

WOMAN IN RED

Will you be there? Rather!

That was the closing line of a *Mudgee Guardian* article in 1933. It was also one of my mother's sayings, 'Rather!' Not the rather of 'I'm rather tired' but the rather with a zing in the 'er'. The emphatic affirmative which knew something exciting was about to happen. 'Never in the history of Kandos' reported the *Mudgee Guardian* after the event.

Miss Alice Solomon pulled the door of her Drapery and Millinery shop shut and walked up Angus Avenue to the Angus Memorial Hall. She would be early but that was what she had planned. She would settle the girls as they came in, go over instructions, remind them about conduct, give them a pep talk and help them steady their nerves. There was no doubt they should be perfect. They had certainly had enough preparation. She'd seen to that. Daily practice for the last four weeks. Most nights it was with her twenty debutantes to practise their walk and curtsy; sometimes with their partners to practise the guard of honour and Debutante Waltz; sometimes with two little page boys who would trumpet the debutantes into the hall and afterwards lead the grand parade; sometimes with eight young ladies who would form garlands and arches of wisteria and asparagus fern, through which each debutante would make her nervous entry.

Was Miss Alice Solomon feeling nervous? Well if she was it wasn't obvious in the benign smile and soft greeting she gave to those she met. It wasn't obvious in the confident way she strolled into the hall in her red velvet coat with shoes to match. She looked serene and unruffled, just the right impression for a maid of honour; just the right example for her twenty young ladies attending their first ball. Of course they were in white to depict innocence and youth. Red, she felt, had a touch of glamour and mystery. An uncharitable person might observe it as a desperate touch. For Miss Alice Solomon, wounded some years ago by a broken engagement, had moved onto the shelf of spinsterhood, though she still clung to dreams of romance.

Zena Hayes Hairdressing Salon, next door to the Angus Memorial Hall, was blushing with excitement and crushed with white ball gowns. Twenty trembling young ladies powdered their noses, checked bouquets, adjusted straps and smoothed hairdos while an assembly of 350 guests arrived in their glamorous evening wear for a glorious night. Gold and green streamers and suspended lanterns transformed the Angus Hall into an artistic triumph. Just before 9pm the beaus, having sent winks and waves to their white-gowned beauties, were marshaled inside to form a guard of honour for His Lordship Bishop Norton, accompanied by the Very Reverend Fathers Ring and Healey, and Miss Alice Solomon. Miss Solomon had removed her red coat to display a black chiffon gown with a collar of red Parisian lace, a string of shimmering beads and a diamante brooch. Trumpeter Lou Junge blew a Royal Fanfare and the debutante march began, to the music of the Rhythm King's Orchestra. It was a piece composed especially for this occasion by Mr Junge himself.

Not one pair of eyes drifted from the shifting tableau of choreography and melody: the march, the presentation, the grand parade, the official photograph, the debutante waltz, the exit. Mothers glowed, fathers preened, young women appraised, young men calculated and His Lordship graciously acknowledged each debutante presented to him by Miss Alice Solomon.

And where you might ask were Miss Alice Solomon and her entourage exiting to? The dancing continued, but in a large marquee next door, handsomely decorated and gleaming with silver, the debutantes with their partners and families sat down to the first of four supper sittings. At the debutantes' table Miss Alice Solomon blew out the twenty candles on the cake and handed a piece to each debutante and her partner, together with a memento of the occasion – a dove for the young man, a candle and rose for the young woman.

Miss Jean Walsh, 18 years old, and one of the debutantes, whispered to her sister Miss Madge Walsh, 16, and also a debutante, 'Do you think red would suit me?'

This article by Colleen O'Sullivan first appeared in the *Mudgee Guardian* on 24 July 2009, under the title "Kandos Debutantes Step Out".

The featured photo shows dance partners at a ball in the 1930s.