

UNDERNEATH THE ARCLIGHT

By

Robert Philip Bolton

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Preview file information

This preview file of *Underneath The Arclight* contains the first seven chapters of the book. The complete book comprises thirty-seven chapters and 183 pages.

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UNDERNEATH THE ARCLIGHT

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For my friend Peter Gillmore
who so liked the people of Blythewillow

Prologue

‘I’VE BEEN TALKING to Clint,’ said Phyllis Dawson to her older brother Graham Eggleston.

‘Oh dear,’ said Graham. ‘What is it this time?’

‘He said things are going to change,’ said Phyllis.

‘What things?’

‘He didn’t say exactly,’ said Phyllis. ‘But he said that he’s leaving and that lots of things are going to change around here and that Karen and Clintene will soon be very happy.’

‘Very happy? What does that mean? Very happy? No details?’

‘I didn’t know no details them other times did I,’ said Phyllis. ‘I just knew things were going to happen. And they did happen, didn’t they.’

Graham looked carefully at his sister across the big table in the big kitchen. ‘And you feel like that now, Phyllis? Like before?’ he asked nervously.

‘Yeah,’ said Phyllis. ‘One of my premonitions. Lots of things are going to change. I’m sure of it. And Karen and Clintene will soon be very happy. Clint said it so it must be true.’

Karen – Phyllis’s daughter, Graham’s niece – had long ago fallen pregnant to her boyfriend Clint whom she had called her husband although he wasn’t but whose name she took for the sake of propriety. And then poor Clint – a self-employed window cleaner – had died tragically, falling off his ladder while cleaning a customer’s window in Dalrymple street, in Rangī’s Pa, and banging his head really hard on a large scoria boulder which stood sheltering a red-faced and red-hatted gnome in the customer’s rock garden; a tragedy made even more tragic when his daughter Clintene was born the day after he died. That was almost five years ago.

Karen’s heart was broken when Clint died. But then, unknown to Karen, Clint revealed himself to Phyllis in the silverbeet patch whence, ever since, for

almost five years, he had secretly furnished her with guidance and advice about caring for the widowed Karen and the fatherless little Clintene.

No one else could see or hear Clint – Phyllis knew that – so she kept his presence secret from everyone but Graham. She told Graham because she needed his help to convert the garage – which stood to one side of the back yard at the end of the gravel drive and within which her son Roger housed his Holden – into a bedroom where she could sleep and so always be close to the silverbeet patch and therefore close to Clint, even at night. And so her kind brother Graham kindly overcame his scepticism and converted the garage to a bedroom done out nicely in pink, heliotrope and white. Phyllis had then vacated the big bed, in the big bedroom, and had slept in a small bed in her garage/bedroom ever since in order to be always close to Clint in the silverbeet patch.

But now – after five years – Clint was gone.

Phyllis thought about what he had said before he left. Life must go on, he had said. You can't live in the past, Mother Dawson, he had said. You must think of the future, he had said. Karen and Clintene are doing fine, he had said, but they have their own lives to live now. Things are going to change and I know – I promise – that things will be much better for Karen and Clintene. They'll soon be very happy.

Chapter 1

MONKEY OLDFIELD TO Roger Dawson: 'I seen you, young fellah.'

Roger to Monkey Oldfield: 'What?'

'Oh, all lovey-dovey with that blonde sheila.'

'Where? When?'

'Last night. At Pirovich's,' said Monkey Oldfield.

'I was getting fish and chips for Saturday night tea. Mum sent me. And mussel fritters.'

'Love mussel fritters,' said Monkey Oldfield. 'Anyway, don't worry, son. I won't tell nobody.'

'Neither will I,' said Charlie Downs. 'Me lips are sealed.'

Roger looked at his Uncle Graham.

'I've got no one to tell,' said Graham Eggleston.

'Anyway there's nothing to tell,' said Roger.

'Then what're you worried about?' said Monkey Oldfield.

'Nothing. She was just there. Getting fish and chips like me. Haven't seen her for years. We used to wag it together.'

'I'm sure, son,' said Monkey Oldfield somewhat patronizingly. 'But it looked pretty lovey-dovey to me.'

'It wasn't. Not for me anyway.'

Monkey Oldfield looked Roger in the eye and raised his own eyebrows in a silent question which demanded an answer. The younger man folded under the old man's unspoken demand.

'Jeez, she's so, I don't know, so sappy or something,' he said with a shudder, remembering how close she had stood while they waited together in the steamy-heat of Pirovich's. 'Gives me the blardy creeps sometimes.'

'She's a sheila, Rog,' said Charlie Downs (the cynic) cynically. 'They're all like that, sheilas. And they all like being like that.'

'Really?'

‘Mate,’ said Charlie Downs. ‘The more you know about women the less you know about women.’

It was late Sunday afternoon, the first day of November, and the four men were sitting together on the steps of Monkey Oldfield’s back porch sharing a flagon of Carlisle’s pale ale. Howard Dawson was there too although at that particular moment he was emptying his bladder into Monkey Oldfield’s long-drop which stood somewhat crookedly against the tecoma hedge which marked the boundary between the Oldfield and Dawson estates.

The men had spent the warm afternoon laying a concrete floor for what was to be Monkey Oldfield’s new hen house.

‘Council says I gotta have a concrete floor and a concrete nib all round to stop the rats,’ he explained.

During the week, while the working men were working at work, the retired but never idle Monkey Oldfield had prepared all the boxing, raked out the scoria, set all the reinforcing and arranged all the fixings, tools and equipment for mixing and laying concrete. All he needed to finish the job was manpower. And so he had asked the four men next door – none of whom was noted for his manly power but was not otherwise employed at that time on a Sunday afternoon, and all of whom were willing to help their friendly old neighbour – if they could give him a hand.

To be fair, and like Monkey Oldfield, Graham Eggleston was rarely idle. Being prematurely retired meant he had plenty of time to pursue his cultural interests and hobbies as well as doing-it-himself around the Dawson house in Robinson Street. Indeed, he had long ago appointed himself head of maintenance of that house and its demesne where he had lived for almost five years, since he had left his long-standing wife Trish – widely known in the family and beyond as Trish the tart – to whom he had not spoken since.

Also, to be fair, Charlie Downs – who had rarely if ever worked in a proper job at all – never minded lending his untrained and unskilled assistance (as well as his uncalled for and generally worthless advice) to Monkey Oldfield. Charlie Downs, who was Howard Dawson’s best and oldest friend, had also lived with the Dawsons in Robinson Street for more than five years although his shift of domicile had come not because he had left his wife – he didn’t have a wife – but because he had been ejected from his lodgings in Mafeking Street for doing things in a boarding house which shouldn’t be done in a boarding house, or any other house for that matter, according to his strait-laced Roman Catholic landlady. And so in the years he had lived with the Dawsons Charlie Downs had come to learn that Monkey Oldfield – who

always needed help with one project or another – would always have a flagon or two of cold Carlisle’s pale ale to share at day’s end with his project helpers.

The Monkey Oldfield project on this occasion – laying the concrete floor of his new hen house – was completed thanks chiefly to Graham Eggleston’s natural leadership and all-round ability as a handyman including undoubted concreting skills. And the first of the aforementioned flagons of Carlisle’s pale ale had been opened and was now being surrounded with admirable swiftness by the five men although it must be noted that Graham Eggleston was only a light consumer of alcoholic beverages. And now they were relaxing together on the porch steps, sharing the cold beer, watching Monkey’s twelve plump, shiny and lacy barnevelders scratching around in the dust and gravel while they waited patiently for the opening of their new home.

‘She’s a pretty little thing though, isn’t she,’ said Monkey Oldfield.

‘She’s not bad,’ said Roger. ‘A bit soppy but not bad looking.’

‘All that blonde hair,’ said Monkey. ‘And pink lipstick.’

‘I don’t mind blonde hair and pink lipstick,’ said Roger. ‘Quite like it actually.’

‘What’s her name anyway?’

At that moment Howard Dawson, Roger’s father, emerged from the long-drop somewhat bent over as he awkwardly hauled up the zipper of his trousers.

‘Pickle me, I hate blardy spiders,’ he said to the collected, relaxed and beer-drinking company when he achieved zippered uprightness. He reached the porch, retrieved his glass and sat down weightily on the wooden step beside Roger.

‘No spiders in there, Howie,’ said Monkey.

‘Blardy is,’ said Howard. ‘Actually I don’t know how they survive in there. It blardy stinks.’

‘Keep the lid down, that’s the trick,’ said Monkey.

‘You’ve got to lift it to pee though, don’t you,’ said Howard. He took a long draught of Carlisle’s followed by a long beery belch. ‘Better out than in,’ he said while tipping more foamy beer into his glass. ‘Anyway, whose blonde hair and pink lipstick?’

‘What?’

‘What you were talking about when I came out of the dunny?’

‘Oh, that,’ said Monkey Oldfield. ‘Roger’s got a new sweetheart.’

‘A sweetheart?’ asked Howard of his formerly sweetheartless son. ‘Roger? Come again?’

'She's *not* a sweetheart,' said Roger adamantly. 'I just met her at Pirovich's.'

'How blardy romantic,' said Howard.

'I knew her at school and ran into her at Pirovich's,' said Roger by way of innocent explanation. 'She shifted out of Blythewillow a few years ago. Then her dad died and her and her mother shifted back. They bought a house in Robinson Terrace.'

'Just around the corner,' said Monkey Oldfield.

'Just around the corner,' said Roger.

'How convenient,' said Monkey not without sarcasm.

'What's her name?' asked Howard.

'Her name, if you *must* know, is Marigold Yelland.'

'Well pickle me, she must be Augie Yelland's daughter,' said Howard. 'Is her dad's name Augie by any chance?'

'I don't know,' said Roger. 'Her dad's dead, I know that.'

'Augie Yelland's dead? Pickle me. Seems like yesterday. You remember Augie Yelland, Charlie Downs?'

'Course I do,' said Charlie Downs.

'Anyway, her name's Marigold Yelland,' said Roger, 'and we're going to the Arclight together on Wednesday night. So there. Now you know.'

'What's on?'

'How do I know?'

'Be something old,' said Charlie Downs. 'Always old stuff at the Arclight.'

'You're going to the pictures and you don't blardy know what's on,' said Howard in astonishment. 'I'd never do that.'

'You never go to the pictures.'

'Blardy used to. With your mother.'

'Only because Karen got you free tickets.'

'Still wouldn't go if I didn't know what was on. Neither would your mother.'

'I don't actually care what's on,' said Roger. 'Neither does Marigold.' And then, after a pause, he added: 'It's something to do. Somewhere to go. Not much else to do around here.'

'He's in love,' said Monkey Oldfield.

'Am not,' said Roger indignantly. But he was blushing lightly.

'Not what?'

'What Monkey said. In love and that. I'm just blardy not. She's just a sheila I knew from school. We used to wag it. We were just friends then and we're just good friends now.'

At that Howard and Monkey and Charlie Downs exchanged sly glances; and each laughed a low laugh that was cruel and knowing. Graham didn't laugh.

'Famous last words,' said Howard. 'Famous blardy last words.'

The two flagons of Carlisle's pale ale were empty. The five glasses were empty but for the smears of creamy foam clinging to their insides. And the smell of meat roasting in Pattie Morrison's kitchen brought on aches of hunger in five bloated and beery bellies. So Monkey Oldfield stood up, brushing down nothing from his trousers, and collected the empties.

'Sorry, yous jokers, but I'm beggared after all that work and the Carlisle's. Mum's making a roast so I'm going to have a hot bath before tea.'

'Eh?' said Howard. '*You* have a bath?'

Monkey Oldfield was noted for his malodorousness derived mostly from the fowl manure he collected and used so liberally in his garden; hence Howard Dawson's sarcastic comment. Interestingly, Pattie Morrison was untouched by his pernicious pong because she was fortunate enough to suffer from congenital anosmia. I've got no-nose-mia, she used to say.

'What do you mean, Howard Dawson?' said Monkey with mock resentment. 'I always have a bath. Every Sunday night whether I need it or not.'

'Well, pickle me,' said Howard.

'Then I'm going to settle down for a pleasant evening with my sweetheart.'

The other four men, standing at the bottom of the porch stairs ready to leave, were puzzled by this declamation. They looked up at their old neighbour quizzically.

'Pattie,' said a grinning Monkey hooking a thumb towards the kitchen door. 'I'm slinging off at the young bloke.'

'Oh. I get it,' said Howard.

'Very funny I don't blardy think,' said the young bloke in question.

'But, hey, thanks a lot for today, yous jokers. Can you help again next Sunday?'

'What's on next Sunday?' asked Howard.

'I'll get the framing ready during the week. Then you can help me put it up,' said Monkey Oldfield. 'The concrete'll be well set by then.'

'No problem, mate,' said Howard.

'I'll be there,' said Roger.

'Me too,' said Charlie Downs.

'And me,' said Graham.

'Oh, thanks, yous jokers,' said Monkey. 'See you then if not before.'

‘Probably before,’ said Howard.

The four men from next door then passed in single file through the gap in the hedge, kicking loosely at the scratching barnevelders as they went, led home by the unmistakable slightly-rancid smell of roasting mutton hanging heavily in the cooling air.

Chapter 2

PHYLLIS TO KAREN: 'It's nearly five years now, love.'

Karen to her mother (piquedly): 'Mum. You don't have to remind me. I'll never forget Clint. Apart from anything else he's Clintene's dad isn't he. And I still miss him like mad.'

'I know you haven't forgotten Clint, dear,' said Phyllis kindly. 'I haven't forgotten your Granny Eggs after more than five years have I. You just don't forget do you.'

'No. I'll never forget Clint.'

'Anyway it's not that, dear. That's not what I meant.'

'Well what did you mean?'

'It's just that Clinty will be five at the end of the month. Little pet going off to school next year. Then what'll you do?'

'What do you mean what'll I do?'

Karen and Clintene are doing fine, Clint had said. But they have their own lives to live now.

'You and Clinty are doing fine, dear,' said Phyllis. 'I know that. But you both have to get on with your own lives.'

'I still don't get it, mum.'

Things are changing, Clint had said.

'Things are changing, Karen. I don't know how or why but I've had another premonition.'

'Premonition,' said Karen.

'Yes. Things will be different soon. Better. Much better.'

'Like how?'

'I don't know really. But I know they will be. Better, I mean. I'm sure you and Clinty will soon be very happy.'

They were sitting together on Phyllis's bed in the garage/bedroom watching Clintene play with a rag doll on the floor. Howard and Roger were at work

while Charlie Downs was working in the big bedroom which he used as his office during the day and in which at night – since Phyllis had moved to the garage/bedroom – he shared the big bed with Howard. Graham, meanwhile, was in the garden planting out some Russian Reds and sowing two new rows of Top Crops.

‘It’s been hard, love, I know,’ said Phyllis, her hand on her daughter’s knee.

‘It’s been all right, mum,’ said Karen. ‘I’m not complaining am I? Never have. So don’t worry. Course it’s been hard. Never much money. But enough. And course I miss Clint. But I’ve got Clinty haven’t I.’

‘Look at her there,’ said Phyllis. ‘She’s growing up before our every eyes.’

‘Very eyes.’

They both looked down lovingly at Clintene.

‘Nearly five,’ said Phyllis with a sigh. She turned from her grand-daughter to her daughter. ‘And then what, love? That’s what I mean.’

‘What do you mean that’s what you mean?’

‘Well I mean to say you’re busy now, helping me around the house, doing the shopping, looking after Clinty, helping out at kindy and that. But when Clinty goes to school you’ll soon get broad with nothing to do.’

‘Bored. Clinty at school? I don’t want to think about it, mum. I really don’t.’

‘But life must go on, love’ added Phyllis. ‘Clinty will *have* to go to school all day so things will change for you.’

‘Like how?’

‘Well, you’ll be able to get out more. Meet people and that.’

‘You mean meet a bloke and forget Clint don’t you,’ said Karen with a hint of resentment. ‘Why are you saying that? I’ll *never* forget Clint, ever.’

‘I’m not saying that, love. I won’t forget him neither,’ said Phyllis who had good reason to never forget her SIL. ‘But you must think of the future. For you and Clinty.’

‘Oh, I don’t know why. Why should I? I don’t want things to change.’

‘But they will, love, whether you want them to or not,’ said Phyllis. ‘Clinty will grow up so quick and one day she won’t need you any more. It’s inedible.’

‘Inevitable.’

‘You could get a job, love,’ said Phyllis. ‘That would get you out and about and keep you busy. You’ll meet new people, new friends, after all this time. And you’ll bring in some money too. You’d be financially independent.’

‘Independent,’ said Karen who stretched her arms behind her on the bed and leaned back on them to think.

She looked down at Clintene. She thought for a while. She didn't like change. She didn't want anything to change. She wished things could stay the way they were. But she knew her mother was right. Now that Clintene was nearly five it was inevitable that things would change. And so, reluctantly it must be said, she made a decision. And, it must also be said, she didn't like making decisions. Not at all.

'I suppose you're right in a way, mum,' she said. Reluctantly.

'There you go, love,' said Phyllis, relieved.

'I could always go back to the Arclight,' said Karen. 'Mr Dunwoody said I was the best usherette he ever had. And the prettiest. He said I could have my job back any time I wanted it.'

Phyllis felt like she was at last making progress in preparing Karen for the changes she knew – thanks to Clint – were inevitable.

'You could be an usherette again and see all the best fill-ums for nothing,' she said.

'But that was ages ago you know.'

'They have nice ice creams at the Arclight.'

'Daisy runs a nice little nibble nook doesn't she,' said a remembering Karen.

'And there's Fred and Cecily. They were good friends when you were there.'

Karen suddenly felt nostalgic for the old Arclight. But after more than five years?

'Oh, I don't know, mum. After more than five years? Things can change an awful lot in more than five years.'

'You can only ask,' said Phyllis.

'Mmmm,' mmmmed Karen thoughtfully. 'I'd get a free uniform again,' she said brightly. 'Save buying clothes.'

'That's right, love. Free fill-ums *and* a free uniform.'

'And Mr Dunwoody said that I looked lovely in my uniform. He said I was as pretty as a film star.'

'Wasn't that nice of him.'

'I'm not sure actually,' said Karen doubtfully. 'He was a bit creepy sometimes.'

'Was he? You didn't say nothing.'

'He was all right I suppose. Just sometimes. I don't know. But what about Clintene?' said Karen. 'Who'll look after her when I'm at work?'

'Well it's nights at the Arclight isn't it.'

‘Five o’clocks and eight o’clocks. Plus a matinee Saturday,’ said Karen. ‘Used to be anyway.’

‘Yes. Well, everyone will be home then so you can look after Clintene during the day, till she starts school, and we can all look after her while you’re at work. And I’ll make sure she gets her bath before bed and one of us, Roger even, will read her a story. Roger’s a good reader.’

‘Roger likes war comics and cowboy comics,’ said Karen. ‘Clinty likes once-upon-a-time stories with princesses, fairies and giants. Things like that. And happy endings.’

‘I’m sure Roger will read something nice.’

‘Mmmm,’ mmmmed Karen again. ‘I hope so.’

‘Well, that’s that then,’ said Phyllis with satisfaction. ‘We must think about the future.’

Karen had rarely thought about the future, ever, and certainly hadn’t thought about it since Clint had died so tragically the day before Clintene was born. He never even saw his little daughter, was her constant lament. But now, thanks to her mother, she knew she *had* to think about the future whether she liked it or not. She knew now that her mother was right: Clintene was growing up. She had been at Blythewillow South kindergarten mornings for a year. Then, when she was five, at the end of the month, she’d be ready to start school in the new year. After Christmas. In February. She’ll be going to Blythewillow South Primary, thought Karen. And then Blythewillow High. Just like me and Roger and mum and dad and Uncle Graham and Charlie Downs.

What a lovely thought, thought Karen.

Chapter 3

HOWARD TO PHYLLIS: 'Got some big news today, love.'

Phyllis to her husband, without turning around: 'That's nice, Howie.'

Howard was taking a bottle of Carlisle's pale ale from the Kelvinator. Phyllis was at the bench inspecting the middle-loin chops which Howard had brought home for tea. As she was chop-inspecting she managed without looking to fetch a bottle-opener from the drawer and a glass from the overhead shelf and put them both on the big table behind her just as Howard sat down.

Howard poured his beer, surrounded a good mouthful of it, and said ahhhh. He put down his glass, emptied the rest of the bottle into it, and said: 'Did you actually hear with your ears what I just said?'

'You said got some big news today, love, love,' said Phyllis.

'That's right. Big news. And what did you say?'

'I said that's nice, Howie, Howie,' said Phyllis.

It was eleven minutes after four. Phyllis and Howard were the only ones home. (Charlie Downs was at The Record Reign; Graham was at the hardware; Karen had taken Clintene for a walk in the park and a play in the playground; and Roger had stayed at work, having an after-hours Carlisle's with Ernie Wake, waiting for Marigold to finish work at Dai's.) Wake's, The Friendly Family Butcher, between the dairy and Pirovich's, two doors from the Arclight, opposite the post office in Ladysmith Parade, only a short walk away, closed at four o'clock so Howard and Roger were always home a few minutes later. Howard usually got a ride home with Roger, and might otherwise had stayed on with him and Ernie, but on this occasion, anxious to get home with his big news, he had walked home alone.

'Well don't you want to hear my big news?'

Phyllis turned and held out one of the pink and fatty chops.

'Did you do these chops, Howie?' she asked.

'Eh?'

‘Did you do these chops?’

‘No. Roger did. Why?’

‘Oh, he’s done a lovely job,’ said Phyllis. ‘Trimmed so neat and professional. Clean cuts and no bone dust.’

‘It’s his job, Phyllis. He’s a blardy butcher isn’t he,’ said Howard. ‘Anyway, my big news. It’s important.’

Phyllis put the chop back and, wiping her hands on her apron, turned her attention to the big table.

‘Another beer, eh.’

Phyllis took another Carlisle’s pale ale from the Kelvinator and put it on the big table in front of her husband. Howard opened it, refilled his glass, took another deep draught, said another ahhhh, placed the glass on the big table and looked up at his expectant wife.

‘My news is this: Wakey is retiring,’ he said.

It must be said that he said it rather melodramatically. Then he crossed his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair smugly the better to observe his wife’s reaction. He watched as she suddenly looked shocked. She looked shocked because she was shocked. She held a hand up to her mouth, in shock, chop-checking forgotten, drew out a chair with the other hand, and sat down.

‘What?’ she said.

‘I said Wakey’s retiring,’ Howard said again, uncrossing his arms and returning his chair properly to the floor.

Phyllis, to whom talking was as automatic as breathing, didn’t know what to say. And, for a moment at least, she even forgot to breathe. She held up her hand to her mouth and just stared across the big table at her very happy- and relaxed-looking husband. And she remembered: Howard had worked at Wake’s, The Friendly Family Butcher, since he was fifteen; an apprentice to Wakey’s father. He had never known any other work. Wake’s, The Friendly Family Butcher, had provided their income (and their meat) since their nuptualization; they had brought up their children on what (money and meat) it had provided. Roger, who had grown healthy and strong on Wakey’s meat, had worked there since he too was fifteen. Like his father he had never known any other work. Furthermore, Wake’s, The Friendly Family Butcher, had been a feature of the Blythewillow shops all Phyllis’s life; she couldn’t imagine Wakey’s shop not being there. And what would happen to Howard and Roger? What was Wakey going to do about them?

Phyllis was worried. Change. Was this the sort of change Clint was meaning? She didn’t think so; how could this change be good? How could it make

Karen and Clintene very happy? What was going to happen? At last, having thought all those thoughts in her head, she found her voice.

‘What’s it all about, Howie?’ she asked nervously. ‘What’s going to happen?’

Howard held up his right hand.

‘Nothing to worry about, love,’ he said. ‘Under control.’

‘What? How can that be?’

‘I said don’t worry didn’t I?’

‘So tell me what it’s all about, Howie. Please.’

And so Howard told Phyllis what it was all about.

‘He told me after lunch. When it was quiet.’

‘Does Roger know?’

‘No. Not yet. Just me although Wakey might tell him now while they’re having a beer.’

‘When did he tell you?’

‘We were in the yard taking a delivery of some beautiful porkers. Roger was in the shop.’

‘And?’

Howard told Phyllis what Ernie Wake had told him. That he, Ernie, would be sixty-five in the new year and that his wife wanted him to retire.

‘Mabel’s a bit crook apparently,’ said Howard. ‘Don’t know what or why, he didn’t say, but she wants Wakey to retire.’

‘What are they going to do?’

‘Wakey said they’re going to move to some blardy country-bumbleton town somewhere to be near their daughter.’

‘Margaret. I remember her. Her husband’s a shearer. They’ve got two kiddies.’

‘That’s it,’ said Howard.

‘But what about the shop? What about you and Roger?’

Phyllis’s hands were in her lap now, twisting her apron.

‘That’s the big news,’ said Howard. ‘Margaret and her husband don’t want the shop, obviously, so Wakey’s going to let me and Roger buy it.’

‘What?’

Phyllis was more shocked than before.

‘We can’t afford to buy Wakey’s shop,’ she said.

‘Of course we can’t *now*,’ said Howard. ‘Not blardy *now*, like immediately, straight away, instantaneously, at once, at the drop of a hat. But Wakey’s going to work out a way that me and Roger can buy him out of the profits we make

over the next five years. So he and Mabel will get some regular dough from the shop for five years see. After that, by hook or by crook, it'll all be ours.'

'But, Howie, you and me and Roger. We don't know nothing about shops and business and money and all that.'

'We don't, I grant you, love. In fact I'd say we're completely pig ignorant in that particular department of life. But I know someone who knows plenty,' said Howard, rubbing his hands together with joy. 'As clever as they come, as honest as the day is long, and dead boring with it. The ideal person.'

'Who?'

'Who? Your very clever brother Graham of course. That's blardy who.'

Chapter 4

HOWARD TO PHYLLIS: 'What's for tea?'

Phyllis to Howard: 'Wakey's pigs' trotters. The ones you brought home last night. They're in the oven.'

'Yeah. They smell beaut,' said Howard.

It was the next night, Wednesday night. Roger had driven Howard to The Record Reign with Ernie Wake to meet Charlie Downs.

'But what about meeting your sweetheart after work?' Howard had asked.

'She's not my sweetheart,' Roger had insisted. 'But, anyway, we're going to the pictures later. Eight o'clocks.'

'What's on?' Howard had asked.

'Don't know and don't care,' said Roger. 'It's somewhere to go that's all.'

'Pashing in the back row I bet,' said Howard.

When Charlie Downs didn't turn up at The Record Reign as scheduled Howard, Roger and Ernie had one Carlisle's and left. When Howard and Roger got home Phyllis was in the big kitchen folding the washing and stacking it on the big table. Graham was helping.

'Graham,' said Howard.

'Good evening, Howard,' said Graham.

'Has Phyllis talked to you about you know what?' asked Howard.

Graham stopped what he was doing, stacking folded washing on the big table, and said: 'Indeed she has. And I'd be honoured to help, Howard.'

'That's great, mate,' said Howard, slapping his BIL on the back, a little too hard for Graham's liking. 'Won't happen for a while but when it does, it'll be blardy beaut.'

'Well when will it happen?' asked Phyllis.

'Next year,' said Howard. 'End of March Wakey reckons.'

'End of the financial year,' said Graham.

‘That’ll be it, mate,’ said Howard. ‘See. Smart. Tolja. Where’s Karen?’ he asked of Phyllis who was collecting all the folded washing to put in the hot-water cupboard.

‘She’s taken Clintene for a walk,’ she said at the door to the hall, over her shoulder. ‘In the park I think.’

‘And Charlie Downs? He never turned up. Me and Roger were going to go have a Carlisle’s with him at the Record.’

Phyllis was gone by then but Graham said: ‘I believe he’s already at the Record. With a lady friend. That’s what he said.’

‘What! A lady friend? Charlie Downs? Pickle me,’ said Howard. ‘I don’t believe it.’ Howard really couldn’t believe it. His oldest – indeed his only real – friend had a lady friend? ‘Well he wasn’t there when we were there,’ he added.

Charlie Downs liked The Record Reign; mostly because it was mostly his place of business where his customers knew they would find him most of the time. He liked the chilled Carlisle’s pale ale on tap. He liked the indoor bowls and the darts. He wasn’t especially good at indoor bowls or darts but he liked mixing with those who were and he liked the business they gave him as they played. But he’d never been known to associate with a lady friend; not at The Record Reign or anywhere. The belief was not that he didn’t like lady friends but that he didn’t like spending money and that lady friends required the spending of money.

‘Actually a rather attractive lady apparently,’ said Graham who was at that point collecting cutlery with which to set the big table for tea. ‘Mature, intelligent, well-groomed, well dressed, well spoken.’

‘What? That definitely doesn’t sound like Charlie Downs,’ said Howard. ‘Not at all like Charlie Downs.’

Graham shrugged as he moved around the big table laying the cutlery.

‘Have you met her?’ asked Howard.

‘No.’

‘Have you met her?’ he asked Phyllis who had come back into the big kitchen.

‘Who?’

‘Charlie Downs’s new lady friend, if you can believe your brother here that Charlie Downs does actually have a new lady friend.’

‘No.’

‘No what?’

‘I don’t know nothing more than what Graham said,’ said Phyllis.

Howard turned to Roger who had come back into the room having been to the toilet.

‘Don’t look at me,’ said Roger. ‘I know nothing.’

‘Well according to who?’ demanded Howard.

‘According to who what?’ asked Graham.

‘According to who is she all them things you said.’

‘Mature, intelligent, well-groomed, well dressed etcetera etcetera?’ asked Graham.

‘Yes.’ Howard was impatient and was getting annoyed with his BIL.

‘According to Charlie Downs himself,’ said Graham.

‘Jeez,’ said Roger.

‘Pickle me,’ said Howard.

‘That’s what he said,’ said Phyllis. ‘I heard him say it to Graham. Now how about you let me and Graham finish setting the table for tea.’

‘Well pickle me,’ said Howard, sitting down. ‘What’s the world coming to. First Roger’s got a sweetheart and now Charlie Downs.’

‘What?’ Phyllis stopped what she was doing, which was laying dinner plates between the knives and the forks. ‘Roger?’

‘I have not,’ said Roger.

‘Yep. He’s got a blardy sweetheart,’ said Howard.

‘I have not,’ said Roger again. Defensively. He too sat down at the big table. ‘Don’t believe him, mum.’

‘He’s taking her to the pictures tonight,’ said Howard.

‘Oh, that’s nice. What’s on?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Roger.

‘You’re going to the fill-ums and you don’t know what’s on,’ said Phyllis. ‘I’d never do that.’

‘That’s what I said,’ said Howard.

‘You never go to the pictures,’ said Roger.

‘Used to. With your father. When Karen worked there. Got in free then. Anyway, what’s this sweetheart’s name, Rog?’

‘She is *not* my sweetheart.’

‘Well, what’s the name of this girl you’re taking to the fill-ums who is not your sweetheart?’

‘It’s Augie Yelland’s girl,’ interrupted Howard.

‘Really?’ said Phyllis.

‘Her name, if you must know, is Marigold Yelland,’ said Roger.

Phyllis stopped, thought for a moment, and returned to the big table where she sat, pondering.

‘Oh, *that* little thing,’ she said, remembering. ‘Blonde hair. Curls. She used to be in marching. The Cold Cream Guards. Me and Howie and Charlie Downs and Graham and her mother and father, Myrtle Chamblee that was, Myrtle Chamblee and Augie Yelland were always a couple, even at school, childish sweethearts they were, we all went to school together.’

At that – Phyllis’s mention of the Chamblee name, and the associated references and reminiscences – Graham too sat down at the big table, the setting of which for tea was temporarily deferred. He, too, remembered Myrtle Chamblee from school. Significantly, he remembered Myrtle Chamblee from school with a certain fondness. I wonder what she looks like now, he thought.

‘Well, we’re going to the pictures tonight but she’s not my sweetheart, okay,’ insisted Roger.

‘Okay, Roger,’ said Phyllis, winking openly at the two older men; so openly that Roger, not well-known for being quick on the uptake, saw the wink and, on this occasion at least, uptook the implication quickly enough; however, it was an implication he sulkily chose to ignore.

‘When’s tea?’ he said somewhat in the manner of a sulky seven-year-old rather than the twenty-seven-year-old heavily-muscled rugby-playing butcher that he was.

‘Did Charlie Downs say he’d be home for tea?’ asked Phyllis of Graham.

‘No,’ said Graham. ‘He said he’d be having tea at the Record with his lady friend.’

‘He must have been in the club bar,’ said Howard. ‘So he forgot all about me and Roger and Wakey. Blardy new lady friend be jiggered, eh.’

‘Mmmm,’ mmmmed Phyllis thoughtfully. ‘Do you know who this lady friend is, Graham?’

‘I do not I’m afraid,’ said Graham.

‘Mum. When’s tea?’ asked Roger again. ‘I’m going to the pictures remember.’

‘The table’s set,’ said Graham.

‘It’s nearly ready,’ said Phyllis.

‘I’ll wash my hands,’ said Howard.

‘I wonder who Charlie Downs’s new lady friend is,’ said Phyllis to no one in particular.

‘Mum,’ insisted Roger insistently.

Phyllis suddenly stopped thinking thoughtfully.

‘What is it, love?’ she asked.

‘When’s tea?’

‘Now. Uncle Graham’s done the table and I can hear Karen and Clintene coming up the drive.’

She paused thoughtfully, meaningfully, at this point, and looked directly at her son; so thoughtfully and meaningfully, so looking directly at her son, that he, the son, waited anxiously to hear what she was about to say.

‘And then, Roger Dawson,’ she added, looking even more thoughtfully and meaningfully at her son, ‘you can go and take your new sweetheart, Marigold, to the pictures.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Roger in frustration. ‘She’s *not* my sweetheart.’

Chapter 5

MARIGOLD YELLAND TO Roger: ‘Am I your sweetheart, Roger?’

Roger to Marigold: ‘Eh?’

It was intermission and they were standing outside the Arclight licking their vanilla double-cone ice creams. Actually Marigold was licking her double-cone ice cream rather daintily, trying not to spoil her pink lipstick or get her fingers sticky, while Roger – incapable of daintiness, and, as a butcher, thoroughly comfortable with all manner of stickiness – was nearly finished his. They were both standing rather awkwardly. Marigold was leaning into Roger’s side, evidently trying to get as close to him as public decency would allow. Her left arm, over which was hung a shiny tiny pink handbag, was linked through Roger’s right arm which meant she had her ice cream under the control of her right hand. Roger, on the other hand, unaccustomed as he was to the softness, warmth and scent of the opposite sex, and so much clothing and accoutrements which were so unashamedly pink, was bending away from Marigold’s intimacy to the degree that his rugged rugby-ruck-hardened back ached. And he had to hold his almost-finished ice cream in his left hand which was rather awkward as he was, always had been and always would be decidedly northpaw when it came to holding ice creams or anything else including the bloodied steel tools of his trade.

‘I asked you, Roger dear, am I your sweetheart?’ Marigold said again. Sweetly.

Roger’s flabber was thoroughly gasted by his blonde companion’s highly provocative line of questioning. And so he bent back – even farther back, as if to get a good look at her – and asked: ‘Did you like the first picture?’

Marigold looked up at him adoringly – a look that meant nothing to Roger Dawson the naïf – and jerked him back towards herself with a strength that Roger found surprising from someone so small, frail, pink and blonde.

‘I know you used to watch me when I was in the Coldstream Guards. I saw you.’

‘Eh?’

'You were attracted by the uniform weren't you,' said Marigold coquettishly. 'The short skirts. But it was *me* you were watching really, all the time wasn't it, Roger Dawson. I could tell. All the girls could. Me and my legs.'

If Roger were to be honest – and he *was* honest, more from a lack of guile than a surfeit of morals – he couldn't remember ever watching Marigold Yelland march in the Coldstream Guards marching team. He couldn't remember ever watching any girls' marching team except when he was a child and Charlie Downs took him to town to see the Christmas parade.

Without loosing her grip on Roger's arm Marigold managed to lift her pink dress slightly above the knee and adopt the pose of a model modelling.

'People have always admired my legs. Do you still admire my legs, Roger?' she asked.

'Never thought about them really,' said Roger which, believe it or not, was true.

Marigold abandoned her pose, aimed a bony elbow at her escort's ribs and said: 'Liar, liar, pants on fire.'

'Ouch,' said Roger. 'What did you do that for?'

'You are a scream, Roger Dawson, pretending to forget our past.'

'What past?' asked Roger vaguely. He was in fact thinking less about the past than about the present and especially about the cost of the picture tickets and two double-cone ice creams (vanilla). 'Look, did you like the first picture or not?'

'I don't know, Roger,' said Marigold sweetly but meaningfully. 'I wasn't looking at the screen.'

Roger looked down at her again as if he didn't know her. She was indeed a mystery. There she was, dressed all in pink and white, wearing pink lipstick and pink nail polish (even on her toenails, he noticed through her flimsy high-heeled sling-back sandals), and her soft cheeks were pinkly-rouged. Her hair was a bright yellow and her blue eyes, looking up and back at him, so big and open and luxuriantly black-lashy, looked almost staring; her pink-lipsticked mouth, too, was open and smiling showing off her large but perfectly straight and brightly white teeth. Confused by what he saw – what he was noticing perhaps for the first time – and what he felt as a result of what he noticed, he was suddenly struck even more dumb than usual.

Not receiving the response she expected – in fact not receiving any response from the dumb Roger – Marigold said: 'I was looking at *you*, you silly.'

'Why?' the recovered Roger was astonished. 'Didn't you see Mickey and Judy's last dance?'

‘No.’

‘It was a neat ending.’

‘Roger Dawson,’ said Marigold metaphorical putting her pinkly-shod foot down. ‘Who cares about them and them old pictures when there’s—’ she paused, looked dreamily across and up into empty space and saw the faded and flaky sign pointing across the road to the public toilets in the library beside the post office on the corner of Mafeking Street, and said, with a breathy sigh: ‘-love.’

‘Eh,’ said Roger again. He had finished his ice cream and was licking his stubby fingers.

Marigold gripped Roger’s arm a little tighter and showingly tipped her unfinished double-cone vanilla ice cream into the rubbish bin beside the phone box.

‘What a waste,’ said Roger, looking into the bin. ‘I could’ve had that.’

‘Walk me home, Roger,’ said his wastrel companion.

‘But the ice cream,’ said Roger looking longingly over his shoulder at the rubbish bin.

‘It’s such a lovely night for a walk,’ said Marigold turning the reluctant young butcher across Ladysmith Parade and down Mafeking Street towards Robinson Park.

Roger noticed that people were drifting back into the cinema.

‘But half time’s over,’ he said. ‘The next picture’s going to start, two for the price of one, and I’ve got the pass-outs. It’s Jimmy Cagney as a big tough gangster in Chicago. And all them big Chevrolets and tommy guns. It’s real famous.’

But protest was futile. Marigold Yelland had framed an aim and was now aiming to reach it by any means necessary. Her abundance of feminine skill and cunning (when it came to her aim) was matched by Roger Dawson’s masculine naivety and dullness. Indeed the poor young butcher had no idea of what women want and what they will do (which is anything) to get what they want.

‘But this isn’t the way home,’ Roger protested.

‘That’s funny,’ said Marigold, much later, as she and Roger stood together outside fourteen Robinson Terrace. ‘Mum’s lights still on.’

‘Why’s that funny?’

Marigold turned to face her escort and took his hands in hers. Roger had left the Holden at home so he had had no choice but to walk Marigold home the

way she wanted to be walked home – at half-time – which was the long way; that is, to and around Robinson Park. And so it must be said that by the time they got to the Yelland house in Robinson Terrace more time had passed than would be expected if the distance from the Arclight to Robinson Terrace had been covered by a couple of moderately fit young pedestrians walking at a pace, allowing for romance, somewhat slower than a stroll. However, it was only a few minutes before the witching hour when the young sweethearts – dare they be now so called? – reached the front gate of the Yelland home.

‘She’s never up as late as this,’ said Marigold. ‘I better go straight in.’

‘Righto,’ said Roger, somewhat distracted by recent events, reluctant to now say goodbye but paradoxically attracted by the prospect of walking home alone with time to think about the said recent events which had left him so distracted. He was indeed a confused and distracted young butcher.

‘What was the second picture again?’

Roger told her. ‘But you didn’t want to see it,’ he added, unjoining their hands.

‘I still want to know what it was called.’

‘Why?’

‘What was it about again, Roger?’

Roger delivered an impressively accurate synopsis.

‘That’s right. I remember now.’ Marigold touched Roger’s elbow lightly. ‘Thank you, Roger, for the lovely night. I just *know* that we’re *real* sweethearts now, aren’t we.’

‘I’ve got dirt on the knees of my strides,’ said Roger. ‘What’s mum going to say?’

But Marigold didn’t hear him. While he was futilely brushing at the knees of his trousers, with hands that had attracted their own share of dirt and grit and grass, she had opened the low gate, walked up the path between borders of pinks in her pink but grass-stained dress, and was standing on the porch, under the light, blowing him a kiss.

Roger Dawson didn’t know it – couldn’t know it – but in the entire ancient history of arachnology no clever spider had ever more successfully lured a hapless fly into its parlour than Marigold Augustine Yelland had that night lured Roger Howard Dawson into the dark, deep, warm, moist and pleasurable depths of her parlour where he was doomed to remain trapped in silky blissful ignorance for the rest of his life.

For the moment though Roger Dawson was more worried about the dirt on the knees of his trousers.

Chapter 6

CHARLIE DOWNS TO Mrs Yelland: ‘We get on pretty good, don’t you think, Myrtle?’

Mrs Yelland to Charlie Downs: ‘Come on, Charlie Downs, we’ve only just met.’

That Marigold’s mother was at The Record Reign with Charlie Downs that night was the reason she was up unusually late. And that Charlie Downs was at The Record Reign with Mrs Yelland that night was the reason he hadn’t gone home for tea. And the reason Howard couldn’t find Charlie Downs at The Record Reign was that he was in the club bar with Mrs Yelland. Indeed, Mrs Yelland and Charlie Downs had had a fish and chips dinner together in the club bar. And, indeed again, Marigold’s mother, Mrs Yelland (Myrtle) was Charlie Downs’s mysterious new (attractive, mature, intelligent, well-groomed, well dressed, well spoken) lady friend.

They were sitting together in The Record Reign club bar having finished their battered fish and chips served with tomato sauce and buttered white bread (sandwich loaf, cut thin, buttered thick). Charlie Downs was enjoying a Carlisle’s pale ale while Mrs Yelland – who hadn’t eaten all her dinner and in fact had pushed the plate aside with a slight sneer which Charlie Downs hadn’t noticed – was sipping at a cold white wine.

‘We’ve been to the Arclight.’

‘Once. What a dump.’

‘It’s all right there. And here.’

‘Twice, including tonight. I don’t care for it actually.’

‘Don’t you? Anyway, I remember you from school. I thought you were a bottler.’

‘We were, what? Five? Six?’

‘No. High school too.’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘Still do.’

‘Still do what?’

‘Think you’re a bottler,’ said Charlie Downs. ‘Don’t you remember Blythewillow High?’

‘I suppose so. You were friends with Fatty Dawson.’

‘Howie’s me best mate,’ said Charlie Downs jauntily. ‘Always was. Always will be. But we don’t call him that any more.’

‘And his girlfriend. What was her name?’

‘Phyllis. Was Phyllis Eggleston. Childhood sweethearts.’

‘They have a son called Roger.’

‘Yep.’

‘Mmmm,’ mmmmed Myrtle Yelland. She hadn’t yet met Roger but had heard all about him from Marigold. ‘Clever young chap is he?’

‘Who? Roger?’ Charlie Downs was surprised. Astounded even. ‘Don’t think so. Who said that?’

‘Marigold.’

‘Oh, his sweetheart, of course.’

‘Are they?’

‘Don’t know really,’ said Charlie Downs. ‘But his father teases him about it. Just like he’d tease me if he knew about you.’

‘Would he?’

‘Too right he would. Anyway, what do you think?’

‘About what?’

‘About us. You and me. We get on pretty good, don’t we?’

Mrs Yelland tilted her head, thoughtfully, and looked closely at Charlie Downs.

‘What do you actually *do*, Charlie Downs? For a job I mean?’ she asked.

Poor Mrs Yelland. She didn’t know it – couldn’t know it – but Charlie Downs had only one raw nerve and she had not only touched it but pressed and prodded it mercilessly. The poor chap winced almost outwardly and most certainly inwardly.

‘What do you mean what do I do?’

‘Well you don’t work do you,’ said Mrs Yelland. ‘Are you on the dole?’

‘No.’ Charlie Downs now looked and sounded utterly indignant. ‘Never have and never will.’

He wanted to say how dare you, and don’t you know, and everyone knows what I do, but he didn’t.

‘But you don’t have a job. Do you? No. And you spend almost all your time here at the Record. I’m right aren’t I? Yes. So where do you get your money from?’

Silent was what Charlie Downs was; he really didn’t like this line of questioning.

‘You *do* have money don’t you, Charlie Downs?’ asked Mrs Yelland.

Charlie Downs did indeed have money – a lot of it – but he loved to have it and keep it and he hated to spend it. He had learned how to make it when he was young having been coached by Howard Dawson senior when the young Howard declined to learn. For most of his adult life he had managed to manage his money – accumulating much and spending little – without the dubious (to him) services of the banking industry. He managed by dividing his considerable loot into separate and unconnected lootettes, concealing each cache in a different place, committing their contents and location to memory. As a result there were no paper records of Charlie Downs’s combined holdings by sum nor of the credits and debits to his various stored hoards; no knowledge of anything concerning his considerable accumulation of wealth outside the confines of his own cranium. The personal satisfaction Charlie Downs gained from the secret nature of his money management was offset by the worry that any one (or more) of his caches could be discovered, intentionally or accidentally, at any time, by any person or persons, known or unknown, including the dreaded agents and employees of the Revenue.

Thus was Charlie Downs’s life saturated with stress and tension about money. And now, suddenly, uninvited, came more stress and tension in the admittedly attractive shape of the widow Yelland.

Charlie Downs was glad to have re-met Myrtle Yelland (nee Chamblee) – Marigold’s mother whom he, Howard and Phyllis had known all the way through school – and had even taken her to the pictures (once) and for a spot at The Record Reign (now twice). She was attractive, intelligent, cultured and all-round good and willing company and so he was beginning to think that his voluntary bachelorhood – self-imposed in the interest of his work and his dedication to his hobby of collecting the metal and paper currency of the realm – might be over. But, as every silver lining has a cloud, Charlie Downs’s normal level of stress and tension caused by the thought of a) spending money on any lady by way of courtship, and b) spending money on any lady by way of a continuing relationship well into the future, was now being raised further – indeed, to an alarming level – by Mrs Yelland’s unwelcome prying.

‘Look, Charlie Downs,’ said Mrs Yelland again. ‘I’ve enjoyed our couple of outings together, okay, here at the Record and going to see the old pictures and that, a woman can get lonely you know, but I don’t like idlers. My Augie wasn’t an idler. He was a hard worker. But you don’t seem to work at all.’

Chapter 7

CHARLIE DOWNS TO Mrs Yelland: ‘Crikey, Myrtle, I blimmin *do* work.’

Mrs Yelland to Charlie Downs: ‘What do you do? You haven’t got a real proper job. Never have had as far as I know and, as you say, I’ve known you since school. Yet you’ve always got money. Not much, I admit, you’re a stingy-mingy I must say, but you do have *some* money. So where do you get it? I hear rumours about it and I’m not sure I like what I hear.’

Charlie Downs looked across the table – across the plates smeared with cold fat and streaks of tomato sauce, the hard little bits of burnt batter, the greasy knives and forks lying crookedly across the greasy plates, and the glass salt and pepper shakers standing against the wall with the tomato-shaped tomato sauce squeezer – and thought again how much at home he always felt at The Record Reign, even in the club bar, and how the strikingly handsome widow Mrs Yelland seemed to fit. She’s not exactly beautiful, he thought, but handsome and elegant and refined, and she looks so perfectly at home here in the Record, especially in the club bar. He thought again – and he really wasn’t used to thinking at all let alone again – how he enjoyed her company especially compared to the company he usually kept which was none. Yes, he had his customers – he called them his friends and they called him their friend – but they weren’t really friends and their brief conversations and the occasional shared Carlisle’s, couldn’t begin to compare with Mrs Yelland’s cultured feminine company over fish and chips with a beer (for him) and a quality white wine (for her), or a night at the pictures with an ice cream at half time, even taking into account the considerable expense involved.

But Charlie Downs was perplexed. How could he explain the nature of his work in the dark depths of the shade to such a thoroughly good and decent person as Mrs Yelland who lived her life in the full glare of the sun? How could he make such a pure and innocent member of the weaker sex understand how hard he grafted at home in the day, at The Record Reign in the evenings, and all day Saturday and frequently on Sunday? How could he

tell her – could he even bring himself to tell her? – that he had enough money to ensure that they could both live (together?) happily ever after? Could he bring himself to share such information with her? Indeed, could he bring himself to share his money with her? Or with anyone?

The conflict, the stress, the tension, the thinking, brought pain to his brain. And so, to the extent that he could think and decide he thought briefly and decided rashly that, despite the admiration and affection he had for Mrs Yelland, he could not – not yet at least – confide in her the nature of his work, the source of his income and the great sum of his fortune. But he did enjoy her company. And so.

His thinking and deciding was interrupted by Mrs Yelland who had also thought and decided. After taking a sip of her wine, and carefully placing the glass back on the coaster, she said: ‘Actually, I’ve been thinking, Charlie Downs–’ and he thought, that’s a coincidence ‘–that if we are to continue seeing each other like this I think you should get a proper job.’

A six was what Charlie Downs was well and truly knocked for.

‘A proper job?’

‘Yes. A proper job.’

Charlie Downs took a long draught of Carlisle’s pale ale not to quench his thirst but to give himself time to frame a considered response to Mrs Yelland’s preposterous (to his way of thinking) proposition evidently preposterously proposed by her in all seriousness. His considered response, when he had allowed the cold ale to slip down his throat and given himself time to frame it, was, as he freely admitted, but only later, rash in the extreme.

‘All right, Myrtle,’ he said extremely rashly. ‘I *will*. I’ll get a proper blimmin job. You’ll see.’

I will, thought Charlie Downs. I’ll get a proper job. I’ll show her. That’ll impress her. Then she’ll keep going to the pictures with me. And to the Record. And then he thought, how the dickens will I get a proper job let alone keep it? I’ve never had a proper job in me whole life. I’ve really put me foot in it this time that’s for sure. Charlie Downs, you’re an idiot.

‘Are you sure, Charlie Downs?’

‘My oath, Myrtle,’ said Charlie Downs. ‘Never been surer of anything.’

‘When?’

‘When what?’

‘When will you get a proper job?’

‘Oh. Well. Give me a week, Myrtle, be fair,’ said Charlie Downs, determined to be consistent even in his rashness.

‘And you’ll give up this other non-business of yours?’

‘Too right,’ said Charlie Downs lyingly.

Mrs Yelland deliberately placed her handbag on her knee, finished her wine, carefully put the empty glass back on the coaster, and looked squarely across the mess of the low table at Charlie Downs who nodded and finished his Carlisle’s pale ale.

‘Right then, Charlie Downs,’ she said. ‘Today’s Wednesday. Let’s allow two weeks, not one week. Two weeks. We’ll meet at, say—’ she looked at her tiny wrist watch ‘—six o’clock two weeks from tonight. Wednesday evening, that’s the eighteenth, not here, at the Jasfontein, that’s close for both of us, and you can tell me about your new job.’

‘You’re on, Myrtle Yelland,’ said Charlie Downs sounding positiver than he felt which was negative.

‘It’s not that I need the money, mate,’ said Charlie Downs to Hone Ngawaka.

‘I know that, Charlie Downs,’ said Hone. ‘Because you’ve got all mine.’

It was the next morning and Charlie Downs was on the phone asking Hone Ngawaka, the wood and coal merchant, for a job. So Hone gave Charlie Downs a job bagging one-hundredweight sacks of coal and stacking them neatly in the loading bay ready for pre-winter deliveries.

Charlie Downs lasted until lunch time that first and only day. Once home he got Monkey Oldfield to aim the hose at his naked self while he scrubbed off a morning’s worth of coal dust; then he spent the afternoon in a hot bath easing his aching arms, legs, shoulders, neck, chest and abdomen.

‘You look absolutely jiggered, mate,’ said Howard to him that night at The Record Reign.

But Charlie Downs didn’t hear him. He was asleep in his chair, his Carlisle’s pale ale untouched on the table.

Howard soon surrounded it.

‘Sorry, mate,’ he said to the sleeping Charlie Downs. ‘Can’t stand waste.’

Charlie Downs had many customers like Hone Ngawaka. They weren’t all happy customers – some were sometimes downright miserable customers – but they didn’t blame Charlie Downs for their place, temporary or permanent, down in the depths of the financial dumps. Rather, a typical unhappy Charlie Downs customer blamed Lady Luck, Miss Fortune, the weather, their early timing, their late timing, the animal’s form (or lack thereof), the trainer, the jockey (whom they professed to know but didn’t), another jockey, all the other

jockeys, the vet, the starter, the stewards, the judges, the hard track, the easy track, Turf Digest, Friday Flash, Best Bets, the club, the club president, his wife, his children, the committee, or someone or something else invariably blameless. The only thing or person he – the typical unhappy customer – didn't blame for his unhappiness was the only thing or person that was in fact blameworthy; viz: himself.

Charlie Downs had many such customers but not many friends. But he delusionally thought of his customers as friends, and relations between them were generally cordial so that a random person – Charlie Downs for example – might be led to believe that the geniality he thought existed between him and his customers actually did exist. It was easy to see why Charlie Downs might think that. After occasionally being obliged to thank him they might, while thanking him, say, for example: 'Let me know if I can do anything for you, Charlie Downs.' Or: 'I owe you one, Charlie Downs'. Or: 'One good turn deserves another, Charlie Downs.' Or: 'You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Charlie Downs.' They didn't all say that, or always say that, but enough of them said it often enough for Charlie Downs to think that they meant it which they didn't.

And so for the first time in his life Charlie Downs asked his customers/friends for a favour: he asked them for a real proper job. He was, of course, quick to explain that a) he would accept any job, however menial, providing it was a real proper job for the sake of appearances, and b) he didn't require any wages.

This is the end of the preview file of *Underneath The Arclight*. 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.