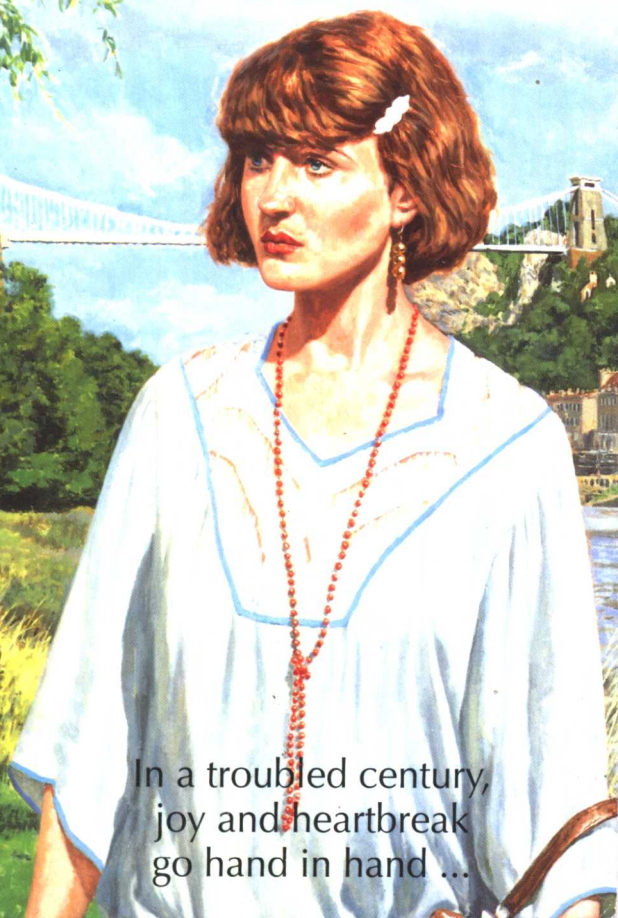


# SWEET AUBURN

BRENDA CLARKE



In a troubled century,  
joy and heartbreak  
go hand in hand ...

# *Sweet Auburn*

BRENDA CLARKE



WARNER BOOKS

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*Prologue*  
1900



The long-case clock in one corner of the room chimed midnight, its sweet, clear notes sounding loud in the silence. Almost at once, despite the tightly shut windows and heavy plush velvet curtains drawn closely across them, a faint noise of cheering could be heard outside. Some revellers were banging on saucepan lids; voices were raised in laughter and greeting as people emerged from their cottages, or the Ring O'Bells further along the village street. At the same moment, St Peter's bells rang out to celebrate not just the first day of a new year, but also the first few moments of a new century.

And what a century the twentieth promised to be, thought Arthur Burfoot, warming his coat-tails in front of his brother-in-law's fire. With England – the other nations of the British Isles counted for little or nothing in Arthur's book – riding high in all quarters of the world, with the tentacles of her mighty empire stretching around the globe, there was nothing that could not be achieved in the years ahead. What a truly glorious future lay before his two boys, three-year-old Donald and Ernest, a twelvemonth younger. There might be a little trouble in South Africa just at the moment, but the English were bound to win in the end. They always did; and it stood to reason that a parcel of Dutch settlers weren't going to get the better of the victors of Trafalgar and Waterloo, Sebastopol and Balaclava. He raised a glass of the best vintage champagne, which he had brought with him from Abbey Court, then noticed with irritation that no one else in the room was drinking. They were sitting, tense and strained, waiting for the first cry of the newborn child from upstairs.

Arthur slapped his brother-in-law on the shoulder. 'Come

on! Drink up! Your son's going to be the first inhabitant of Staple Abbots born in the twentieth century. Helena will be fine this time! If you're that worried, perhaps you should have attended her yourself, instead of bringing old Richardson out from Westbury.'

Marcus Gilchrist compressed his lips. 'It wouldn't be ethical, you know that. And Jack has always been her doctor. If I'm worried, it's because she's had three miscarriages in the past nine years, and she's not a young woman any longer. She's twenty-eight, for God's sake!'

The woman seated at the round table, a scattering of fashion periodicals on the red chenille tablecloth before her, gave a little cry of disapproval. 'Marcus! You know how blasphemy upsets me – and dear Helena. You shouldn't take advantage of her absence, particularly at such a moment.'

Arthur Burfoot nodded approvingly. 'Quite right, Mrs Jardine, ma'am. Quite right. Your brother tends to be lax from time to time in the company of ladies.'

Henrietta Jardine coloured prettily and fluttered her eyelashes. Her patrician features beneath the widow's lace cap were very like those of her brother, allowing for the fact that Marcus was ten years her senior and tanned from being out and about amongst the sick of the village in all winds and weathers. Her eyes were the identical shade of blue, her hair a similar fairish brown. At the ages of forty and thirty respectively, brother and sister were a handsome couple, like their late parents before them.

The same, however, could not be said of their elder sister, who had arrived at Rosemary Villa two days earlier from her Bristol home. At the age of forty-two, Josephine Gilchrist was used to hearing herself described as a 'fine figure of a woman'; which, as she herself was the first to admit, meant that she had a tendency to stoutness, offset by her commanding height. Indeed, her mother had always maintained that it was this Amazonian appearance which had frightened possible suitors away; while others, most notably her younger sister, held by the view that what scared the men

was Josephine's habit of always speaking her mind, plus her extremely radical opinions on almost every subject under the sun, but particularly on the role of women.

'We aren't meant to know about such things, Jo!' Hetty had often wailed in the past, as yet another young man had angrily quit the family home in Clifton after being told that his views on the Irish question were positively medieval, or that his notions on parliamentary reform would disgrace a child.

Their late parents had always backed Hetty. It was Marcus who had been Josie's ally; Marcus who, having become a doctor like his father, and nurturing a passionate admiration for reformers such as Lord Shaftesbury, had intended to devote his life to working among the poor. But Marcus, Hetty reflected with satisfaction as she glanced round the comfortable, almost opulent parlour furnishings, had slipped and fallen by the wayside; and in her opinion, very sensibly too. For what man in his right mind would not prefer a wholesome country practice, together with a pleasant house provided rent-free by his wealthy brother-in-law, to struggling among the disease-ridden Bristol slums? And what a blessing it had proved to be for her when, two years ago, darling Herbie had died and instead of finding herself a well-to-do young widow, she had discovered she was liable for heaven knew how many debts! For Captain the Honourable Herbert Jardine, late of the Coldstream Guards, had been an inveterate gambler, whistling down the wind not only most of his pay but also a modest fortune inherited from an aunt. And when, after his untimely death from liver failure, his aristocratic parents had made it plain that they wanted nothing more to do with a daughter-in-law socially their inferior, things might have been very difficult indeed. But Marcus and Helena had insisted that she come to live with them, an arrangement which suited both ladies admirably – one being in need of a comfortable home, the other looking for a companionship impossible to find in a husband with whom she had nothing whatsoever in common. Yes, it had

all worked out very satisfactorily, Hetty decided, turning the pages of her fashion periodical and noting that dresses for the coming spring would have even smaller waists, with lavish trimmings of lace or silk braid.

'Well, Hetty, how are you going to enjoy having a baby in the house?'

Hetty started nervously at the sound of her sister's voice. There was something very intimidating about Josie; there always had been. For one thing, she was twelve years older than Hetty, but it wasn't just that. Josephine Gilchrist was the author of a series of children's books which not only sold, but sold well enough to make their creator a financially independent female, still something of a phenomenon even though women in general were beginning to make their ideas and presence felt in a way unthinkable a decade or so ago.

'Oh, I shall be delighted,' Hetty answered. 'And I can be such a help to dear Helena, you know.'

'No, I don't know,' her sister retorted bluntly. 'You're years younger than Marcus and me, you've no children of your own, so how you can have any idea what to do with a small child is beyond my comprehension. On the other hand, you did live with Herbert for seven years, and I suppose he couldn't have had a mental age of much more than three.'

Hetty coloured indignantly. 'Really! That's a horrid thing to say.'

'But true, nonetheless.' Josephine regarded her sister with a smile of derisive affection. 'Are you happy here, Hetty? If you ever get tired of living in the country, especially in a spot as remote as this, you know you can always come back to Holly Lodge. It's your home as much as mine; it's the house we grew up in.'

Hetty barely repressed a shudder. The mere idea of going to live with her sister in the rambling house overlooking the Downs filled her with dismay. It had been enjoyable enough when dear Mama and Papa were alive and Marcus had been at home, but just her and Josephine? The very suggestion of

it was sufficient to make her turn pale.

Her sister's smile deepened. 'My dear Hetty, you need not look so alarmed. I'm not pressing you to come. I'm more than happy with my own company, as you well know. But you've always been one for city pleasures, and I was afraid you might be missing them. The back of beyond on Salisbury Plain is not, I should have thought, your ideal milieu.'

Hetty felt somewhat surprised at this observation because, until that moment, she had not seriously considered how remote the village was. Staple Abbots and its attendant hamlets of Lower and Upper Abbots were isolated, it was true, surrounded as they were on all sides by the vast, empty tracts of Salisbury Plain, much of which belonged to the War Office and was used in the training of soldiers. But so much went on in the villages during the course of a year, so many events which centred upon either the church or Abbey Court or the changing seasons, that there was little time to feel cut off from the mainstream of civilization. And the towns of Westbury and Warminster, at a distance of some six or seven miles, were only an hour or so's ride away by pony and trap, while Salisbury itself could be reached from either by that miracle of the nineteenth century, the railway.

'There is as much going on here as there is in Clifton,' Hetty replied with spirit, raising her voice just enough to attract Arthur Burfoot's attention.

'That's right, my dear Mrs Jardine! You set the record straight. City dwellers always think nothing happens in the country. You should take a long holiday here sometime, Miss Gilchrist. Do you good, put the roses back in those pasty cheeks. Just say the word, and I'll put a cottage at your disposal – rent-free of course – for the whole of next summer.' He chuckled richly. 'Might even find yourself a husband. There are a couple of widowers hereabouts looking to remarry.'

Josephine swivelled round in her chair until she was directly facing Arthur Burfoot, her blue eyes – a deeper and

richer blue than either of her siblings' – expressionless. Then she reached into a pocket of her navy-blue serge skirt and pulled out a silver cigar case. From this she extracted a cheroot which she proceeded to light by rising from her chair and kindling a taper at the fire. Drawing herself up to her full five feet, ten-and-a-half inches, she inhaled deeply before blowing out a cloud of smoke which made Arthur cough and splutter.

There was a moment's complete silence, even the noise from the street having ceased temporarily. Then, in spite of his worries about his wife, Marcus began to laugh.

Arthur rounded on him. 'You think it's funny, do you, to encourage your sister in such outrageous behaviour? Smoking is . . . is unwomanly! Not to be tolerated. She needs a man to school her. If ever I caught my Mabel smoking, I'd tame her, I can tell you!'

'For heaven's sake!' his brother-in-law snapped impatiently. 'Josie's forty-two. No one can treat her like a child.'

'It's all right, Marcus, you don't have to spring to my defence.' Josephine threw the remains of her cheroot on the fire and smiled grimly at Arthur Burfoot. 'These two widowers of yours,' she said consideringly, 'do they have this propensity for "taming" women? I suppose that could be rather fun.'

The silence this time was more profound, more outraged, and even Marcus slanted a swift, shocked look at his elder sister. Before anything further could be said, however, there was the sudden, unmistakable cry of a newborn baby from above their heads and, after what seemed an eternity, the patter of feet on the thickly carpeted stairs. A moment later Ellen Lightfoot, the kitchen-parlourmaid, who had been fetching and carrying for the doctor and midwife, burst into the room, her round, homely face wreathed in smiles.

'Oh, sir, please sir,' she gasped, addressing Marcus, 'the Doctor and Mrs Pollitt say will you come up, sir? The baby's born, sir. A lovely little girl.'

But Marcus had already gone, bounding anxiously up the

stairs. Arthur Burfoot frowned, a look of disappointment momentarily shadowing his face.

Josephine regarded him with amusement, no whit abashed by the animosity she had recently provoked. 'Dear, dear,' she mocked, 'another recruit to John Knox's monstrous regiment of women.'

Arthur pulled himself together. 'You're talking your usual nonsense, Miss Gilchrist. Another Burfoot, that's what matters. And I've two splendid boys of my own to carry on the family name. Besides,' he added with growing enthusiasm, as he detected a hitherto unrecognized advantage in the situation, 'she'll be just the right age for marrying either Donald or Ernest in twenty or so years' time.'

For a few seconds Josephine was bereft of speech, but having recovered her voice, she remarked ironically, 'How very stupid of me not to have thought of such a thing for myself! But of course she'll have to marry Donald, so that she can be mistress of the Staple Abbots estate. I'm sure dear Helena wouldn't want her daughter to wed a younger son.'

Impervious to sarcasm, Arthur Burfoot shrugged. 'Wouldn't matter if she did. The estate's not entailed ... never has been. I can leave it to whomsoever I like.' He grinned complacently. 'Good arrangement, as successive generations of elder Burfoots have discovered. Keeps the younger ones on their toes; none of them can take anything for granted.'

'A place for everyone and everyone in his place,' Josephine murmured, as she sat down again on one of the old-fashioned, balloon-backed dining chairs drawn up to the table. 'What an extremely well ordered existence you seem to lead.'

Arthur was saved from having to reply by the re-entry of Ellen Lightfoot, who bobbed a curtsy and said, 'Master asked would you like to come up one at a time, please, and see the baby? He also said to tell you the mistress is doing well.' And overcome by the sense of her own importance, she retreated hastily upstairs again to see if either Doctor

Richardson or Mrs Pollitt had anything further for her to do.

\*

The heat in the front bedroom of Rosemary Villa was almost unbearable. A huge fire burned in the grate, on which kettles of water needed for the confinement had been boiled. The four-poster bed, like the rest of the furniture, was made of mahogany, dark and heavy, while every available surface was crowded with ornaments and knick-knacks. The marble mantelpiece was draped with loops of blue silk plush. The wilder extravagances of home decor might be growing more restrained in towns, but the more affluent housewives of Staple Abbots preferred what they had grown up with, and change was slow to gain a hold. The cradle which stood beside the bed, looped and frilled with Honiton lace, had served the last four generations of Burfoot babies, and had been brought from Abbey Court several months ago in preparation for the new arrival. It was in vain that Marcus had protested that he would prefer something more modern; Helena had been close to tears at the mere suggestion, and her husband made to feel like a criminal for upsetting her in so delicate a condition. And like most women, she had made the most of her pregnancy, for it was the only time when men were of less importance than their wives. The feeling of power was exhilarating, and of all too short a duration.

Marcus's first thought on entering the room was for his wife, and as he bent over her the midwife drew back, but not too far. Her hovering presence was a reminder that her ministrations were more necessary than his caresses just at present, and a further proof, if one were needed, of female ascendancy in these matters.

'How are you?' he whispered, smoothing back a tendril of sweat-darkened hair from Helena's forehead. All the Burfoots had red hair of one shade or another, ranging from Arthur's fiery thatch, streaked as yet with only a thread of

grey, through young Ernest's carrotty mop and his brother's sandy curls, to Helena's rich, copper-coloured mane. And a glance at his baby daughter, lying in the crook of her mother's left arm, showed Marcus that she too was a Burfoot in this if nothing else, for the soft fuzz covering the tiny head could be described by no other word than auburn.

'Tired. Very tired,' came the faint response to his question, at which Mrs Pollett immediately took charge, elbowing Marcus unceremoniously out of her way, lifting the freshly washed and clothed little bundle from her mother's side and placing her in the cradle.

Marcus turned to Jack Richardson, who was still in his shirt-sleeves and looking exhausted from his labours. 'Is it all right if the others come up? Arthur will want to see the latest addition to his family.'

If the older man detected an underlying note of bitterness, he did not let on.

'Yes, but tell them only one at a time, and their visits must be brief. Helena's had a hard time.'

Marcus gave Ellen her instructions, then turned back to his colleague. 'Was it bad?'

'Bad enough for me to advise you, Marcus, that this must be her last attempt at childbearing. You will have to be satisfied with the one. I know how much you both hoped for a large family, but I'm afraid it's not to be. After those three previous miscarriages, it was touch and go whether or not she carried this child for the full nine months.'

'And thanks to you that she did so.' Marcus pressed the other man's hand. 'I can't tell you how grateful I am for all your care of her.'

The bedroom door opened to readmit Ellen, with Arthur hard on her heels.

'Come on, then!' he exclaimed jovially. 'Where is she? Where's this niece of mine?' Ignoring the midwife's frowns provoked by his hearty tones, he stooped over the cradle, parting the lace curtains adorned with white satin bows. 'Well, she's a beauty and no mistake.' He chuckled with

pleasure. 'And a proper Burfoot by the look of her hair. Now what colour d'you call that?'

'Auburn,' his brother-in-law admitted grudgingly, 'but it could very well change. Babies don't always keep the colour of hair they're born with.'

'She will,' Arthur predicted confidently. He turned his attention to his sister – that sister seventeen years his junior whom he had always regarded with an affection more paternal than brotherly, and who was the apple of his eye. 'Well done, my dear!'

The delicate, flower-like face crumpled and thin arms were raised to entwine themselves around his neck. 'Oh, Arthur, thank you. I was so afraid you'd be upset because the baby isn't a boy.'

Jack Richardson, packing away his instruments in his doctor's bag, glanced up at Marcus, noted his wooden expression and smiled to himself. The child he had just delivered might have the Burfoot colouring, but in the matter of upbringing she was likely to prove a Gilchrist if Marcus had his way. And if it came to a battle of wills, he would bet – if he were a betting man, that was – on Marcus outfacing both Helena and her brother; for whatever Arthur Burfoot liked to think, his brother-in-law was a very determined man, the more so because Marcus had betrayed his principles by coming to Staple Abbots in the first place. He would resist allowing himself to be compromised again. The doctor looked at his watch; it was gone one o'clock. He touched Marcus on the shoulder.

'I must be off. I'll drive over in the morning, but in the meantime Helena will be in Mrs Pollitt's capable hands.' The midwife smiled complacently. 'Let Helena sleep as much as she can.' Dr Richardson broke off, chuckling. 'Listen to me! Teaching my grandmother to suck eggs. Are you coming downstairs now, Arthur? The quicker Mrs Jardine and Miss Gilchrist see their niece and your sister, the sooner Mrs Pollitt can get them settled for the night, or what's left of it. By the way, a Happy New Year to you all!'

He left the bedroom accompanied by Arthur, who promised his sister that he would also be returning in the morning; and by the time Josephine had trailed upstairs after *her* sister, and added her congratulations to those of Hetty, Marcus heard the wheels of the doctor's pony-trap rattling away from the house on its homeward journey across the Plain. He stooped and kissed his wife a second time, but Helena was already drowsy, soothed by the flickering firelit patterns playing over the carpet and walls.

'Excuse me, Doctor,' Mrs Pollitt whispered as he wished her good night, 'what name have you and Mrs Gilchrist decided on for the child?'

Marcus hesitated, recalling that their discussions on this subject had been perfunctory, all Helena's concentration being centred on male names, so certain had she been that the child she was carrying was a boy. There was no urgency in the matter; it could perfectly well wait until tomorrow when Helena could make her wishes known. But the memory of his wife clinging to her brother, together with Arthur's confident assertion that the child was a Burfoot, made him say, 'Eve. We shall be calling her Eve, Mrs Pollitt. It was my mother's name.'

The midwife nodded approvingly. 'That's nice. And fitting somehow, for someone born on the first day of a new century.' She peeped into the cradle with a proprietorial air. 'Bless her! You can't imagine them growing up and growing old when they're as young as this, can you? Just think! If she lives to be a hundred, she'll be celebrating her birthday on the first day of another century. Fancy that!'

Marcus smiled. 'But not just the first day of another century, Mrs Pollitt, the first day of a new millennium! The year two thousand. Now that really is a thought. She'll have seen out a thousand years that started with Ethelred the Unready on the throne of England and the Norman Conquest still sixty-six years away.' He saw by the midwife's blank expression that she found it difficult to assimilate such a length of time, and added kindly, 'Don't worry about it.'

It's all a long time ago. And if Eve should live to be a hundred, one thing's sure; you and I won't be here to see it.'

'That's true enough,' Mrs Pollitt answered briskly. 'Good night then, Doctor. I hope you have a peaceful night without any calls of your own.' And she turned to build up the fire before making herself comfortable in the armchair until such time as either Helena or the baby should need her. Ellen Lightfoot had long since been despatched to her bed in the small attic room next to that of Mrs Kellaway, Rosemary Villa's housekeeper-cum-cook.

Marcus thanked her and went downstairs, where he found his elder sister in sole possession of the parlour, smoking a cheroot.

'Your brother-in-law asked me to say his farewells for him, as he had to get back to give Mrs Burfoot the glad news; she apparently insisted on waiting up until his return. Hetty has gone to bed with one of her nervous headaches, but whether this was brought on by the excitement, the lateness of the hour or my reprehensible conduct I should be afraid to hazard a guess. I just hope I don't wake her when I go up.'

Marcus poured himself a brandy, then sat down opposite her on the other side of the fire, which was almost out.

'I'm sorry you're having to share with Hetty, but now the baby's born I'm afraid I'll be using the guest room for a while.'

Josephine finished her cheroot and threw the stub on the coals. 'No more than I expected. And I'm the one who should be offering apologies for my conduct tonight.'

Her brother smiled. 'Don't be sorry. I rather enjoyed your passage-at-arms with Arthur, even though you did perhaps go a little too far.'

'Pompous creature!' Her eyes kindled. 'How dare he imagine that every woman's goal in life is marriage with a man!'

Marcus threw back his head and laughed. 'Honestly, Josie, the things you say! If we're talking about marriage, what other alternatives are there?'