith's shop. Glorietta's ancestors had once done all the heavy work, including pulling the mowing machines, but now the park was onto its second Fordson tractor and old Glorietta had not worked for years.

At that time working horses were being phased out everywhere to be replaced by trucks. But because of the war there were few large trucks about to take their place and where motor power was essential many people and businesses cut away the back of an old motor car's cabin to install a flat tray and so fashion a useful and versatile truck of sorts. Still, there were a few horses working around the town; I remember that the Walker's ice people were using horse-drawn carts for their deliveries up and down Nelson and Hobson streets, and the carts of the big carrying firm of Ernest and Herbert Craig, hauled by two shire horses, seemed to be everywhere around town.

But they were the exception and when working horses died or were retired they were inevitably replaced by motor transport. Old Glorietta was kept on by Mister Barber and his family for what could only have been sentimental reasons; she no longer served any practical purpose but she was kind and gentle and the Barber children, whom she willingly carried around the yard on her broad back, sometimes into the park when it was closed to traffic, loved her dearly.

In what was only a coincidence, but was construed by the children as my fault, poor old Glorietta was found dead in her stall the morning after the arrival of my small but wholly-innocent little motor car.

The next day, after the park was closed, Glorietta's huge body was hauled out of the stall by the tractor and onto a trailer upon which it was carried slowly, with the children for company, having a ride on the trailer and resting their hands on Glorietta's bulk, and some of the staff following on bicycles, to a deep grave which had been earlier scooped out by the mechanical digger. Before Glorietta was buried I helped a sad and softly weeping Marjorie cut a clump of coarse and sticky hair from Glorietta's black mane which she said she would "treasure forever" while Elinor and Michael, the younger children, stood back with their mother – it was the first time I had ever seen Missus Barber – looking sad and puzzled.

The children had been allowed to choose a large tree from the nursery's stock, something ready for planting, to mark Glorietta's grave. For some reason they selected a Moreton Bay fig which I helped them plant, letting them take their time to tamp down the soft volcanic earth with their small gumbooted feet. Now, nearly seventy-five years later, Glorietta's tree dominates the north-western corner of the park and has, over the years, provided shade for hundreds or even thousands of picnic parties.

As a result of Glorietta's passing one of the senior staff was allowed to park his motor car in her stall and so room was made in the garages for my Baby Austin. Unfortunately for us all before two years had passed a private motor car's petrol ration was reduced to just two gallons a month which was hardly enough for any of us to get to and from work. And then, before long, as so many of my colleagues were called to war, my green and black Austin Seven was the only motor car in the long garage.

By the beginning of nineteen forty-three only the youngest and oldest men remained working in the park and for the rest of the war it had to manage on between half and one-third of its usual numbers. As a result many maintenance chores were deferred but while I was there Mister Barber insisted that we keep up routine seasonal planting, regular mowing, maintenance of the cricket pitch and oval, the Jamieson Pond, the fountain, the playground and aviary, and the bandstand for Sunday concerts, as he believed that the park provided worried mothers and wives – many of them already grieving widows – and innocent children, with a tranquil refuge from the dreary cares and struggles of life without their men folk.

Meanwhile I never quite overcame my guilt about driving on purloined tyres so I left my Austin in the garage all week and returned to the trams; as a result I had enough petrol to ensure that I could see Aggie on the weekends. And then when she gave me her dreadful news I stopped using it altogether and put it up on blocks in the garage, which was warm and dry, where I was allowed to store it while I was in the army. It was still there when I returned but I decided then that I had no use for a motor car with stolen tyres and so after the war I sold it for fifty pounds which was exactly what I had paid for it in nineteen-forty.

After that I never owned another motor car.

This is the end of the preview file of *To The White Gate*. Thank you for your interest and support. For complete buying information go to www.bolton.co.nz.
For any questions, comments or feedback don't hesitate to email me at robert@bolton.co.nz. Thank you.