

Chapter 14

# Trying for a second child; camping on the Gower

Summer 1948



Peter's book was progressing well, so we settled to a nightly routine after supper, broken only by unwanted visits from a "friend" John Longdon, a very intelligent but very boring man who was working as a statistician for the health service. Soon he was coming every evening and staying and staying until in desperation we said "Sorry, John, but we must go to bed".

"Don't worry," he would say. "I'll let myself out," which was *not* what we had hoped to hear. However, he did respect Peter's need to write and mine to type and we could think of no way of discouraging him.

There was still no sign of another child! So we decided we needed help and our doctor referred us to a Sterility Clinic in a hospital in London. I forget which one!

At first I went alone. All the doctors were male; the one who examined me being particularly young and handsome. He questioned me closely.

"How often do you and your husband have sex?"

"Most nights unless one of us is very tired."

"Fine! Nothing wrong there! You would be surprised how many couples say they manage it at least once a month, and then wonder why they can't conceive!"

Then I had tests.

"Nothing wrong there as far as I can tell. Now I would like to see your husband."

I made an appointment. Peter was terribly insulted at first but then began to see it all as a bit of a joke. The appointment was early, so he took the day off school and we left Gale with Lynne and Jill so that we could spend the night at Canonbury Square with Geraldine and Randall Swingler, who thought it all hilariously funny. Geraldine took me aside and offered me the services of her husband if Peter proved sterile.

"He wouldn't make any claim on the child," she assured me. "It would be entirely yours and Peter's." She didn't mean by artificial insemination either.

By then the whole subject had turned Peter on and we spent most of that night, much against my better judgment, making love. So I was not unduly surprised at the hospital, when Peter was sent into a private room and asked to produce a specimen, that he took a fair time. On examination the doctor said the sperm proved a bit sluggish and many had bent tails. Of course, he didn't tell them what he had been up to the night before.

In the end we were told that there was nothing basically wrong with either of us – to look after our general health and diet and to keep trying.

Peggy was very, very sympathetic. Children were of supreme importance to her. She quite seriously suggested that *her* husband, Arthur, would make an ideal father for our child.

“He’s so brilliant,” she explained, “that he ought to father a *lot* of children. He wouldn’t interfere.” They both considered I was an ideal mother. Neither Geraldine or Peggy understood that what I wanted was another of Peter’s children, not just any child.

By now it was summer 1948. Gale was nearing her fifth birthday and would be starting at Blackheath High School in the autumn. Peter’s book was finished, all but the title and chapter headings. We decided to camp with Arthur and Peggy and their two boys plus Paddy and Mary Fisher. Mary, also a pianist, was Geraldine’s twin sister. After much discussion we chose the Gower Peninsula in Wales and found a rather boggy field on top of a cliff (again) on a farm. It made a great difference that Arthur and Paddy both brought their cars.

To get to our ideal beach, sand, caves, rock pools and all, we had to climb down the cliff.

Peggy took charge, of course. We were all to eat proper porridge for breakfast, and, before breakfast, to prevent any couples nagging one another, we were to swap husbands. Someone else’s husband would be much less likely to snap about the long trek for water and milk and the crises that always arose when people were hungry. After breakfast we were allowed to change back.

All three men decided to grow beards – and none of the women could bear the look of other people’s husbands but didn’t mind our own, which was fortunate. As far as I was concerned, Peter looked like a version of Jesus Christ – Arthur a grizzled bear and Paddy like a large pink pig.

We went for long, long walks with the children as Peggy believed in tiring children out every day. Four-year-old Henry was unable to tell what was wrong if he felt uncomfortable. Was he tired? or hungry, cold, or too hot? He didn’t know, so Peggy had to guess. Stolidly he marched on, uncomplaining. Not so Stephen! He was still not talking intelligibly, indeed he started school that year unable to make himself understood so said not a word for the whole term. But if he wasn’t understood he would throw a tantrum.

On one of our walks we had at least ten minutes of a screaming, kicking Stephen lying on his back on the path before a very patient Arthur discovered he wanted to know why the waves came in curved and not straight.

One night at about two o’clock we were all shocked awake by screams coming from the boys’ tent. Eventually, Arthur found that Stephen had been lying awake since bedtime trying to work out

the internal structure of a crayfish and it had all suddenly got too much for him.

When the children were in bed the six adults would gather in one tent with plenty of blankets – put a stew on a primus as a primitive kind of central heating, and lie among the bedding solving the problems of the universe and drinking beer. Peggy had a weak head and one evening got really drunk – sat bolt upright and announced firmly "I want to see Arthur doing all the work!" before passing out.

Peter discussed chapter headings for his book, now to be called *The Rule of Three*, which he decided to take from Hall and Knight's "Algebra". Arthur asked advice about what he should do next. He had been Chief Engineer of Cossers during the war and had been responsible for the invention of Radar, among other things, around Orford and Felixstowe, but now felt there was no future for himself in science. "It's only a case of spending enough money and we can do anything, even control the weather", he said, not anticipating the Chaos Theory. "The task before us is to discover how to stop mankind destroying itself."

We suggested Chancellor of a University. "No, that's just a figurehead! Vice-chancellor might do, but is not quite right."

He went off for a long interview – three days – during which he had to explain why he had been an active Communist for so long. He must have been persuasive, because he came back as "Our man in charge of Safety in Mines" in Britain. At that time two men a day were being killed in the mines, most because although strip-searched and although they knew only too well the risks for explosion in a mine full of firedamp if someone lit a match, they still smuggled tobacco and matches down with them. If he could stop miners blowing themselves and their mates up he would have he would have started on the task ahead of us all.