

MARTHA'S GIRLS

By Alrene Hughes

Chapter 1

It was difficult to know what Martha Goulding was thinking as she stood in the warm kitchen with her hands in the baking bowl rubbing the flour and margarine into breadcrumb consistency. Perhaps she worried about the small amount of meat in the pie compared to gravy, or the rush to get the girls' tea ready on the table when they came home, so they could be washed, changed and out again for seven o'clock. She added water and, with a deft touch, worked the pastry into a pale yellow ball. Wiping her hands on her apron, she checked the range and stooped to shovel nutty slack into the fire.

Maybe she thought about the fact that she wouldn't be able to pay the coalman when he came for his money on Friday night. Robert hadn't been well and he'd missed three days at the shipyard. A carpenter didn't earn a great deal anyway and his pay packet this week wouldn't keep a family of six. The eldest girls, Irene, Pat and Peggy, earned poor wages, but they always handed over their pay packets unopened. Maybe when Sheila was old enough to work, there would be no need to hide from a different tradesman every week.

Somewhere pushed to the back of her mind there was probably the thought that everyone had in the fading summer of 1939 about a man called Adolf Hitler and his armies and his plans, but she could do nothing about that. There were potatoes to peel, carrots to scrape, pies to be made and time was getting on.

Irene knew she'd been away too long, but there was no point in hurrying back. The foreman would tell her off for taking ten minutes to go to the lavatory, so she might as well take fifteen and make a detour. The weaving shed, where the huge cones of thread were woven into cloth, was noisy and lint clogged the air. She counted herself lucky she worked in the finishing room, where the linen goods were hand painted. Better to be a brushie with paint on her hands, than a stitcher sewing all day, or worse, a weaver going home with lint in her hair.

She found him at last leaning against a loom wiping oil from his hands.

'Hello, Sean.' His smile alone was worth the telling off. 'Your Theresa wants to know if you're going straight home after work.'

'Oh aye, and why would she want to know that?' His eyes narrowed in mock suspicion, but the smile stayed the same. Irene felt the colour rising in her cheeks and lowered her eyes as though an answer lay on the dusty floor.

‘You might be going down town or something and she could tell your Ma to keep your tea warm.’

‘You can tell our Theresa I’m not goin’ anywhere the night.’ He returned to cleaning his hands.

The silence stretched between them until she said quietly, ‘I’d better be getting back.’

‘But Saturday night, might be a different matter altogether.’ His tone was friendly enough, but she suspected he was enjoying her embarrassment. His gaze moved from her face down to her paint-splattered overall. ‘I’ll probably get myself smartened up and down to John Dossor’s; maybe have a few dances with a nice looking girl.’ He pushed himself off the side of the loom and winked. ‘If I see one that is.’

Irene watched him go, enjoyed the slight roll of his shoulders, too subtle to be called a swagger, and wondered if he might even dance with her, if she ever got the chance to go to Dossor’s.

‘So... the wanderer returns at last. Have we enjoyed our morning constitutional, Miss Goulding?’ Alan Briggs was a squat little man, old beyond his years with a look of Herr Hitler about him.

‘Not feeling too well, Mr Briggs, you know how it is,’ said Irene holding her stomach.

‘Aye, well, in that case you can work through your break this morning. Give your insides a rest.’ And with that he went out into the yard, leaving Irene to click her heels and give the Nazi salute to the closed door.

‘You didn’t happen to see our Sean on your dander did you?’ Theresa asked.

Irene picked up her brush. ‘I might’ve seen him talking to someone in the yard.’ Theresa looked suspiciously at her best friend, but said nothing. There were things she kept from Irene too and sometimes it was just easier to change the subject.

‘What are you going to wear tonight then, Irene?’ asked Theresa without looking up from the blue periwinkle petals she was painting. Irene raised her dark head and scanned the room to make sure the foreman hadn’t returned

‘It’s a lovely blouse, with puff sleeves.’ Her hands shaped the outline on her shoulders. ‘A bit gathered at the neck and a bow in the middle.’

‘Is that so?’ Pat Goulding caught her sister with a piercing stare.

‘I can wear what I want.’ Irene’s defiant words were not matched by her quiet tone.

‘Look, we all agreed that we have to be dressed the same when we sing tonight.’

‘But those cardigans Mammy knitted make us look like school girls. I want to look a bit more glamorous.’

‘For goodness sake, Irene, it’s a church and we’re singing hymns. We’re not in a dance band!’ As far as Pat was concerned that was the end of the discussion. She dipped her brush in the jar and swished it, turning the water bright yellow.

Irene mouthed, ‘A dance band?’ at Theresa and the two of them began to sway from side to side, then their toes tapped out a rhythm and Irene sang under her breath: *‘Come on and hear, come on and hear, Alexander’s Ragtime Band.’*

The swaying passed round the group, more voices joined in, the painting stopped and under the table their feet moved in dance steps. At the end of the second verse, Irene nodded at Pat who smiled in spite of herself and took up the difficult change of key. As the singing reached its climax the sound finally registered with Alan Briggs, foreman of the Ulster Linen Works who hurriedly pulled up his trousers, flushed the privy, and with the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ under his arm, ran back across the mill yard.

Margaret Doreen Goulding, known to everyone as Peggy, leaned on the counter of Goldstein’s music shop and, not for the first time, congratulated herself on finding a job so well suited to her talents. She loved every part of it, even the dusting and there was plenty of that. For a start, there were the pianos, six uprights and a stunning baby grand, then the gramophones and radiograms, big as sideboards. Next the records, which all had to be flicked with her feather duster.

There were few customers in the shop in the morning, so she had time between the dusting to read the record labels. Even the titles were beautiful, ‘Pennies from Heaven’, ‘Paper Moon’, ‘Begin the Beguine’, like poetry. Best of all, she could choose which records to listen to while she worked.

She straightened her skirt and checked the seams of her stockings then stepped out of one shoe and bent her leg back to rub her aching foot. Shop work was hard on the legs, especially in high heels, but Mr Goldstein expected her to look smart, that’s why he’d taken her on. That and the fact that when he interviewed her, he realised she knew far more about popular music than he did, what would sell and what would lie on the shelves because it wasn’t catchy enough. Goldstein had been selling musical instruments since he arrived in Belfast in the early twenties; in the thirties he expanded into sheet music then, when he acquired the lease on the shop in Royal Avenue, he added gramophones, records and, finally, an assistant. In doing so, Goldstein made it clear he was counting on Peggy to help him make a handsome profit this year. She was just lowering the needle onto the latest Ella Fitzgerald, when the shop bell rang and Goldstein hurried in.

‘Peggy, fetch me a cup of tea, will you? Hot, strong and black, you know how I like it.’ His accent was a curious mixture of tight Polish consonants, overlaid with the nasal Belfast vowels he had acquired since arriving in the city as a young man. He seemed agitated and his face was pale and clammy. In his hand was an envelope.

‘Are you all right Mr Goldstein? Has something happened?’ Peggy lifted the needle off Ella.

‘My sister in Warsaw has written that things do not look good.’ He pulled an immaculately white handkerchief from his breast pocket and rubbed it over his face. Peggy wanted to ask where Warsaw was and what things didn’t look good, but decided to make the tea first. When she returned he was re-reading the letter. ‘Forgive me, Peggy.’ He managed a half-hearted smile. ‘My sister is convinced Hitler means to invade Poland and no one will stop him.’

So that was it, war talk. Peggy was sick of it. Every night her father would go on about the Hun and how they’d been beaten in the Great War and just let that upstart Hitler step out of line and he’d get what was coming to him. Now she was expected to listen to it at work!

‘My father says the British government will stand up to Hitler.’

‘Ah yes, the British government...’ The half-smile again. ‘Well, we shall see.’ He seemed to shake himself, took a sip from his tea and went to check the cash register. ‘Now, how has business been this morning?’

‘I sold half a dozen records and a few pieces of sheet music.’

He nodded, satisfied.

‘But that’s not all. A customer enquired about the baby grand. Very well dressed he was. I asked him if he played. He said he didn’t; he was thinking of buying it for his wife.’ Peggy enjoyed the look of panic in Goldstein’s eyes. The baby grand was the most expensive item in the shop and it had been sitting there, polished and elegant, for nearly six months. Peggy watched him wring his hands at the thought of the lost sale before adding, ‘I played for him. He looked like a classical music lover, so I gave him a little Mozart, ‘Eine Kleine Nachtmusik.’ She watched the relief spread over Goldstein’s face before adding, ‘He said he’d be back in the morning to discuss the sale with you.’

The meat pie was in the oven and the potatoes peeled and waiting in a pan of cold water ready for a light under them. The scallions were chopped up small and soaking in milk. Martha had just finished washing the dishes when she caught sight of someone pass the

kitchen window. She heard the latch and expected someone to call out. Silence. She wiped the soap suds on her apron and opened the door. He was standing quite still, head lowered, shoulders slumped.

‘Robert, what are you doing home?’

In reply he lifted his head and in that moment she took in his grey face, his rapid breathing.

‘What’s happened? Have you been hurt?’ She helped him to the armchair.

‘No, no.’

‘What is it then?’

‘I had a bit of a pain again this morning, like last week when I thought I had indigestion.’ He went on, squeezing the words out between difficult breaths. ‘We had to shift some big planks of hardwood, me and Jimmy. I thought I’d be all right...’

‘Did you strain yourself?’

‘No it wasn’t the carrying. I wasn’t right before that. Sure I haven’t been right for over a week.’ His breathing was a little easier now, but the awful greyness was still in his face.

‘I’ll make you a cup of tea.’

She watched him closely as the kettle boiled. He didn’t move, not a muscle. ‘There you are, love.’ She handed him the cup and noticed his lips were tinged blue. He drank a little, then let out a low groan and doubled over. The cup slid from his hand landing with a crack on its handle, tea spreading in a pool at his feet. In a moment, Martha was on her knees, cradling him as he rocked back and forth in agony.

‘I’m getting the doctor,’ she whispered, but his hand tightened on her arm.

‘No. I’ll be all right. We’ll not waste half a crown on a doctor.’

Martha reached out and pushed back the thick dark hair that had fallen over his sweating brow and as she did so she saw the blood-specked spittle in the corners of his mouth.

‘No, Robert, I’ll nip round to Mrs. McKee and ask her to fetch him. She won’t mind.’

He didn’t argue.

Martha didn’t think to take off her apron; she certainly didn’t take a coat or a scarf for her head. The McKees lived two doors down and Martha ran straight round the side of their house and tried the back door. Locked. She looked through the kitchen window. Everything was tidy, no sign of anyone. For a moment Martha thought about Robert’s face, his pain.

How far was it to run, half a mile? He'd be all right on his own; she wouldn't be long. Anyway, she realised with relief, Sheila would be home from school any time soon.

Joanmount Gardens was a long winding street of grey pebble-dashed semis with neat privet hedges just off the busy Oldpark Road where trolley buses ran into the centre of Belfast. Martha prayed that one would appear, but none did. There was nothing else for it, but to run. I'll be back in less than twenty minutes, she thought, then realised, with a stab of shame, that she was still in her slippers.

About the time Martha lifted the brass knocker on Dr. Patterson's door, Sheila lifted the latch at Joanmount Gardens and by the time she heard the sound of her knock reverberate around the doctor's empty house, Sheila was at her father's side.

When Martha failed to find the doctor at home she wasn't sure what to do. Then she heard a sound coming from the back garden. It was the housekeeper, beating a rag rug hung over the washing line for all she was worth.

'Thank goodness you're here,' said Martha. The woman looked her up and down, taking in the slippers, the apron and the wisps of hair that had slipped from the clasp at the back of her head. The doctor, it seemed, had been called to a child with suspected mumps, but the housekeeper agreed to send him to Joanmount as soon as he returned and she was as good as her word, for he pulled up outside the house just as Martha reached her gate.

Sheila, her eyes wet with tears, stood up as they came in. The doctor immediately crossed the room and raised Robert's bowed head. Martha looked into her husband's staring eyes and felt her knees give way.