

THIS IS AN EXTRACT FROM THE WINNING ENTRY OF THE 2021 E.M. FLETCHER WRITING AWARD.

THE BITTERNESS OF THEIR WOE by Denise Newton

*‘The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.
Blessed be the name of the Lord.’*

I stare at Emma’s memorial stone. It wasn’t the Lord who took my darling wife away from me. It was my own foolish, stubborn nature. I thought I could keep them safe—Emma, our children, and my brother’s family. I’d reckoned myself smarter than the Lord himself, who’d sent the rains. But what did I know? Not enough.

I do, however, know how to mourn.

Cornwallis, near Windsor NSW, 1867

That cursed rain began mid-June. When the fields around our house became a seething sheet of water, my brother George rode over to see me.

“The water’s reached the level of the ’64 flood,” he said. “You’d best bring Emma and the children to my house. I’ve told William the same.”

I agreed. George’s house was newer than mine and our brother Will’s, and on a higher point of land. We could wait it out in safety there.

Emma carried little Maudie and gripped Angelina’s hand as they sloshed across low ground, already sodden from days of rain. I could barely see our two boys, walking ahead with Annie and Eliza. We covered our heads with our coats but were soaked and chilled when we reached George’s door.

George ushered us inside and passed around towels to dry ourselves as best we could. William and Catherine were already there, their five youngsters gathered in a tight knot. The

smallest ones were grizzling from cold and Emma went to help them get dry. Always kind, my Emma.

George said, “I’m taking Dora and the children by boat to Windsor. Shall I take Emma and your youngsters too?”

I hesitated. “What about your workers?” George had two young lads who worked his farm alongside him and his eldest boy.

“I can come back for them, if the river keeps rising.”

I shook my head. “Take them now, and send another boat back for us if it’s still raining by nightfall,” I said. “We got through the last flood; remember how we’d worried my place would go under? Turned out fine. We’ll be safe enough here. Get the lads into Windsor and send help if you think it needed.”

I turned to Emma and the children. Emma was pale.

“Don’t you think we should send the three youngest, at least? And Catherine’s?” she said in a low voice.

I gave her a reassuring smile.

“The river has never reached George’s house, not once. I’ve lived through plenty of floods. We’ll be safe here. Wouldn’t you rather we stayed together? George can send another boat for us, but I don’t believe we’ll need it.”

Emma went to answer, but I cut her off.

“Trust me, the children will be safe. Now, you and Catherine get something hot for them to drink.”

Emma bit her lip and turned away.

I had a moment of doubt then. Should I allow them to go with George? But George’s boat wasn’t big enough to take them—eleven children and their mothers. I’d shepherded us through the last big flood and would do so again. I knew this river and its moods.

We watched as George rowed his boat upstream. It dragged in the water under its heavy load and I was glad I hadn't trusted our little ones to it. George had enough to manage with his family and the lads. His wife turned to wave and shouted something back to us, but her voice was lost in the turbulent river as it raced past.

When night fell, I wished I had that time over to decide differently. I'd thought the rain heavy before, but as the world darkened, water crashed from the sky in torrents, a powerful wind behind it buffeting the sturdy walls and roof of George's house. Emma gasped at each thud. Then Charles called out in a frightened voice I'd not heard since he was a tiny boy.

"The water's coming in!"

We hurried to staunch the flow with towels, sheeting, anything we could find, but nothing stopped the cold rush of water under the door.....