

THE ALLENS

(EXTRACT FROM PHYLLIS PARKINSON'S HISTORY OF THE GARRETTS)

My mother on the other hand had a vast number of stories of her childhood. She too came from a big family, and her father Frederick Allen, also married twice. His first wife, Elizabeth Esther, died when my mother was 3. She had already had a number of children. There was Jack, who was apprenticed to a tailor and hated it so much that he ran away to sea, and eventually got to Australia, where he wrote such a beautiful hand that he got a job at Sydney Town Hall and made his fortune and had at least 14 children. The eldest sister was Ella, who ran away to marry Harry Champion (music-hall star who used to sing 'Any old iron'). He used to desert her for months at a time, leaving her once in Paris with no money at all. Finally he was had up in court for some crime or other, and as he left she saw him hand his gold watch to another woman, and that finished it. Then there was Sam who had two sub-normal children. Apparently he did not find out until after he had married her that Aunt Alice's family had mental trouble. Of the two children Ruth was a nymphomaniac, and Frank cut off the top of his thumb to avoid conscription in 1914.

My mother's favourite sister was Aunt Emmie. During the 1914 war she was my favourite too, because she somehow made cakes of chocolate in the lids of cocoa tins so that they came out stamped with the name of Cadbury, which she gave me when we went to see her in a house at Eltham which had curtains of blue glass beads. When she and her husband retired to New Zealand her daughter Peggy eventually had to look after them. She told me how when uncle Harry finally took to his bed, Emmie who had put up with his very quirky vegetarian ways for years, used to get her own back by hiding his books and his woolly vests etc. He had been a first class cricketer and so retaliated by unscrewing the brass balls off the bed and lobbing them round the room after her. Later on after his death, she lived with Peggy, and to the last kept up her energetic habit of two good walks a day, which exhausted Peggy so much that she begged the doctor to give her mother a sedative so that she herself could get some rest. Having tucked her mother up after lunch, she collapsed on her own bed only to be woken up by Emmie, always a strong Evangelical church-goer, walking up and down the passage, clapping her hands and singing "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so". Poor Peg got up to ask what she was doing – Emmie replied that she was having to do it to keep herself awake.

I do not know why Mother's family were so much more eccentric than the Garretts. Perhaps it was the result of Grandfather Allen's Victorian repression, or the unsettled background of litigation in which he was always indulging. His children were all afraid of him and his violent temper - he used to throw his dinner across the room if it was served on a cracked plate. Mother said that his first wife's children were denied everything, even her mother's jewellery was given to her three half-sisters. Mother had to leave school at the age of 12 to look after them, but she loved them and May and Edith particularly were always devoted to her.

They seem to have moved around the country; at one time they lived at Clapham Common, then they went to Fairseat Manor near Wrotham Hill in Kent, and then to Yarmouth. For a time Mother lived with her Uncle Tom and his wife; they were kind to her and wanted to adopt her, but she was hauled back to be nursemaid again when Emmie was married. She was finally made to serve behind the bar, the Allens then having a pub in Yarmouth, and that is how Father met her. She hated being a barmaid, it is impossible to imagine how she ever did it, she was always so gentle and quiet and innocent. She was terrified of her father, she once broke a bottle of brandy and was petrified that he would find out. When she got married she had hardly any clothes, and only 6d in her pocket. But in spite of it all she said she was known as the pretty Miss Allen - she certainly is in her photos.