

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Crooked Mile

Ruth Hamilton

About the Book

In the shadow of the Althorpe mills, the Myrtle Street residents endure cramped and often verminous conditions.

Joe Duffy, a Bolton tradesman, strives to lift his family out of the 'garden' streets. But as more children are born, Joe's wife Tess sinks deeper into the obsession that will be her undoing. When Tess screams her belief that the area is cursed, few people heed her ravings. She is ignored, even as the Myrtle Street tragedies become more frequent and begin to feature in local gossip.

It is left to Megan, the third Duffy child - the one who felt she was unworthy and unloved because she had been born a girl - to end the curse. When she becomes embroiled in a web of deceit, Megan needs all her strength, talents, and wit in order to survive. But it is her capacity to give love that ensures her family's stability, the future of the Althorpe cotton mills, and the safekeeping of the Hall i' th' Vale.

For more information on Ruth Hamilton and her books, see her website at:

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About the Author

Ruth Hamilton was born in Bolton and has spent most of her life in Lancashire. Her novels, *A Whisper to the Living*, *With Love From Ma Maguire*, *Nest of Sorrows*, *Billy London's Girls*, *Spinning Jenny*, *The September Starlings*, *A Crooked Mile*, *Paradise Lane*, *The Bells of Scotland Road*, *The Dream Sellers*, *The Corner House*, *Miss Honoria West* and *Mulligan's Yard*, are all published by Corgi Books and she is a national bestseller. She has written a six-part television series and over forty children's programmes for independent television. Ruth Hamilton now lives in Liverpool with her family.

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A WHISPER TO THE LIVING
WITH LOVE FROM MA MAGUIRE
NEST OF SORROWS
BILLY LONDON'S GIRLS
SPINNING JENNY
THE SEPTEMBER STARLINGS
PARADISE LANE
THE BELLS OF SCOTLAND ROAD
THE DREAM SELLERS
THE CORNER HOUSE
MISS HONORIA WEST
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A CROOKED MILE

Ruth Hamilton



CORGI BOOKS

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For Figaro and Charlie . . .

also
for their lodger, Carol Smith,
who happens to be my agent.

Thanks for all you do for me, Carol.

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Thanks to

David and Michael, my sons.

Diane, my editor.

Margaret Mullin, my sanity.

Joe Mullin, my wheels.

Amber, Benny and Scooby, my foot rests.

PART ONE

ONE

He was a tall, spidery man with thin limbs, black clothing and dark, greasy hair. Agitation made him jerk about, as if the arachnid he imitated tried to escape from a web of its own making. 'Can't you keep still?' he roared. 'I've come miles for this and your mams have paid me for the trouble. That lad at the back - yes, you!' He pointed a skeletal finger at the culprit. 'Have you got St Vitas' Dance? You're like a bloody puppet, you are.'

Billy Shipton, who had never kept still in his short life, made an attempt to take in some air. 'I can't breathe,' he managed. 'Me collar's too tight.' He had been the owner of the rigid Eton since his first communion, and he was two years bigger now. Mam had scraped his neck with carbolic and scrubbing brush, and this felony had been compounded by strangulation and two sharp slaps to the ears.

The photographer inserted his plate and glared at the purplish face that belonged to Billy Shipton. There were at least a hundred children in the frame, toddlers squatting on the cobbles, two rows kneeling on uneven stones, their faces twisting with agony. The only decent expressions were the property of those at the back, some seated, some standing on the pavement, the rest balancing on forms borrowed from the Methodist hall. Billy Shipton, on a back row bench, had inserted the tip of a finger between throat and collar. 'You are spoiling the picture,' yelled the impatient stranger. 'Undo the stud for him, somebody.'

The 'somebody', in the shape of Elsie Shipton, leapt across the street and yanked the miscreant to the ground. 'Showing me up,' she wheezed as she removed the offending fastener. 'Again. Always showing me up, you are.' Elsie was a martyr on account of her chest, and the level of her children's sufferings depended on the state of her

breathing. As this was a bronchitic day, she clipped the lad once more, the plump hand making his cheek even more colourful. 'Keep still,' she snapped. 'Then your collar will look fastened.'

Billy reclaimed his position, pushing others out of the gap that had closed during his brief absence. The resulting movement had a domino effect, causing three or four subjects to go missing from the ends of the rearmost bench.

The photographer threw up his arms. He couldn't understand why the residents of a slum wanted a picture in the first place. Myrtle Street in Bolton was not a location worth remembering. This particular warren of terraces sported a bouquet of misnomers, Myrtle, Ivy, Holly. There was even a Blossom Place, twin rows of mean houses that had never seen a petal or a blade of grass. Folk hereabout called these the 'Garden Streets', a name that was at odds with the dingy area.

Oh well, it wasn't up to him. It was a job that would pay at least four shillings, so he would just get on with it. 'On the bench, please,' he ordered in a quieter tone. 'And will the little ones try to smile?' The pain in their knees was showing in great round eyes and downturned mouths. 'Just another minute,' he coaxed. 'Then you can get back to your games.'

Megan Duffy, who was seven (eight next time, she kept telling herself) and seated, knew that the smile had frozen on her face. If the wind changed, she would spend the rest of her life grinning. It was cold, very cold for June, but she was going to be brave. Everybody else could look as daft as Billy Shipton, but she was going to come out like a lady. Five more members of the Duffy family were dotted about the group, while the seventh was in the house, too young to be photographed. Megan was clean. She was tired after ironing since five in the morning, but she was polished to perfection, as were her brothers and sisters.

While the spidery man messed about with his wonky tripod, Megan took a furtive look around to check on her

brothers and sisters. Annie and Nellie – eleven and ten respectively – were dressed in frocks belonging to Mam. They were in the back row, so overlong skirts and loose waists would not show in the photograph. Megan had a bleached and starched apron over her grey school frock, while the twins, Harold and Albert, had been forced into cruel Eton collars that nipped the skin of their necks. It would soon be over, Megan thought. Then she would be able to free her brothers from the vice-like grip of celluloid. Harold and Albert were special and had to be looked after, because they were the only boys. Little Freda, the next-to-youngest, was at the front in Megan's communion frock. Where was Phyllis? Megan wondered, her head twisting back and forth as she searched for her best friend. Phyllis Entwistle, who lived at number 7, seemed to be missing and —

'What's the matter with you now?' yelled the nasty man. 'You,' he shouted, a bony digit pointing towards Megan.

'I was looking for me brothers,' she mumbled.

'Keep still,' he screamed.

Megan could feel her skin heating up. She had what her dad called a 'paddy', and this temper of hers always started in her cheeks. While roses burned bright on her face, her stomach tickled, as if the words were bubbling behind her ribs. Sometimes, she managed not to speak, but keeping silent often meant several trips down the yard until her stomach stopped tickling. 'You're too slow,' she answered. 'We can't stop here all day, sir.' The 'sir' was added to show that she was polite and well-brought-up.

He almost toppled the precious equipment. Cheeky young madam, she was, with the snow-white frills starched to attention on narrow shoulders. Like the rest of them, she was a thin-boned street urchin, a creature of no importance. And any minute now, the babies would start howling, so he had better hold his tongue, attempt to ignore the brat. He

clenched his jaw, bit down hard into the lower lip, squashed his impatience.

He studied the upside-down group in the frame. This was not his forte, not by a long chalk. Studio work was more in his line, engaged couples arranged in front of trees on a painted backcloth, a tasteful pillar in the foreground, perhaps an urn on a plinth. Children came to the studio, of course, but they usually came singly, quietly, in the company of a parent who would shoulder some responsibility. Indoors, he just had to shove his head under a cloth, wave a doll or a toy, capture the smile when it eventually arrived. It did not occur to him that his appearance was daunting, and that most young ones found him ugly to the point of terror or fascination, usually a mixture of the two. Here, he was visible, was not yet hidden in folds of black cloth. 'Don't be rude,' he advised Megan somewhat tardily. 'When everybody is still, I'll take the picture.'

Megan swallowed, knew that she had been naughty – even if she had called him 'sir'. But she was tired, worn out after lighting the fire, making porridge, changing the irons for Nellie and Annie, taking over at the table when the older girls needed a rest. Ironing twelve sheets and clothing for eight people plus one baby was wearying. Mam usually did it, but she was in bed with the newborn Hilda. Hilda was a big disappointment because she was another girl.

When the photograph was finally taken, a corporate sigh of relief came forth from the assembled multitude. Mothers leapt forward to grab offspring dressed in 'Sundays', while a fight broke out among a crowd of lads who had tumbled from a Methodist bench. Elsie Shipton grabbed Billy, separated him from his collar, marched him into the house and slammed her door. The rest of the Shiptons had escaped, had refused point blank to be framed for posterity. So she had paid tuppence towards a photo of just one of her children, and him in an undone collar, too. Well, she would

give them all a pasting by bedtime, so she worked to control her breathing, then pushed up her sleeves in order to prepare the ham-like arms for the imminent fray.

Megan led the twin boys into number 13. Harold and Albert were luckier than some of the smaller boys, because they were old enough, at six years of age, to be breeched. Many of the little lads had been photographed in frocks, so that when the devil visited, he would pass them by. The devil wanted boys, not girls. Megan raised her eyes to the ceiling. Mam wanted boys, too. Because she was just another big disappointment, Megan Duffy made herself useful by removing collars, combing hair, changing boots for clogs. 'You can go up now,' she said.

Harold and Albert climbed the stairs, a bit of pushing, pulling and light banter accompanying the ascent. When they had disappeared into Tess Duffy's bedroom, Megan crept up the flight so that she might listen to what she was missing by being a girl. The smile in Mam's voice was audible. 'Eeh, my lovely boys. Come and have a look at your little sister. Don't push like that, Harold. Be nice to your brother, he's just as important as you are.'

Megan nodded sagely to herself. Harold was always the pusher, while poor Albert was often the pushed. Harold wasn't nice. As if agreeing with Megan's thoughts, Hilda, who was three days old, began to wail. On the stairs, the baby's big sister wished she could remember being in a bed with Mam, all warm and snug in a shawl and bonnet. Mam never touched her girls. She was polite to them, reasonably kind to them, but she never showed any love. Albert and Harold got all the attention, all the fussing, while the female members of the Duffy clan just got on with the difficult task of living in near-poverty. The Duffys weren't really poor, though. Megan comforted herself with the knowledge that Dad had a bit put by. And they never went hungry, not like Phyllis.

Still, it was hard work for the Duffy girls. The twins did not go to the shops, never swept, polished, cleaned grates, kneaded bread, got scalded by the 'whites' water. Albert often volunteered, but was excused labour on account of being one of Mam's little soldiers. And when Tess Duffy gave one of her boys the top off Dad's egg, there was sometimes a little bit of yolk left in it. But Megan wasn't jealous, no, she didn't resent the fact that a pair of superior beings had arrived when she was just a year old. Although a bit of yolk would have been nice . . .

Tess Duffy smiled at her sons, gave them the orange. This piece of precious fruit had been presented to her by Joe. Tess's husband always bought her fruit after a confinement. She thought about her life while the orange was peeled, segmented, divided into two exact portions. That rest had been lovely. From 1914 until 1918, she had had no husband. A husband away at war had meant no children and, although she loved Joe dearly, the pattern of yearly childbirth looked as if it might establish itself once more. At the outbreak of the Great War, Tess's children had numbered six. The seventh had just arrived, was yet another girl, and there would probably be a repeat performance within the foreseeable future.

She watched her sons as they devoured the sweet flesh. If this carry-on carried on, she'd be dead inside five years. Each time, the birth got a little harder, a lot more painful. Eventually . . . No! She couldn't die, couldn't leave her boys. Or the girls, she told herself firmly. They were good women in the making, her daughters, folk who would make excellent wives one day. And she'd done it right just once. In 1913, she'd produced not one, but a pair of lovely baby boys.

Tess looked down at the babe in her arms, another screwed-up scrap of blonde, pink-faced humanity, another mouth to feed. Megan was the only Duffy with dark hair, probably a throw-back to Tess's own raven-haired mother

who had died many years ago. Tess's mother had died in childbirth . . . She wouldn't think about it, would concentrate on . . . on what? Bug marks on the walls, fungus round the window? No, she could look at her twins.

They had finished eating and were staring at her, Harold's blue eyes expectant, as if he wanted another gift from her. 'There was only the one orange,' she said apologetically.

Harold grinned. Harold was the one with dimples in his fatter face. 'Can we go to the park?' When begging a favour, Harold was always pretty. Albert just kept his eyes fixed on Mam's face, waited for the outcome of Harold's wheedling.

'It's dangerous,' replied Tess. 'You'll have to go with Annie or Nellie.'

Harold looked to Albert for some backing, got no help. He was soft, their Albert, too gentle for his own good. Well, Harold would manage on his own, just as he always did. He studied Mam, estimated her tiredness, waited for the right moment.

Tess found herself wandering again. There'd been a three-year gap between Nellie and Megan, a long wait for another son who hadn't turned up. Perhaps that would happen again. Perhaps she might remain childless from now on, fruitless and free from pain. Still, after Megan, she'd had the twins and . . .

'Mam?'

'What?' Harold was going to be a winner with the girls, she thought.

'Annie and Nellie are doing bread. They got the flour this morning and the yeast, so they'll be stopping in. It's Bolton holidays, we want to go to the park. Can't our Megan come with us?'

Megan. Megan was sensible up to a point, dreamy and distant once she forgot that point. 'She's only seven, only a year older than you two. Megan can't mind you, she's—'

'She's clever and she makes me laugh,' said Albert. The love for his sister shone brightly in his narrow face. 'She's a

good looker-afterer.'

Tess was drained. The birthing of Hilda had been a tortuous process, very slow and wearisome. 'Be safe,' she said, her lids drooping towards sleep. 'And tell our Megan to wear an old pinny.' She'd found Megan in a book somewhere, had chosen the name for its sound, like a breath of soft air on a summer evening. Megan. Lovely name, lovely girl. She drifted off on a cloud of exhaustion, the tiny Hilda still nestling in the crook of an arm.

Megan, in the middle of sorting sheets for repair, was accosted by one of her brothers. 'You've to take us,' announced Harold, his dimples deep and charming. 'Mam said.'

Megan was not charmed, not in the least. 'I'm sewing.'

Harold, sure of his ground, chortled. 'No, you're not. You've not started sewing yet. If you don't take us out, I'll tell Mam and that'll be you in trouble again.'

Nellie wandered into the kitchen, sleeves rolled in readiness for pummelling dough. 'Do as you're told, Megan,' she said mildly. Annie and Nellie were Mam's posse, her deputies when it came to organization. Annie and Nellie were already old, tired of a life that promised to be nothing short of drudgery. Annie came in with two bowls and some rising-cloths, bits of muslin that were used as covers for fermenting bread. 'Get gone, Megan,' said Nellie's clone. 'Mam'll be needing her rest for a few days. You know how noisy boys can be.'

Albert placed a hand on Megan's arm. 'You don't need to take us,' he whispered. He wanted to go, needed to get out of the house, yet he couldn't bear to see Megan looking as fraught as the other two girls. Megan was only seven, but she didn't seem to be having a childhood. 'Any road, if you do go with us, you can play with your skipping rope.'

Megan grinned at her favourite person. Albert was keener about the face than his twin, serious, inclined towards generosity. 'We'll go for an hour,' she answered. 'Then when

we've had some fresh air, I'll do a bit of mending.' At seven, Megan achieved the finest seams, the neatest darning in Myrtle Street. She even earned the odd penny for 'take-ins', items of mending brought from other houses in the area. Sometimes, she wished she weren't such a good needlewoman, because close work was tedious and hard on the eyes, especially at night under a flickering gas mantle. If she weren't so good at sewing, she might have more free time. 'Come on, then,' she said. 'Back way out, I'll get me rope.'

On their way down Back Myrtle Street, Megan stopped outside the gate of number 7 and begged a favour. 'I just want to call in at Phyllis Entwistle's,' she said. Megan's social sphere was narrow, so she grabbed her chances when they arose. 'You'll have to come in, 'cos Mam doesn't like you left on your own.'

Albert nodded his tacit agreement, waited for Harold to erupt.

'I'm not going in,' announced the larger twin. 'Their house stinks.'

Out of loyalty to Mam, Megan chose not to inform him that the smell in number 13, though different, was just as bad. Everybody's house smelled of something or other. 'You'll do as you're told,' she said firmly. 'Me and Phyllis are down for church cleaning next Saturday, so I've got to make me arrangements.' She smiled, satisfied that she was sounding so grown-up and important. 'Harold, I'm in charge, do as you're told.'

The Entwistle house was less crowded than theirs, though poverty cast its grey shadow in every corner. The fireless grate wanted leading, and the horsehair rocker was ripped in several places. There were only three Entwistle children, and those children had a mam but no dad. Ernie Entwistle was one of the many who never came home, one among thousands buried under foreign soil.

Ida looked up from her darning. She was a tiny woman with thin arms, thin hands, thin hair. Everything about her was sparse, as if she'd been shoved to the back of the queue when bits and pieces were being given out. 'Hello, love,' she said to Megan, the voice as reedy as the rest of her. 'Our Phyllis is in bed, she's not well.'

Megan smiled, took the darning mushroom and the sock, began to mend the small hole. She kept a corner of an eye on Harold, though, because he looked as if he might just dash out of the house at any minute. When the neat weaving was accomplished, Megan begged permission from her pale hostess, then took the twins up the stairs to visit her very best friend. At a paint-starved bedroom door, she turned on Harold. 'Listen, you. Be nice to Phyllis, 'cos she's not well and she's got no dad and—'

'Why?' Harold wore one of the more cherubic of his many beguiling expressions.

'He's dead, is Phyllis's dad and—'

'Why?'

Megan tapped a toe on cracked oilcloth, tried to keep her voice low. 'He died in the war.'

Harold nodded. 'Like our dad got the shrapnel in his leg, and Phyllis's dad got it somewhere else, like in his head or —'

'Yes.' Megan prayed that the lad would shut up. She wasn't fooled by their Harold, not for one minute. Albert was worth ten of Harold, yet—

'Or in his stomach, all blood pouring out.' Harold smiled, well satisfied with himself.

Yet everybody seemed to love Harold, Megan concluded. 'Shut your mouth this minute, Harold Duffy. You're a nasty piece of work, you are. I sometimes wonder how our Albert manages to be so nice when he's your twin. Just behave yourself.' Her arms had crooked themselves into a shape copied from Mam and Nellie and Annie, who often stood with balled fists pressed just below their waists, elbows

pointing out sideways. 'One wrong word to Phyllis and I'll set our Nellie on you.'

Harold's eyes narrowed. Nellie was strong and was usually on Megan's side. Nellie knew how to inflict pain without leaving a mark. 'None of you can hurt me,' he said loftily. 'We're not to be hurt, me and him.' He jerked a thumb in the direction of 'him'. 'Cos we're boys.'

Megan inclined her head. 'Our Nellie goes to confession every week. She tells the priests how bad you are. And she tells them about smacking you when Mam doesn't know.' She sniffed, was becoming a professional sniffer, almost as adept as her older sisters. 'And Father O'Riley says you need your hide tanning. So our Nellie's in the clear.' In the Duffy house, word from beyond the confessional door was law. 'Our Nellie will clobber you,' ended Megan, her tone still soft.

'I'll tell me mam.' He tried to sound defiant, though the words wavered slightly.

'And I'll tell Father O'Riley. So there.' Megan's tongue stuck so far out that the root hurt. She opened Phyllis's door, looked at the three tumbled beds, two empty, one occupied, dragged Harold to Phyllis's bedside. 'He's at it again, Phyllis, trying to rule the roost.' She kept her tone as normal as possible, tried not to let confusion show in her voice. Compared to this child, Ida Entwistle had looked well, even robust. 'Are you poorly?' That was a daft thing to ask, she thought.

Phyllis nodded. 'All over. I ache all over. And . . .' She swallowed, her face crumpling inward against the pain. 'Me neck's sore, me throat. I can't hardly drink nor eat, talking hurts. Sore, I'm sore.'

Megan felt as if she were riveted to the spot. She wanted to run, needed to escape from the pitiful sight of her dear friend, yet she was immobilized by some invisible force that seemed to pierce her body from skull to toes. She cleared her own clogging throat. 'Has the doctor been round?'

Phyllis closed her eyes. 'No. No money.'

Mental arithmetic was not Megan's favourite subject, but her head rattled with the sound of coins stored in a box beneath a certain loosened floorboard. There was a silver thre'pence, four farthings and a couple of ha'pennies and pennies. It was her mending money, the bit she'd kept back from Mam. Not that Mam minded, of course . . . She shouldn't have bought that packet of broken biscuits at the Co-op. Fivepence, she reckoned. No, it might be sevenpence. Would a doctor come for that price?

Galvanized into action, she said a quick 'ta-ra' and followed her round-eyed brothers to the landing. 'I've got to go home,' she explained. 'I need to get some money for the doctor, fetch him up to Phyllis.'

Albert touched his sister's arm. 'Is she going to die, Megan?'

'I hope not.' Megan hoisted the slipping apron up a narrow shoulder where it found poor purchase, slid down again. 'You two stop here. Go round the back and wait for me under the lamp outside number one's gate.' She could sneak into number 13 by the front door and get past Annie and Nellie without their seeing her. They would be up to their eyes in flour anyway, too busy to look for further problems.

Minutes later, she found herself staring breathlessly into an empty box. Harold had found her money again. She kept moving it from one hiding place to another, and he kept finding it. Long fingers curled themselves round cardboard, flattened the box, tossed it back into its useless niche. Sometimes, she almost hated her own brother. With her hands still curled, she descended the stairs, no longer worried about secrecy.

Annie and Nellie turned as their sister entered the kitchen. The story poured from Megan's mouth, while her hands, still white-knuckled, imagined of their own accord how it would feel to strangle their Harold. 'Phyllis'll die,' she sobbed. 'And our Harold will have killed her.'

Annie whipped off her apron and tossed it on to the table. 'I'll come,' she said. 'Our Nellie would flay him alive. He's out of order, is that brother of ours.' After drying Megan's tears, she grabbed her hand and marched down the back street. Albert stood under the lamp, misery etched into the serious face. 'He's gone,' he mumbled. 'Laughing, he was, but I know he's scared.' The tear-brightened eyes fixed themselves on Megan. 'He bought toffees with it, I think. He smelled of mints last night in bed, so I think he's took the money. I asked him if he had, and he just ran off. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know whether to follow him or what.'

Annie squeezed her sister's hand. 'Stop here, Megan. I'll nip down and get the doctor and we'll work out how to pay him.'

Megan breathed a sigh of relief. She was sensible, their Annie, always seemed to know the right thing to do. But the tension did not leave Megan's shoulders, because too many things were wrong. Harold was missing, Mam was in bed, the money had been stolen, Phyllis needed a doctor, Annie had left the bread. Baking for a big family took more than one pair of hands. So above all the big worries in Megan's head sat a bowl of spoiled dough. And it was Harold's fault . . .

After ten or so minutes, Annie returned. 'He's coming. We'd best tell Mrs Entwistle what we've done, then we can go and find our Harold.'

Phyllis's mother was still seated by the cold range oven, her hands occupied yet again by darning. She looked up at the group of three, seemed to stare through them. 'She's poorly,' she whispered.

'Doctor's coming.' Annie spoke in her most common-sensical tone. 'He'll put her right, will Dr Walsh.'

'I can't pay.' The wooden mushroom, clothed in a black sock, fell to the floor. Albert retrieved it, placed it on the table where newspaper tried to play the role of a cloth. A

few grains of precious salt lingered in a cracked saucer, and the bread board was empty save for an idle knife that mocked the situation. Annie stared at this implement for a moment or two. 'I've baking on, Mrs Entwistle. I'll fetch you a couple of loaves after, happen a scrape of butter and some dripping.'

Megan no longer managed to worry about spoiled bread, because Mrs Entwistle's panic was suddenly the biggest thing in the room, bigger than the grate and the oven and the torn chair.

'Infantile paralysis,' whispered Ida Entwistle as, mobilized by terror, she rocked back and forth in the ladder-backed chair. 'I've sent the lads to our Vera's.' She paused, ran a pale tongue over paler lips. 'Daughters is special,' she murmured. 'A son is a son till he gets him a wife, but a daughter's a daughter the rest of your life. I can't lose her, I can't.' The grey eyes strayed towards the door. 'I shouldn't have let you go up to her, Megan. But I've only just thought about what's wrong with the lass. It's that infantile, I know it is. My boys came home just a minute ago, and it dawned on me. So I've packed me sons off to safety.'

She swallowed, her eyes wandering over the bare table. 'I've no tea, no milk, can't even offer you a brew. And I can't look at her no more, I can't and she's upstairs all by herself with her dad's coat on her bed and it's only five minutes since I said ta-ra to him and he never came back and now—'

Albert gasped as Annie's hand made sharp contact with Ida's chalky face. 'Stop this,' ordered the tall, thin girl. 'You'll only make yourself ill, then you'll be no good to nobody.' She knelt, took the sobbing woman's hands, tried to rub some life into them. 'Doctor's coming. Our Megan'll pay when she's done some more mending. Stop saying Phyllis has the paralysis. Doctor knows more than we do. Let him do the job he's paid for, don't you go naming what's wrong with Phyllis. And you'll have to go up to her, she's your daughter. It's the same thing as you said before - a

mother's a mother the rest of her life, so don't be turning your back.'

They all heard the front door as it swung wide enough to meet the lobby wall. 'I'll go straight up, Mrs Entwistle,' shouted the invisible doctor. The house was silent apart from heavy footfalls on the stairs. Everyone looked up at the ceiling, as if eyes might penetrate the flaking plaster. He crossed the bedroom, stopped, sat on the bed. The four in the kitchen held their breath as a spring twanged beneath the man's weight. Ida's sobs were swallowed, and Annie continued to rub the work-dried hands of this grieving widowed mother.

When he came in, his face was grave. 'I'll have to take her into isolation, Mrs Entwistle. She's got a fever and she needs nursing for a week or two.'

Dim hope, in the form of two spots of pink, sat briefly on Ida's face. 'Will they get her better?'

'I don't know,' he answered carefully. 'It's a matter of time, I'm afraid.'

Ida pushed Annie away, leapt from the chair and threw herself at the startled man. 'You've not to let her die - do you hear me? She's me only girl, me only friend. That's my Phyllis you're taking into the fever hospital.' She was pulling on his coat, tearing at the chain of his watch. 'Save her. Do you hear me? You save my Phyllis. Ernie's gone and I can't take no more.'

Annie overcame the frantic Ida by simply lifting her away from Dr Walsh. 'Stop this,' said the eleven-year-old woman. 'Megan, show Dr Walsh out.' While Megan obeyed, Annie dealt with the matter in hand. 'Get her ready,' she ordered. 'Put her in something clean and give her a lick and a promise. If she's going in hospital, let her go decent.'

Ida blinked. 'Water's cold.'

Albert pulled at Annie's sleeve. 'I'll go and fetch some of ours in the bucket. It's only four houses away.'

Annie smiled at him. 'Good lad. And bring that cotton nightie of Mam's - it's on the pulley. She'll not mind when I tell her about the emergency. Go on, son.'

Megan returned up the lobby, passed Albert on his way out, assessed the situation. 'Shall I get Phyllis ready, Annie?'

'No. Stay away, love. We don't know what she's got and we might catch it.'

'But we've . . .' Megan allowed the words to die a natural death. They had already been in the room with Phyllis. Phyllis, being a daughter, was special. Albert and Harold, being sons, were special too. She wouldn't think, mustn't think. Her eyes raked across the room, as if she expected to see the germs marching towards her, an army on the offensive. If anything happened to Harold and Albert, there would be murder done and she, Megan Duffy, would be on the receiving end of it.

When Albert returned, she rushed to the door, relieved him of the nightdress and the white-and-blue enamel bucket, knelt on the remains of a coconut mat in the tiny lobby. 'You're a clever lad, Albert,' she said, the calm in her voice covering a multitude of terrors. 'See, I want you to go and find our Harold. Don't go as far as town or the park, just root about round here, in the back streets and the mill yard. If you find him, take him home. If you don't find him, just take yourself home when the Town Hall strikes four. Can you remember all that?'

'Course I can, Megan.' He touched her face, drew a line along her cheekbone. 'I wish I had black hair,' he said. 'It's more grown-up than blonde hair.' This was his way of expressing love for his sister. He often told her that her eyes were like blue jewels, and she always laughed at him.

'Don't be daft,' she said now. 'Go and do as I said, then with any luck, Mam won't even know about Harold going missing.'

She carried the bucket through to the kitchen. 'Here you are, Mrs Entwistle,' she said. 'For washing Phyllis. I've left

Mam's nightie at the bottom of the stairs.'

The two sisters clung together when Ida Entwistle had gone to prepare her daughter. There would be an ambulance in a minute, a black vehicle with a motor and a lot of smoke. 'What do you think, Annie?' asked Megan.

'I don't know what to think,' came the quiet reply. 'I hope our Nellie's managed that batch. It's hard work carrying half a stone of flour on me head in a pillowcase. Waste of money, too, if it's left to spoil. But she'll have to keep an eye on that yeast, she will.' Annie hugged Megan. 'Pray, love. Pray to Our Lady.'

'I will. I'll do five decades tonight.'

They sat together in the old horsehair rocker, each waiting for the clanging of an ambulance bell. 'Whole street'll be out any minute,' commented Annie. 'They'll have their eyes on stalks watching little Phyllis Entwistle getting took away. Dear God, Megan, I hope we don't catch it.'

Megan closed her eyes and screwed up her face while Phyllis was lifted downstairs and through the front door. She didn't want to catch whatever disease her friend had, but more than that, she didn't want Albert or Harold to catch it. If anything happened to them, she would surely be to blame. The fact that Albert was the better twin was quickly pushed to the back of Megan's mind. Nothing must happen to either of them. No, no, she wasn't telling God that if one had to die it mustn't be Albert. And Mam would create something awful if either of her boys became ill.

Elsie Shipton bustled in, all worries about the photograph forgotten beneath the weight of a neighbour's troubles. She manhandled Ida Entwistle, sat her on the usual chair, cast her eyes over Megan and Annie. 'My lot's gone missing,' she said without preamble. 'There's only our Billy in, and he's about as much use as a rubber knife. So you two can fettle for Mrs Entwistle. I've had our Fred's wages, I can spare a few scraps.' She couldn't spare anything, but this was an emergency . . . 'Go in my house and fetch some tea, sugar

and milk. If our Billy's come downstairs, crack him across the head, Annie. There's a bit of bacon in me meatsafe, so fetch two back rashers and an egg. Leave that streaky, it's for bacon and egg pie.' She turned her attention to Megan. 'Run to the butcher's, lass, tell Mr Armstrong we've had a bit of trouble and will he send me some broth bones.'

Ida rocked to and fro, her arms crossed over her chest, as if she were trying to keep her feelings trapped behind the frail cage of ribs. 'You've been a good friend to my girl, Megan Duffy,' she said suddenly. 'I'll never forget you.'

All the strength seemed to drain out of Megan in that moment. Ida was talking as if Phyllis had gone forever, as if she were never coming back except in a coffin. She steadied herself against the dresser, tried to remember what was wanted. Broth bones. That was right, she was going for bones.

Outside, she leaned on the house wall for a moment and took in some deep breaths of oxygen. Harold was right, of course, Mrs Entwistle's house did smell. It smelled because the Entwistles were poor, too poor to afford even the cheapest yellow soap. Mrs Entwistle had gone funny after the war, still wasn't well enough to go back into the mill. Poverty stank, then. She would remember that smell, would try to avoid it when she grew up and got a house of her own.

With broth bones printed firmly on the front of her brain, she began the short walk to Armstrong's butchers. He was nice, was Mr Armstrong. He'd sent nearly a quarter of potted meat and some pork sausages for Mam yesterday, wanted no money. He always gave a present to the mother of a new baby, always had a kind word for the children who visited his shop. Megan nodded, decided to tell Mr Armstrong the tale of Phyllis's illness. That way, she might get more than a couple of broth bones out of this expedition. Oh, she hoped Albert would find Harold soon.

The ambulance that contained Phyllis had stopped at the bottom of the hill. Ambulances were supposed to hurry up, she thought as she rounded the corner on her way to the shop. The driver hadn't even used his bell after loading Phyllis on to the wooden stretcher. People were flapping about, bending down, crying, a woman screamed. Then Megan saw a bundle being lifted, a pile of clothing with arms and legs hanging out of it. The limbs were pale and one of the clogs was missing. When she noticed the blue clog on the floor, Megan sank into a dark abyss where she heard and saw nothing.

But when they revived her, she still knew that Albert had been run over by that ambulance. He was the only boy in the garden streets who wore blue clogs, fashioned by his own father from the very best leather. Megan didn't need to close her eyes to achieve a picture of the limp body being lifted from the cobbles. That hadn't been a hurt child, it had been a . . . it had been a lot worse than that.

Albert was dead and she, Megan Duffy, had killed him.