

I'll Be Your Sweetheart

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Chapter One

The Bennett house was like bedlam on the Monday morning, for the alarm hadn't gone off and the family had overslept. While Molly busied herself making a pot of tea and toast, her husband, Jack, and youngest daughter Ruthie shared the kitchen sink for a cat's lick and a promise. And as they didn't have time for their usual leisurely breakfast, they each drank their tea standing up, and left for work with a piece of toast in their hand.

'They'll have indigestion all day, gobbling toast down like that,' Molly told the empty living room when she came back after seeing them off. 'I'll have to get another alarm clock; it's the second time that one's let us down in the last two weeks.' She began to clear the table. 'Mind you, we've had our money's worth out of it. I only paid a few bob for it when I bought it, and that was at the beginning of the war if my memory serves me right. So I shouldn't be moaning about it.'

However, when Molly walked through to the kitchen, and her eyes rested on the dolly tub, which was filled with clothes she'd left in steep over night, she decided a good moan was in order. 'Oh dear, oh dear, where shall I start? Would it be better to tidy and dust the living room, or get started on the washing?' She pondered for a while, her chin cradled in her hand as she

leaned against the doorjamb. Then, with a sigh, she straightened up and told the kitchen of the decision she'd reached. 'I'll do the living room first, 'cos yer never know, I might just have a visitor. Not that it's very likely at this time of the morning. And if by some strange chance I did have one, they wouldn't get a very warm welcome. Still, as me ma always told me, yer should be prepared for any eventuality, so I'd better make the room respectable.'

When Molly stood back half an hour later, she felt very pleased with herself. The living room was as bright as a new pin. The hearth gleamed, the aspidistra looked satisfied that the table it stood on in front of the window was highly polished, and you could see yourself in the shine of the sideboard.

'Not bad going, even if I do say so meself.' Molly nodded to endorse the self-congratulation. 'I'll have a quick cup of tea with a round of toast, then get cracking on the ruddy washing. It's been in steep all night, in soapy water, so by rights it should be clean enough to rinse.' She hummed as she lit a match under the kettle. 'Then it'll go through the mangle and be ready to hang out. There's a decent breeze out, so it should be dry enough to iron tonight.'

All went according to plan, for Molly was very methodical in her work, and at ten o'clock she was opening the kitchen door with a sheet over her arm and four wooden pegs in her mouth. She was about to step down into the yard when she heard a familiar voice. It came from three yards up, and belonged to her best mate, Nellie McDonough. A smile came to Molly's face when she recognized the tune. It was a song Laurel and Hardy had sung in a picture the two mates had been to see a few weeks ago. They'd laughed till they cried in the picture

I'LL BE YOUR SWEETHEART

house as they'd watched the antics of the two funny men, and they'd had many a laugh about it since.

Molly looked down at the sheet, was thoughtful for a second, then made a sudden decision. She did an about turn and made her way back to the kitchen where she spat the pegs into the sink before putting the sheet down on the draining board. Then, throwing off the washday blues, she hurried down the yard, closed the entry door behind her, and tiptoed over the cobbles to her mate's door. Nellie was still singing so loud she didn't hear her mate come up behind her, and she was startled when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

'Molly Bennett, yer stupid sod! Why did yer creep up on me like that? I nearly jumped out of me skin.'

'I didn't creep up on yer, sunshine, it was you what was singing so loud yer didn't hear me. Anyway, that was a nice welcome to give yer very best mate.'

Nellie's eyes narrowed. 'If yer were me very best mate, yer wouldn't have tried to give me a heart attack.'

'It would take more than me to give you a heart attack, Nellie McDonough, it would take a ghost . . . or the devil himself. Anyway, the reason I came up was for a bit of light entertainment. Anything is better than turning that ruddy handle on the mangle. And I could hear yer singing, so I thought I'd join yer. With the two of us, we could sing that song like Laurel and Hardy. You can be Stan, and I'll be Oliver.'

Nellie put the wet towel she was carrying over the clothes line. 'How can I be Stan, yer silly nit? He's as thin as a drink of water, while I've been blessed with this voluptuous body. So, I'll be Oliver, and you can be Stan.'

'Are we going to give it the full works, sunshine? The dance

as well as the singing? It would cheer us up for the rest of the day.'

Nellie's eyes disappeared from view as her cheeks moved upwards in a smile. 'Just the job, girl, just the job. I hate bleeding washday.'

Nellie's next-door neighbour, Beryl Mowbray, had heard the exchange and knew whatever Molly and Nellie got up to would be a laugh. Just what she needed to take her mind off the mound of clothes waiting to go in the dolly tub. As she'd heard Molly say, a little light entertainment would brighten the day. So over the yard wall she called, 'Hang on a minute, ladies, while I fetch a chair out to stand on. I won't be two shakes of a lamb's tail.'

'Well, the bleeding cheek of her!' Nellie folded her arms and they immediately disappeared from view beneath her mountainous bosom. And when she heard the sound of a chair being scraped along the yard next door, and saw Beryl's head appearing over the wall, she snorted in disgust. 'Yer've got a ruddy cheek, Beryl Mowbray. I've a good mind to charge yer tuppence for a ticket.'

Molly jabbed her mate in the ribs. 'We haven't got no tickets, sunshine.'

'Well, if we did have, I'd charge the cheeky article at least threepence. Just look where she is, girl! She's up there in the best seat in the house, and will see more of us than we'll see of ourselves.'

Beryl leaned her elbows on the top of the wall. 'Ye're dead right there, Nellie. I'm definitely in the best speck. If yer like, I'll give Mrs Harris next door a knock. Then yer'll have a proper audience.'

'If there's any knocking to be done, it'll be me what's doing

I'LL BE YOUR SWEETHEART

it.' Nellie rolled her sleeves up and made a fist to wave at Beryl. 'See this, missus? Well, if yer don't keep quiet and let me and me mate get on with a private performance, then this will knock yer off that ruddy wall. And it'll knock the bleeding smile off yer face, as well.'

'Nellie, will you and Beryl call a truce, please?' Molly asked. 'I came down for a little light-hearted amusement, to cheer meself up. But the mood is beginning to wear off.'

Nellie's face was transformed into a beaming smile. 'Yer've got a smashing way with words, girl. I wish I'd gone to the same school as you, 'cos then I'd be as clever as you, and understand what ye're talking about all the time.'

Her lips pursed and her head shaking slowly, Molly said, 'Nellie, sunshine, if I'd gone to the same school as you, and we were mates, I certainly wouldn't have the vocabulary that I have now. So as far as I'm concerned, it's thank God for small mercies.'

Nellie stared open-mouthed at her mate. Then, after she'd given the matter some thought, she asked, 'What was it yer said yer wouldn't have, girl? It sounded like "big belly" but I can't see yer saying that. Besides, it's me what's got the big belly, not you.'

Beryl was having the time of her life. At that moment she didn't care if the washing never got done. 'Molly said vocabulary, Nellie, but it's too big a word for you to understand, never mind get yer tongue round.'

Molly screwed up her eyes and through gritted teeth she groaned, 'Ooh, that was a bad move on your part, Beryl. Yer should have kept yer mouth shut. Nellie will have yer guts for garters now.'

The little woman was standing with her arms folded,

looking up at Beryl. 'Okay, clever clogs, now spell it for me.'

'Spell what, Nellie?'

'Yer know what word I mean, Beryl Mowbray, the one yer said I wouldn't understand. Just spell it for me. If yer get it right I'll eat me hat. Get it wrong and I'll knock yer off that bleeding perch for poking yer nose in where it wasn't wanted.'

Beryl chuckled. 'Nellie, I couldn't spell the blinking word if yer paid me. It took me all me time to say it. Yer see, queen, the school I went to must have been like the one you went to.'

Nellie asked herself if that sounded like an apology. Then, after due consideration, she decided it was good enough to let Beryl off the hook. 'Okay, girl, I'll let yer off this time. But keep yer gob shut, eh?'

'Oh, sod this for a lark,' Molly said, making for the entry door. 'I could have had me clothes on the line by now. I've got more to do than waste me time listening to two grown-up women acting like a pair of spoilt kids.'

For an eighteen stone woman, Nellie was very light on her feet. With her lips set in a thin line of determination, she covered the few yards in seconds. Grabbing Molly's arm, she pulled her back. 'Where the hell are you off to, girl? If ye're desperate to go to the lavvy, yer don't need to go home, yer can use mine. I won't charge yer.'

This was the outcome Molly was reckoning on. There was no way she was going back home until she'd done her little turn with Nellie. She was going to cheer herself up even if she killed herself in the process. 'I'm going home, Nellie, to get the washing on the line before it goes dark.'

Her hand flat on the door keeping it closed so Molly

I'LL BE YOUR SWEETHEART

couldn't escape, Nellie said, 'What are yer on about, girl? How can it go dark at bleeding ten o'clock in the morning?'

'It was ten o'clock when I left our house, sunshine. I was hoping to have a little singsong with yer, and a laugh, and be back putting me washing on the line by a quarter past ten. Thanks to you and Beryl playing silly beggars, I'm later than I expected to be, so I'm on me way to make up the time.'

'Over my dead body, girl, over my dead body.' Nellie did a perfect imitation of Oliver Hardy shaking his head and playing with his tie. 'Yer came here to visit me and have a laugh, Molly Bennett, and a laugh yer'll have. Even if I have to go upstairs and take that ostrich feather off me wedding hat to tickle yer with.'

Not to be outdone, Molly took on her Ethel Barrymore dramatic pose. With her body limp, and the back of a hand on her brow, she sobbed, 'Oh, not the ostrich feather, I beg of yer. Please have some pity on a poor widow who is about to be thrown out into the street because she won't let the landlord have his wicked way with her.'

'Don't be sad, girl, I won't let the landlord have his wicked way with yer.' This was right up Nellie's street and she was thoroughly enjoying herself now. 'I'll stand in front of yer, and I'll offer myself in your place. And when the landlord sets his eyes on my voluptuous body, he won't be able to resist my charm. So dry yer eyes, girl, for all is not lost. I am willing to sacrifice myself so you have a roof over yer head.' Nellie couldn't keep all the laughter back, and some escaped. 'While he's under my spell, I'll make a deal with him. He can have my body, in exchange for your roof.'

Beryl was quite taken with Nellie's performance, and she clapped with such gusto that the chair she was standing on

toppled over, and she was left hanging on to the wall for dear life. But it didn't stop her from gasping, 'That was great, Nellie, yer surpassed yerself. Yer were so good, yer brought tears to me eyes.'

'Thanks, girl, it's nice of yer to say so.' Seeing the predicament her neighbour was in, Nellie offered some advice. 'That happened to me once, girl, and it's a bugger when ye're left swinging. But what I did, I let meself down slowly, and I found the drop not nearly as bad as I'd thought. I landed on me backside, like, but it didn't hurt.'

They could hear Beryl's shoes scraping down the wall, followed by a loud groan. 'It was all right for you, queen,' her voice sailed over the wall. 'With the size of your bottom, yer had plenty of flesh to cushion yer fall. I bet I'll be black and blue tonight.'

'Get your feller to rub some cream on it when yer go to bed,' Nellie suggested. 'It'll make you feel better, and your feller will think he's won the pools.'

'Sod off, Nellie! The day I let my feller rub cream on me backside is the day I'll have given up on life.' Beryl's left buttock had taken the brunt of the fall, and she rubbed it gently. 'Anyway, he might enjoy himself so much he'd want to make a habit of it. And I couldn't be doing with that.'

'Oh, stop yer moaning and get round here.' Nellie showed no sympathy. 'Ye're holding the performance up.'

'I thought I heard Molly say she was going home to put her washing out?'

'Molly Bennett is staying in this yard whether she likes it or not.' Nellie nodded, forgetting her neighbour couldn't see through a brick wall. 'Even if it means carrying her under me ruddy arm.'

I'LL BE YOUR SWEETHEART

'You carry me, sunshine?' Molly kept her face straight even though the faces Nellie was pulling were comical. 'That would be no mean feat.'

'I didn't say nothing about yer feet, girl. Where did yer get that from?'

'I didn't mean feet, as in the two things I've got at the bottom of me legs. The feat I meant was when someone does an unusual act, sort of thing.'

Nellie threw her hands in the air. 'I give up. One of us is going daft, girl, and it ain't me. But before yer go completely gaga, can we bring Stan and Ollie on? They've been waiting in the wings and getting impatient.'

'Hang on a minute.' Beryl slipped through the yard door and closed it after herself. 'Wait until I've found meself a good speck, so I can see everything without getting in yer way.'

Nellie rubbed her hands together, a huge smile on her chubby face. 'Let's get the show on the road, girl.'

'Sure thing, sunshine.' Molly was always bucked up by one of her mate's smiles. 'Left foot forward and then step back, and sing in harmony.'

'In the blue ridge mountains of Virginia,
On the trail of the lonesome pine.
In the pale moonshine, our hearts entwine
As she carved her name, and I carved mine.'

Nellie moved like an eighteen stone ballerina, so light on her feet she seemed to float just above the ground as she and Molly gave a good imitation of the two much-loved comedians' well-known routine. And several back doors opened as neighbours left their washtubs to listen. The singing, plus their

imagination, put a smile on their faces. It certainly chased away the washday blues.

Beryl watched with hands clasped and body swaying as she sang along with gusto. She would have loved to tag on next to Nellie, but knew she couldn't watch and take part as well. And watching really was a treat. For Molly and Nellie had the actions and the facial expressions of Laurel and Hardy off to perfection. And the pleasure written on their faces told of their fondness for each other. Theirs was a friendship that no one would ever come between.

When the performance came to an end, the two mates held hands as they bowed to the applause from Beryl and their neighbours, who called for an encore. 'Sorry, ladies,' Molly called. 'But if I don't get me washing on the line pronto, it'll put me behind all day. We'll do it again for yer some other time.'

Beryl followed Molly into the entry. She'd never known anyone like the two mates before. You never knew whether they were serious or acting the goat. But she wished she was one of them. And if Laurel and Hardy had had another partner, she could very well have been.

When Nellie called to Molly's later, for their usual cup of tea, she was in high spirits. 'Ay, girl, next time we entertain the neighbours, I think we should sell tickets. Then we could buy ourselves two second-hand men's suits from the market and dress up.' She'd had this brainwave while she was hanging a sheet on the clothes line, and really thought it was a brilliant idea. 'We wouldn't half look good if we could dress up like them. We'd bring the house down at the party.'

I'LL BE YOUR SWEETHEART

Molly's eyes widened. 'Which party is that, sunshine? Nobody has said anything about a party to me.'

Looking the picture of innocence, Nellie said, 'The party when our Paul gets married.'

'Your Paul!' Molly fell back on her chair. 'I didn't know he was getting married. Him and Phoebe have only just got engaged.'

'I know that, girl! He's too bleeding slow to catch a cold, that's his problem. But he's bound to be getting married some time, so we could start looking for second-hand suits so we'll be ready when the time comes. Ye're always telling me off for leaving things until the last minute.'

'Nellie, I've only ever said that to yer when ye're late calling for me to go to the shops. There's a lot of difference between buying a pound of sausage for the family's dinner, and two second-hand men's suits, which would only be worn once.'

Her face deadpan, Nellie answered, 'They wouldn't only be worn the once, girl,' cos we could wear them for the christening party as well.'

'Which christening party is that, sunshine?'

'When our Paul and Phoebe get married, girl, that's when. I know I said our Paul was too slow to catch a cold, but I bet he's not slow when it comes to making a baby. Not if he takes after his dad, anyway.'

Molly shook her head as though dazed. 'I don't believe what I'm hearing. In five minutes flat, yer've married yer son off, and made him a father into the bargain! That's going a bit too far, even by your standards, sunshine. For heaven's sake don't mention it in front of Phoebe, she'd die of embarrassment.' Molly drained her cup. 'Come on, drink up, Nellie, before yer come up with any more crackpot schemes.'

Nellie put the cup to her mouth, but she didn't drink from it. She was too busy muttering under her breath that her mate had no sense of humour, imagination or adventure.

When Molly and Nellie entered the butcher's shop, they were greeted by their neighbour, Ellen Corkhill, who worked behind the counter in the shop. 'Ye're late today, ladies. Was the wash load bigger than usual?'

Tony, the owner of the shop, came through from the stockroom. 'I bet they've been jangling over their morning cup of tea. It's nice for some people, who don't have to slave all day, like me.'

'Oh ay, Tony, I know someone who's worked a lot harder than you.' Molly put a hand on Nellie's shoulder. 'My mate, here, has not only married a son off, she's made him a father as well. I bet that makes you feel as though yer've been working in slow motion.'

'Is your Paul getting married then, Nellie?'

Nellie's eyes went to the ceiling as she tutted. 'Take no notice of this mate of mine, 'cos she's got a cob on. And all because I wanted to buy a man's suit each, so we could do our Laurel and Hardy act better.' She spread her chubby hands as though asking for understanding. 'Now that's nothing for her to get her knickers in a twist over, is it?'

Tony winked at his assistant. They were in for a laugh now. 'I don't think so, Nellie. It seems to me that Molly is being very unfair to yer. And I'd like to help yer out. I've got a suit in me wardrobe what I haven't worn for ages on account of me expanding waistline. It would fit Molly, so that would be her fixed up as Stan Laurel. And if she's getting it for nowt, I don't see how she can complain.'

I'LL BE YOUR SWEETHEART

Nellie glared at him. 'I'm Stan Laurel, soft lad.' She jerked her thumb at Molly. 'She's Oliver Hardy. So yer wouldn't be doing me no favours.'

Ellen leaned across the counter. 'While you two are fighting it out, I'd like a quiet word with Molly. I've heard something from a customer that I think she'd want to know about. So you two carry on, and we'll move down the counter.' She gave a slight jerk of her head. 'Come on, Molly, it won't take a few minutes, and I know yer'd go mad if I didn't tell yer.'

'It sounds serious, sunshine.'

'It is, Molly, and I'm blazing mad, as well as being worried to death.'

Nellie's ear was twitching. 'Tell yer what, Tony, why don't we talk about yer suit another time? For if there's something going on, like dirty work at the crossroads, then I've got to stay by me mate. Yer see, it might be a job for the McDonough and Bennett Private Detective Agency.' The little woman followed her mate's example and leaned her elbows on the counter. 'What's all the secrecy, Ellen?'

Ellen kept her voice low, and her eyes on the door for customers. Tony was a good boss and she would never take advantage of him. If a few customers came in, she wouldn't leave him on his own to serve them. He deserved as much for being so good to her over the years. 'Have yer heard what's happened to Mrs Parker? The old lady who lives at the back of us?'

Molly shook her head. 'Why, is she ill?'

Once again Ellen's eyes went towards the door before she answered. 'Mrs Clarkson was in before, and she told me Mrs Parker hadn't been feeling well for a few days, so this morning she decided to have a lie-in. She must have been in a deep sleep

because she didn't wake up until eleven o'clock. And when she went downstairs, she found the living room had been ransacked and the front door was wide open.'

Molly's hand went to her mouth. 'Oh, the poor thing must have been petrified getting a shock like that. Especially at her age, and her not being well. Was anything stolen?'

'Whoever it was sneaked in, they must have got nerves of steel,' Ellen said. 'They stayed long enough to search every drawer and cupboard. Mrs Clarkson said things have been stolen, but Mrs Parker is too upset to look properly. She said she felt as though the house is dirty now some rotter has been through her things. One item she does know has gone, and she's breaking her heart over it, is her husband's fob watch. Yer know he was killed in the First World War, and that was the only thing she had left of his. And she's treasured it all these years.'

'What a lousy thing to do to anyone of that age.' Molly's anger was rising. 'The shock is enough to kill her.'

'I'll tell yer what, girl, I hope they find the bugger what done it.' Nellie's face was red with temper. 'I'll strangle him with me bare hands. Has anyone gone to the police to report it?'

'Mrs Clarkson's been to the police station,' Ellen told them. 'She was in a hurry to be served 'cos she wanted to be with the old lady when the police come. Not that Mrs Parker has been left on her own – all the neighbours are keeping an eye on her. There's been someone with her all the time, talking to her and making cups of tea.'

Molly stood upright. 'Serve us quick, will yer, Ellen, and me and Nellie will go there straight from here. We can get the rest of our shopping in this afternoon.'

I'LL BE YOUR SWEETHEART

‘What did yer want, Molly?’

‘I’ll make do with three-quarters of stewing meat, sunshine, and I’ll make a pan of scouse for quickness. Lots of veg and dumplings, it’ll be easy to make and go down a treat.’

Ellen turned to Nellie. ‘And what about you, love? What do you want?’

The little woman clicked her tongue and looked at Ellen as though she’d gone daft. ‘What sort of question is that, soft girl? Yer know damn well I always buy the same as me mate.’

Ellen grinned. ‘Only asking, Nellie! I mean, it’s policy in any shop for the assistant behind the counter to ask a customer what they want to buy. Otherwise, we could spend the day just gazing into their eyes and trying to read their mind.’

Nellie’s eyes narrowed and she touched Molly’s arm. ‘Would you say Ellen was being sarcastic, girl, or is it my bad mind?’

‘I don’t like taking sides, sunshine, but seeing as yer’ve asked for my opinion, then yer can hardly clock me one if I give it to yer. I would say that Ellen was well within her rights to ask yer what yer wanted to buy. After all, Tony pays her to stand behind the counter for that very reason.’

Nellie was all flustered. ‘I’ve been getting the same as you every day for the last twenty years, girl, and she should know that by now.’

Tony leaned over the counter until his face was on a level with Nellie’s. ‘For your information, Mrs McDonough, Ellen has only worked here for five years, not twenty. In fact, I didn’t own the shop twenty years ago.’

The heavy bosom was hitched up and the eyes became slits as Nellie pushed her face forward until her nose was almost touching Tony’s. ‘Listen to me, soft lad,’ she hissed. ‘You go and teach yer grandma how to milk ducks. I know yer haven’t been

here that long, 'cos me and me mate remember the man what had the shop before you. And a real gent he was too! Wasn't he, girl?' She glanced at Molly but didn't give her a chance to answer. 'Yeah,' Nellie repeated, 'he was a real gent. And he knew a real lady when he saw one, as well. Treated me and Molly like royalty, he did. And he always knocked a penny off anything we were buying. Whether it was a pound of stew or a leg of lamb, he never failed to knock a penny off.'

Molly, who was standing behind her mate, had eyes the size of saucers. 'In the name of God, Nellie, yer've either got a lousy memory, or ye're very good at making things up. I don't even remember the name of the man who owned the shop before Tony. But I do remember he was a miserable beggar. A smile would have cracked his face. And as for being a real gent, and very generous, well ye're miles out! I never looked forward to coming in this shop, 'cos there was never a smile or a greeting. And I don't know how yer can say he was generous with us, 'cos he was dead tight! He always sold us short, yer know that! At least yer should, for I still have a picture in me mind of you trying to climb over the counter threatening to strangle him. If yer legs hadn't been so short yer'd have made it, too, 'cos yer were blazing mad. Surely yer remember that, sunshine? Yer caused ructions in the shop.'

Nellie's smile was a sight to behold. 'Yeah, I remember that all right, girl. I really had me dander up that day. But it wasn't me short legs what stopped me getting over the counter, it was me knickers. I couldn't get me leg up high enough because the elastic had no ruddy give in it.'

Tony could picture the scene in his head. He knew Molly and Nellie very well; they were his favourite customers. He had also seen Nellie in action and was well aware of what she

I'LL BE YOUR SWEETHEART

was capable of. 'Nellie, just so I don't make the same mistake as my predecessor, and in the knowledge that it is quite possible you are now wearing a larger size in knickers, will yer tell me what the man did to bring about your probably justified anger?'

Nellie gaped. 'Bloody hell, girl, did yer hear that? He's either swallowed a dictionary or he made those words up as he went along. Would you mind translating them into plain English for me?'

'We haven't got all day, sunshine, 'cos I want to go and see Mrs Parker. So I'll make it short. Tony wants to know what made yer mad at the man who owned the shop before him. And make it snappy; we're in a hurry.'

'Right, snappy it shall be, girl.' Nellie stood to attention. 'Me and me mate were as poor as church mice in those days, lad, always counting the pennies. The day Molly's talking about, we'd asked for four sausage each, which is half a pound. And didn't the tight-fisted bugger cut half an inch off one of the sausages after he'd weighed them, 'cos he said they'd gone over on the scale.'

'And had they?' Tony asked.

'Had they hell! Me and Molly both had our eyes on the scale because we didn't trust him. And when I saw him cutting half an inch off one of my sausages, then off Molly's, well, I saw red. I would have throttled him if I could have got to him.'

'And that's it for now,' Molly said, pulling on her mate's arm. 'But so ye're not left wondering, Tony, I'll tell yer the end bit. The man really thought Nellie would do him an injury, so he put the two bits of sausage back in the wrapping paper. I imagine he thought it would be cheaper to do that than have Nellie wreck his shop, and him have a heart attack. And now yer know the outcome, we'll love yer and leave yer.' She

propelled Nellie towards the door. 'Come on, sunshine, shake a leg.'

The two mates were walking through the door when Tony and Ellen roared with laughter as Nellie answered, 'I can't shake a leg, girl. Me knickers will fall down.'