

Chapter 13

Camping in Dorset

Summer 1946



It all did Peter a lot of good, giving him back some of his self-confidence. He was enjoying school very much and had long been Senior English master. My father had many faults but he was a good Head, liked and respected Peter and gave him a free rein. Peter also enjoyed the mild flirtations in the mixed staff-room, although when one young woman playfully slapped his face he slapped *her* face back, quite hard, believing firmly in the equality of the sexes.

We had begun to think of another baby as Peter agreed, rather reluctantly, that only children were a mistake. He adored Gale now she was here and a real person but didn't much like the idea of children he didn't yet know. I had to be very careful that he never felt pushed into the background. As I had conceived at first attempt last time we were surprised when my period arrived on time as usual...and when the next month came round, and the one after, and the one after that we began to worry.

Undaunted by Cornwall we decided on Dorset that year. My sister-in-law Lynne was expecting a sibling for Jill and decided to join us as soon as it was born. There was a polio epidemic that year, the last really bad one before people were vaccinated against it, so we got out of London as soon as the schools broke up. Spikey came with us to a field in Burton Bradstock in Dorset. Half our camping equipment failed to arrive on time so we had to cut sticks from the hedgerows to use as poles! But after a few days we settled down to domestic bliss.

Then we had an urgent message from Peggy. Extreme as always she had been making her two boys sleep all day and stay up all night to avoid risk of infection, but they were not taking kindly to the regime. Could she join us at Burton Bradstock? Of course we agreed.

Stephen, Gale's age, was a difficult boy, but Henry couldn't have been more placid. Neither of them were speaking intelligibly yet, and Stephen took his frustrations out on the world – and had in consequence been banned from railway carriages so they had to travel in the guard's van. At once Peggy insisted on doing all the work of the camp and looking after *all* the children, insisting that we should “let self-sacrifice *be* its own reward.”

We were near the sea, but not too near. There was a little stream running through the field – only a few inches of water running about two and a half feet below field level on its bed of boulders. Gale, in a new sun hat of which she was very proud, perched herself on a tiny wooden stool balanced right on the verge, *overbalanced* and fell in, landing on her head. Very luckily she seemed not to have been injured but the trauma has stayed with her to this day. As summer wore on, Spikey went back to work and Peggy and sons packed up and left. We met a married couple

that Peter took to at once as the man was a butterfly collector – inspiring him to relive his youth, make himself a net and join in, setting them on a jagged bit of driftwood. Soon we found that the collector was a schizophrenic looked after by his long-suffering wife.

The time came for Peter to start school – but there had been two cases of infantile paralysis in Lee Park, so Lynne and I stayed on with the two little girls. It seemed silly to take them back into danger.

So I missed a fantastic party given by Cedric Dover in an Indian restaurant. He had been offered a permanent job in the USA, a lectureship in race relations, and was taking his female partner. After a long, delicious meal he took his friends back to the flat and *started* to pack, taking all night. What he couldn't pack he gave to his guests and left for America at seven o'clock in the morning.

I did go to London to see Peter for one night, leaving Lynne in charge in Dorset and taking his driftwood set butterflies with me. The train was very crowded so I had to stand clutching the four foot flotsam and calling "mind the butterflies" when anyone got up to leave or have a fag in the corridor. Peter was pleased to see them and me, and we had a very pleasurable re-union.

As I ran into the station next morning I called to the guard, "Is this the train to Bridport?"

"Yes, but hurry! It's just going!"

I jumped in and settled down to read, but presently I began to sense that something was wrong.

"This *is* the train to Bridport?" I asked the man opposite.

"No! This is the non-stop to *Newport!*"

I considered pulling the communication cord but decided to keep perfectly calm and resign myself to a long day in the train – first to Newport, then back nearly to London, and finally to Bridport.

Lynne was extremely relieved to see me.