

## ACT ONE.

*Gerald Hulbert enters and addresses the audience.*

GERALD: (*To the audience.*) I suppose it all began when Newcastle Cougars fired Ronnie Reed. Ronnie had been their manager for four and a half years, but he had been involved with the club in one capacity or another for twenty seven seasons. A dozen of them as a highly regarded and uncompromising defender who just missed out on being capped for his country. However, the Cougars, who were conditioned to nothing but unadulterated success, were, for the first time in living memory, struggling near the bottom of the Commercialship. So something had to be seen to be done, and Ronnie's dismissal was it. Three weeks earlier his board of directors had cursed him with their vote of confidence, and from then on it was merely a matter of time before he had to spend the weekends mowing the lawn and walking the dog; his age, and loyalty to the Cougars, disbarring him from securing employment with another club. Ronnie Reed's sacking was the stimulus that began the annual managerial merry go round that seems to exhilarate football club chairmen more profoundly than a cavalcade of goals. Newcastle poached Lennie Bradbury from Solihull Strollers, who in turn acquired promising young Steve Thompson from third division Taunton Turks. The Turks were perturbed at forgoing their prize asset who had steered them to their highest ever league placing, and complained to the lower division administration. The authorities sympathised with the plight of the Turks, who were after all one of their valued members, but they were incapable of redressing the wrong as Solihull, being a powerful Commercialship club, were outside their jurisdiction, and effectively gave the league officials the old red card. (*He waves a red card.*) However, that wasn't the end of it. Far from it. That particular season's silly season went into extra time and then some, as Carlisle Chieftains dismissed Gary Oakes and brought Jock Mctag from an obscure corner north of the border. Gary Oakes traversed the length of the country and landed up at Plymouth Brethren, whose former manager Bobby Haversham went to Leicester Lynxes, ousting Scott Smith who sidled off to Switzerland. Exotic foreign coaches were making their mark too, replacing home grown managers blessed with more mundane monikers and reputations. Patrice Ennui was shaping the diamond pattern at Edmonton Sundowners, who had discharged Ted Jones, while Luciano Tagerrelli had shipped his brand of total football at Hounslow Harriers, sinking the managerial career of Albert Drake. However, when another falling giant, Manchester Athletic, abruptly sacked long serving Tommy O Grady who had supplied them with so much success in their recent past, the soccer world finally seemed to have flipped. If the sporting pundits had only known - the insanity had barely begun.

*He leaves.*

*Lights up on a press conference at Manchester Athletic.*

*The Chairman, Eddie Jackson, Vice Chairman, Eric Ottaway and coach, Nobby Bond face the press. There are two journalists, who will have to represent the conference. The first journalist is Charles Clark.*

ERIC: (*To the assembled press gathering.*) If we can have your attention, gentlemen, The Chairman will read a short statement. Mr Jackson will then be prepared to spend a few minutes answering any legitimate questions you may have.

EDDIE: (*Reading.*) It is with the greatest reluctance that Manchester Athletic has made the decision to release Tommy O Grady, the first team coach, from his contract. The club has enjoyed great success under Mr O Grady's leadership since he was appointed to the post seven years ago, but the results this campaign have not been what we have been used to, consequently we find ourselves in an usually precarious league position at this critical stage of the season. A club of Manchester Athletic's status cannot afford to lose its position in the Commercialship. It was mutually agreed therefore that a change of direction was needed with regard to team management while it is still possible to prevent the club from being relegated. We hope to make a suitable appointment as quickly as possible. In the meantime, Nobby Bond, the assistant coach, will have full control over team matters.

*Eddie becomes more relaxed now he has got the formal statement out of the way. He adopts his usual bluff demeanour.*

EDDIE: Right, gentlemen, I'll take a few questions now. But please, lads, keep 'em sensible.

CHARLES: You say it was a mutual decision? Did Tommy have any say in the matter?

EDDIE: It were a mutual decision.

SECOND JOURNALIST: Was he fired?

EDDIE: Are you deaf, lad?

CHARLES: Why isn't Mr O Grady here?

EDDIE: I expect he'll speak to you lads in his own good time.

CHARLES: Do you have a specific replacement lined up?

EDDIE: We have a number of folk in mind.

CHARLES: Are you prepared to name any?

EDDIE: Come on, lads, you can't really expect me to at this stage.

SECOND JOURNALIST: Do you really believe that a new manager can save you from relegation? After all, you are six points from safety with only five games left?

EDDIE: I can read league tables, lad.

SECOND JOURNALIST: You have to admit it's a tall order.

EDDIE: It's always been Eddie Jackson's motto to be positive. How do you think I got where I am today?

CHARLES: Shouldn't you have made the appointment earlier? For example, after you were knocked out of the Multi-National Sponsorship Trophy by Salisbury Plainers?

EDDIE: We don't make panic decisions at Athletic.

CHARLES: I would have thought that just five Commercialiship wins all season and being knocked out of the premier domestic cup competition by a third division side was reason enough to change your manager?

SECOND JOURNALIST: If the new man doesn't save you will you sack him?

EDDIE: I don't answer hypothetical questions, lad.

SECOND JOURNALIST: (*Aside to the first.*) It seems he doesn't answer any.

CHARLES: Was Tommy O Grady's dismissal purely a football decision?

EDDIE: What do you mean by that, lad?

CHARLES: Do you deny the allegations that he had a liaison with Eric Ottaway's wife?

EDDIE: Those rumours are complete bunkum. And I'm surprised you've mentioned such a thing in front of Mr Ottaway here.

CHARLES: They might be bunkum, Eddie, but they're persistent bunkum.

EDDIE: All newspaper nonsense. Completely without foundation ... Now if you haven't got any more questions to do with the football I think we'll wind this up.

CHARLES: Is Nobby Bond a candidate for the position?

EDDIE: Nobby has been chosen as temporary coach pending a permanent appointment...

Now, gentlemen, if you'll excuse us.

*As they get up the journalists continue to fire questions.*

SECOND JOURNALIST: Don't you feel you owe your fans a proper explanation?

EDDIE: Nay, I'm not answering any more questions, lads. You shouldn't have wasted time with stuff and nonsense.

CHARLES: Mr Jackson!

ERIC: (*To the journalists as Eddie and Nobby leave.*) This press conference is now closed, gentlemen.

*They leave. Gerald enters and addresses the audience.*

GERALD: (*To audience.*) An alternative way of looking at it is to say it all started when my Headmaster asked to see me, my wife required psychotherapy and my daughter demanded a pony... Which to begin with? ...Well, how can you deny a cute ten year old who reminds you of why you fell in love with her mother?

*His ten year old daughter, Lianne, enters.*

LIANNE: Jenny Jones has got one.

GERALD: So you feel you need to keep up with the Joneses?

LIANNE: If you can't afford it, daddy, why don't you just say so?

GERALD: Truly, you are your mother's daughter.

LIANNE: Does that mean you're mean to mummy too?

GERALD: I didn't say I couldn't afford it, Lianne.

LIANNE: Well, if you can where's the problem?

GERALD: It isn't just the expense, although it is a consideration. A pony will require an enormous amount of looking after. It isn't a hamster, you know.

LIANNE: Believe it or not, daddy, I am aware of that. It would be rather difficult to ride a hamster, don't you think?

GERALD: I'll talk it over with your mother.

LIANNE: Oh, daddy, do stop procrastinating, she's already agreed.

GERALD: Is that your new word for today?

LIANNE: Really, daddy, you are developing the most awful tendency to patronise me. I do hope you don't treat your students the same way.

GERALD: I'll think about the pony.

LIANNE: Please do that if you would be so kind, daddy.

*Lianne leaves. Gerald turns to speak to the audience.*

GERALD: (*To the audience.*) I felt as though my integrity had just been cleverly discredited by a precociously talented barrister. But truth to tell, I had other things on my mind...

Meanwhile back in the glamorous world of the footballing elite...

*Gerald leaves as Eddie, Nobby and Eric enter. Eddie pours drinks for them all.*

NOBBY: Bloody waste of time, Eddie. They're only interested in digging for scandal.

EDDIE: Vultures! Don't know why we bother with 'em, really I don't.

ERIC: One has to cultivate relations with the media, Mr Chairman. It's part of the modern game.

EDDIE: Don't know why you're so sympathetic towards 'em after the way they've just tried to embarrass you with their stuff and nonsense.

ERIC: I have the club's best interests at heart, Mr Chairman. They won't be served by alienating the press.

EDDIE: Even so, I remember a time when you could hire and fire without having to justify everything to that lot.

*He offers drinks to them. Nobby accepts, but Eric refuses.*

ERIC: Not for me at this time of day, Mr Chairman.

EDDIE: Suit yourself, Eric lad. But this abstinence will only make it *seem* like you'll live longer.

*He clinks glasses with Nobby and speaks enthusiastically.*

EDDIE: Well this is it, lads, I can feel it in my bones. When we get the new fellow in the good times will be just around the corner again.

ERIC: I wish I could share your enthusiasm, Mr Chairman, but I fear it's too late for anyone to redeem this season.

EDDIE: Nay, Eric lad, you need to be more positive. *Redeem this season?* You talk like a hellfire preacher. I expect that's what comes of an expensive education?... And how many times have I told you to cut out this *Mr Chairman* lark? You've been on the board long enough to know my name.

ERIC: The players address you as *Mr Chairman*.

EDDIE: They aren't my Vice-Chairman, Eric lad. The rest of the board call me Eddie. It's time you fell in line. After all, how would you like me to call you *Mr Ottaway* morning, noon and night? Or *Mr Vice-Chairman*?

*Eddie chortles at this as though it is a hilarious joke. He swigs back his drink.*

ERIC: I expect I'm just old fashioned.

EDDIE: Old fashioned! And here's me ten years older than thee.

ERIC: Eleven to be precise.

EDDIE: Finicky as ever, Eric... Anyway, once we've got one of these exotic continental fellows I don't expect it'll be long before we see the glory days back here at Athletic... At least our share value ought to rise.

NOBBY: We haven't got one yet.

EDDIE: Haven't got one? Nobby lad, they'll be queuing up to manage a club like Athletic.

ERIC: I can't pretend I'm happy about the situation, Mr Chairman. We ought to have made more thorough enquiries before dismissing O Grady.

EDDIE: You were the one that wanted me to sack old Tommy.

ERIC: He was bringing the club into disrepute.

EDDIE: Eric lad, I've heard it called some things in my time. *You* reckon he was playing about with your missus. Now, as you know, I'm the last to stand for that sort of jiggery pokery, but there were never any proof. And now you've got the press hounds gossiping like a bunch of washerwomen on their day off.

ERIC: I had evidence enough, Mr Chairman. Anyway he was no longer doing the business, as they say.

EDDIE: Who do?

ERIC: The omniscient and all powerful pundits.

NOBBY: We didn't need them to tell us, Eric. His results spoke for themselves this season.

EDDIE: Aye, Nobby lad, but three Commercialships and two Multi-National Sponsorship trophies, including a double in six seasons is not to be sniffed at.

NOBBY: It was his lack of European success that did for Tommy.

EDDIE: Aye, but if anybody deserved to win the European Union Invitation League Trophy the season before last it were us. We outplayed Milano-Munchen in that final for one hundred and fourteen minutes. One hundred and fourteen minutes! Then six minutes from a penalty shoot out we were beaten by the flukiest golden goal you're likely to see in seven seasons.

NOBBY: I *was* there, Eddie.

*Eddie goes to pour himself another drink.*

EDDIE: Milano-Munchen! I reckon they should never have allowed clubs from different countries to merge. I mean, it don't make sense. Could you imagine us and Glasgow Albion merging? Our fans would never stand for it.

ERIC: What about our shareholders?

EDDIE: Nay, Eric lad, while ever I'm Chairman of Manchester Athletic it's our fans that come first... (*Eddie considers something.*) You know, lads, I'll not deny that sponsorships, stock market flotations, all seater stadiums and corporate hospitality haven't been good for the game, but I have to confess that there are times when I do miss the good old days of Dodger Davies.

ERIC: Dodger Davies?

EDDIE: Still the finest winger - nay probably the finest *player* - Athletic have ever had. Nobby'll remember him. In fact I bet you played with him, Nobby lad.

NOBBY: He was just before my time, Eddie. I was an apprentice. I expect I cleaned his boots.

EDDIE: And a privilege that were an' all. (*Nostalgically.*) Ah, it were a sight to behold seeing Dodger weaving down the wing. I've seen many a fullback stand with his knees

knocking like a pair of castanets with old Dodger bearing down on him. His ball control were so perfect you'd have thought it were welded to his bootlaces so you would... (*Dreamily.*) Ah happy days, lads!

NOBBY: Even though the lavs stank and the pies tasted like they'd been baked there.

*Lights down on them.*

*Lights up on Phil Gadsby, a teacher, watching a schoolboy football match. Gerald enters.*

PHIL: Come on, lads, let's see some movement off the ball! You're bunching that much anybody'd think you liked each other! Find some space and use it! (*To Gerald.*) Well?

GERALD: What do you think?

PHIL: Bastards! They wouldn't know a good teacher if they fell over one... (*To the players.*) Come on lads, show some effort! You can't be knackered until you're as old as me! Push and run! Push and run! (*To Gerald.*) What did old Maybury say?

GERALD: What *do* they say? "Greatest reluctance... Economic realities... Falling roles... Limited room for manoeuvre... Best interests of the school... Excellent references, Gerald... Rhubarb, rhubarb..." Tell me, Phil, why is it always rhubarb?

PHIL: Because it makes you shit?... (*He shouts to the players.*) Call yourself a goalkeeper, Atkinson? You'd be better playing netball with the girls!... On second thoughts they wouldn't have you! (*To Gerald again.*) After all the work you've put in with the under fourteen team.

GERALD: I was employed as a modern languages teacher, Phil. A *temporary* modern languages teacher.

PHIL: But you've done wonders with those lads. They'll really miss you.

GERALD: Trouble is our esteemed headmaster and board of governors won't.

*Phil shouts to the players again.*

PHIL: (*To the players.*) Good grief! That was schoolboy defending, Johnson. I know that's what you are, but we don't have it in this school!... (*To Gerald.*) So, me old mucker, what will you do now?

GERALD: I expect it'll be back to the old supply routine.

PHIL: Is that what you want?

GERALD: I'd rather have stayed here... Then again I'd rather have stayed in France.

PHIL: Why didn't you?

GERALD: I thought I'd told you.

PHIL: I believe you did. Something about Caroline not liking frogs legs wasn't it? ... (*To the players.*) Come on, Rogers! Stop poncing around like a fairy on a Christmas tree and get stuck in, lad!

GERALD: I'll never understand women as long as I live.

PHIL: How many poor sods have said that in the past, Gerry?

GERALD: I expect you don't even try to? I expect that's the secret of your success?

PHIL: They prefer you that way.

GERALD: That's not what they say.

PHIL: The secret is not to believe them.

GERALD: Haven't you ever thought of getting hitched, Phil?

PHIL: What and join the long face brigade?... (*To the players.*) Good God! Can't you even stay upright Johnson?... What?... Change your studs? You'd be better changing your game! Have you ever thought about playing tiddlywinks? No? Well maybe you should?... (*To Gerald.*) What are you going to do for your leaving do?

GERALD: Haven't really given it much thought.

PHIL: Well you ought to. You can't just fade away without a big bash as though you've never been here.

GERALD: Well that's what it feels like. The rest of the staff and most of the kids won't miss me.

PHIL: I will, mate. And those under fourteen footballers. If old Maybury and his bloody board of governors had any sense they'd recognise it. I expect most of 'em prefer rugby though.

GERALD: Funny, that's what Caroline said.

PHIL: She's really giving you a hard time isn't she, your trouble and strife?... Tell you what, mate, your leaving do. You leave everything to me. I'll make sure you get a send off to remember.

*He becomes involved in the match again as he shouts to the players.*

PHIL: (*To the players.*) Come on lads, let's at least try to keep a shred of respect!... Look out Rogers, he's after you! Man on! Man on, lad! Look out he's coming in hard!

*We hear a scream of pain.*

PHIL: Oh, no! That's another parent I'll have to avoid.

*He runs off towards the pitch as Gerald addresses the audience.*

GERALD: (*To audience.*) Phil's enthusiasm was infectious, but on the morning of my last day at school Caroline seemed to be in a particularly perverse mood, attacking her breakfast

grapefruit with gusto as though she fondly imagined the fruit she busily excavated was actually particles of brain from my skull.

*Caroline enters carrying a dish from which she eats grapefruit with a spoon. Lianne follows her with paper and crayons. She sits at the table and begins to draw as Gerald speaks to Caroline.*

GERALD: I'm not sure what time I'll be home this evening. I think Phil's organised a bit of a do for me.

*Caroline looks him over her dish, the spoon poised halfway to her mouth.*

GERALD: It'll look bad if I simply leave.

CAROLINE: Why should you bother about what they think? They don't care about you.

GERALD: Of course they do.

CAROLINE: Why are they sacking you then?

GERALD: They're not sacking me. I'm being made redundant.

CAROLINE: What's the difference?

GERALD: They don't have a choice.

*Pause.*

GERALD: We knew it was a temporary post when I took the job.

CAROLINE: Temporary posts usually become permanent if you don't do anything wrong.

You must have done something wrong.

GERALD: I didn't do anything wrong, Caroline. In fact I did everything right. I was a good teacher, so far as it was possible for a modern languages teacher to be in such an environment. The kids liked me. Well, no less than they disliked any of the teachers. I set homework and marked it. At least as much of it as I received back. I attended all after school meetings and parents' evenings. I didn't upset any parents by telling them the truth about their little darlings. And I even coached the under-fourteen soccer team to a reasonable level of success - the quarter finals of the Southern Regional Schools Cup.

CAROLINE: (*Sceptically.*) Hmm, it seems all those evenings after school were wasted.

Maybe you should have coached the rugby team instead?

*She sniffs and digs deep into the grapefruit.*

GERALD: I've asked you to come with me.

CAROLINE: In case you haven't noticed, Gerald, we do have a child to consider. *Lianne looks around ostentatiously as though searching for the 'child.'*

GERALD: I did tell you in plenty of time for you to have arranged a baby sitter.

LIANNE: (*Indignantly.*) Forgive me, daddy, but just who is this baby that needs sitting?

GERALD: (*Correcting himself.*) Child minder. (*To Caroline.*) Anyway, Caroline, it isn't the staff who are responsible. It's the governors' decision.

CAROLINE: Why didn't they come out on strike to support you?

GERALD: Really, Caroline, it's not -

CAROLINE: (*Interrupting.*) You hear about it all the time at other schools.

GERALD: Don't be ridiculous.

CAROLINE: And what about the parents and the pupils? If they're so grateful for all you've done for them with your precious football team, why don't they support you? Why don't they show some of this parent power and pupil power we're always hearing about?

*She leaves with a toss of her head. Gerald stands uncertainly before going over to look at Lianne's drawing. He picks it up.*

GERALD: That's wonderful, darling. It's so lifelike.

LIANNE: It has to be. It seems now it's the nearest I'll get to owning a pony.

*She walks off tossing her head exactly as her mother had done. Gerald stares after her helplessly.*

*Phil enters enthusiastically.*

PHIL: Come on, Gerry, let's go and sink a jar or three. I've passed the word around concerning which watering hole we've arranged to refresh ourselves at. You'll be surprised how many of 'em will be there.

GERALD: You're saying they hadn't really forgotten that I'm leaving?

PHIL: What do you think after your impact here? Come on, get your drinking gloves on.

*He drags Gerald off stage.*

*Lights down. Music to indicate a passage of time.*

*Lights up on Gerald and Phil sitting at a table in the pub. Manchester Athletic's latest match is being played on the television in the background. They have been there for some time.*

*Gerald is depressed. He looks at his watch.*

GERALD: (*Echoing Phil.*) You can't just fade away without a big bash as though you've never been here.

PHIL: It's early yet, Gerry. Give them time.

*Pause.*

GERALD: Caroline didn't want me to come, you know.

PHIL: Why not? Does she think I'm going to corrupt you?

*Pause.*

GERALD: She's started behaving rather bizarrely, Phil.

PHIL: (*Surprised.*) Really?

GERALD: Yeah, it's not the first time.

PHIL: (*Even more surprised.*) Really?

GERALD: Nothing outstanding, but the kind of thing you notice when you've been wedlocked eleven years.

PHIL: What kind of thing?

GERALD: Hanging *my* shirts in *her* wardrobe, folding odd socks together, putting coffee in the tea pot and tea in the washing machine. And most disturbing of all, looking at me in an accusatory manner as though hoping to extract a repentant confession for something I haven't done.

PHIL: You sure you haven't done anything you shouldn't have?

GERALD: Apart from being made redundant?... Maybe I shouldn't have taken her to France in the first place?

PHIL: Why's that?

GERALD: I never really told you, did I, Phil? Never properly explained how I ended up at Hellform Comprehensive?

PHIL: But you're going to?

GERALD: Don't you want me to?

PHIL: I expect you'll shut up when everybody arrives?

GERALD: And I expect I'll have time to tell the whole story half a dozen times over before even one of them appears?

*Pause.*

PHIL: (*Resigned.*) Go on.

GERALD: I guess it started when we were living in France. I was teaching English as a foreign language in St Brieuc.

PHIL: Where?

GERALD: An obscure spot in Brittany.

PHIL: How'd you end up there?

GERALD: We originally emigrated to Paris. Caroline loved the glamour of the capital, despite being much less fluent in the language than I was. However, our bank account wasn't so enamoured. After six months spiralling deeper into debt I heaved a sigh of relief when a provincial opportunity came up. I didn't want to leave La Belle France, but I had to get away

from Paris. However Hemingway and his coterie of starving artists survived there I can't begin to guess. Maybe they didn't have partners with expensive tastes? Naturally Caroline wasn't pleased with the idea of being prised away from the attractions of the Champs Elysee, but eventually, after much persuasion, I won her round, and for four quiet years we were model citizens of St Brieuc.

PHIL: So when did it start to go tits up?

GERALD: Well Caroline appeared to have accepted the move and our future seemed set fair, as we settled into the steady rhythm provided by a rural area. Unhappily, her limited command of the language didn't improve very much as she kept herself to herself, refusing to make friends or to look for work of any description. In Paris she'd occupied herself with some serious shopping; in St Brieuc, to my enormous relief, such expensive diversions weren't possible. I began to worry that she was developing agoraphobia, as she became loath to leave the house even with me, claiming that the locals didn't care for her.

PHIL: How did she know if she wouldn't leave the house?

GERALD: I've no idea, but the more she stayed in the weaker her grasp of the language became. When I tried to give her refresher lessons she would become frustrated, angrily demanding, "Why the hell should two English speakers have to talk to each other in bloody French?" Then she'd go to bed with a migraine.

PHIL: Ah, the old migraine!

GERALD: Even in our bleaker moments though we always had the consolation of our daughter. Lianne was growing up: pretty, bright and beautifully bilingual; just as her mother remained wilfully monolingual. In Caroline's migraine free times we began to try for another baby: a little sister or brother to complement our pride and joy. Unfortunately, it seemed we weren't to be so blessed again. Caroline suffered a miscarriage; for which she blamed the French health authorities, and she began to pine for the white cliffs of old blighty. When tests revealed that she wouldn't be able to have another child, her capricious love affair with Gaul was well and truly over.

PHIL: And so here you are?