

CHAPTER 16: FAMILY CHAOS AND MORE WAR STORIES

The day after I finished the school spring term at the age of fourteen in 1943, I started to look for a job. If I could not be a farmer, my earnest desire was to do something literary, although I had not had the full education for this, having had to leave school and not proceed to high school. My Mother went with me to the local town of Chichester and I applied for jobs at The Chichester Observer newspaper and The West Sussex County Library. I was turned down at both places. Immediately after these defeats I went on my own to see Mr. Emery, the Editor in Chief of Butterworths, the publisher's of the Justice of the Peace magazine, established for the war period in West Dean House. I knew Mr. Emery quite well because I was very friendly with David his son and had been to tea with them several times at their private house. So I purposefully went and requested an interview with Mr. Emery through his secretary. Surprisingly, he immediately allowed me an interview and I explained my literary ambitions. He said that the only job he had available was Assistant to the Maintenance Man. I accepted this work with alacrity. After all, this was at least a paying job and close to the class of workplace I desired. I was also most conversant with the layout of the 'Big House' interior and could carry out my duties with out having to ask anyone where the rooms were. I said to Mr. Emery if he eventually had an opening for an office boy, perhaps he would be kind enough to consider me. He said yes and suggested that I take night classes in English Grammar, which I did until my dream faded, due to unexpected turns of events and my father's plans for me.

Late in the summer of 1943 my family had an unexpected and sudden shock. My father's boss, Coker, was planning to sell the tenancy of the Home Farm to Mr. Fleming of Colworth Farm on the hill above West Dean Park on the western part of the Estate.

To this day I can conjure up mentally, the extraordinary sadness that permeated our lowly household, when we realized that our life might finish at West Dean Park and considered the heavy burden of an idyllic, rural and sylvan life coming to an end.

There was to be an auction sale of all the farm equipment and livestock and the sale of the tenancy was to be concluded at Michael Mass, the 29th. of September.

I was well skilled in all aspects of farming the farm; having studied the jobs of the farm worker's up close, day after day for many years. I had been a member of The Young Farmer's Club and worn the obligatory white coat and completed a number of practice livestock judging

contests. The only thing my Dad did not want me to learn was the boring heavy chore of hand milking the cows but I actually did do some of this on the quiet, so to speak. He also wanted me to avoid the seven day work week of running a dairy farm and to learn a modern technical trade. A thing he had always aspired to but never had the opportunity. I said to my Dad, "Why don't we buy the farm?" and he replied, "I'm too old son and you're too young".

Coker sold Binderton farm tenancy at the same time to Donald Cox, his principal assistant and farm manager there, who continued to run the farm in an exemplary manner. Donald ultimately turned this farm into a model for the whole of Britain. Coker was indeed blessed to have had two loyal, hard working, skilled and diligent executive-workers running his farms, like my Father and Donald Cox.

I believe the main reason for Coker to decide to retire so suddenly was because of James's edict for higher rentals to be exacted from his farms and houses. This was being implemented by the Estate Agent and the new Trustees he had promoted. I suppose it was possible that it was necessary to make the Estate more viable. One has to remember that James also needed funds at this period of time for his American and Mexican ventures. However, James really had a responsibility at home to keep his Estate in order; as so many little people and workers depended on it. West Dean Estate was a 'hive', founded by his forebears and he should have seen to it that the 'hive' continued as before and prospered and not spent his enormous funds, time and effort on some foreign, self indulgent, escapist sanctuary. His self preservationist, war imminent behavior would probably have been forgiven by local people in time after the war. I understand he did return to Monkton Hall for brief periods after the war and then take up permanent residence there about 1980, when he was very friendly disposed to and welcomed by village dignitaries and people in general.

Unfortunately for me, my Dad had other different and secret ideas for my future employment and after I had worked about six months at Butterworths, he told me that he had secured an electrician's apprentice job for me at T.F. Lummus Electrical in South Street, Chichester. This would be at the same wage of ten shillings per week but I would have to work six and a half days instead of five days and, I would have to cycle seven miles each way to work. I argued and pleaded that I did not want this job and desired to stay at Butterworths. However, he said this was wonderful opportunity to learn a technical trade, that, incidentally, he had always wanted to do himself. In those days sons still obeyed their father's wishes and finally I had to

give in. This set me on a path of learning and travel that has permeated my life but I was never very happy at this job.

I believe he landed the electrical job for me because he was a Freemason. It was only after he died that I discovered in a drawer in my parent's bedroom his full Freemason's regalia, medals and documents. My mother knew this secret liaison of my father's but it was always kept from my knowledge. (*So Many Secrets*). The two Lummus brothers were top Mason's in the City of Chichester. My Dad undoubtedly knew them and approached them about an apprentice job for me, they accepted and I was done for.

Coker had always assured my Dad that he would reward him well when he retired. Actually, he gave my Dad 400 pounds sterling. I believe my Dad was so disappointed and derided this paltry sum that he put the money in a bank at no accruing interest and it stayed there until after he died in 1954, when he bequeathed it to me.

After all, my Dad had worked for more than twenty years for Coker, most of the time for seven days a week. Cows have to be milked twice a day, seven days a week. He had worked and operated the farm with great efficiency and profitability, producing an exceptionally large monthly milk cheque by itself for Coker to bank.

My Dad only had two years to go before being eligible for the Government National old age pension and Coker arranged with Fleming that he would continue to employ my Dad for at least those two years. As it happened, Fleming only retained a small part of the milking herd and the farm was to be run by his son. My Dad still worked a little in the dairy but was chiefly relegated to that of a general farm worker and was required to do all sorts of menial and heavy tasks, this included carrying 150 lb sacks of grain; he was not used to this sort of young strong man's work and it caused him a severe hernia rupture. Thereafter he had to wear a large supportive truss and was not allowed medically to do the heavy work. He got very stressed and contracted pneumonia and pleurisy. He recovered from this and went back to work.

Fleming, being unable to make my Dad quit his job by making life unpleasant for him, he accused him of giving a pint of milk each week to the Singleton policeman who lived in the cottage in Far Meadow. This was a long standing arrangement known about and approved by Coker. It was to compensate the policeman for seeing that all the cattle gates were kept closed leading to his cottage. This was to ensure that the cows did not run out on to the main highway. Lovers would sometimes open these gates, drive their car in, consummate their trysts and then

upon leaving, fail to close the gates. Fleming indicted my Dad in the local court for fraud. However, the policeman supported my father's case and a letter from Coker was produced in court that proved my Dads gifts were a time honoured practice. I believe the case was dismissed but it gave Fleming an excuse to end my Dad's employment. I am sure my Dad did not want to stay anyway, after this cruel attempt at defamation. We lived in a 'tied' house; that is: tied to the job, when a job ended one could be forced to leave; so Fleming gave us notice to vacate.

Farmer Pearce of Boxgrove Priory Farm, who knew my Dad for many years and did not believe him capable of doing such a thing as commit fraud, heard what they had done to him and kindly gave him a job on his farm and a home to go with it. We then lived in a classic flint built Goodwood 'Duchy' house at Easthampnet, overlooking Tangmere fighter plane aerodrome

I was working and living near Fairford town, Shropshire at the time of the moving of the house contents. Some of the family antiques were burned in the garden to get rid of them because of space considerations in the new accommodation, it was still war time and no one wanted them. The house we were going to was smaller and would not accommodate all the furnishings we possessed. I came home and expressed my great sorrow at the loss of the furniture. I was already in love with antiques from my visits to James's magnificent furnishings and Miss. Robert's collection next door and even living with our own modest pieces. For example; we had a complete parlour suite of Victorian mahogany sofa, gentleman's and lady's chairs and side chairs, and a Late Georgian Spanish-Santo Domingo mahogany 'loo' table. (Custom made for playing the card game of Lanterloo), all incinerated. However, when my Dad died in 1954, I discovered that he had willed all our remaining antiques to me. He clearly remembered my earlier distress. Anyway, the family antiques stayed with my Mother until she passed away, when they were distributed among the three sons of my first marriage.

After living at Easthampnet until my Dad retired, we went to live in East Ashling for a while. For about a year my mother legally tried to gain possession of her bungalow in Parklands, Chichester, the one that she had purchased in 1937. The nurse who rented it was in a war time protected-renter's profession and did not want to give it up. However, after protracted legal negotiations my mother ultimately prevailed, because, after all, the war had been over for some time. Then we all moved into this accommodation. Both my father and mother lived out their final days at this address.

So it came about that, after forty five years of my family living at Home farm, West Dean Park; through my Grandparent's, my Mother and father and me, we vacated and went to live at Easthampnet. Our house there was situated overlooking the east side of the north runway of Tangmere aerodrome, chiefly used by Spitfire fighter planes. The house was elevated on a low rise and my upper bedroom window over looked the whole aerodrome. Thus I was thrust into the position of observing more action's of war. I would usually be awake at dawn and in the dusk Spitfires would land after chasing Doodle Bugs or flying 'sorties' (a name derived from the French verb 'sortir' to go out) over France. Upon coming to a halt, often the fighter planes engine would burst into flames from damage by enemy air craft fire or anti aircraft fire, even overheating from flying too fast. Fire and rescue vehicles would rush forward to put the flames out and rescue the pilot. Sometimes he climbed out but other times he had to be lifted out; almost certainly injured. The worst thing that happened whilst all this was going on, was when the plane exploded. In this period allied fighter planes, particularly Spitfires, which were prolific by this time, would fly constantly and daily over Northern France; doing what they metaphorically and jokingly called: Rodeos, Circuses and Rhubarbs: this included attacks on grounded enemy aircraft and ruses to draw the enemy fighter planes off the ground into battle. The idea was, to destroy their opposition and to reduce their air power prior to the secretly planned 'Overlord' invasion. The Spitfire organization at Tangmere aerodrome became known as; 'Bader's Bus Service', (after Group Captain Douglas Bader) because of its attacking regularity and reliability. At this time the Spitfire pilots preferred living in tents under the hedgerows around the fields, near our house, instead of the barracks. They just went back there to do their ablutions and get meals from the Officer's Mess. Unless they were on 'scramble' duty, then they would be at the ready near their aircraft with all their flying apparel on. Tangmere aerodrome had been bombed by German planes several times during the prior days of the war and they considered it too risky to live on the 'drome itself. I was not allowed to enter the periphery fence of the airfield but these pilot's were well outside and I befriended some of them. My mother baked small teacakes for them and I took them over; they were very appreciative of this home cooking and gave me some sweets and chocolate, not to mention chewing gum, a real treat and all non-existent items for us civilians in those days.

One pilot was from Australia and his name was George Dunk; the same family name as ours; I chatted with him many times when he was not on duty. I went to see him one day as usual

and two other airmen were packing up his possessions; I asked: “ where was George” and they said he had not returned from a ‘sortie’ that day. They did not know if he was deceased or captured by the enemy. It was a very sad day for me. I contemplated the inside of the tent, now awaiting the next participant in the relentless cruel war. I noted the cube of neatly folded bed blankets at the end of the rectangular mattress: like a headstone and grave marker. I stayed a while, almost expecting George to appear but eventually walked away from the vacant tent in tears. I find that I am shedding a few more today, when I write about the incident.

Some of the jargon of the pilots was interesting: ‘bogey’ an enemy plane spotted at a dangerous position in the sky, ‘ditched’ was crashing into the English Channel, ‘wizard prang’ was when one walked away from a crash, ‘good show’ was a successful mission, ‘belly flop’ was landing without wheels and bringing your ‘kite’ (aircraft) home all shot up was ‘coming in to land, on a wing and a prayer’.

Sometimes two and four engine bomber planes would land to re-fuel at Tangmere; very tricky for the big bombers, because of the short runways but usually they managed somehow.

However, one morning I watched as a two engine De Havilland Mosquito Mark 4- fighter bomber started taking off south to north on the north runway. It was known as ‘The Wooden Wonder’, ‘The Timber Terror’ or just plain ‘Mozzie’. This was another of those exquisitely streamlined and beautiful British aircraft; with a very high maximum speed and enough fuel to fly to Berlin and carry out bombing raids. The fuselage of this unique plane was entirely made from a wood armature with plywood sheeting. This particular model had a 57 mm cannon set in the nose. Any way, to return to the events; after rising on take off to about 200 feet: both Rolls Royce engines cut out together, it then rapidly lost height and landed at the end of the runway; then proceeded on at high speed bouncing and leaping over ground humps and hillocks; which I suppose were put there to slow down such over running aircraft, in an emergency. The wheels, which were still lowered down, very soon collapsed. This buffeting caused the wooden plane to completely disintegrate. First the fuselage broke in half, then the wings broke off the front part until there were large and small debris scattered all along the line of the crash. Amazingly, despite the loaded fuel tanks, it did not catch fire (no metal parts to cause sparks?) and the cockpit section remained intact, like a capsule. Two airmen climbed out, lit cigarettes and stood back to survey the scene nonchalantly and chat about the whole spectacle they had wrought. Fire and medical trucks rushed up to the crash site but there was nothing serious for them to do. Only

a giant mess to clean up. The two airmen were picked up in a Jeep and with their legs casually hanging over the side, were driven away. Definitely a ‘Wizard Prang!’