Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Jam and Roses

Written by Mary Gibson

Published by Head of Zeus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Mary Gibson

Jam & ROSES

First published in the UK in 2015 by Head of Zeus Ltd

Copyright © Mary Gibson, 2015

The moral right of Mary Gibson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB) 9781781855928
ISBN (XTPB) 9781781855935
ISBN (eBook) 9781781855904

Typeset by Ben Cracknell Studios, Norwich

Printed and bound in Germany
by GGP Media GmbH, Pössneck

Head of Zeus Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45–47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

1

‘We are the Bermondsey Girls!’

June 1923

Milly Colman and her workmates linked arms as they walked, three abreast, along Tower Bridge Road. Throwing her head back with a bold grin, Milly suddenly started up a song and the others bellowed in unison: ‘*We are some of the Bermondsey girls, we are some of the girls! We spend our tanners, we mind our manners, we are respected wherever we go . . .*’

They were singing because it was Saturday afternoon and, until Monday morning, they were free of the factory. It was time to have fun. After a week at Southwell’s jam factory, hulling strawberries till their fingertips bled red as soft fruit, Milly felt she deserved it, they all did. Vans and carts from Kent, crammed with strawberries, had been arriving daily for over two weeks. There was no shortage of overtime and the factory had even taken on extra hands to make the most of the brief strawberry season, when the fruit had to be sorted, hulled and boiled into jam, before it spoiled. The sweet strawberry scent of the Kent countryside now hung over the whole of Dockhead, vying with hops from the Anchor Brewery, cinnamon and ginger from the spice mill, and the less savoury aromas of the tannery. The strawberry glut meant that the girls all had extra money in their pockets, even after handing over most of their wages to their mothers that dinner time.

'*When we're walking down the Old Kent Road, doors and windows open wi-i-ide. If you see a copper come, hit 'im on the 'ead and run. We are the Bermondsey girls!*'

They roared the last refrain even louder, breaking ranks for no one, so that some of the shoppers thronging the pavement had to hop quickly out of their way. A few older women looked at them disapprovingly as they careered along the street, and as one respectable-looking couple crossed the road to avoid them, Milly heard the woman mutter, 'Common factory girls, what can you expect?'

'We're as good as you, any day!' Milly offered loudly, so that the woman ducked her head and hurried on. Milly felt affronted. When did it become a crime to be happy? They might be loud, but they weren't scruffy. They'd all been home to change from their work clothes and Milly was proud of the new summer dress she'd made for herself. With its scoop neck and long white pointed collar over the pretty blue print, it was actually the height of fashion, and who was to know it was made from an old dress from Bermondsey clothes market that she'd unpicked and re-used?

Yet not everyone scorned them. There were others, often the elderly, who smiled indulgently. Perhaps they knew themselves that after working ten hours a day, six and a half days a week, every little scrap of leisure time was to be savoured to the full. And in an often ugly world of close-crowded houses, packed with too many bodies for any privacy, sometimes happiness had to be found wherever it could. If that was on a crowded shopping street, so be it.

And, as usual, given any disapproval, Milly's bravado only made her all the brasher. 'Where shall we go first, girls?' she asked her friends Kitty Bunclerk and Peggy Dillon in a deliberately loud voice.

'Manzes, I'm starving!' Peggy said.

'You're *always* starving, we can go there later, look at the queue!' said Milly, pointing to the shuffling line of eager diners

that stretched back from the pie-and-mash shop to the street corner.

'Well, I can't go round looking at stalls on an empty stomach. Come on, girls, the queue's moving.' Peggy let go of Milly's arm and headed towards the shop.

Tower Bridge Road was lined with stalls selling all manner of fruit and vegetables, household goods, and oil and paraffin, and at this end was the Bermondsey second-hand clothes market, known simply as the Old Clo'. The stallholders were calling out their wares and Milly would have preferred an hour in the fresh air, wandering from stall to stall, before surrendering to the steamy heat of the pie-and-mash shop. But this was the girls' traditional Saturday dinner-time treat and so they tagged on to the end of the queue, which was indeed moving quickly. Thankfully, the shop's front window, which stretched its entire length, had been opened up to let in some air, and the smell of parsley liquor and vinegar caught in Milly's nostrils. Oh well, perhaps she was hungry after all.

Sawdust covered the shop's tiled floor, and a white marble counter ran the length of it. From behind the counter, four equally big-bosomed women, in green-splashed white aprons, served at a frenetic pace, screaming their orders down a dumb waiter to the kitchen below. 'More pies! More liquor! More eels!' The insatiable Saturday morning crowd had the air of not having eaten for a week.

'Pie, mash and liquor, three times!' Peggy gave their order and a white-aproned woman piled their plates with deep, oval meat pies and dollops of mashed potato, before ladling over bright green parsley liquor.

They were lucky to find a marble-topped table near the back, which had just been vacated. This was never a leisurely lunch; people tended to eat fast and get on with their precious Saturdays. But Milly loved it here. The bustle and life, the thick steam from the green-encrusted liquor pots and the delicious gravy smells that wafted up from the pies, all spoke of Saturday freedom.

She liberally doused her dinner with vinegar, and lifted the first delicious mouthful.

'Mmm, taste that, Kit!'

But her workmate was a fussy eater, though how she'd managed that, in a houseful of seven children, Milly couldn't fathom. Kitty was a skinny girl who seemed to live on air.

'It's all right, but I don't know why everyone raves about it,' Kitty said, putting delicate forkfuls into her mouth.

'I should think you'd be glad of a change from bread and drippin', that's all you get in your house, innit?' asked Peggy, shovelling in another mouthful.

After a few more forkfuls Kitty pushed her plate away and Peggy, who could always find room, asked, 'Don't you want the rest? I'll 'ave it.'

'Peggy, you gannet,' said Milly. 'It's a wonder you're not half the size of a house the way you pack it in.' Milly looked on in astonishment as the girl devoured the rest of Kitty's dinner.

'Comes of starvin' as a kid,' Peggy said solemnly. She was also from a big Dockhead family, but her father had rarely been in work and Peggy had grown up used to going without. Where Kitty had learned to eat less, Peggy's appetite seemed to have grown in proportion to her lack. 'My dad says I've got hollow legs.' She smiled.

While they waited for Peggy to finish, Kitty went to get them three mugs of dark brown tea.

'You meeting Pat tonight?' she asked Milly, as she slid the mugs across the marble table.

Milly shook her head. 'He's working.'

'Oh, *working*. Moonlighting more like!' Peggy said.

Pat Donovan had managed to buy his own lorry by the time he was nineteen, largely on the proceeds of stolen goods. He was one of Milly's drinking pals at the Folly, a pub her father never used. The group of friends would often go to dances at Dockhead Church Hall, but over the past couple of months Pat had begun to single her out to be his partner, and almost without

realizing she had a choice in the matter, it seemed accepted that they were courting.

'It might not be an *honest* bob, but at least he's out earning something. He's a grafter!'

Peggy was silenced, perhaps thinking of her own father, whose working day consisted of walking down to the call-on gates at Butler's Wharf in the hopes of getting some dock work and then walking home again, disappointed.

'Well, you might as well come with us to the pub then,' Kitty said.

Milly agreed and stood up abruptly. 'Come on, Peg!' She had waited long enough for Peggy to scrape the plate clean. She pulled it away, leaving Peggy with her knife poised.

'Oi, I haven't finished!'

'You have now,' Milly said, pulling her up. The girls pushed through the crush at the door and out into the bright day.

'First stop, the Old Clo'!' said Milly.

The market was crammed with people; there was barely enough room between the stalls for the crowd to get through. Trousers, suits, dresses and coats were piled high, and it took a lot of patience to discover anything decent amongst the dross. Milly loved to root around, picking up old garments made of good material that might have been overlooked simply because they were out of fashion. While she was sorting through one stall, Kitty and Peggy went off in search of stockings and underwear. After half an hour they met up with their spoils. Milly held up a coat of navy-blue wool. 'What do you think of this?'

Kitty wrinkled her nose. 'Looks like my mum's!'

'Use your imagination! Feel, it's lovely material! I'll make it into a wrap-around.' She produced another threadbare jacket with fur trimming which was still in good condition. 'I'll take the fur off this one and make it into a collar!'

Kitty's eyes lit up. 'You couldn't make one for me an'all while you're at it, could you?'

After strolling the length of Tower Bridge Road, and examining every stall, Milly still didn't want to go home. Her father, only ever known as the old man, would be rolling in from his lunchtime drinking session about now. Sometimes he fell into bed, to sleep the rest of the afternoon away, before getting up for his evening at the pub. Other times he would sit slumped in his armchair by the fire, like some sleeping dragon, ready for Milly or one of her two sisters to trip over his outstretched legs. Then he would roar, flicking them with the back of his hand. She suggested they get a tram down to Greenwich Park.

'I can't go, got to look after the kids this afternoon,' said Peggy, 'but I'll meet you at the Folly tonight. Cheerio!'

As Peggy left them, Milly spotted a tram. 'Come on, Kit, we can still catch it!' The girls ran at full pelt, hopping on to the back board, just as the tram pulled out into Grange Road. Settling breathlessly down on the top deck, Milly took off her cloche hat, letting the breeze lift her hair. Turning to Kitty, she asked suddenly, 'What do you think of Pat?'

Perhaps she had caught her friend unprepared, but Milly felt her hesitate.

'He's nice enough, I suppose, but . . .'

'But what?' Milly pressed.

'Well, he's never going to be much good, is he?'

Milly was surprised that she didn't feel more hurt at her friend's assessment.

'What, because he's on the fiddle?'

Kitty shook her head. 'Who's not? It's not so much *that* as, well, you must have heard about the girl from Rotherhithe?'

Milly shook her head. 'No, tell me.'

But just then the tram came to a halt and they clattered down the stairs. As they passed through the ornate iron gates, Milly prompted her friend.

'Go on then, what about the girl from Rotherhithe?'

'He got her up the duff and then sodded off.'

Milly could certainly believe it. Pat's hands were continually wandering to her dress buttons after a night at the pub. But so far she'd always been able to slap him down and keep him in order. Her physical strength was useful for more than hefting baskets of fruit or seven-pound stone jam jars.

'Well, he won't do that to me!' she said grimly.

'Just be careful, Milly,' her friend said. 'I've noticed these days you get pissed as a puddin' when you're out with him. Sometimes you can't even walk, let alone push him off!'

'Oh, I can look after myself!' Milly laughed, then grabbing Kitty's hand, she began running towards the boating lake.

Milly spent the next hour rowing them round the lake, making sure she splashed Kitty liberally for her assertion that she was turning into a drunk.

'Come in, number nine! You'll tip that boat up!' The boat keeper had seen her antics and was frantically waving them in, calling their number on his megaphone. Milly gave one last thwack with the oar and as the spray flew high over the boat, glinting in the late afternoon sun, she saw a rainbow form. Taking it as a good omen, she put Kitty's suggestions about Pat firmly to the back of her mind, and rowed hard for the bank.

'You're banned!' the boat keeper said as they tumbled, giggling and soaking wet, out of the boat. He was a grey-haired, well-groomed military-looking man, with one arm of his park keeper's uniform pinned up, a not unusual sight since the war. Now, in spite of his ire, he offered them his single hand, helping each of them out of the wobbling boat.

'We're only having a bit of fun!' Milly protested, looking down at her wet feet. 'Nobody got drownded!' Milly smiled as winningly at the boat keeper as she knew how, which seemed to do the trick.

'I'll give you drownded! Clear off, you cheeky minx.' He smiled and the two girls sauntered off down the gravel path, back to the park gates.

'Oh, Kitty, don't you just love to see a bit of sky!'

In Dockhead, where Milly lived, every vista was sliced and slashed by rooftops, chimneys and brick terraces; even the river was largely obscured by slabs of warehouses, and Milly instinctively sought out any open spaces. Now she led her friend off the path, on to the grass, where ancient chestnut trees were all that obscured the sailing clouds. She tipped her head back and began to whirl round, spreading her arms wide, so that the treetops spun in and out of view and she could drink in the cobalt, cloud-painted sky. From here, at the top of Observatory Hill, she could see the Thames snaking away below her, she could pick out the chimneys, belching smoke from Bermondsey factories, and could name each of the crowded docks upstream. She felt alive, full of an irrepressible energy, and began hurtling down the steep hill at breakneck speed.

'Careful!' Kitty called after her.

'Keep up, Kit! I can't stop now!' she called as she careened towards the lower path. At the bottom she pulled herself up short, skidding to a halt on the gravel, while Kitty tottered down gingerly behind her.

'We haven't all got your legs!' she complained as she reached the path.

'Come on, old gel, let me help you home!' Milly scooped Kitty up, swinging her round, ignoring her squeals of protest. If only she could stay out here forever, Milly thought as she whirled, and never have to go back home. For though the Great War had ended all of five years ago, peace had yet to find its way to the Colmans' little terraced house in Arnold's Place.

When she arrived home Milly's high spirits were immediately squashed. Her mother was laying the table ready for the old man's dinner. She was a slight, faded woman in her late forties, but looked older by a decade. Her broad pale face, betraying her Irish descent, creased into papery crinkles as she smiled at Milly. But from the cupboard under the stairs, which led to the tiny coal cellar, came a low snivelling

'Why's Elsie in the coal hole?' Milly asked. Her youngest sister, Amy, was never consigned there, so she knew it must be her middle sister, Elsie, undergoing one of her father's punishments.

'Ohhh, I'm sick of it. She cheeked the old man. She never learns.'

Milly dropped her purchases and opened the cupboard, to be confronted by Elsie, an angular thirteen-year-old, her face streaked with coal and tears.

'Why d'ye cheek him, you dozy mare?' Milly asked.

Elsie's skinny frame shook with tremors of small sobs. 'I didn't cheek him. I just said I'd dreamed he was dead . . . which I did!'

Milly raised her eyes, muttering, 'We've all had that dream,' as she pulled her sister out of the cupboard.

'What if he comes down?' Elsie whispered fearfully.

'He's snoring in the bed, it's shaking the bloody ceiling. He won't know any different,' Milly said, wiping her hands of coal dust.

'Jesus, you look like a minstrel. Go and wash your face and hands.' Their mother sent Elsie to the scullery.

'Why did you let her stay in there?' Milly asked accusingly.

'Truth be told, love, I had such a job getting him upstairs to bed and then I was so busy – I forgot all about her! God forgive me.'

Seeing her mother's stricken face, Milly immediately regretted her question. After all, she thought guiltily, while she'd been larking around in the park, her mother had been contending with all the miseries Milly had been avoiding. 'Oh well, Polly Witch *will* tell us her dreams, won't she?' Again came a stab of guilt; it was easier to blame Elsie than the one person who deserved it.

Just then she heard thudding upstairs, followed by a burst of phlegmy coughing from her father. 'I won't need any tea, Mum, had pie and mash with the girls.' And hastily picking up her purchases, she dashed upstairs to her bedroom, before the old man came down and ruined her good mood entirely.

*

Everybody called it the Folly, though its real name had been lost in time, hidden beneath the thick grime that obscured the painted sign above its door. Situated at one end of Hickman's Folly, it looked from the outside like a conventional spit-and-sawdust pub, but the attraction for Milly and her friends was its unconventionality. No one could see in through the windows, veiled as they were with a film of soot, the door was ill-fitting and the exterior betrayed its years beneath peeling layers of paint. Only the bills, plastering the walls like mismatched wallpaper, hinted at its new identity. The latest advertised a night of jazz music from the resident pianist, and therein lay the attraction. By far the best thing about the Folly was Maisie, the pianist. Unlike Harry in the Swan, whose repertoire was restricted to the old tunes Milly's mother liked to sing, Maisie was up to date with all the latest jazz music from America. So long as she always had a full pint glass on top of the piano, she would play all night, and so the younger residents of Dockhead gravitated towards the pub.

It had been a fairly sedate night and Milly and Kitty were trying to liven things up, singing along happily to 'Ain't We Got Fun'.

'There's nothing surer, the rich get rich and the poor get poorer!
In the meantime, in between time, ain't we got fun?'

They'd just reached the end of the chorus when Pat walked in, with a tall, fair young man Milly hadn't seen before. Pat made his way over to their table and unable to be heard above the din, mimed a drinking gesture. Peggy and Milly's arms shot out as one, holding up their empty glasses to be refilled.

'Good job I've already earned me bunce tonight!' said Pat, shaking his head. But as he went to the bar Kitty's face fell.

'Well, that's the end of *our* fun for tonight.'

'What's the matter with you?' Milly asked. 'He's all right. At least he offers to buy a round. Shove up.'

Milly made her friend scoot along the bench so there'd be room for Pat and his friend.

'It's just that he takes over,' Kitty whispered, 'and you go all soppy round him, you don't act like yourself at all and it's not even as if he's your type.'

'How do you know what my type is?' Milly snapped. The truth was, she didn't know herself what 'her type' was, so how could anyone else? Surely she wasn't the only one who went out with a feller just because he asked, rather than because she felt much interest? Anyway, how would she know if she never tried?

'Just don't let him keep buying you drinks all night, he's got a wad of notes there the size of me nan's feather mattress!'

Milly had noticed. Pat wasn't averse to flashing his money about, when he had it.

'Oh, Kitty Bunclerk, you're worse than me mother. Shut up now, here he comes.'

Pat came back with the drinks and introduced his friend, Freddie Clark. Pat had mentioned him before as a 'business partner', though Milly had never met him. The men settled down happily in the midst of the girls.

'I thought you'd be out all night?' Milly said to Pat.

'I did too, but my mate Freddie here turned up sooner than I expected. He got some lovely stuff from Atkinson's factory, didn't you, Fred?'

Freddie lifted his glass. 'We should give the girls some samples, mate, before they all go!'

Atkinson's was a Bermondsey perfume and cosmetics factory, situated next to Young's glue factory, an incongruous but convenient location as gelatine from the bone yard ended up in many face creams. Milly had worked there for a while, when she first left school. It had been one of her favourite jobs. Proud of her shapely, long-fingered hands, at Atkinson's she could dip into the moisturizer all day and come home with the soft hands

of a lady, instead of a factory girl. Now, looking down at her rough, chapped knuckles and swollen fingers, she wished she still worked there.

'Here y'are, girls.' Freddie dug into his pocket and brought out three small bottles of perfume. 'California Poppy, you'll be smelling like a field of flowers!' He smiled and Milly noticed that Kitty didn't decline. In spite of her criticisms of Pat, she allowed the boys to buy several rounds and by the end of the evening they were all the best of friends, singing along with Maisie.

'*Look for the silver lining, when e'er a cloud appears in the blue, remember somewhere the sun is shining, and so the right thing to do, is make it shine for you . . .*'

When last orders were called and they all tumbled out of the pub into the cool summer night, the sound of their loud goodnights echoed in the street and Pat caught Milly's hand, asking to walk her home. As the friends went their separate ways, Milly wasn't so tipsy that she didn't notice Kitty walking unsteadily up Hickman's Folly, in the company of Freddie Clark.

Pat put his arm round her, which was welcome, if for no other reason than that the night had turned chilly.

'Shall we walk down to the river?' he asked, and partly because she didn't want to bump into her father coming out of the Swan at the opposite end of Hickman's Folly, she let herself be guided down Jacob Street, to the little jetty at the back of Southwell's jam factory. It was a secluded spot, bounded by Southwell's warehouses and with only the dark river to witness their kisses. But as Pat became more passionate and his hand strayed to her dress front, she remembered the girl from Rotherhithe, and using more force than she intended, shoved his chest with the flat of her hand, sending him toppling backwards.

'Hold up, Milly, you'll have me in the river!' His alarmed face was comical and Milly laughed.

'Oh, don't look so grumpy!' she said, dragging him back into her arms. 'But I'm not as easy as the girls from Rotherhithe!'

'You shouldn't believe everything you hear,' Pat said, tight-lipped.

She kissed him lightly on the cheek and spun round. 'No one's said nothing to me, must be your guilty conscience. Come on, walk me home.'

At the corner of Arnold's Place she let him kiss her goodnight but after he left her, standing beneath the gas lamp outside Mrs Knight's, she heard footsteps behind. Turning to see why he'd come back, she felt a ringing blow to the side of her head that sent her spinning against the wall. Her cheek grazed sooty brick, and for a moment the gaslight seemed to pale. Her fingers scrabbled for the window sill as she tried to steady herself.

'You little slut!' It was the old man. Grabbing her by the shoulder, he frogmarched her towards their front door.

'What? I've done nothing!' Milly pleaded, but his hand was a vice and she couldn't wriggle away.

'You dare show me up, letting him paw you in the street like a prossie! Get in there!' He flung her into the house but she was ready for him now, and the minute he released his grip she leaped free, bounding up the stairs. She was in the bedroom with the chair firmly jammed under the handle before he could catch her. Holding her breath, her head pounding and blood trickling from the graze on her cheek, she waited. But she heard no following footsteps. *Too pissed to get up the stairs*, she thought, *probably conked out in the kitchen*. Turning towards the bed she shared with her sisters, she heard Elsie's sleepy, sweet singing voice coming from the bed: '*Every morning, every evening, ain't we got fun . . .*'

Milly groaned and, slipping off her frock, made her way gratefully to the bed. She got in beside Elsie, who allowed her to snuggle up in the warm spot she'd made.

'Did he get you?' Elsie asked drowsily.

'Nah, too slow.'

'Good.' Elsie yawned.

'Good,' Amy echoed from the other end of the bed, gripping Milly's cold foot with her small warm hand.

If only it could always be like this between her and her sisters, Milly thought as she drifted off to sleep, but she knew the fragile threads that bound them together tonight could so easily tear apart, and tomorrow they would be at war again.