

HELEN GOLEBY

Who Dunn It?

Nellie had gazed rapturously at the figure kneeling before her. With eyes looking earnestly into hers, Edwin Dunn had asked her to marry him and she'd said 'Yes.' Nellie's father had granted his approval and her mother had kissed her on the cheek and murmured 'trousseau', and 'society wedding'. Nellie's father quickly commandeered Edwin to work in his bank, determined that his daughter would maintain her father's social status.

Her trousseau was extensive, featuring expensive nightwear and silken undergarments, as well as fine linen and napery. The large society wedding was celebrated in true Victorian fashion and the couple honeymooned by the sea at a fashionable resort. Walking along the shore, they planned their future, where they'd live, how many children they would like and what he wanted to do.

To her surprise Nellie learned that Edwin was finding working in her father's bank rather restrictive. She was a little alarmed when he mentioned that he'd like to follow a different career. Her father would be outraged and would not approve at all. As a leading member of society and highly respected in the banking world, he'd recently been approached to enter into the world of politics. His family's respectability was paramount, which was why he'd pushed Edwin into the banking world.

Nellie wondered if his taking up a hobby might appease him and suggested tennis, but his glum expression indicated that this did not meet his needs. Nor did golf, a garden club or even hot air ballooning spark any interest. Edwin kicked the sand and gazed out at the spear fishermen diving for their catch.

"What I'd really like to do," he said slowly, "is learn how to be a diver."

Nellie gasped with surprise. That's the last hobby she would have imagined for him, "Well, my darling Edwin, if that's what you want, you must find out all about it. But you will stay at the bank with Father, won't you?" Edwin agreed to this condition and together they wandered back to their hotel.

The honeymoon over, the newlyweds moved into the west wing of their parents' home in Richmond, Victoria. There, for the next year, the dual household maintained the sanctity of privacy, although Nellie's father occupied much of her husband's time discussing the banking business in the evenings, as well as nominating him to join his exclusive men's club. Edwin resented this, having spent all day in the banking world, and introduced the idea of moving to Sydney to his wife. His father-in-law saw this as a great opportunity to expand and promptly appointed Edwin as the New South Wales manager.

Nellie was reluctant but she wanted her husband to be happy, so the couple moved to Waverley, Sydney, a short distance from the ocean. Under her father's tutelage, Edwin established the new branch of the bank in New South Wales and the next few years kept him occupied as a young banker with his well-to-do wife, well entrenched in the Sydney social scene.

But his dream of becoming a diver was not forgotten. He reminded Nellie about his plan and the couple travelled to Exmouth in Western Australia by a coastal trader for a lengthy stay, leaving the bank in his assistant manager's capable hands. Edwin gloried in learning about pearl diving, how to select and extract the pearls from the oysters, and the dangers of decompression. He loved parading in his diver's suit and posed beside his wife in his underwater outfit. And Nellie was delighted with the beautiful rope of pearls he presented to her on the final day of his training, pearls he'd located and then had strung into a necklace for his wife.

Life back in Sydney saw the young Mrs Dunn proudly wearing the magnificent rope of pearls, as she mixed with society's elite. She was sure that Edwin had satisfied his yearning to dive. But for Edwin, life resumed its monotony and his restlessness soon became apparent to Nellie. He wanted them to live in Exmouth

where he could develop his skills as a pearl diver. Nellie begged him to keep to his end of the bargain to stay at the bank, but he was vehement in his determination to follow his dream. She felt betrayed. The once happy family home became rife with discord and the future seemed bleak.

Edwin spent his days at the bank, returning home late, sullen and taciturn. Little was said as the couple observed the social niceties of dining together and occupying the same sleeping chambers so the household staff would not observe any change.

Nellie took to walking out, alone, to the crashing ocean thundering against the cliffs at Waverley. Its angry waves suited her mood and the desolate cry of the gulls echoed the misery within her. Day after day she trudged along the road, head down, lost in her thoughts, with her hands fingering her rope of pearls and her lips moving as if she was confessing her sins. Behind closed curtains, sympathetic eyes followed her path but no-one spoke to her. In those days people were left to cope with their misery as it was considered rude to pry.

On a hot February afternoon in 1898, Nellie Dunn was seen to stagger and fall while walking on the cliffs at Waverley. Horrified eyes watched her plummet into the ocean. When the searching Government steamer hoisted her body, hampered by its long skirts, from the surf, her head still oozed blood from the ledge of rock she'd struck when she fell before dropping into the sea. Her eyes stared sightlessly at her retrievers, who gazed sadly at the young woman cut off in her prime. Who was she?

It didn't take them long to find out that she was the wife of the respected banker Edwin Dunn, and the only daughter of the Victorian respected banker and politician in local Government. Nellie Dunn, a leading Sydney socialite, dead.

This was a mystery that attracted the headlines of the newspapers, always hungry for a scoop. Had she been drugged? What about the husband? Was the marriage happy? Was there a lover? How would this affect her father's future? And where were the pearls, the pearls that her husband had given her, the pearls that she was

never seen without, that she fingered as she went on her solitary walks, that were missing from her dead body retrieved from the ocean.

The photograph of Edwin Dunn posing in a diver's suit beside his wife led the police to believe he had killed his wife, that he had drugged her so that she'd fall, then dived to retrieve the pearls from her body. He'd often been seen at the Waverley cliffs, practising his skills in his diving suit.

Edwin Dunn was arrested on suspicion of murder and trial by jury found him in prison for life. He died in prison, still protesting his innocence.

Nellie's father resigned from his seat in parliament and retired from his banking emporium to live his days in ignominy and bitterness. Her mother ended up in a mental asylum, sent mad by the end of her social status due to the scandal.

And the pearls? At the end of World War II, a dozen old homes in Waverley were demolished to make way for a new post-war building boom, including the home of Nellie and Edwin Dunn. There, in the rubble, lay a box. Inside, the pearls lay in a soft glow on a ragged, dusty cloth.

Once, and only once, she'd stored them in safety under the floorboards before embarking on her last walk, along with a farewell note. The note said, *'You didn't keep to the bargain and destroyed my dreams. I hope you find this too late, for now it is my turn to destroy yours.'* Nellie Dunn had taken her own life.