

OVER THE TEACUPS

Miles Cowper was in a quandary. His young assistant, Letty Pott, had run off with a commercial traveller, and there was no one to help mind the shop. And if that wasn't bad enough, there was opinion in the community that it had been his responsibility to stop her. As if he could have done anything. He was only the grocer. Then there was the question of morals. As old Celia Crabbe pointed out, young Letty Pott was barely seventeen, and had hardly had time to grow any. Miles conceded that she was probably right, although he preferred to avoid such philosophic propositions.

Letty's mother was strongest in her condemnation.

"Mr Cowper, why didn't you do something?"

"But Mrs Pott, what could I do?"

"If I'd known," she shrieked at him, "you'd let that dirty little devil run her off like that, I'd have never let her work for you!"

Miles tried to point out that he didn't know anything about the dirty little devil, until Letty had flown, and that anyway, if Letty hadn't been forced to live such a sheltered life out on the farm, she would have been less likely to have run off with the first bloke to proposition her.

The question of propositions again.

Mrs Pott was suitably disgusted, and left. Her husband came in the following day for some tobacco, but seemed more concerned with his stallion's foot-rot than his daughter's scandalous departure. Mr Pott probably knew when he was well off.

Although Miles was sorry to see his assistant go, he was not really surprised. Anyone who christened a sweet young thing like that, "Letty," deserved to be dumped at the first opportunity. As if "Pott" wasn't bad enough. And that made him wonder. Ziggy Campelli, the publican, put him right on that one. The young "rep" had stayed in Ziggy's rooms.

"Badger his name was," Ziggy told him, "Mick Badger. Flash little bugger."

Mrs Letty Badger nee Pott, Miles reflected over a glass of Tooheys' old.

There wasn't much in it really.

"And what will you do now, Mr Cowper? Manage on your own?" It was old Dora Appleby this time. Yesterday it had been her companion,

Celia Crabbe. Miles, who was totting up their weekly account, said nothing. She was probably hoping he'd make a mistake in her favour. He'd done it once, but not noticed until after she'd left. After which he was too embarrassed to approach her about it.

"Nine dollars and fifteen cents," he said at last.

Miss Appleby rummaged in her purse.

"Be a bit of a strain, won't it?" she asked. "Being on your own."

"Well I am the only grocer in the district," he said superiorly.

"And Pinchgut's getting bigger all the time, what with those new houses going up the bottom of Pickles Street."

It was true, he reflected. He'd read it in the paper. The population of Pinchgut (and surrounding district) had topped one hundred. He'd need a new assistant.

Miles nodded and gave Mrs Appleby her change.

"Have you seen Mrs Buchanan?" the old dear asked, knowing full well that he hadn't.

"Mrs Buchanan?" he repeated, trying to place the name.

"Her who's moved into old Teddy Marshall's place. Used to have a farm up the Tenterfield Road. Then her husband died on her and she found it a bit of a struggle. Daughter went off to Sydney, so she sold up and came down here. Young ones don't care these days. Leave their old mothers on their own." And she added with discreet emphasis, "She could do with a few extra pennies. She's a widow, you know."

Miles agreed that she would indeed be a widow.

Miss Appleby nodding sagely snapped her purse shut, and toddled out. But at the door she said without turning, "I'll tell her to pop in and see you then."

Miles pushed his glasses up his nose, and smiled. He really should get his eyes tested again. Bifocals might be more appropriate considering.

Damned if he hadn't underchanged her.

Annie Buchanan popped in the following day. Dear Miss Appleby had come up *specially* to tell her. Mr Cooper is *most anxious*, she had said. And brought a pound of sugar too.

Annie had never been interviewed for a job before. But just in case, she changed her underwear, and put on a clean skirt and blouse. Brushing her hair, she viewed herself in the wardrobe mirror. Her prodigious bust strained the fabric of her blouse, and her round hips split and tapered into a pair of firm muscular legs.

"Annie Buchanan," she informed her reflection, "you're thirty seven years old, and a real beauty."

That, there was no denying.

But when she reached the grocer's, she felt less sure of herself. And then the name over the shop confused her, and the bell as she opened the door jangled on her nerves.

He wasn't a bad looking old stick though, she noted as he poked his head round a shelf. He seemed flustered at the sight of her, and she fingered the buttons of her blouse, worried that she was exposing herself.

"Good - um - day," he said. And a thin stick of a body drew alongside the head.

"Mr - Cowper?"

Annie, stepping up to the counter, heard the air drawn rapidly through his nostrils.

"Cooper!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's pronounced 'Cooper'."

"Oh I see." And she laughed and thought, what a silly idea.

His glasses slipped down his nose, and he removed them.

"Are you - Mrs Buchanan?"

"That's me," she said gaily, and stood stiffly to attention.

"Hm." He looked at her briefly through narrow eyes while polishing his glasses in his cardigan. Replacing them across the bridge of his nose, he squinted once or twice, and then stared long and hard at her bulging blouse.

"Now let me see," she heard him murmur, "now let me see."

That bust, he seemed to be thinking, is most unsuitable for a grocer's shop. As if she should've known. And the money wouldn't be much, he told her, trade was so bad. And it would be such a come down for her, after being her own mistress. Some people didn't take to being told what to do. Annie agreed, and felt she was hardly the woman for the position, and was glad that she'd been let down lightly.

But then he asked, "Now when can you start?"

And she wondered.

Miles had little to complain of. Mrs Buchanan knew her stuff. She liked his customers, and better still, they liked her. Sometimes they came in just to chat, while he frowned at them over his glasses. He had a little word with her, and after that she always encouraged them to buy something before they left. His profit margin widened slowly but significantly.

How many husbands, he wondered, were nibbling nuts for the first time?

She was clean too, Miles noted with satisfaction, never smelt of perfume or talcum powder (unlike the Misses Appleby and Crabbe who always stank of the stuff), invariably wiped the basin after she'd washed her hands, and never left the lavatory seat cover up. It was the little things that he noticed.

For her part, his new assistant seemed contented. She insisted that he call her Annie, but he was too embarrassed to offer his own name in return. In time she simply dropped the mister and called him Cowper, which wasn't exactly agreeable, but settled matters.

She kept busy, turned out his stockroom, and helped with his accounts. Even painted the window frames when the old paint flaked in the sun. He gave her a pair of his old overalls to wear and she looked rough as rags. To her consternation she had to leave them undone to the waist, to allow for her bust.

In slack times they played gin rummy, or she showed him photographs of her daughter and dead husband, and the farm that had gone to pot. Mostly she just talked about herself.

On his forty-second birthday, she bought him a pair of cuff-links, and he didn't know what to say. At his age he liked to keep his birthdays to himself, but Celia Crabbe had given her the nudge. It was the Misses Crabbe and Appleby who had told Annie about his wife Gloria who had died four years earlier, and was buried in the Pinchgut churchyard.

Annie had buried her husband somewhere else, and Miles wished he had been as wise. She went out to see the grave, and scolded him for neglecting it.

The following Sunday he took a trowel and fork, and dug it over.

It was not long after that that the Misses Crabbe and Appleby invited them both to tea. After all, Celia Crabbe had told her companion, you can't ask one without the other. They're never apart these days.

If Miles had heard that, he'd have shuddered.

"And how are you coping now?" Dora Appleby asked, pouring tea.

Miles leaned back in his chair and tried to burp discreetly.

"Well business has picked up a bit, so it's a justification."

By which he meant his employment of Annie, who in turn would have preferred to have been referred to by name.

"And didn't I say that it would?" Dora said lightly.

"It's those new people down Pickles Street," Celia explained. "They're city folk, and they live out of tins."

Miles smiled, and sipped his tea. The Misses Crabbe and Appleby were so alike, he often confused them. If he closed his eyes and listened to their prattle, he wouldn't know who was saying what.

"And how are you settling in, Mrs Buchanan?" Dora asked.

Annie breathed in, and he watched her magnificent chest expand.

"We're working out very well together, isn't that so Cowper?"

Miles frowned at such familiarity, and expected much the same response from their hostesses. But they tittered and grinned like girls.

"You do seem to have so much in common," Dora said slyly.

"And you get on so well together," Celia threw in.

"It's truly wonderful to see."

Miles had closed his eyes, so he didn't know who had contributed the last remark. But he did hear Annie say, "It's because we're both *sufferers*, Miss Appleby. After all, we've both lost loved ones, and poor Cowper there with no children to comfort him, and my girl Kim gone off with some beatnik on Bondi Beach. It can be a hard life and there's no disputin', and a lonely one too for the likes of us abandoned in our prime."

Miles opened his eyes.

"Oh it's a tragedy," Dora Appleby wailed.

He could have believed it.

Celia Crabbe pushed the banana pudding under his nose, but he declined. He had taken quite enough.

"It's a blessing you've found each other," Celia said warmly, and reaching across the table she took her companion's hand, adding, "it's such a comfort when you're getting on."

Miles thinking about it guessed they were right. They were such a happy pair, if only they didn't smell so.

Afterwards, he took Annie home, and under her dark porch said, "Shall we be married then?"

And she murmured, "Yes, yes soon." And kissed his mouth.

They couldn't take a proper honeymoon, because there was no one to look after the shop. But they did manage a weekend at Byron Bay. When they returned, Annie moved some of her furniture into his rooms behind the shop, and gave the rest away.

Miles said, "I'm a very restless sleeper dear."

And suggested single beds.

She didn't mind really. She was no slip of a thing herself, and she liked to loosen up at night, and spread her ageing limbs across the bed. Her first husband Harry had been a big man too, and she often wondered how their old double bed up at the farm had taken the strain.

It was strange being married again, and even stranger being Mrs Cowper pronounced "Cooper." She took it up with him.

"We should change our name, dear."

He looked at her over his glasses, and frowned.

"To what, exactly?"

"To Cooper, exactly. Spell it properly. Or if it must be Cowper, then let's pronounce it Cowper. Really Miles, you are the most."

She called him Miles when he exasperated her.

Miles picked at his ear.

"It's my name," he said stiffly. "I can't change that."

"Yes you can," she fussed, "if you want to."

But Miles didn't want to, and he had his own way.

Annie didn't mind. It was only a suggestion, and how were you to sort these little differences out, if you didn't discuss them civilly? Take the bacon for instance. Miles liked his rashers crisp so that they cracked like dried sticks. And he chewed at the rind like a dog grinding at a bone. She told him it was cancer forming, to each such burnt food, but he wouldn't listen. In fact, in time she realized that he rarely listened to anything she said.

But she didn't let it bother her. It was a fundamental difference in their nature, she told herself. She liked to yap about anything, but Miles was even quieter than she remembered him in the shop. Though she was rather astonished to hear him say one evening. "I wonder if they're lovers."

"Who, dear?"

"Those two next door, Crabbe and Appleby."

"How can they be?" Annie said lightly. "They're the same."

"I mean —" and he looked up at her guiltily, "*lesbian* lovers."

"Oh really dear, I shouldn't think so. Country people are much too conservative for that sort of thing."

But such conversations were very rare. And they were too old and fixed in their ways to haggle over silly little things like eating habits.

But then there were other habits which she found more distasteful. He picked his nose as well as his ears, and was given to letting off wind after meals. A perfectly natural function, she reminded herself, but he might at least do it out back, or wait until he was in the dunny.

She loved it though when the customers called her Mrs Cowper, and treated her as his equal. As Harry Buchanan's wife, she'd never been referred to as anyone other than missus. Her husband too, God rest him, and even her daughter had never been an affectionate child. She hadn't seen or heard from Kim for months, although she had received a brief note when she married: *Mummy dear, do be careful at your age*. Such a pure being, her daughter, although when she thought of the beatnik whose photograph had dropped through the post one morning, visions of her daughter's purity sidled sadly from mind.

Oh to be eighteen again, she sighed, and untouched.

But being thirty-seven had its compensations. She liked her well-developed figure with its prominent bust and rounded hips. She was, after all, a woman in her prime, not one of those skinny things you see in magazines. And even if Miles was slow with his praise, Ziggy Campelli knew a good thing when he saw it.

Taking her money across the bar, he lifted her fingers to his lips.

"Mm, Mrs Cowper, you are the love of my life."

Annie stepped back, and smiled discreetly.

"Mr Campelli! My husband!"

Ziggy Campelli was unperturbed.

"If your husband was a good man," he announced passionately, "he would share you. And you have so much to share, Mrs Cowper, there is so much of you that is pure woman. So much meat!"

Miles suggested weakly that Ziggy should have been a butcher, but the Misses Crabbe and Appleby sipped their sherries and thought the publican vulgar.

"What a coarse man," Dora said, once Annie had returned to her seat. "Old Mr Thomas was never like that. He was a gentleman."

"It's the Italian in him," Celia said definitively. "It's in his blood. He can't help himself."

"And him married too," Dora added with appropriate disgust.

"And he perspires," Miles muttered ungraciously. "And smells of it too." But this was a minor criticism.

Annie simply smiled. There was no meat on Mrs Campelli. She was as thin as a line-prop. And just as wooden.

"I don't think he's really Italian," Miles said at length. He'd been thinking about it. "I think his father was, but his mother was Australian."

"It's still in his blood," Celia said fiercely. She knew what she meant. "Bad blood always over-runs good blood!"

"Really, that's hardly scientific —" Miles began.

"Miles, don't be such a bore," Annie said vehemently. "Who cares about science? It's passion that counts!"

"Oh my dear."

The Misses Crabbe and Appleby giggled and tut-tutted.

Miles looked crestfallen, and Annie was a little sorry that she'd been so abrupt with him. But when she saw from the corner of her eye Ziggy leaning over the bar and gazing with unashamed pleasure at her bold cleavage, her remorse vanished. From that moment Ziggy was her man.

And it was unfair of her husband to deny her so. She had discovered what it was in his nature that repulsed her. It was a meanness, a meanness of passion. He hardly ever had anything to say, no longer referred to her

by name, in fact rarely referred to her at all, except in the most oblique manner. And what's more, he never *touch*ed her. What a despicable thing that was, she complained bitterly. He hated her nearness to him.

"You don't love me, do you," she remonstrated later. "You've never loved me."

And he looked up at her as though to say, what have I done now?

Annie hung her apron over the oven door handle, and hiccupped. She'd been up to the bar once too often that evening.

"Say you love me."

"I love you," he said hoarsely. But it was painful, she could see.

"Say my name."

And he whispered "Annie."

She pulled him out of his chair, and clung to him as best her bust would allow.

"Is there anything you wouldn't do for me?" she murmured. "Anything?"

"Nothing," he cried, confused. "Nothing at all!"

She looked into his face, and her eyes beamed desire.

"Make love to me on the table," she pleaded. "Will you?"

Miles was shocked, and would do no such thing.

Annie pushed him away, contemptuously. Ziggy would have done it. She knew.

All things were for the best, Miles observed dispassionately. Which didn't mean to say he condoned his wife taking a lover. But it did rather make his life a little easier. For she was a demanding woman.

To the world outside, there was no change. No one mentioned a separation. Annie wanted a lover, not another husband. And they were very discreet. Just odd afternoons, when business was slack. Annie would disappear for an hour or so.

One afternoon, when there were no customers, he took off his apron, and walked up to the pub. Loath to go in, he peered through the window. The room was empty, and Mrs Campelli was sitting behind the bar, cleaning glasses. She was no beauty. Her thin drawn face reminded him of a horse. Miles had wondered if he was expected to take Mrs Campelli as mistress in return, but he wasn't very keen. It wasn't so much her lack of beauty or spindly body that repulsed him. Rather he was afraid of encroaching on her ruins. Of having to pick over the remains of Ziggy's insatiable lust. Once he'd finished with Annie, there'd be nothing much left of her either. Only broken bones and sagging flesh. And what would become of that mountainous chest? He hardly dared to think.

Mrs Campelli looked up, and must have recognised the thin eyes behind the glasses. She waved him in, but he shook his head and returned to the shop where the Misses Crabbe and Appleby were waiting.

"A pound of tea, Mr Cowper, if you please."

"Of course, Miss Crabbe," and he glanced over his glasses and revealed, "Tea's on special, three cents off."

"Mrs Cowper not here?" Mrs Appleby asked pointedly.

As if they didn't know.

"No, I think she's up the pub."

Miss Appleby breathed deeply, and hissed, "The hussy."

"Dora!" Her companion dragged her away, and whispered, "That's his *wife*, don't you forget."

"In name only," Miss Appleby retorted. "And she won't be wanting *that* for much longer."

But try as he would, Miles could conjure up no sense of outrage. He never blamed. Didn't consider it his duty to find fault. More so, if Ziggy could satisfy his wife, then it was *his* duty to do so. And he was a good fellow really.

Miles still called in the pub most evenings for a glass of Tooheys'.

And Ziggy always gave him one for free.

## GRAEME HETHERINGTON

### FOR MY DAUGHTER

She knows my visiting won't last  
And asks why I can't live with them.  
The TV holds her more than my reply,

Until I think we'll easily say goodbye.  
Then seven year old fingers disagree  
By fastening my coat buttons as I leave.