

Helen Allan

THE RANKLING

Helen Allan is writing a series of stories about life in the 1920s

Before Em was born her mother had tried to get rid of her. So she told Em anyway in one of their confidential chats over a cup of tea. This was long after Em herself had had a family and had evolved from daughter to friend. As Mother explained there'd been nothing personal in this, Em having been only at "it" in those days and not a very big "it" at that.

Even so.

"But I was desperate" Mother brought out the cliché as though new-minted. "I just couldn't have a third child. Your father's business was on the verge of bankruptcy. On top of that he was playing around with his typist. The main thing was, though, the birth itself. I just couldn't face it again."

Em wasn't too ready with blame. Mother had always had "terrible times". Still, for one with a pathological dread of childbirth ("the worst pain there is" she called it) she was dangerously ignorant about sex. And as for contraception! Yet what was that worth in 1915, six years before the trial of Marie Stopes for daring to publish a book about it? The miracle was that Mother had ever even heard of abortion.

"There was this woman," Mother whispered guiltily, though there was no one about but her golden canary, whistling his head off as he always did when they talked. "My cousin Crystal told me about her. You paid five pounds and if it didn't work she gave you your money back. Well," she added, giving credit where credit was due "she gave me back mine."

"I'm sorry," Em felt obliged to murmur. "I must have just, well, hung in there."

"Oh good heavens," cried Mother. "Once I actually *had* you. . . And what on earth would I do without you now?" She smiled warmly at Em over the teacups, then became anxious. "Perhaps I should never have told you. You won't let it rankle?"

Em reassured her. She understood completely. Besides Mother had gone on to bear three more children after that, husband playing up or not. Each birth had had to be followed up by three months with her leg on a chair because of a thrombus, while a carefully chosen, not too pretty housekeeper ruled the kitchen. Each birth had been dreaded

more, not less, than the one before, and before the final one Em could remember Father, white to the lips, pursuing his distraught wife to the very banks of the river and practically dragging her out of the water. To her it was as bad as that.

“And the worst of it all was”, Mother mused, “that I never liked it! In fact I loathed it. Of course I cared for your father — but I hated it. And you couldn’t give him a friendly hug but he thought you were after it. Ugh!”

By now this was an old story to Em. A marriage counsellor of years standing, she was a veteran of women’s confidences on this theme, including the “adding insult to injury” complaint that they had to pretend to like it “or they turn nasty.”

“And did you pretend to like it?” she asked with academic interest.

A laser beam of pure venom shot from Mother’s usually mild eye.

“Not once! Never! He knew perfectly well that I detested it,” she hissed. “Not that that would matter! Men! They like that all the better. They can play at rape.”

Mother was very bitter and Em felt a pang for her dead father, not here to put his side of the story. Ashamed, too, of uncovering her parents’ nakedness, she hurried to change the subject but first, as she rose to collect the tea things, stressed that she really did understand about the attempted abortion.

“Oh please,” her mother begged “don’t call it by that dreadful name. I never thought of it in that way at all. And please — don’t let it come between us now. Don’t let it rankle.”

Em didn’t then or ever. But there was something else that did rankle, perhaps it had rankled all her life. . . .

She’d been about nine, a skinny child, a clinger to Mother’s skirts. Not much, as she’d already gathered, to look at and certainly not in the same street as her big sister Ruby. Ruby had all the looks — “far too much for her own good” Mother used to say, thanking heaven she didn’t have two beauties to keep her eye on. Good heavens the boys were hanging round Ruby already, though if Father caught them Mother said he’d skin them alive. To Em this was patently ridiculous, Father being a man who never laid a hand on anyone.

Mother, Emerald and Mother’s cousin Pearl from Adelaide were sitting on a park bench in the Gardens. The cousins hadn’t seen each other since before Em was born, that having been the time of the family’s exodus from South Australia. There was a lot to catch up on and they were impatient to start. Pearl’s holiday in Queensland could not be long.

“And what do you think of our pigeon-toed one?” Mother asked, presenting Em for inspection.

Pearl studied the child closely, then marvelled. “But who on earth is she like? Surely not our side of the family?”

Mother laughed at this absurdity. “Heavens no. She’s not a Stone.” “But she’s not at all like her father,” Pearl went on, taking Em’s chin in her hand.

Mother pooh-poohed that idea. “Certainly not. She’s not a Pye at all. No I always say, Pearl,” and Mother chuckled at this old chestnut, though the child stiffened under Pearl’s hand “I always say we got the wrong one. They mixed them up at the hospital.” The cousins shared a knowing laugh, then Pearl, though she had no children, cast a quick look at Em. “Have a humbug dear,” she urged, producing a cone of these treasures from her bag. Em sucked what comfort she could from the lolly.

“And how is Hotham?” Under a huge Moreton Bay fig Pearl lowered her voice to invite confidences. Mother’s smile vanished.

“Oh Hotham’s fine,” she said in the dry voice she reserved for talking about him. “As you’ll see for yourself tonight if he honours us with his company. Most nights lately he hasn’t been in before midnight. At his club, he says.” She laughed mirthlessly. “Up to his usual tricks, of course.” And as Pearl politely pretended not to understand, Mother’s lip began to tremble. “Oh you know,” she quavered. The same as before. The girl in his office! he denies it of course but I know. And I won’t stand for it. I tell you Pearl, for two pins. . . .”

Suddenly she caught sight of Em hovering in the background and pounced. “Oh not Miss Big Ears again! Well really Em. Hanging round my skirts when I want to talk to Auntie Pearl. Why on earth didn’t you go with Ruby and the boys to the kiosk? Catch them hanging round on a lovely day at the Gardens! You go down there now and look at the birds. Go on!”

Em dragged reluctantly down the green slope to the birdcages. What were Father’s “usual tricks” and what did that pretty lady in his office have to do with them? Why was Mother so angry at times with Father and at others so nice? What if she left them and went back to Adelaide with this cousin? “For two pins”, she had said.

In the cages scarlet and green King parrots flashed like jewels while next door sulphur-crested cockatoos walked upside down on their ceilings or dropped down in a flash of yellow to the side wire. “Cocky want a kiss” one grated, flickering his black tongue.

“Cocky want a piss” mocked some small boys on their way back from the monkey cages. Shoving and sniggering, their minds seemed back with the monkeys. “Didya see that one doing it to the lady

monkey?" one chortled. "Corblimey, *they* don't care who sees them," cried another. "I'm going back. Birds are boring." In a second, like a school of fish they had swerved and vanished.

Em eyed the cockatoos unseeingly. What did it all mean? The boys and the monkeys, Ruby with boys hanging around her, Father and his "usual tricks"? And as they'd entered the Gardens today they'd passed a man lying on the grass and he'd smiled at them in a peculiar way. Mother had raged. "Don't look! Don't!" she'd warned her brood though Ruby had turned and looked hard. "I'll report you my man!" Mother had thundered, rushing them away. Why? What was it? And what was the connection among all these clues that everyone seemed to know but herself? "For two pins. . . ."

She edged her way back up the slope to the cousins. This time she approached obliquely and finished up slightly behind their seat — almost, but not quite, out of sight.

"But are you sure?" Pearl was asking. "It might be a false alarm." Mother laughed, but not happily. "As if I wouldn't know! This will be number five."

"Some people" hinted Pearl "use something. Bob and I never have, of course, because we can't have any. But you?" "Bit late now," Mother said. "Besides Hotham wouldn't. Though I bet he does with them."

"Them?" Pearl was always exquisitely polite.

"Oh you know. His others. But perhaps you still don't believe me?"

"Of course I do Beryl, if you say so. Still. . . ."

Mother began to cry. "I don't know how I'll go through it," she sobbed and Pearl put her arm around the shaking shoulders. "Poor Beryl. I'm so sorry. Isn't it just the way though? Here's you with four and a fifth on the way and here am I. . . To him that hath, eh?"

Mother laughed hysterically. "Perhaps I should offer you one of mine," she cried wildly. "I've more than enough" Pearl shifted uneasily and her eye fell upon Em, openmouthed in the background.

"Why here's Em back! Didn't you like the birds dear?" she asked in that special voice adults keep for other people's children. "Would you like another lolly?"

But Mother swooped like an avenging angel. "So, miss! Back again with your ears flapping! You know what I told you about eavesdroppers. Oh I don't know Pearl! You bring them to the Gardens and *then* they're not satisfied. What on earth do you want, Em?" "Nothing," said the child, the lolly in her cheek like a gumboil. "Then for goodness sake go off and watch the birds. That's what you're here for. Go on now. At once."

Em went, but slowly.

Through the wire fence, she stared into the fierce eye of the emu.

The emu stared back haughtily. Would they really pick your eyes out "like grapes off a bunch" as her big brother Jack said? Without moving his feet the emu advanced his sinuous neck, which seemed to have a life of its own. She recoiled in haste. The fence was between them, yes, but what if it fell down? Such a thing *could* happen. She stepped back further and fell over a concrete border.

Two little girls in pink pinafores ran up and laughed at her, their red gums and baby teeth glistening. Gathering her dignity, she pretended she'd been picking grass for the emu and produced a clump. Immediately her emu and several others thumped up to the scene, beady eyes gleaming and beaks at the ready. She ran back in disorder, while the little girls danced in derision.

"Big baby!" they sang, first one, then the other.

"You rude things," she cried but they poked out their tongues and bared pink pants at her. She tried ingratiation. "Let's all get grass for the emus" she coaxed. But they threw her offer back in her face and a moment later threw grass too. Why didn't people like her, she wondered, for there was no doubt they mostly didn't. Well, she would punish them. She would call on her "imagination", of which she was often told she had too much for her own good.

"You'll be sorry," she warned. "I know how to turn myself into a wicked witch if I want to. And I will, tonight when it's dark. And I'll get you. When you're in bed. And I'll take you away and I'll feed you to the big crocodile in the pond. So there!"

The younger one, a mere baby, was appalled and opened her mouth to wail but "she can't" said the elder "there's no such thing as witches."

"Oh isn't there?" Em retorted. "Then why are people so scared of them?" A kind of crazy logic in this argument floored the elder child and, combined with the terrible face Em pulled, set them screaming for their mummy. A woman ran up anxiously. With an obligato of screams from the younger girl, the elder told her tale. The elegantly-dressed lady turned with distaste to Em.

"You're a wicked little girl," she scolded. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Frightening children smaller than yourself!" She picked up one child while the other clung about her dress. Em hung her head.

"What on earth's the matter?" cried Em's mother who had rushed down at the sound of the commotion, followed by pearl and a few interested onlookers. The lady outlined the facts coldly, while the children put in their pennyworth. "She's going to feed us to the

crocodile," one sobbed and the other pointed an accusing finger at the culprit. "She told us she's a witch," she reported faithfully.

"Good heavens! A witch! Of course she's not, darlings," Mother said winningly. "And surely big girls like you don't believe in witches? Of course not. Em, tell these children you are not a witch and tell this lady you're sorry." Em complied sullenly.

"I don't blame the child," said the lady loftily. "I blame you. Why haven't you taught her not to tell lies?"

Mother's dander rose. "Em doesn't tell lies. She has a vivid imagination. It's always getting her into trouble."

"I don't wonder," the lady returned, provoking Mother by her fancy accent and smart clothes. Mother reacted with spirit.

"But really! What a fuss! What a storm in a teacup! Goodness, the row your children were making I thought there'd been a terrible accident. but you're all right now, girls? No bones broken? No heads chopped off?"

"Won't you have a humbug, dears?" This was Pearl, offering her panacea. But the lady swept her children aside as if from pestilence. "No!" she warned them sternly as they reached for the lollies. "How many times do I have to tell you not to accept sweets from strangers? They could be dirty — you don't know where they've been — they could be bad people! I say NO!" She dragged them off wailing. Mother went scarlet. "Well really," she gasped. "Some people!"

Frogmarched up the hill and flung on the park bench, Em feared she was in for it. But it was to Pearl that Mother spoke. The little scene had been the last straw, and she poured out her hurt, anger, despair and inadequacy quite oblivious of the child between them. Em took in little of the detail of the struggle to make ends meet in hard times, the terror of the expected birth, the resentment at Father's "tricks" and Mother's own helplessness in coping with her fate; but she felt and suffered the pain of it all and knew again the terror of being left — "for two pins".

Then Pearl made her proposition, putting it in the form of a joke to forestall possible rejection. What about giving her one of them? After all as girls together they'd always shared. Why not share now? Em felt both women stiffen. Did she mean the baby to come, Mother whispered. But Pearl laughed in an actressy sort of way and said oh why not an older one? She was a bit long in the tooth for a baby, Beb, but a little girl now. . . A daughter for Bob. That was what he'd always longed for. They weren't rich, but there was the farm, a pony to ride on, plenty of fresh air to make rosy cheeks! A little girl, say about nine, could be very happy there. She deliberately took Em's brown paw in her hand. The joke was over.

Not rejecting anything, Mother wondered parenthetically whether she meant adoption? Because she wasn't sure you could — but Pearl said why worry about that, she would settle for anything. Mother said of course she'd have to think it over, if Pearl was serious. She mustn't be selfish. Why not give it a try, Pearl hinted, say on a holiday basis for a start? Then Mother thought of Hotham and how he'd never agree. Certainly in the case of Ruby, or the boys, there'd have been no hope — but with this one. . . who knew? She was an odd little thing, had never seemed to fit in. But good, mind you. Only . . . well, clingy.

Pearl said she could cling as much as she liked to Bob and her; but feared there would be a real problem with Hotham. A man's children, she said doubtfully. But Mother perked up at that. A man's children! Apart from earning their keep, what did he ever do for them? She'd go as far as to say that of all the husbands she knew, Hotham had probably the least to do with his own children. All very well for him! Who was he to make terms? After his latest tricks, he wasn't going to lay down any law to her. Oh yes, she thought Pearl could safely leave Hotham to her. Anger, as usual, galvanised her and she rose purposefully.

"I'll think about it, Pearl," she promised as she collected basket and rug. "Very seriously, too. Come along now, Em," she urged the child who dragged after them. "It's time to meet the others at the kiosk."

All the powers of Em's nine year old mind bent on thwarting what she knew in her bones they were up to.

"Oh I've got these dreadful pains," she suddenly shrieked. Flung herself down on the grass, she curled up in the shape of an embryo. Because of her mother's constant fear of appendicitis, she knew she'd be safe from them all for a while.