

Chapter 21

Birth of James; Paradise Regained

May – August 1950



Easter came and went. Peter planted out his sweet peas. He was now able to leave his bike at Graham's house rather than in the hedge and we were already eating our earliest vegetables. The roof of the house and the stairs were in.

As the months went slowly by I grew large, and larger. Often in January, February and March I had made the builders' tea to save them the trouble. Now in May, June, July and August they made me tea and watched my progress with paternal eyes. They were all local men and had played in the empty mill as boys or, if old enough, as some were, had played round the working mill before the war. They must have thought us very strange. The Campbells had kept themselves to themselves with (now) four children and their art and also being Roman Catholic. So as far as Kirton was concerned we were the first incomers and they couldn't make us out. There I was, walking around in bare feet – cycling up to the village to shop and queuing with other village women on Wednesdays and Saturdays at the mobile butcher's van – but as I rode I would be reading a book propped open in my bicycle basket – and we didn't mix with the local gentry but we didn't talk Suffolk.

As summer and the baby drew nearer I decided to cut down the officers-for-the-use-of mattress to fit the baby's cot. Peter had to stay at school that evening for a parents' meeting... so I put a stew on the slow oil cooker and started work on the floor, with difficulty as it was not very easy to reach over my bump even that early. It took me at least a couple of hours to make the alteration, but I stuck at it. At last it was done. Triumphantly I stood up, stretched, and turned round. The whole of the part of the room near the door was black! Everything was black! The kettle was black! The white enamel bowl was black! A whole tray of our eggs, carefully numbered, all had black caps on! I had left the wick on the oil stove turned up just too high and it had been smoking all that time – greasy black smoke. I suppose I hadn't smelt it because my nose was near the floor. The stew was fine, except for the lid which was on tight.

Wearily I filled the kettle from the outside tap and set it on the primus to boil. That done, I was able to wash the enamel bowl and the kettle – refill and boil up again. Bit by bit, using all the soda and soap we had, I cleaned down the black walls to their now habitual whitewash – the black furniture to its usual brown – and lovingly washed and dried each egg, piling them up in a now clean enamel bowl.

Peter and Bob had waited at school after the meeting until they could get a lift home, so it was eleven before they turned up. Peter was greeted by a very tired and bedraggled pregnant wife and the lingering smell of paraffin smoke. It could have been worse, I suppose. But I wasn't really grateful that the mess had been confined to the area round the door. I was too tired to be grateful for anything except bed.

Peter's garden was really taking shape and the vegetable garden was beginning to make a real contribution to our diet. He raised many boxes of seedlings in his strange cold frame, and as June turned to July he and Gale were off down the garden whenever I needed them for a meal or wanted something done – picking sweet peas! The mill was awash with sweet peas in jam jars. “You *must* pick them every day,” he explained, “or they stop flowering.” And pick them every day they did.

At first, as we had no compost or manure to build up the fertility of the soil, our vegetables, though fresh and tasty, were on the spindly side – but no matter.

Now that we had stairs it wasn't long before we had a bedroom door from the stairs – and Graham was called in to remove the ladder and little door at its top, and to replace it with a proper window. This time we decided to have wooden lintels. We were also going to put in triple south-facing windows as we needed more light and more air. With no cavity walls and nothing but boards under the tongue-and-groove our bedroom was liable to get too cold in the winter and much too hot in the summer. The new window to replace the door could be standard like the one that faced north-east, but the triple would have to be made by Graham as it would be too expensive to get it purpose built by Brown's. The lintels we did have made for us in the village. The long one would need to be curved but the triple window could consist of the three windows at a slight angle. Now Graham was a wood butcher, not a carpenter, but we had infinite confidence of his ability to do anything, as had he himself. He set to, and his windows would have been fine had they not caught on the bottom edge of the roof so that they could only be opened outwards a few inches. This was a pity because we really needed the fresh air in the summer. However we left that problem to be sorted out later – much later.

Luckily I felt very well. The floors were in upstairs in the house. We acquired a very intelligent female tortoiseshell cat who very soon became pregnant too. This did not stop her catching lizards and bringing them in, where, in self defence, they shed their tails. Either she ate them or they escaped, and several times we found a tail still wriggling long after its owner had gone.

Once we had a spare bedroom in which to put a bed, my father came to stay with us, and our cat produced kittens. He set himself the task of building us a potting shed and bike shed out of the timbers and corrugated iron from the pigsties, just between what was to be our coal bunker and the little hut. By now the plumbing had been done, thank goodness, and we had been able to get rid of the Elsan. The drains were a bit complicated. There was no main drainage in Kirton so Mr Woolnough had dug and lined an enormous cesspit half way down the garden, fed by several lidded chambers, to hold hundreds of gallons. This was to purify itself

and the “clean” liquid would disperse through the orchard via “weeping pipes”. At least, that was the theory. But in practice after the system had been inspected the pipes were more or less joined together, an extra one was put in to allow the presumed clear liquid to escape into the ditch and be carried down to Kings Fleet and the sea. The council provided a twice-a-year free emptying service, but if we wanted more, we had to pay.

The ditch never smelled really bad so we presumed it all worked and asked no questions.

The kittens were a great joy to Gale. As soon as they became mobile they took to climbing up inside her rather wide trouser legs, and when I sat down they would climb up and sit hiccuping on my rather large bump.

Peter’s parents, Florence and Arthur, had agreed to come and look after Gale and Peter while I was in hospital. One day Mr Rivett, the bricklayer, came to find me. He had just fixed the Redfire into the new kitchen with its back boiler, and, never having done one of these before, was anxious to test it to make sure he had done it right. So he had spent his meagre lunch hour picking up little bits of coal left around under the mulberry tree from the old days of the mill being a mill, had lit the fire, heated the water and now said that if I was very, very careful not to splash, as the floor was not done yet, I could have a bath. I did, and it was bliss. By now I was too large to be able to wash my feet, and had to take a bus down to the sea to bathe if I wanted to clean them, by paddling.

My Dad went home, and Florence and Arthur arrived at the beginning of August as baby was due on the 15th and they wanted to be in good time just in case it was early – but weeks went by and I was still as large as ever. Dr Smith was away on holiday and his stand-in was most abrupt when I rang to ask if such a delay was all right. A fortnight went by. Still no baby. Florence and Arthur were due to go home!

Finally, on Wednesday August 30th I cycled into the village for some stewing steak and cooked a sturdy stew, potatoes, cabbage, the works, on my new gas cooker in my new kitchen. The house was almost finished – the workmen had been racing the baby. They just had the fireplace in the mill to finish. Dear Mr Rivett went round the garden with Peter, picked some flowers and stood a vase in front of the completed hearth and mantelpiece – then called me to admire the effect. There were just a few odd jobs to finish off.

Half way through lunch my waters broke. There was no way I was going into hospital until I had finished eating. I remembered only too well the starvation I suffered at Gale’s birth. I must have changed colour though because Florence noticed, but I wouldn’t allow Peter to go next door to phone for the ambulance until I was good and ready. It came almost at once.

Heath Road Hospital was a great deal more civilised than Lewisham Hospital had been, and as before I gave birth painlessly and easily at 6.05 to a very large James, who looked more like a month-old boy than a new born baby. Peter came in by bus to see me that evening. This time we were allowed to keep our babies by our beds – change them and feed them when we wanted to, and get up the next day if we wished. They still kept us for a week in hospital, but that week was stress-free and thoroughly enjoyable.

Gale and Peter were glad to see us back. Florence and Arthur went home having admired James. Gale and Peter went back to school. The house was finished and “Peter’s Garden” was taking shape nicely. At long last, it was, for Peter, Paradise Regained. Almost he forgave his father for having torn him away from Owslebury all those years ago.

PS Peter told me, years later, that he had found it difficult to believe that he had been able to father another child and had three-in-the-morning thoughts that I might have taken up one of our friends’ offers and got pregnant to make him feel better about himself. Indeed, Geraldine, who could be very malicious, hinted as much. It was only when Florence discovered that James had double jointed thumbs just like his father that he really believed a hundred percent that James was his. When Jas was born, indeed, he looked exactly like my father, but luckily only for about ten days, and in many ways he is a second Peter, for good and ill.