Mother had made up her mind to speak to Mrs Moody. A simple thing to say, perhaps, but it was not going to be a simple thing to do. Mrs Moody had become a regular, if not close, friend but in the fashion of the twenties they still called each other Mrs Moody and Mrs Pye. Actually, Mother would have liked to call her Bessie and make a sort of surrogate cousin out of her, especially now that Pearl, her real cousin, had returned to Adelaide. Mother now had neither kith nor kin in Queensland.

Mrs Moody was a very reserved woman, standoffish in fact, although very kind. Certainly there were things you couldn’t discuss with her however much you might want to, she being the wife of the local doctor.

Ambrose Moody and Hotham Pye were Amby and Hoth to each other, but this was probably because they played so many sets of singles together on the Pyes’ court. This was an antbed court, the pride of Hotham’s heart. The whole family had spent countless hours breaking up anthills and tamping them down to produce the swift, springy surface on which the two men loved to fling themselves about. Meanwhile their wives would sit sedately on the lofty verandah set on its tall Queensland stumps high above the action. They might have been two goddesses on Olympus as they sat and sewed their gerbera supper cloths or drank tea, occasionally flickering an eye upon the two mere mortals below. It was pleasant on the high verandah, for even on the hottest day a cool sea breeze would set the hanging baskets of fern swinging and gently rattle the venetians.

Em was usually of the party in an unofficial capacity. Her job was to wheel Mrs Moody’s latest up and down the front verandah while the ladies sat together on the side one. Tucked into its pram, the baby would pretend to doze, though only while the wheels moved. Should Em stop — say to pick up an interesting titbit from the ladies’ talk — it would open accusing eyes and cluck warningly. This posed a problem for Em who, always on the lookout for a key to the mystery of life, tended to linger overlong at the corner. Inevitably the indignant clucking of the baby, and her mother’s wrath, moved her on.

Today was to be particularly interesting, for Mother had this question that she was determined to put to Mrs Moody. She’d been working herself up to it for weeks, ever since Pearl had gone back to Adelaide after Mother’s miscarriage. “I’d ask Mrs Moody, I really
would,” Pearl had said on that last night. It was weeks ago now and Mother hadn’t dared.

Carefully she selected a piece of red stranded cotton from her basket and wet the end with her tongue, preparatory to threading. Mrs Moody, a large, placid woman, glanced up under shining brown hair that was parted in the middle and pulled into two big buns over her ears. (Cowpats, Hotham crudely called them, but it was a good description).

“You’re very quiet today, Mrs Pye,” she said with her gentle smile. Mother laughed nervously — it was now or never. “As a matter of fact, I was just wondering if you’d mind my asking you rather a personal question,” she blurted out.

“Of course not,” Mrs Moody said politely, looking as though she’d really prefer not.

Mother was not to be put off now. “I was wondering — my cousin Pearl was saying — you remember Pearl of course? She was with me when I lost my last baby. Well she suggested that I have a little talk with you about” she stabbed blindly at the eye of the needle “doing something. About not having any more. You being a doctor’s wife, she thought you might know of something I could do. I don’t want any more, you see. I have four,” she added apologetically.

Mrs Moody patted the sleek buns over her ears. It was a habit of hers and could mean anything or nothing. Mother wondered. Had she gone too far? For her friend just sat there with a queer expression on her face.

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” Mother said. “But after all — between two women. . . and it is the twenties.”

Mrs Moody coloured. “You didn’t offend me. At least I’m sure you didn’t mean to. But what a funny question to ask me! When you know I’ve got seven.”

The ice broken, Mother was unstoppable. “But I always assumed that you had seven because you wanted seven,” she said naively. Then, as Mrs Moody closed her lips firmly and remained silent, she added “As a doctor’s wife you’d naturally be in a position to well, know. Quite a lot. Which is more than I do I’m afraid.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Mrs Moody said in rather subdued tones, “but I really don’t know the first thing about it.”

Looking baffled, Mother yet persisted. “Your husband has never discussed it with you?” she asked in astonishment. Mrs Moody sewed quietly. “He never has,” she replied.

“Some women,” Mother laughed artificially, “might have taken a look now and then in some of his medical books. . . ” but “It would be more than my life was worth,” Mrs Moody said in that same
subdued tone. "Besides, they are always locked up. No, Mrs Pye, I'm afraid I can't help you at all."

Another woman might have taken this as a dismissal of the subject but Mother's blood was up. "So you may have more?" she asked boldly. Mrs Moody glanced down at her husband, a little, jockey-sized man winding himself up to serve. "I well may," she said, watching him with an unfathomable look. Mother shrugged. She felt she was in the presence of an alien soul and might as well give up. "Oh well," she murmured and fell silent. There's no accounting for taste, the ensuing silence said.

After a while, during which time the husbands below puffed, grunted and danced on the court, Mrs Moody broke silence. She may have felt perhaps that an explanation was due to her friend and that she could be trusted with it. She may have seen the tear of mortification standing in the other's eye. She was always a kind woman.

"I don't want you to think, Mrs Pye, that I don't sympathise with you. But I am truly the last person, the very last, that you should ask. You see with me the question you are asking just simply doesn't arise."

"You'd like a large family?" Mother suggested politely

Mrs Moody gave a hard laugh. Totally unlike her, it was. "I really don't have much choice," she said. "Perhaps I should tell you, but in the strictest confidence, what he said to me on the very day that one" she jerked the nearest bun in the direction of the pram and Em "was born."

Mother demurred for sake of form. "Perhaps the doctor might not like. . . ?" But she was all ears. Perhaps Em was too.

"I really think it would do me good," the other said judicially as though talking about someone else. "For once."

Mother vowed secrecy, and before her eyes a transformation took place. Her pale, submissive friend sprang to vivid life. It seemed that an actress had been lost to the world, locked up in that swollen body like a statue in the raw marble. Leaning forward, and eyeing every movement of her husband on the court below, she boldly parodied him before his face. For a big woman with a soft voice she brought out his deep growl amazingly. For a second or two she even looked like him.

"Another girl eh? Well thanks for nothing. Do you do it on purpose, just to annoy me? Or because you're too stupid to produce a boy? Eh? Eh? No use whimpering, woman. What you've got to do is keep on — and on — till you finally do your duty and give me what I've got every right to expect. A son." Thus Mrs Moody grated, totally in character, "Even," she added with her husband's consulting room scowl "even if it kills you."
It was uncanny to watch her taking him off so cruelly while he danced about quite unconscious below, unaware of the wrath of the goddess above. Yet he must have felt her eyes upon him, for he looked up, waved his racket in some sort of salute and played on.

Mother was appalled. She too flashed a baleful eye on the flannel-wrath wretch. "The brute!" she cried and flashed another at her own husband, reaching to receive a serve. "Men!" she bayed. "Oh if only they had to have them. Just once, that's all I ask. There'd never be another."

But all the fire seemed to have gone from her friend. The vivid, fluid personality had gone and she had settled dully back into her too too solid flesh. The statue had gone back into the marble.

"Naturally he wants a son," she said, actually apologising for him. "To carry on his practice. He's worked so hard. And all I've given him is seven daughters."

"But that's not your fault," Mother cried indignantly. then, suddenly aware of how little she knew about the whole process added "Or is it?"

"He thinks so," Mrs Moody said submissively. "There were plenty of sons in his family. I was one of five girls."

"I still say it takes two," Mother was beginning when, alerted by the treacherous clucking of the baby she spied Em's fascinated gaze from behind a potplant. Em at the helm of a pram definitely not in motion. "Miss Donkey Ears again? Didn't I tell you to keep baby moving? And on the front verandah, where it's quiet. Off you go now. At once." She turned to her friend. "That child!"

"She wouldn't understand what we were talking about," Mrs Moody said calmly. "What is she? Nine? I never understood till the day I was married. If then."

"Really?" Mother asked with interest. "I thought I was the only fool. No one told me a thing. Of course that was back in 1910. But I thought, in the modern world... still..."

Silence fell for a while as though the interruption had made them lose the thread of their theme. They sewed quietly, red and yellow gerberas blossoming under their fingers. They made a picture of submission and wifely industry. Then Mother, to work herself up again, repeated the doctor's words stagily. "If it kills you! Well, Mrs Moody, it just might."

"He says I'm as strong as a horse," the other said bending her head with its shining coils over her work. But Mother snorted angrily. "All very well for him! They don't know..." She began to cry. "They don't know what it's like."

Mrs Moody dropped her needle and put a shy hand on her
friend's arm. For the first time, she used her christian name.

"Poor Beryl! You still haven't picked up after that last one."

The two friends clung together, oblivious of their men's athletics far below and of Em's sudden stillness behind the potplants. She had discovered that a gentle shaking of the pram sometimes fooled the baby.

"It's so unfair," Mother sobbed. "To lose the baby! All the little clothes I made. Oh you don't want them, but when they come! I'm a fool," she said suddenly, blowing her nose. "I tell you I don't want any more, then I cry because after all that, I lost it."

"I understand, dear," said Mrs Moody. "And I do wish I could help you. Give you the advice you need. But I can't. Why don't you ask Ambrose yourself? As your doctor?"

Mother went a deep scarlet. "Oh I couldn't. I just couldn't."

Mrs Moody rather tentatively made another suggestion. "Your own husband? Hotham?" She gestured down at him as he stooped for a ball. "Wouldn't he...?"

Mother's eyes flashed. She was on familiar territory. "Hotham! He'd be the last. He says that sort of thing is only for fast women. So that they can go out and play up. Well, what I say is, if anyone knows about fast women and what they do and don't do, Hotham does!" As usual, anger had dried her tears.

Mrs Moody recoiled, as one who had been given a confidence she'd rather have done without. "In that case," she said with the finality of one who would like to change the subject, "there's nothing to be done. One can, of course, abstain."

"And there's nothing I'd like better," Mother flared. "But what a perfect excuse that gives them to go elsewhere!"

But Mrs Moody had gone as far as she intended into a difficult subject and wouldn't be drawn. So after a while, Mother went off to make fresh tea and the mere mortals from below mounted the stairs to join the Olympians.

Dear Auntie Pearl, wrote Em shortly after her tenth birthday. Thank you for the birthday present and for the invitation to come down for a holiday. I can't come now though the pony sounds nice. We are all very well.

A funny thing has happened. I mean, a bad thing. Do you remember Mrs Moody, Mother's friend? Well she's gone to a lunatic asylum. One day she came over when only Mother and I were home and she was mad then. We were very frightened but Mother said we had to humour her. She made Mother and me clean everything over
and over again. All the cups and saucers and floors and tables and chairs and even the walls. She made us get lots of hot water and soap and put a bit of phenyl in it for the floors and walls. Poor Mother was scared not to because Mrs Moody is a very big woman and when they get mad they’re stronger, Mother said. But Mrs Moody kept saying it’s for your own good Mrs Pye you did ask me to help you and what you’ve got to do is get rid of the seamen. And she kept saying more water, more soap. Then her husband came with two men and they took her away, but first Mrs Moody bit them and scratched them. And all the time she only had on her nightdress. Mother cried when they took her away and she put her arms round Mrs Moody and said Bessie. And Mrs Moody didn’t bite Mother at all. She only said get rid of the seamen Mrs Pye it’s a matter of life and death.

Love to yourself and Uncle Bob.

P.S. It was a pity about Mrs Moody because she had just had a lovely little baby girl.