

Helen Allan

THE CASE OF THE PRETTY MOUTH

Fourteen-year-old Ruby had been coming home late from school for the past week. Flushed and shiny of eye she'd claim sports half, library duty, a missed train or being kept in, but Mother was suspicious, she knew not of what. Bluntly questioned as to mischief Ruby acted injured innocence and mother was fooled. Yet how many times had she herself told people that Ruby was a born actress!

On the Friday afternoon Ruby forgot to pick up some items from the corner shop. "Just turn around and go straight back then, miss", Mother scolded. Her bones told her something was wrong. But Ruby dawdled, claimed she needed the lavatory. Em was sent.

Trudging the familiar path to the shop Em indulged in one of her favourite fantasies. In this, she was not a Pye at all but had been, as a baby, "changed at the hospital". How often she'd heard Mother make this joke to some friend or relation who commented on the difference between Em's looks and the rest of the family's. How it had always hurt her! But she had learnt to find comfort. Very well then they were right. She was not a Pye at all but the child of some noble family, preferably English because "they had lords". Let's say some English lady — why not say a countess had had a baby at the same hospital, at the same time as Mrs Pye, and the babies had been mixed up. Em dreamed that one day this countess would come and claim her. What more natural than that she should suddenly look at the interloper and ask herself "Now is this really my child? She's not like me and she's not like the Earl's side. Now I wonder ..."

Plodding along, head down as usual, Em dwelt with bitter pleasure on the agonies the Pye family would have to go through when they gave her up. Perhaps they would really appreciate her then, perhaps show some sign of love. If they did, she thought, she would invite them to stay at the countess's castle; though possibly not the boys, too noisy and rude.

"Ham! Ham Pie!" yoo-hoo'd someone from the row of workers' dwellings Em was passing. It was Edie Jones, notorious for intermittent head lice and the smell of yesterday's bloomers. How the daughter of a

noble house hated being accosted in such a vulgar way by her school nickname.

"I seen you walk under that blue tree, Ham Pie. Now you'll git the fever and die."

"Will not" Em retorted but was far from sure. Could it be true that the blue trees gave you sickness? Uneasily she recalled the popping of the fatal blossoms under her bare feet.

"There's some in yer hair now," Edie warned. "Me mother won't let me go near them trees. They'll kill ya."

"That's just stories! Flowers can't kill you."

"Some kin but, me mother said so." Then Edie looked at the practical side: "If you do die, kin I have your new pencil case?" she wheedled. "You could put it in a will."

Em ran on, raking blue blossoms out of her hair. The jacaranda would have to take its place among her long list of even worse anxieties. Mad dogs, infantile paralysis, being sent to Coventry at school, all had priority over it, not to mention the helpless terror she felt when Mother and Dad had a row. More than once Mother had threatened to leave them all.

Her mind turned for relief to the matter of the pretty mouth. Apparently *someone* was the lucky possessor of one of these very desirable features but who was it? Was it actually she herself, Emerald Pye, or was it in fact Mrs Burns at the shop? The mysterious mouth had first been mentioned last night at dinner. Em had just got herself into hot water once again. Tired of playing second fiddle to her sister, the sparkling Ruby, she'd made her own bid for the limelight by making what she thought would be an interesting and informative announcement. She had found out at school today, she said, that babies came out of your navel. Far from impressing anyone this item of news evoked only a lazy grin from Dad and a kind of frozen stillness from the boys. But Mother, after a stunned second, erupted. What sort of dreadful children was Em playing with at school? What was wrong with the child that she came out with such disgusting things? Mother imposed a total ban on the whole subject and offered stern advice. It would be better for Em, she warned, if she could just learn to keep her big mouth shut, especially in front of visitors. "Visitors" in this case were represented by Mother's cousin Pearl (all the Stone girls had gem names).

Pearl as usual tried to pour oil on troubled waters and as usual made things worse.

"But someone has a very pretty mouth, big or not big" she hinted with a smile meant to heal.

"Who? Me?" Em rushed to ask. You had to be quick to claim a compliment in that household.

"Now Pearl!" Mother clucked. "Praise to the face, you know. Certain disgrace!"

"But who is it?" Em persisted.

"Certainly not you, anyway" Ruby tossed off. As recognised beauty of the family she was alert for the faintest sign of challenge.

"What about Mrs Burns at the shop?" Dad suggested with a cheeky wink.

Mother glared. "Well what about her?" she asked icily. "Sounds as if you've been looking her over. Men!"

Dad shrugged, gave vent to a soundless whistle that was intended to convey nonchalance but didn't. Pearl took a nervous gulp of water from her glass and Em felt the stirrings of ancient anxieties. Into the tension Ruby suddenly blazed: "Don't mention that awful Burns! She's nothing but a stickybeak and an interfering bloody old bitch."

You didn't say bloody old bitch in the twenties.

The focus was now on Ruby, who had asked for trouble and now got it, further, was gladly sacrificed to it by some at the table whose sighs of relief went up like incense. Later, though, when Em went to bed she was still no wiser about the pretty mouth.

"A pound of butter, a tin of golden syrup, three-penn'orth of pumpkin and two pound of beans — not stringy, please." At the corner shop Em chanted her message across the counter. Mrs Burns bustled to pat up the butter while inviting Em to snap a bean to test its freshness. Em inspected her narrowly. Mrs Burns in general was no novelty to her, great goer of messages as she was, but today the general became the particular. Em had always been wary of this woman, never being quite sure that she wasn't being laughed at. Now she saw the reason for this feeling. The reason was that same mysterious mouth. Like a door that won't quite fit, it was always slightly ajar. This, she saw, was due to protruding front teeth that tended not to fit in, but lay along a full bottom lip in a sort of semi-permanent grin. Em didn't like the result at all — it didn't seem to call for an answering smile. Indeed an answering smile could be taken as impertinent. But there was no accounting for taste, especially adults', and this could well be the authentic pretty mouth of last night's discussion. Indeed must be. If not, why was Mother so cross?

Mrs Burns finished the order and took up a dog-eared book that was tied to the counter. This was her charge book. Cash played very little part in grocery transactions in the twenties, booking it up being the order of that day. But "What about telling your father to let me have a cheque?" she frowned, moodily licking the pencil point to make it write darker. "I can't carry youse all forever. I've got my bills to pay too you know. You tell your dad that." Em went red. Money was a very delicate subject indeed in her house.

"I seen him driving up the street in his new car" the lady hinted.

"It's only second hand," Em apologised, then to change the subject suddenly blurted out, "He thinks you have such a pretty mouth, Mrs Burns."

"What? What's that you say?" It was certainly not the sort of thing Mrs Burns heard every day of the week. Em repeated it and added for a sort of proof "He said that last night. When we were having tea. He did truly."

Mrs Burns went very red, made appropriate noises and giggled like a girl. But after she had preened herself enough, a nasty suspicion occurred. Was this Mr P's smarmy way of sweetening her up? Did he want to run up an even bigger bill? If so it wouldn't work. But just fancy now. What a compliment for a widow of forty plus! "You know, you're a funny kid," she said almost maternally to Em.

Em did know. She'd been described as funny, quaint, queer, odd and old-fashioned all her life and knew quite well these terms were not meant to be flattering. She knew she was different and hated being different. "My Auntie Pearl said that about the pretty mouth too" she said in corroboration.

Mrs Burns ignored this — Pearl was nothing to her. Her mind was running on some sort of reward for Em, some mark of high esteem for the bearer of such a compliment. She wrapped boiled lollies in a paper cone and presented them. Em began on one immediately. It occurred to the lady then that perhaps Em's father deserved something in the nature of a boiled lolly too. She grinned. "Look love. I bet your father doesn't know somethink I know. About your sister Ruby. She comes home every afternoon now with a boy, you tell him that. He walks her here from the station and they stand outside the shop talking for ages. Starting early, isn't she? She come in for an ice cream yes'dee. 'I bet your dad don't know 'bout the boy friend' I says and she gets real huffy. Real Lady Muck, that

one is. But you tell your Dad from me. He better keep an eye on that young lady. A bit of a flapper, I reckon she is."

You tell him! There was nothing Em wanted to do more. She hadn't won her title of blabbermouth for nothing and had the instincts of a reporter wanting to be first with the news. The fact that she never got any thanks for her trouble and quite often got the reverse hadn't cured her. She did it over and over again. Whatever was on the top of her mind just had to spill over. So she grabbed up her parcels and hurried past Edie Jones's place, past the baleful tree, past the workers' dwellings and on to home.

Flinging herself up the back steps she burst breathlessly into the kitchen. She noted with satisfaction that a worthwhile audience was assembled. Mother was here, turning and basting the roast.

Her pink cheeks, flushed from the heat of the wood stove, made her eyes seem bluer than ever and Em felt a pang of unrequited love. Pearl was here, reaching down the good willow-pattern dinner plates. Even Dad was here, for once. He was the least domesticated of fathers, claimed he'd never wiped a dish in his life and looked upon men in kitchens as sissies. "I don't wash or wipe dishes" he would say if challenged (not that that was likely). "It's my job to pay for the food that goes on them." But he was here now, thinly slicing a lemon for Pearl's pre-dinner drink. And Ruby herself was here — a rubber-gloved Ruby, distastefully massacring potatoes at the scrubbed deal table. "Hurry up with those potatoes" Mother urged. "I want them now."

Em took a deep breath. "Dad, Mrs Burns told me to give you a message. About Ruby. Mrs Burns said she's meeting a boy. After school. Down at the shop. Mrs Burns said I was to tell you. She's seen them." Relieved of her news, she awaited reactions. But apart from Ruby turning nearly as red as her hair all the adults went on with what they were doing and she had to repeat the whole message. This time she embroidered it slightly — such was her unethical custom — and it came out "boys". This time they heard.

Eruptions ensued which would have gratified any sensation seeker — until they became alarming. Mother became a volcano from which lava flowed indiscriminately on friend or foe. Dad was the first to be scalded. This was all his fault. He'd utterly spoilt the girl, let her get away with anything. He was too soft. What she needed was a father-of-a-hiding and this time he'd have to give it to her. Late home from school day after day and now this! And just look at her, guilt written all over her face!

Meeting boys! Well he'd just have to deal with her — she was too much for her mother. Like father, like daughter, some would say.

Dad had not seemed to be as shocked as Mother by Ruby's infamy. He perhaps did not think it very dreadful, even in the twenties. But he was stung by certain underlying inferences in Mother's attack and a bit of lava of his own now spilled over. Pity Ruby didn't have a bit more sense, he told the girl. If she absolutely must hang around with a boy, fancy doing it outside old Mother Burns' shop. Why not put it in the paper and have done with it? Anyway (for he saw more maternal lava bubbling up) she was far too young to be thinking about boys. Where did she expect to end up? Good heavens, if she went on like this, he added, trotting out an old threat, he'd send her to a girls' boarding school that's what he'd do, and see how she'd like that. After a few more ineffectual rumblings — for everyone knew that Dad would never give anybody a hiding and couldn't possibly afford boarding schools — he escaped thankfully to the front verandah and his drinks.

Mother now erupted in the direction of Ruby, who sat very still, but with head held high. So! Miss Ruby was chasing boys now was she? And telling lies to her own mother about being kept in and so on. Mother hoped she was proud of herself, that was all. She needed a jolly good lacing, and if she had a proper father that was what she'd get, too. And what was this boy's name? Or names, if there was more than one? Because Mother was going to tell their parents, yes parents, don't think she wouldn't. Also, she intended notifying the principal of their school. Oh yes she was!

Ruby stubbornly refusing to give any name or names was told to go straight to her room and stay there. There'd be no dinner for her tonight and by tomorrow Mother would expect to have these names. Ruby flounced out, tossing her head and crying with flash of eye "If anyone says another word about the whole thing to me or anyone else I'll run away from home that's what I'll do." "Nasty little sneak" she hissed at Em as she fled.

Mother's volcano gradually began to subside, though there was still fallout for the unwary. Em had watched the proceedings with a mixture of feelings, none of which was much to her credit. Now it was her turn to get scorched. Why had she been gossiping with Mrs Burns, of all people? Probably telling that hussy all the family's business. Who told Em to discuss Ruby with Mrs Burns? Was Mrs Burns Ruby's mother? Really you couldn't even send Em a message without her coming back and

upsetting the whole family! She was just as much trouble as her big sister and by rights ought to be sent to bed too.

A rivulet of lava now trickled towards Pearl who rashly commented that after all the child had been specially sent to the shop and couldn't help it if Mrs Burns gave her a message for Hotham. "A message from Mrs Burns! And to Hotham! The cheek of the woman ..." Anyway, Mother didn't need Mrs Burns or anyone else to tell her how to bring up her own children, thank you. As for Pearl, it was all very well for her to stick up for Em but what did she know about children? She was lucky, she didn't have any so didn't know what a worry they could be. Of course if Pearl thought she knew so much about bringing up children she could take over Mother's job, any day. Any day she liked ... Pearl took the first opportunity she could to flee to the front verandah where Hotham received her with a rueful grin and a gin squash.

Later, they all sat down to one of Mother's superb roast dinners. Strangely enough the atmosphere was calm. Each had something in the way of an apology to make and each in his own way set about it. Dad, conscious of being in some sort of deserved or undeserved bad books, set out to be what he could be when he chose — very charming. Certainly, he did negotiate initially at least via Pearl but that was only common prudence and useful to Pearl who had amends of her own to make. Try as she did to keep out of things she always ended up getting involved in the family's wars. As for Mother, she knew she had over-reacted, snapped at Dad and been rude to her guest so she leaned over backwards now to be the perfect hostess. Miss Ruby was present on sufferance only. No Pye parent would ever dream of actually sending a child to bed supperless, but Ruby was subdued and wanted to lie low. Lying low, too, were the boys. They had missed the fracas, but knew well that one had occurred and that time must elapse before it was safe to emerge.

But Ruby's absence from the limelight tempted Em to make a bid for it. Something was nagging at her — an "i" not dotted, an end not tied, a duty not done. Yes! It was another message from Mrs Burns, not yet delivered. An unpalatable message, sure, but that had never stopped Em. So into a peaceful lull, over dessert, she piped up: "Oh Dad by the way Mrs Burns said to tell you to pay the bill, it's getting too big again." Mother bridled and Dad shot an embarrassed glance at Pearl but Em blabbered on. "She wasn't nasty about it, Dad, really. I told her what you said about her mouth and she even gave me some lollies."

There followed that peculiar silence that was often the result of Em's contributions. "And what is your father supposed to have said about Mrs Burns' mouth?" Mother demanded. "Well, miss?" "But you know! You heard him. He said she had a pretty mouth. And I told her. And she was very pleased."

Mother laughed unpleasantly. "I'll bet she was!" She swung around upon Dad. "So there's another string to your bow by the sound of it. And only up the road too. How very convenient."

Pearl laid an anxious hand on her arm. "Beryl" she begged "don't."

"Oh don't worry about me" Mother said haughtily. "I'm quite used to it."

Dad rose in unusual wrath. "Emerald. Have you finished your meal?" Em nodded, although she hadn't really, but he was white with fury. "Then for Christ's sake — for Christ's sake — will you leave the table immediately and go straight to bed."

Miserably Em went. Oh if only the Countess would come and claim me, she said to herself.