

## ***When Martha opens the door***

She opens the door, and there is a man in uniform. Two men. Behind them, Harold, looking defiant, and Stanley, looking sheepish – and Ethel, her frock and boots all over mud. ‘You get out to the wash house and get that clean my girl’ she says to Ethel, who now she looks closer is definitely crying, and the first man says ‘So these are yours then?’ and ‘We’d better come in missus’, and she asks what’s happened, and he says ‘Best we tell you while you’re sitting down’, and ‘What about Fred here makes us all a nice cuppa, that’s a good idea isn’t it, back through the hall I’m thinking Fred, plenty of sugar, that’s right’, and in they troop. And the shutter starts to slide across, and the first man, the one in the police blue, catches her and then she’s sitting down and Harold is calling ‘Eth! Eth! get some brandy’. He kneels down and makes sure she drinks it, he’s a good boy really, only a bit wild, but what can you do, and she tells the policeman ‘They only went to the picture show’, and he says ‘Yes well that’s probably the problem, and Fred here will tell you all about it’. And she sees that Fred is from the railways, at least his jacket says so, and he says ‘Well they nearly put me in my grave, I tell you that for nothing, and I wouldn’t have believed it if you told me about it as a yarn’, and the Policeman says ‘Now nobody got hurt missus, but I reckon Fred here will be having nightmares for a while’. ‘We saw it in the pictures Ma’ says Stanley, ‘and we thought we would give it a go’. ‘What?’ she asks. He’s too easily led that’s his trouble and Harold all too ready to egg him on, but how did Ethel get involved? ‘Too much of the melodramas’ says the Policeman, and she doesn’t understand. ‘You know’, he says, ‘*The perils of Pauline*, that kind of thing, like in the old song. ‘And the great big saw, came nearer and nearer and nearer and nearer to poor little Vera!’ he sings and she is bamboozled. ‘I come out of the tunnel’ says Fred, ‘and there I seen it, the little girl, down on the tracks’. ‘They’d only tied her to the railway line’ says the Policeman, ‘just a good thing Fred here managed to stop the engine’. ‘You what?’ she screams at Harold and Stan, her Stan, too easily led, ‘What do you think you were doing?’ ‘It was only a game Ma’, says Harold. ‘You wait till your Pa gets home’ she shouts at him, right in his face. ‘You’ve gone too far this time, you’ll be the death of me you kids you really will’ and the Policeman says ‘Yes well maybe we’ll leave you to it, come on Fred’, and off they go.

She opens the door and there is a man in uniform, and his hat says ‘Telegraph Office’ and yet he has Harold’s face and he is grinning. ‘Look Ma aren’t I just the cat’s miao?’ And she says ‘Why aren’t you at work? You know the trouble your Pa had getting you that position at the drapers’ and he says ‘But Ma, I got this much better job and look: it comes with a bicycle and all’, and he rides around the garden to show her, and she says ‘Mind my hydrangeas’. And he pulls an envelope out of his satchel, and takes out a half crown, and says ‘Look Ma: it’s for us! Just you and me!’ And she says ‘What is it, a tip?’ And he says ‘No, I got this new job, and it pays 12/6 Ma, a whole 12/6, and that’s half a crown more than the old job at Willis’s, and we can keep giving Pa the 10 shillings, and you and I can share the rest, isn’t that a corker?’ And she says ‘Well it might be until he finds out, and then he’ll kill you, you know how much trouble it was for him to get old Mr Willis to take you on, what with your reputation around the neighbourhood’, and Harold says ‘Don’t go on Ma, he won’t find out’, and rides off

around the hydrangeas again saying "Look! Look! I can even do handstands!" and she says 'You'll be death of me you really will' but this time her heart's not in it because she's thinking that Herbert certainly will find out, he always does, and then there'll be what for.

She opens the door and pulls it to behind her, and there are men in uniform, a Police sergeant and a constable, and they say 'Ready are you Missus?' and she walks out in her best hat and gloves, past the hydrangeas and down a whole row of boys looking just like Harold in Telegraph Office uniforms with their hatbands and all wearing gloves and holding on to their bicycles like a guard of honour at a wedding, and the men from the rowing club, and the lifesaving, and the rugby, all there, with their hair plastered down neat and their team emblems. And they form up into a procession and she steps up to the front and off they go. And the Vicar is waiting, and he says to her 'Now, you know that it won't be a proper Bible service, the dust and the ashes, but just a form of words to mark his passing', and she nods and looks across at the stone, and Harold's name cut just as she asked, and she says 'Yes yes, that's just what I expected, I thank you', and he begins. And she thinks of how for the whole year she had hoped, because with them not having found any body even after them dragging the harbor as Pa had insisted there was always hope, but not now, not now with the weight of the stone and the words, even with there being nothing underneath. And then the shutter starts to slide but she makes it stop, 'not in front of Harold's friends' she thinks, 'at least I can do that for him, stand here, even if his Pa won't'. And the stone stands, and she visits it every week with some flowers, and she thinks 'So where are you then? Because you certainly aren't under there'. And the time goes by.

She opens the door and there is a man in a uniform, tall and thin and suntanned, and in a sailor suit. 'Hello Ma' he says, and grabs her for a kiss, and he has a whole bunch of bananas in his hand, and on his shoulder a monkey in a little red jacket. And the shutter slides across and he says 'Whoa Ma - no need for that!' and the monkey screeches and runs and hides in the hydrangeas. She says 'Where have you been? Where did you go?' and he laughs and says 'Everywhere Ma, I went everywhere,' and then Ethel is there, and she is crying, and someone sends for Stan from school, and together they wonder who's going to tell Pa. And they show Harold the stone, with his name and his date of birth, and she says 'Now it will have to come down again', and Harold laughs, and says 'Not so fast Ma, it can stay until I need it. Sure as eggs, I'll be needing it some day'.

And she opens the door, and there are two men there in uniform, in khaki, with their lemon squeezer hats, and they both salute, and she sees that it's Harold and Stanley and they've only gone and signed up. She looks at their boots, their shiny brown boots, polished to a level she could never persuade them to at home, and she looks at their belts and their buttons, and Stan says 'Hal's going to be with the horses, Ma, and I'm in artillery', and she says 'You can't be with anything Stan, you're still too young' and he says 'They said I can start the training though Ma' and she says 'We'll see what your Pa has to say', and then knows he'll say yes.

She opens the door, and there is a boy in a uniform, with a hat that says Telegraph Office, and at first she's confused, and thinks it's an old friend of Harold's, but then he hands her the telegram, and it says on the front OHMS, and the shutter slides, and then she is saying 'No No, really I'm all right', and he's saying 'Are you sure Missus', and 'Is there anyone I can get to be with you', and she says 'It's all right my daughter is here', all the time thinking what use will Ethel be, really she's worse than me, constantly worried about her Barney, and her still only a girl. And she thinks I'll wait for Pa, he can open it, and then she thinks no, no, not knowing is worse, and she opens it herself. And it begins 'Regret to announce', and she knows that it is bad, and Ethel is there, and she's saying 'Is it Barney, Mum is it Barney?' and she says 'No of course it isn't Barney, it's Harold, your brother Harold, they say he's been gassed, at the Somme', and then Ethel goes into hysterics.

The door opens, and this time it's Pa goes to answer it, and then his steps come rushing back into the kitchen where she's cutting up gravy beef, and he says 'Martha, Martha', and he never calls her that anymore, and he says it again: 'Martha: it's Harold, it's a telegram, it's another telegram, and he's in Paris'. And the shutter starts to slide, and he says 'Now stop that, he's safe, he's all right, they're taking him to a hospital in England, and he's all right', and she thinks well he's out of it now, he's safe, he's in hospital. In England. And Pa makes tea, and they send a message to Ethel, and Pa arranges for someone to go and tell Stan. And she goes outside, quietly by herself, and she thinks about how it's going to be all right, and she picks the hydrangeas, and puts them into a vase, one of the brass shell cases Stan has brought home for her, fills it right up, strips all the bushes, because now everything is all right.

And she opens the door, and there are two men in uniform, in khaki with red hat bands, and she thinks 'It's military police, who can they be looking for?' And one of them says 'Excuse me Ma'am, are you Mrs Williams?' And she says 'Yes', and he says 'I'm sorry to have to inform you,' and she says 'No no, you have the wrong person, because Harold is in hospital in England and Stan is still here, he's at camp in Trentham, he doesn't have an embarkation date as yet', and the Sergeant says 'Yes, ma'am, that's Private Stanley Williams ma'am, I'm afraid there's been an accident ma'am', and she says 'Is he hurt? What's happened?' And he says 'Well it appears there was an explosion ma'am, a real big blast, we have people looking into it, nobody knows yet what went wrong, but it's clear that he didn't stand a chance'.

And the shutter slides, and this time it stays down.