

Chapter 6

Cornwall One, Serebriacov

1937–1938



1937

Peter and I attended a Communist Party student summer school one week. Professor Haldane was there. He was a funny fat man who wore long shorts and short socks held up by suspenders, and boots. His high pitched voice, rather like that of H.G. Wells, made him a rotten public speaker, but in ordinary conversation he was fascinating.

A British submarine, the *Thetis*, had recently sunk, killing all but two of its crew. Haldane had been experimenting to discover why the rest of the crew had died. He was well known for doing all his experiments on *himself*. He described the airtight chamber he had constructed in which he sat, watched by a small boy, while he turned on a pump to remove oxygen and replace it with carbon dioxide. Once he fell down unconscious the boy's task was to turn off the pump and open the chamber to release him. Thus he had been able to find out at what concentrations the mind was unable to act rationally so that in a submarine the crew would be unable to take the simple steps needed to escape.

A blond young man, Dr. Paddy Fisher, who became a close friend later on, sang and played the guitar. He had a very beautiful Irish tenor voice and played us the folk song he had recently written:

I'm the man, the very fat man
That waters the workers' beer
I'm the man, the very fat man
That waters the workers' beer
And what do I care if it makes 'em ill
If it makes them terribly queer
I've a yacht and a car and an aeroplane
And I waters the workers' beer.

Each evening he was in demand for a repeat performance.

[In 1998, 61 years later, our son-in-law attended a session in a Maldon pub with a group of American folk dancers and folk singers and suddenly found himself listening to Paddy's song, still popular in folk circles in the USA. As Paddy had later become one of our family friends Mike was able to boast of having known the author.]

Peter and I, with a small group, sat up all night and watched the sun rise at dawn.

We now set off on a week's walking tour of the Pusey Vale to research Peter's *Uneducated Poets*. One of the more important was Stephen Duck, the only English poet other than Shakespeare whose birth is annually celebrated. Stephen was a thresher who lived in a little village called Carlton. His best, in fact his only good, poem *The Thresher's Labour* was published by subscription – that is, people subscribed towards the cost of printing in return for having their names listed in the book.

As usual in those days, it was immediately pirated – not content with robbing the poet of his meagre profits, the piratical publishers wrote a libellous preface sneering at Stephen and suggesting that his arrogance in daring to write poetry when he was nothing but a mere peasant had resulted in his becoming impotent. Eventually he was made a clergyman and provided with a little cottage in Kew where he lived miserably until committing suicide.

The first Lord Palmerston left an acre of land in Carlton the produce of which goes towards a Duck Feast each year for the villagers. We missed the actual feast, but saw the hat made of duck feathers used each year when money is collected towards the celebration – the acre not providing enough to feast the whole village at 20th century prices.

We talked to the villagers in the pub over lunch, ploughman's, of course – called on the local schoolmaster who told us that he taught his flock about their "famous" poet – found that the village parson was old and mad and had been married five times, and then moved on.

I forget the names of the other uneducated poets who came from that area. I think there was a soldier who wrote his verse round campfires on the battlefields of Europe. On the whole the walk was fruitful in a small way as we found tiny village museums which cared for forgotten volumes of verse. As we wended our way towards Bath Peter sprained his ankle leaping over a ditch – probably in search of a bird's nest. Luckily we had brought with us the address of a potentially useful student whose father was a doctor in Bath, so with the help of the walking stick that Peter always carried on a walk, we found him at home and willing to drive us to Bristol – our final destination.

Peter had written ahead to Bristol Library and when he limped in with his stick the librarian had copies of all the relevant old newspapers ready for us that covered the time of Anne Yearsley, a Bristol milkwoman, married and with a large family of children. She had written not only poetry but plays which had been performed and which made her a reasonable sum of money. An intelligent woman, she had wished to use it to educate one of her sons who would then be able to raise the whole family out of poverty. But her patroness, Mrs Mary Montagu, a celebrated Bluestocking, would not allow this but doled out the money shilling by shilling so that the family were made reasonably comfortable but KEPT IN THEIR PLACE.

Two of Anne's small sons had taken a short cut across the estate belonging to the Lord of the Manor and were caught by his agent and horsewhipped. When the little boys appeared at the cottage door covered in blood Anne had a miscarriage. She wrote a poem

describing exactly what she thought of that agent which pulled no punches. She was a very brave woman.

When we got home I discovered that the principal of St Hughs, I suppose fearing for my moral well being, had managed to get my grant withdrawn. She had frequently seen me, she said, waiting after dinner outside college for a notorious Communist student and wished to save me from myself! My father was furious and in the end she apologised and offered to take me back next year – but by then Peter would be going down and anyway we thought that some time we would marry. In those days women were not allowed to teach if they were married. So now, instead of my being in Oxford without Peter, Peter was in Oxford without me. I took a teaching job in a girls' private boarding school in Bromley, Kent, and lived in. It was run by a neurotic old maid and her sister. She was terrified of one of the girls running into her by accident, as she was convinced that such a blow would give her cancer!

On my 21st birthday, October 13th, Peter rang me fairly early from Oxford, but the headmistress refused to call me to the phone. I had to wait until he rang in the evening when she graciously allowed me to receive the call.

I did get one or two weekends off, though, and Peter would meet me in London. We would spend Saturday night in a large rented room. The walls were covered with murals painted by our host of his naked wife. There was a very fierce gas fire, a large comfortable bed and a small sausage dog which was determined to eat my underclothes. Mrs Pinney had been a debutante who had eloped with a building worker who was repairing her parents' aristocratic house, and of course had been disowned by her family. They gave us a very good breakfast after which we would sometimes help them twist up old newspapers really tightly to use as fuel in the basement where they lived.

One late Autumn night we were wandering hand in hand down Kings Road looking for a café that was still open as we had not eaten. We saw lights – candles on tables, and outside, projecting above the plate glass window, a large clock. It was midnight! Not daring to hope, we went in.

"I don't suppose you are still serving meals?" Peter said.
"Anything will do!"

"Oh yes, find a seat! Would you like egg and chips?"

Indeed we would, and wine, and coffee. We enjoyed the warmth, the bohemian atmosphere, and above all the food. No-one seemed to be in a hurry to get rid of us. When eventually, we emerged into the misty cold, the clock still said midnight! We had forgotten that the clocks went back that night. It seemed we had enjoyed a stolen non-existent hour.

1938

After Christmas I enrolled myself in The City of London Secretarial College to learn shorthand, typing and book-keeping on a six-month course. It was quite hard work but Peter came to London most weekends, and we still met at the Pinneys', so we always had something to look forward to.

Peter's money was running out and he had not nearly finished his B. Lit. Peggy and Arthur were involved with six others in researching the close links between the British Houses of Parliament and the German Nazi movement. They needed someone to write the book. So Peter came down in June and stayed with them to do the actual writing of *Tory MP* by Simon Haxey.

We decided we needed a holiday before I started work. When Arthur and Peggy had married they had done extensive research to discover the best place on the Cornish coast for their honeymoon. Indeed they sent a questionnaire to 120 farms round the coast of Cornwall, collated the replies and chose Kennack Sands, six or seven miles from the Lizard and around 2.5 miles along a cliff path from Cadgwith. They found it all they wished, so we got the address of the farm from them and wrote asking if we could camp in one of their fields. Indeed we could, so we sent off our tents and other equipment by goods train to await our arrival. Bill was to come with us. In those days the train went as far as Helston and we did the last twelve miles by bus.

We had a wonderful time and got to know the local fishermen, Trip (Tripconey), a Sunday painter, and many of the Lifeboat crew. We even had good weather – swam and sunbathed, walked looking for wild flowers, and drank in the Cadgwith pub.

The only day it rained we lay in our tents and sang through all the most terrible popular songs we could remember, mercifully most long since forgotten: "Three little words", "Tiptoe through the tulips", "If I had a talking picture of you-who"...

Peter and I firmly resolved that we would return next year if it was in any way possible.

When we got back to London I found myself a job as Private Secretary to a Press Photographer, G. Denes, a Hungarian, thirty years old. The twenty-year-old junior partner was not much use at anything – but he had a father who provided the money to set us up. As soon as the paint was dry in the set of offices and the studio at Blackfriars I started work. It was an interesting job, but not very well paid.

We were all young – the dark-room man was eighteen, the office boy fifteen, and I was soon doing a bit of everything not actually involving taking and processing photographs.

Most important, during the first few weeks, I kept the accounts, and visited the bank weekly to draw all our wages. I had to

produce each week, too, a truthful graph which went up, not down, to be studied by our source of finance – not always easy as in the beginning of course we were losing money – thus enabling Mr Denes to touch his partner's father for enough to keep us going.

I never used my shorthand as Mr Denes' English was not good enough to be worth taking down. He told me what he wanted to say and I wrote the letter. We also wrote a book together on Cloud Photography. We got a photograph in *The thousand best photographs of the year* – of two poached eggs on toast which took us all of two days as the studio lights were very hot. Each time I buttered the toast and arranged the two glittering poached eggs Denes would say "Hold on a minute" and adjust the focus or lights – and the toast would dry and curl, the eggs film with a wrinkled skin. I don't remember eating any of the rejects.

We had two huge metal filing cabinets full of photographs; our stock. A newspaper would ring up to ask, say, for a picture of a Chinese crowd rioting. The office boy and I looked first, of course, under China, but found nothing. "Try Japan" – no good. Finally we found a lot of Chinese in America's China Town who looked a bit violent! The shops were in bad nick. We added a picture of an urban fire with plenty of flame and smoke and sent both up to the dark room where they were blended into a fairly convincing riot in China! Newspapers didn't mind at all if we sent them fakes.

More interesting was advertising. "Send us something to mean 'Whiteness'," we enjoyed – but to be asked for a picture of a young couple with two children sitting in the middle of a field looking at a tubercular cow within the next half hour was asking a little much, even for us.

We did some fashion work and I had to dress the models. Either the frocks wouldn't meet at the back and they had to be sewn in, or were much too large, which meant a row of clothes pegs up the back.

An article on Battersea Dogs Home with me, for economy's sake, as the human interest, went to *Titbits*.

Meanwhile Peter had finished *Tory MP*, to be published by The Left Bookclub (Gollanz). Hitler was invading more and more of Europe. Rumours of war were everywhere and trenches were being dug in Hyde Park.

Chamberlain came back from a visit to Hitler waving his bit of paper – the valueless treaty he fondly imagined would bring Peace in Our Time!

My father, now headmaster of Stratford Grammar School in the East End, rang me up at work. One of his English teachers, a young pacifist, had realised our failure to stand up to Hitler meant war, walked out into the sea and drowned himself.

“What’s your Peter doing now?” my Dad asked.

“Nothing much. He’s just finished writing a book.”

“Have you a phone number for him?”

I had, so my Dad rang him.

“I’m in a jam, Peter,” he said, “I need someone on Monday morning to teach English. It would pay you £5 a week”. He explained about the suicide, and that he wanted someone at once to give the school something to talk about other than the tragic death. Peter went over to Stratford that Friday afternoon and was shown round. He had always said that there were three things he would never do – teach, get married, and join the civil service – but the £5 a week seemed like riches and it was only temporary. He agreed. He would obviously have to lodge with us as he could not travel from Bexley.

This presented slight problems.

My father had left my mother for another woman in 1935, the year I went to Oxford, but no-one at Stratford Grammar School knew. Actually, he was living with a Mrs Parker and her two children, a ten minute walk away, and travelling to school on a 108 bus through the Blackwall Tunnel. If anyone rang him at his supposed home, as they frequently did, the drill was to say “I’m sorry – you have just missed him. Can I get him to ring you back?” Then we immediately rang his new number and passed on the message.

Now it was going to be even more complicated! My father should have been living at 44 Lee Park, but wasn’t. Peter was going to live at 44 Lee Park but shouldn’t be, because no-one at school was supposed to know there was any connection between him and the headmaster.

Luckily we were well used to such complications. My father never told *his* mother and sisters that he had left home, and they came every year to spend Christmas day with us. So at about 8 am on Christmas morning he would arrive for breakfast and the giving of presents, as always. By about 10 am when they all arrived together, my grandmother, my two aunts and a pseudo-aunt Miss Phillips, known as Phil, Aunt Edith’s best friend, he was well established as part of the household.

Our mother, helped by the five of us children, would have spent weeks making everything, the cakes, puddings, mince pies, turkey stuffing, bread sauce... and so on. The gigantic turkey would be in the oven – had been since about seven o’ clock – the present wrapping-paper would have been tidied away, the Christmas tree would be looking its best and we were all clean and tidy.

She, henceforward to be known as “Spikey” as she so much disliked her two given names – Marjorie and Doris – had explained to us all that it wouldn’t be kind to upset our grandmother and aunts by letting them guess that our father

didn't live there anymore. So, after a magnificent Christmas dinner, we entertained our guests, played quietly, or read our new books in the first floor drawing room while our father spent the afternoon in the basement kitchen doing the washing up for twelve *all alone*. This he insisted on. He didn't like either of his sisters, and his mother didn't know he smoked and wasn't teetotal – and this gave him the chance to smoke his pipe in peace.

So we had to listen to long lectures on what a wonderful husband and father we had, and make polite conversation. At about four o'clock the Christmas cake was produced, tea was served. Then they all went off home – and ten minutes later my father was out of the door to rejoin Mrs Parker and family, and we could start to enjoy our real family Christmas.

Earlier that year my mother had taken me aside and shyly broached the subject of Peter. She didn't want me to make the same mistake that she had – marry too young. If we really loved one another, and if I was very careful not to get pregnant she advised me to sleep with him (gulp) rather than marry too soon. I didn't want to spoil this magnificent gesture by telling her we *had* been for the last two years, so I accepted her advice gracefully and gratefully. Now she moved out of her bedroom – and her double bed – for us. What other mother would have done that in 1938?

So now, on Monday morning, Peter followed my father (hereinafter The Old Man) on a second 108 bus through the tunnel. He was taken straight to a classroom full of fourteen- to fifteen-year-old boys and girls, and left there. These were streetwise East London teenagers – and they made rings round him!

Poor Peter, straight from Oxford with his gown, made all the mistakes that could be made, and each time they called his bluff! They knew perfectly well that he couldn't keep them in indefinitely, so when he announced that they must be absolutely quiet for at least five minutes before they could go, they just went on rioting. He tried setting them lines, but they didn't do them! Many were responsible for the care of several small brothers and sisters so if not let out more or less on time they had hysterics. Most evenings he would walk back through the East End trying to work out how to manage them. He couldn't bear to be beaten, so when the permanent job was advertised, he applied for and got it. Meanwhile, he enjoyed teaching the little ones – the eleven-year-olds, and the Sixth and to some extent the Fifth form enjoyed him.

Gradually he learnt his trade, and within a year had become an excellent teacher, but that particular Fourth form always made him uncomfortable.

My mother found her new lodger very congenial. She could see I was very happy and could understand why.

Peter's brother Bill had become friendly with a very large and interesting family in Bexleyheath, the Serebriacovs. The father could remember sitting on Lenin's knee as a small boy in Russia. Now all his children were over fourteen, the school leaving age, and were working. Bill's particular friend, Victor, drove a lorry. They were all intelligent and lively and most weekends the family held a party. Those who, like us, could not get home afterwards were invited to share a bed with one of the young ones. It was my first experience of a really intelligent working class way of life and the first time I realised I had been brought up with different values – money spent on education, books, theatres, clothes of “good” quality that would *last*, and a healthy diet. The Serebriacovs lived from week to week, drew their pay on Friday and blew it on a wonderful party every weekend, and their bedding was thin and I thought inadequate.

When Easter came round Peter, of course, had school holidays, whereas I as a secretary had only the Bank Holiday weekend off. Victor and his girlfriend invited Peter to spend a week with them in Cadgwith, as we had raved about the place. I felt really envious as they drove off, and the wonderful photographs of spring flowers and birds they brought back were no real compensation for not having been one of the party.

When war came we lost touch – but Victor was given an intelligence test when he joined the army and was astonished to learn he had an IQ of over 160. When the war was ended he founded MENSAs and became a company director.