

PHILIP ARDAGH

UNLIKELY EXPLOITS



THE FALL OF FERGAL

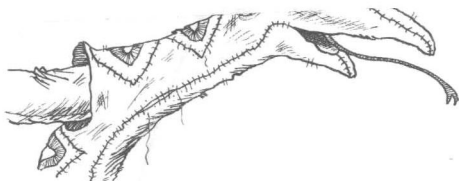
UNLIKELY EXPLOITS 14064262

The Fall of Fergal

or

Not So Dingly In The Dell

PHILIP ARDAGH



illustrated by David Roberts

ff

faber and faber

First published in 2002
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU

Typeset by Faber and Faber Limited
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved

© Philip Ardagh, 2002

Illustrations © David Roberts, 2002

Philip Ardagh is hereby identified as author of this work in accordance
with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise
circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is published
and without a similar condition including this condition
being imposed on the subsequent purchaser*

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-571-21069-4

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

UNLIKELY EXPLOITS 1

The Fall of Fergal

or

Not So Dingly In The Dell

When not writing silly books, Philip Ardagh is very serious indeed and frowns a great deal. He also sports a pair of those little round glasses that brainy people often wear. He is best known for the bestselling Eddie Dickens Trilogy, beginning with *Awful End*. *The Fall of Fergal* is the first of his new *Unlikely Exploits* series. He probably lies awake at night thinking: 'Why does no one take me seriously?' His wife is a Doctor of Philosophy, which means that she's far cleverer than he is, but he's bigger than her. So there.

*by the same author
published by Faber & Faber*

Fiction

Awful End

Book One of the Eddie Dickens Trilogy

Dreadful Acts

Book Two of the Eddie Dickens Trilogy

Non-fiction

The Hieroglyphs Handbook

Teach Yourself Ancient Egyptian

The Archaeologist's Handbook

The Insiders' Guide to Digging Up the Past

Did Dinosaurs Snore?

100½ Questions about Dinosaurs Answered

Why Are Castles Castle-Shaped?

100½ Questions about Castles Answered

For Rebecca McNally. No relation.

*And for my long-departed Great Aunt Phyllis, who
gave me one of the greatest gifts of all and never even
knew it. Thank you.*

A Word to the Wise

There's one thing we need to get straight before any of us get started – me with the writing and you with the reading – and that is this: no matter where you think the events in this book took place, you're wrong. Plain and simple. No room for argument. Just because I have the McNallys speaking English, it doesn't mean they're from an English-speaking country. If you're reading a translated version of the book, it doesn't mean that they actually spoke in the language you're reading either. No. The events in this book took place somewhere none of you has ever been. How can I be sure? Because I'm the author, that's how, and we'll hear no more about it. Discussion closed. And as for the McNallys' names, I know they're strange, but I can't go and change them just to make you happy, now can I? That's what they're called so you'll just have to live with it. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this, the first of their unlikely exploits.

PHILIP ARDAGH



Marley was dead; to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner . . . Old Marley was as dead as a door nail.

From *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens

Prologue

'Philip!'

What?

'Wake up.'

Huh?

'Wake up! The book's started!'

Started?

'Yes -'

What do you mean, started?

'We've already had the title page, copyright blurb, your "Word to the Wise", the dedication no one ever reads and the quotation.'

You mean . . . ?

'Yes, we're on to the story part!'

Blimey.

'You'd better get on with it.'

I'd better.

'Good luck.'

Thanks . . .



Chapter One

The very last words young Fergal McNally heard in his life were: 'Don't lean out of that window!' The very last sounds were probably the air whistling past his sticky-out ears as he fell the fourteen storeys, the honk of traffic horns below (getting nearer and nearer, of course), and – possibly – the 'SP' of the 'SPLAT!' he himself made as he hit the pavement. Fergal certainly wouldn't have heard more than the 'SP', though, because by the time the 'LAT!' part had followed, he would have been well and truly dead.

The person who'd shouted the 'don't-lean-out' warning, good and loud (but far too late), was Fergal's older sister Jackie. Jackie really was an *older*, older sister. Some people (twins, usually) have older sisters just minutes older than them. Lots of people have older sisters a good few years older than them, but Fergal's sister Jackie was old

enough to be his mother, which was kind of handy, because he didn't have a real mother. It had been down to Jackie to bring up the rest of them. You know: feed them, clothe them, stop them falling out of windows . . . that kind of thing.

Of course, their father could have brought them up, but he was a useless dad. He even went so far as to get a note from his doctor saying that he was 'excused parenting', and left everything for poor old Jackie to do. He kept himself busy by collecting empty bottles. They were full when he first got them but were certainly empty by the time he'd finished with them. He very rarely spoke to anyone except the man in the bottle shop and to shout at Jackie to tell her how useless she was at everything.

He would hide in what he called 'the back room', though it was more to the side than the back if you counted the front bit of the apartment as being the part that faced the road. He even had his meals in the back room, whilst Jackie fed her brothers and sister (once a day) around a big circular table in the kitchen.

Rufus McNally – that was their father's name – often liked to add to his empty-bottle collection during meal times and would attract Jackie's attention, to bring him another full one, by throwing something at the wall dividing the back

room (which was really a side room) from the kitchen. Sometimes it'd be a bottle he'd just emptied. Sometimes it might be a boot. Once he picked up the cat, but Smoky was no fool and, with a few swift strokes of the paw and claw, made it absolutely clear to Captain Rufus that she was by no means a cat of the throwing-across-the-room variety.



You see, Smoky was a working cat, not a pet. She let the McNally children stroke her and she let them love her, but they didn't feed her. (It's not that they were mean, it's just that there was barely enough food for themselves without feeding a cat

as well.) Smoky ate the mice and rats that were unwise enough to stop scuttling behind the skirting and make a break across an open floor.

Once Fergal's dad Rufus threw his own wooden leg at the wall to attract Jackie's attention. He'd looked around for something else to throw but couldn't find anything that wasn't furry and purry, so he'd unscrewed his leg and chucked it with such force that it not only cracked the plaster in the wall but also split the leg itself, right along the grain. Thereafter, it always looked like an overripe fruit with a burst skin.

In the days before any of the children (apart from Jackie) had been born, Rufus McNally had been not only a brilliant sailor but also a war hero. He'd been a happy smiling fellow whom – which is simply a 'who' with an 'm' on the end – everyone had been proud to know. He'd been awarded more gold medals for bravery than he had clean shirts to pin the medals on . . . and then he'd lost his leg.

He didn't lose his leg in the way that people lose umbrellas at busy railway stations. No, Captain Rufus McNally lost his leg in such a way that he couldn't simply go to the 'Lost & Found' and collect it. He didn't lose his leg in an explosion, and he'd been in many of those. He didn't lose it when he was clinging to wreckage in shark-infested waters, and he'd found himself in that

predicament on more than one occasion. He lost his leg on the fourth occasion he found himself in a sinking ship. On the previous three occasions he'd done heroic deeds to save others trapped as their vessels went down. On this final occasion it was he who was trapped. His ship had been torpedoed by an enemy submarine and was sinking fast, but he was going nowhere because his leg was caught under a mass of twisted metal.

So Captain Rufus McNally did a very brave thing. As the water poured into the cabin where he was trapped, knowing that if he couldn't free himself he would definitely die, he decided to cut off his own leg. Sorry, but there you are. I'd love to say that the solution was to skip happily with fluffy bunnies with nice music in the background, but this was war. And war is a 'orrible thing. If you don't want to know the details, look away until I tell you that it's safe to carry on reading.

Rufus grabbed a razor-sharp piece of twisted metal (that had once been part of a door frame to the boiler room, if you must know) and cut through his leg – and yes, he did have to hack through his own bone – as the rising water around him reddened with his own blood. At the end of it, he fainted but he floated free, and was rescued by some of his own men who'd made it to a lifeboat. They stemmed the bleeding – people never stop

the bleeding in war stories, they always 'stem' it – and, fortunately for Rufus, help was close at hand and he survived.

The down side was that he was a changed man. What Rufus McNally went through was unbelievably dreadful – I'd be a liar to tell you otherwise – but other people have been through even worse and somehow come out the other side as decent human beings. Rufus McNally, however, became bitter, sick and twisted – in that order (he'd tried twisted, bitter and sick but it didn't suit) – and it was then that he started to d-r-i-n-

Oh, hang on. I almost forgot:

IT'S OK TO START READING AGAIN, YOU SQUEAMISH ONES.

From being a popular hero, Rufus turned his back on all his old friends and colleagues and wanted to be alone. He had his war pension and, whenever he needed a bit more money, he'd have his wife (and, after she died, Jackie) sell another of his many medals. Poor Jackie. That was just another one of her jobs. No wonder she got a bit snappy sometimes.

Fergal and the other kids – his twin brothers Joshua and Albie and his sister Le Fay – sometimes called Jackie 'Jackal', which may have seemed a bit mean. Wouldn't you snap and snarl,

once in a while, with four younger siblings to look after and no life of your own? Probably. Although there may, of course, have been more to her name than that. Those of you who read on shall see.

But I'm pretty sure they all loved each other. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that I expect Jackie, Joshua, Albie and Le Fay (or, if you'd prefer them in alphabetical order: Albie, Jackie, Joshua and Le Fay) were really upset when their little brother Fergal ended up all dead like that. SPLAT!

The sad thing was that things were looking up for the McNally family at the time Fergal took a nosedive from the window. For a start, it was a hotel window from which Fergal fell and – although Fergal's other sister, Le Fay, was the only person who was supposed to be occupying the hotel room (it was a 'single') – they'd never been in the position before in which even *one* of them could legitimately spend the night in a hotel. And The Dell was quite a posh one. Le Fay had entered a typing competition and had won her local and regional finals. Now she was in the national grand finals and that meant a trip to the capital and a night in The Dell.

What is a typing competition? you may well ask. Well, although I've never actually been in one myself, because I can only type with two fingers, I think you'll find it's a competition to see who can

type the fastest, making the fewest mistakes whilst still laying all the words neatly on the page – that kind of thing. Now, it may not sound the most exciting thing to you. You may think that a kick-boxing competition or a fight with laser swords, or a motorbike competition might be more interesting, but it was a typing competition Le Fay had entered and reached the finals in, and there's nothing I can do to change that. Anyhow, her brothers and sisters were very proud of her.

Of course, their father wasn't in the least bit proud of her or her typing abilities. (It wasn't the typing part. He wouldn't have been in the least bit proud if Le Fay had run a mile in under one second or performed successful brain surgery on three patients all at once, either. He was excused being a parent, remember. All he cared about was himself.)

When Le Fay asked if she could go to the grand finals – she hadn't told him about the locals or regionals – he said that he didn't care what she did. When Jackie suggested that the rest of them go with Le Fay to give her support, their father said he wasn't going anywhere and, if he wasn't going anywhere, none of the others was going anywhere either.

So Jackie made a stand. She was a grown woman, old enough to be Fergal's mother, and