

THE ECLIPSED

"BOTTHAMLEY," it read. "At their residence, Coventry Cove, to Mr. and Mrs. F. C. Botthamley, a daughter. Both well." My bosom swelled with pride. Childbirth is a natural process, I always tell myself, but it's almost the only thing that gets one's name in the paper. The phone rings. A wellwisher, or perhaps a talent scout from the Natural Childbirth Association? I shuffle into my slippers and trip lightly to the living room.

It is my mother-in-law, somewhat agitated, with news of an unexpected Blessed Event. My daughter's white rat, Johnny Town-Mouse, has given birth to octuplets.

"But it was a male!" I protest.

"Yes, wasn't it," mourns my mother-in-law.

I feel a little ruffled. My own confinement, conducted I imagined with a minimum of fuss, seems positively melodramatic beside Johnny's casual excursion into multiple parturition.

"Perhaps," I suggest, "it would be a good idea if Susan stayed with you an extra week. Till they're all well enough to be moved."

But it appears that Susan is coming home this very afternoon because she just can't wait to show them to me.

"Of course, it's all right. Of course, I can manage," I protest wanly. "I know she's dying to see the baby."

SUSAN has evidently done some advance publicity before leaving Grandma's, and there's a bevy of little girls to meet her at the bus. She staggers off with a suitcase in one hand and a large wooden box balanced on the other, fights off the ratophiles and pants up the steps and into my bedroom.

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fictional town whose possession is disputed with bitter realism by India and Pakistan. Hancock, on the staff of the United Nations Committee in the town, finds his task of settlement continually disrupted by the disputing claims of the nationalist factions, or by Hindus or Moslems, or the caste system. And it is an "untouchable" who has risen to a high government post and who is a Doctor of Law, who helps him realise the way of slow adjustment necessary.

Countries, characters or the particular form of Professor Hancock's work at the time, are, however, factors incidental to the basic theme of disorganisation by violence in families, cities, nations and the world. *Trumpets in the Dawn* is a worth-while story, based on a plot that allows for plenty of dramatic action, and commercial station listeners will find the Australian cast quite capable of the task set them. This serial will begin Monday, Wednesday and Friday broadcasts from 32B at 7.45 p.m. on May 19, and will be heard from 1XH on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays at 7.0 p.m., beginning on May 21.

followed by a savage horde of sensation seekers. Surreptitiously I manoeuvre the bassinet out of the main stream of traffic.

Susan places the box solemnly on the bed. There is a reverent silence. Then she slides the lid off to reveal old friend Johnny flanked by a double row of moistly quivering cheerios. He looks self-conscious.

"Aah," breathe the little girls adoringly.

"Ugh!" I spit, but nobody takes the slightest notice.

"Careful," Susan admonishes a particularly fervent breather, "you'll give them a chill. They're prems, you know."

"How do you know?" I ask, interested.

But Susan, bearing the box like a votive offering before her, is intent on conveying her loved ones to a place of safety. The little girls, awed, tiptoe after her. The baby, realising company manners don't get attention, wails. Only maturity denies me a similar outlet.

Later on that afternoon I get my daughter to myself.

"I'm so glad it's a girl," she whispers. "So am I," I murmur, gratified.

"Otherwise we couldn't have had any baby rats, could we?"

PATIENCE, I told myself, the novelty of Johnny and his brood would soon wear off, and Susan might have a little more time to devote to her sister. But, dreadful thought, in that case would I be left holding the baby? Which baby? Much better leave her loyalties undisturbed than risk being the one who cleans the cage out. Though you can't expect a woman in my condition to relish playing second fiddle to another female however similarly circumstanced, and I must confess there were occasions when I found resignation difficult. Like the time I thought my husband was painting the pram and instead he was down in the basement making a new house for Johnny. Not that it mattered, as it turned out, since the whole idea of painting the pram was Susan's, and completely put out of her head by Johnny's meteoric rise to parenthood. (She had also stipulated for an embroidered pillow-case and matching spread, or alternatively, one of those furry ones with a dog's head that sticks up. . .)

"Don't you think it would be nice if you and Valerie could take Baby out in the pram for half an hour? I've finished the pillow case," I suggested wistfully one day, coming across Susan pouring my last drops of Adexolin with lavish hand on to Johnny's pre-fortified VitaNuts.

Susan, a nice child, looked regretful. "Sorry, Mum, but I've promised to take Johnny out for his run now. Otherwise he won't be back in time to feed the babies."

I bite back an impulse to say Take him too. (After all, the embroidered pillow-case. . .)

"I should think," I say somewhat huffily, "that Baby's outing is more important than a rat's."

"Come off it, Mum," said Susan. "How would you like to spend your day shut up in one room with eight kids?"

by M.B.



"... Johnny, flanked by a double row of moistly quivering cheerios"

"Six," I correct.

Susan counted frantically. "They must be underneath him," and pounced on Johnny. Only six little cheerios. Two had vanished, leaving not a whisker behind.

I looked at Johnny. Johnny looked unblinkingly back at me. Not Proven. More protein required, I realised with a shudder, and took to slipping Johnny an occasional cut off the joint.

"THEY'RE beautiful," says Susan about a week later. "They're getting fur on."

"My baby," I say tartly, "had hair on right from the start."

"Yes, but it fell out again," says Susan.

We watch the rats in companionable silence. In spite of my initial revulsion I find myself becoming quite attached to the little family. And to see poor Johnny being so ruthlessly exploited by her young makes me feel we have a lot in common.

"They're growing up," says Susan, "it's high time they were christened. I've got it all worked out what I'm calling them. William Roland—Roly for short, and Walter Winchell, because he's always nosing around, and Anne Elizabeth—"

"Stop!" I shout. "That's what you'd decided we'd call the baby."

"Well, I don't mind," says Susan generously. "We can have two Anne Elizabeths."

"Well—" I demur.

"Tell you what," says Susan generously. "You can call her Lauren. I had that for the seventh, but I shan't be needing it now."

"But I don't like the name of Lauren."

"Well, how do you know the baby won't?" says Susan with relentless juvenile logic.

THE weeks slid by. Lauren remained indisputably an infant, but Anne Elizabeth and Co. were in dangerous

proximity to the brink of adolescence.

"Don't you think . . . ?" I asked my husband.

"Quite," he agreed.

But Susan was harder to convince of the necessity for enforced immigration. Certainly she had allowed Ingrid and Gregory to be adopted by school friends, seeing each off accompanied by its quota of VitaNuts, but wholesale disruption of the family life was another story. Coerced, she found homes for Anne, Roly and Winchell, but they came home the following day accompanied by polite notes of regret from the parents.

I suggested the pet shop.

Susan, it must be confessed, brightened at the thought of filthy lucre. But the Pet Shop, echoing my own earlier attitude, announced majestically that We Do Not Handle White Rats.

"I'm afraid," I said to Susan, "they will have to go to an institution."

"An orphanage?" She recoiled.

"Not exactly," I drew a glowing picture—"Thirty Years with the Department of Agriculture," and "I Was a Guinea Pig for the B.M.A." I enlarged upon the nice normal life Johnny and her offspring would lead romping with the other rats, enjoying the social security of a cat-proof cage and an assured lifelong supply of VitaNuts. Plus the satisfaction of knowing themselves to be making their contribution to the Sum of Human Health and Happiness. . .

"I'll do it," said Susan, sniffing.

I tried to mask my unseemly jubilation the day the rats went, but cheerfulness kept breaking through. And I was guiltily conscious as I bent to my baby-tending of Susan's grief-wrapped figure in the background, directing towards me the disinterested contempt which the woman who has given her all to her country's service is entitled to feel towards one from whom no sacrifice has been demanded. . . Well, almost her all. Little Bentley has been snatched at the last minute from the maw of social service, I am forced to remember, shaking a pellet of rat dirt off a pile of clean naps and hurrying the top one to the tub. But I am still happy in the thought that little Bentley, male or female, can scarcely emulate his mother's feat of parthogenesis.

"Susan, dear," I call across the great gulf of unshared experience that separates us, "would you like to take Lauren along in the pram to the store and buy yourself some lollies?"

"No, thank you, Mother," says Susan with the simple dignity befitting multiple bereavement.

"Take Bentley, too," I add impulsively.

"It's quite all right, Mother. It's just that I want to write a letter. To the place I got Johnny from. Asking if they'll send me another rat so Bentley won't be lonely."

Well, I reflect sourly, we've got a fifty-fifty chance. But meanwhile it's difficult doing one's housework with two fingers crossed.