

## **Chapter VII: Brightlingsea, school and pastimes; another baby; life in camp; Australian soldiers; illnesses; air battles over Essex; Cheltenham and the Armistice**

Once a week there was a picture show, with a Pearl White serial, which I loved. When a scene was too frightening, I would gaze at the shaft of light that came through the back wall. The projector was not behind the screen as it is today, but operated from holes cut very high in the back wall. The particular serial was called the 'Laughing Mask', and you never discovered who this hero was, although you had a good idea, and that one day he would be unmasked and marry Pearl White! The villain had a terrible hook for one hand. To my sorrow, I never saw the final episode, because on that very night my parents had booked to take me to see 'The Maid of the Mountains' on the stage at the Colchester Theatre. I was broken-hearted at not seeing the end of the 'Laughing Mask' after all the weeks, but really I had no choice; the theatre would always be my first love.

It was a really beautiful show and I loved every minute of it and, strange to say, the theatre was burnt down within a month. (Incidentally, while in England in 1975, I visited the delightful, modern theatre which had just been opened right on the old Roman wall.)

Every week in the winter there were also dancing classes in the Masonic Hall. One hour for children (we paid sixpence) and the rest of the evening for adults. The instructress was a huge, large-bosomed female of indefinite age. Sometimes she would grab me to her, my face buried in her bosom, just fast enough so that I could hardly breathe...then she would waltz swiftly round the floor until I was terribly giddy, when she would suddenly leave me in the centre of the floor. I would grope my way drunkenly to a chair and collapse, thankful it was over for another week.

A boy, Frank, three or four years older than I was, decided that he wanted to be my permanent partner, and so began my one and only romance. It began during the Lancers; someone trod on my foot, and he stooped and kissed it. He was a senior pupil at Dr Flood's school and it was through him that Mother took Geoffrey away and sent him to the same school as me. Frank said that Dr Flood took no interests in the small boys and taught them nothing. He was only interested in cramming boys of Frank's age.

Frank then told me that when we went to the pictures I would watch another boy in front of us in the dark making sparks with his boots on the pavement. (Boys often wore metal studs on their boots.) He said he was that boy, and he did them specially for me! It was a sweet, childish romance; we even kissed...once. Very different from the petting of today. I think only uneducated boys and girls did that sort of thing in haystacks in those days. After a while he left school and went to work in an office. His first private typing was a card to me. I told him that Frank was short for Francis, so that we really had the same name. We didn't go out for walks or anything, but used to meet at the dancing classes, and sometimes he used to come to our house. That was all, but it was rather sweet.

At school we began having air raid drill. Suddenly the teacher would shout out 'Take cover!' and we all dived under our heavy wooden desks, which were really quite good shelters as they had strong metal fittings. One afternoon, just as we were coming out of school, a small unidentified plane landed in a field nearby. The boys were there like a shot and at first questioned the pilot to make sure he wasn't a Jerry. He was just a frightened, lost young pilot. The boys soon instructed him how to get to the nearest airfield. By the time I had got on the field, he was already taxiing across it and it seemed to me as though the propellers were coming straight towards me like a gigantic catherine wheel.

Marble-playing time always seemed to be in the winter and it played in the wet, muddy gutters. We had never been allowed to play in the road, so marbles were out except small games in the house. When the mess wasn't in use we were allowed to play for a little while on the tables.

We were told to leave as soon as men came in, but sometimes they took over our marbles and played each other.

At Christmas 1917 we decided – for once – not to go to Cheltenham for the festive season and Mother decided she would try to give the sergeants' mess a real Christmas. First she thought of decorations. There were none to be bought, but she got loads of crinkly paper and, with yards of tape, she and the Pawson females and their friends made decorations. The Mother thought she would make hundreds of mince pies. Unfortunately when she took the first batch out of the oven a number of men were about and they had eaten the lot before she had noticed. So she took care, after that to cook when they were not about. Then she told my father what to get to make some bowls of trifle (I had never seen so much trifle in all my life: I know I seemed to spend one entire morning beating the cream).

When the tables and room were all set on Christmas Day, it really did look good. The men were surprised and delighted, and cheered Mother, who of course – being a civilian – was not present, so they sent her a special 'thank you'! It is a sad fact that, for 75 per cent of them, not only was it the last Christmas of the war, but the last Christmas of their lives, for they were killed in that last great push.

When Mother was making all these preparations, after being so well for years, she suddenly did not feel at all well. The doctor told her she was expecting a baby! My parents were very disgusted. They did not want any more children. They had been taking the rather hit and miss precautions of the day and had not expected such a thing to happen. And they had never had such times together before with, as I said before, built-in babysitters at night. It had happened and could not be undone. So they were determined to make the best of it. And not only should Mother have every care possible, but the baby would be welcomed in every way, I was told, and was just the age to be thrilled by it all.

It was obvious that we could not stay with the Woods...there just wasn't room. And everyone had babies at home then, too, so a house must be found. On the corner of the High Street, where the shops ended and the street broadened out into houses, was an empty draper's shop. The man who owned it had another shop in the town and had not enough stock for two while the war was on. And he let the house over it, and at the back, furnished. So we were in luck.

The entrance was through a high-walled, paved courtyard at the back. A glass-roofed, enclosed verandah ran the whole width of the house. A kitchen cum dining room, scullery and the usual offices were on the ground floor and the back of the shop, with empty fittings, was where we used to play when it was wet. Up the steep stairs were bedrooms and a very large corner sitting room with windows facing two ways. Within a very short time we had moved in and, for the first time for many years, I had a bedroom of my own. Mother began thinking of all the things she would need for the baby and herself.

I was 12 years old in the April and, although I knew Mother had a baby in her tummy, I never bothered to wonder how it got in, or how it would get out. In these days it seems impossible to think that a 12-year-old could be so sexually retarded. Especially as I had often been on farms, etc, and I had seen Geoffrey bathed since he was tiny. I just think I was not interested enough, there being so many things in life which were interesting. Perhaps, really, I had sex in the right perspective. It was the same with food and sweets. I did not think of them first, as it were. My great loves in life were the beauty, colour, sounds, and scents of nature, especially the sea, or rivers and waterfalls. And dancing, and books.

I was *sure* the baby would be a little girl. I did so want a sister. I saved my pocket money and bought some *real* silk and made a bib and worked BABS on it.

Mother said she thought the trunk at Brickyard Terrace, which had all my father's prizes in, should be fetched up to Brightlingsea now we had room for it. So my father took three days' leave to go across England to fetch it. Mother sent me with him to show him which trunk they were in. At least, that is what she said.

We went across London by tube – my first experience of this kind of travel. When we got to Paddington we found there was not a train for several hours. So, after ham and eggs in a cafe, again a new experience for me, we went for a walk towards the Houses of Parliament, on the advice of a friendly policeman who told us that members of parliament were taking servicemen and their relations round the Houses. When we got there my father whispered to me that our guide was the famous John Burns and seemed very awed to be in his company. I was muddled, didn't know about politicians, and thought my father had said Robert Burns. I thought he was a poet and that he was dead. (In this, of course, I was right.) Nevertheless, I was greatly impressed by the comprehensive and interesting tour of all parts of both Houses, some of which were destroyed in the 1939 war. The only damage, in the 1914 war was some blue paint knocked off one of the lifesized sailor's trousers in the large painting of the death of Nelson. This was done by flying glass from a broken window.

It was well after dark by the time we reached Weymouth and took a taxi to Chickerell. One of my father's army friends had married the daughter of the landlord of the inn in Chickerell. So I slept there the night and my father went to the camp with his friend. Next morning we picked up one of the trunks and took the next train back to Paddington. My father realized we would be lucky to catch the last train back to Colchester, so he promised the taxi driver an extra ten shillings (a lot of money in those days) if we caught the train. Except for taxis there were few cars in London, and no traffic lights or anything like that, so the taxi driver just nipped in and out across London. Secretly I wished we would miss the train so that we could stay a night in London. We just caught the train as the taxi driver and my father pushed the trunk into the guard's van. The train was packed with servicemen returning from leave, knowing they would most likely be going to France any day. I should think I was the only civilian on the train. We changed at Chelmsford and again at Colchester. It was a dark, cold long journey. The carriages were full of smoke, the smell of army clothes, and stale beer. The men snored and grumbled and snored again. The journey seemed to go on for a month of nights.

By the time we got to Brightlingsea it was the early hours of the morning, and moonlight. My father persuaded the porter to lend him the only two-wheel metal luggage barrow he had, on condition he returned it before the first train. So my father wheeled the trunk all through the silent, sleeping town. Mother said she heard us coming streets away. She took one look at the trunk and told him he had brought the wrong one! My father said that we had always packed the prizes in that trunk before and she replied that was why she had sent me with him to tell him she had put them in another one! Only Mother could do a thing like that and not give my father the keys to see for himself! So we had gone across England for nothing! But that was my parents: one so methodical and trusting, the other so slaphappy and muddly.

On the opposite side of the road was the only fish and chip shop in the town. We had never had anything to do with fish and chip shops and from the first-floor sitting room we had a wonderful view of everything that went on, especially on summer evenings.

There was a most uncomfortable horsehair sofa on which I used to lie for hours, reading and crying over *The Lamplighter*. The book moved me more than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, because we had no slaves in England, but in Victorian days we had the misery and poverty of friends of

lamplighters. Some time the action of the book moved to Boston in America and paddlesteamers, which rather muddled me at first, because I thought it was the English Boston. Then again, most of the streets were still lit by gas and the romantic figure of the lamplighter made his trips every night. Actually there was a little pilot light and the lamplighter, with his long stick, pulled a little chain which lit the mantle at the side and in the mornings he pulled the chain the other way and shut off the gas again.

Sundays could be quite fun in the early evenings, because the Salvation Army held one of their services on the corner, and here again we had a bird's eye view. I remember, one special Sunday, Mother and I came into the room, to find my father and his friends crouching down below the windows, and every now and again popping up and flipping pennies into the centre where money was thrown during the last hymn. They had had bets as to who would knock off the Captain's hat! Mother soon stopped that. The Army really did rather ask for it, because they would chant so many more pennies on the drum and it would be £5 or whatever the grand total.

The Australians were issued with a generous supply of free cigarettes. One brand, instead of having ordinary cards inside, had strong cut-out soldiers of all the different regiments in their correct colouring. We had about 300 of these and, by turning up a special little flap, they would stand up and we would play for hours with them on the dining table. I remember Geoffrey telling his men to 'advance backwards'!

For Geoffrey's birthday and Christmas 1917 he had two 'special' presents we both had great fun with. One was a magic lantern, complete with oil lamp and a large number of slides, mostly of fish! We would have shows with this for our friends for years. The other he bought with some money that had been given him; it was a real child's bow and six arrows. Mother would only allow us to play with it in the fields. There was one near the house which was about 100 feet above sea level, so looked over the surrounding marshland and was good for the bow and arrows, or kites. One day, when we were playing, I saw a sight I knew I would never see again... All my life I have seemed able to realize such moments as being important to remember... A little way off in a cornfield were about six men, each with a scythe, and, standing in perfect formation, they were scything the corn. It was a wonderful sight to see. They all moved as one and for a brief moment the corn flew on the blades, then fell sighing into neat rows. And so corn had been reaped for hundreds of years. (There were horse-drawn mowers, but horses were scarce in 1917.)

At school we were learning 'The Lady of Shalott': 'Reapers reaping early in among the bearded barley...' When it was blackberry time we were given whole-day holidays to go blackberry-picking for the 'war effort'. We were paid threepence for every pound we took to the greengrocer. Some of the boys made a small fortune, but a number of girls like myself just dillydallied and often picked more mushrooms than blackberries. We wandered in among the oyster beds and, of course, ate a lot of blackberries and found dog roses, etc. In fact, we had a whale of a time.

Coming by road from Colchester, which of course is the way everyone does nowadays, before you reach Brightlingsea you find the old parish church on the hill overlooking Brightlingsea. This is where the village used to be. When hundreds of people fled London and the Black Death, a number settled in the village around the church, but alas they brought the plague with them and just about wiped out the village, so all the cottages were burned and the village was built up around the backwater and the little 'hard'. But the graveyard around the church was used by everyone as their burial ground no matter what their denomination.

Early in 1918 the fateful flu came to Brightlingsea and, like everywhere else, some it attacked – sometimes fatally – were quite young and healthy people. It took my teacher, my dear Miss Pawson. I was heartbroken. I wanted to die too. About this time I had measles and the flu

together. The spots ran all together and I really was quite ill. In vain Mother told me all the family loved me and did not want me to die. I even lay in bed writing a poem, a terrible thing really, but it shows the state of my mind.

A FRIEND by FMW 1918

Once I had a friend, a lovely friend,  
But now I have not that big, big friend.  
She was my teacher fair and lovely,  
And how I miss her I will tell thee.  
I play a piece on the old piano,  
The self-same piece I played to her,  
I hope you believe me my dear Sir;  
She sometimes kissed me with her own lips.  
I did not know how much I loved her.  
I am just able now to carry on,  
But I have to wait so many long years  
Before I see my dear Miss Pawson.

Rather terrible, isn't it? But it does show what a state I was in. The whole school mourned her terribly, especially her class. The whole school marched up the hill behind the coffin. We, her class, stood in a special position when we sang her favourite hymn, 'There is a green hill far away'.

And then after the funeral when I got the measles and flu, the doctor said it was not the measles, but the soldiers kept popping in and kissing me in the hope that it was the measles and they would get them and so delay going back to France for a few weeks. Then the doctor changed his mind and said Mother was right. So she stopped the men from coming in, but it didn't matter, none of them caught it. It is strange to think now that I do not believe I ever knew Miss Pawson's Christian name, although she was one of the handful of women who greatly influenced my life.

A few weeks later Geoffrey had the mumps, very slightly, and gave them to Mother quite badly. My father took a snap of her in bed and she looked very pretty with her head tied up. Years later someone told me that the unborn baby (David) would be sterile. I haven't noticed it, I think he was the most sexy of the lot of us, and has two beautiful children.

Now we had come to live in the High Street, Geoffrey and I explored the countryside more than ever. Especially around the oyster beds, marshes and fields. One sunny afternoon, in the holidays, we decided to make a day of it and took some food and a bottle of water. Mother told us if there was an air raid we were to come home at once, so that she would know where we were. I suppose we were about a mile or so from home when a batch of planes went over. I *thought* they sounded like ours, but before they were out of sight another lot came the other way and they seemed to engage in a fight. So we grabbed our bottle of water and ran home, only to find when my father came home that the planes were all ours, they were having a mock fight. But they had spoilt our day out. So we had been right about the engine noise being ours.

Talking of engine noises: in 1940, in Weston-super-Mare when there had been exactly 100 warnings and we had seen no planes, and in the daytime businesses had been so disrupted, it was agreed that no notice would be taken of the warnings unless there was any action. This particular morning during one of my wartime WVS jobs, which was cleaning the Service Women's Club, one of the young helpers was talking about this new ruling – as a warning had just gone – and how we were to know if the planes were ours or not and I was telling her that in the 1914 war you could tell the different noise of the engines. As I was talking we heard some planes, we went out on to the fire escape and I told her that I was sure these were German planes, as the noise of the engines was

different, and I advised her to go home. About 20 planes came in to view, and as they passed over another 20 followed closely behind. They made a wide circle over Bristol and then dive-bombed in like crows going for their prey. I said that I was going home, because on their way back they could drop any spare bombs on us. Actually they returned over the Mendips and dropped their bombs on the countryside. That was the first surprise daylight raid over the west of England.

We made one more trip to Colchester before the baby was born, this time by governess trap. Mother and I were on the first floor of a draper's shop and, while Mother tried on dressing gowns, I was looking out of the window. I saw that Geoffrey was alone in the trap, when suddenly the horse began to move. Mother threw aside the gown and we both dashed down the stairs. By the time we reached the trap my father was safely holding the horse's head. He was being very angry with Geoffrey for moving his hands that were holding the reins. He said that he had not moved. Then Mother was cross with my father for leaving Geoffrey in charge, in a busy street where the horse would be worried. But the panic was soon over and we returned to the shop.

Even with all the shopping we kept doing, and all the little garments that began to appear, Geoffrey didn't seem to notice anything, except one day to our amusement he remarked on how big Mummy's tummy was getting, and that she must have eaten a lot of pudding! Truly Mother had become rather large. Not only was it the fashion to eat for two (if you could afford it), but expectant women who were 'ladies' were not seen out of doors, so they got little exercise. When it was quite dark Mother would go to meet my father from the camp; she would carry a lighted cigarette so that people thought she was a man. Eating so much often seemed to comfort her for so much of her own company, she never did return to the slimness she had always had before.

On my twelfth birthday I was given a wrist watch. That was really quite something. Not many adults had wrist watches in those days. Mother had a very beautiful gold watch, and my father had it fixed to a gold strap but it would not go. It had not the right mechanical inside to withstand the movement of the arm and wrist. We take all these kinds of things for granted nowadays!

There was a time when we attended the Wesleyan Chapel on Sundays. I was intrigued by quite a lot of it, particularly the seating in little boxed tiers. I did not care for the prayers because they were not set ones, and sometimes the minister went on for ages, almost making another sermon out of them. I felt sure that sometimes they liked their own voices and got carried away.

My father began taking us for walks on a Sunday morning like he used to do at Weymouth, only it was not quite the same.. We all seemed a little shy of each other, for one thing. And again – looking back – I think he was beginning to worry about the future. It was obvious that the war was going to end soon, and what should he do? Should he return to WA...would Mother go, etc? Again the countryside on the whole was not so interesting for walks as Dorsetshire, so we mostly played 'I spy' games. Geoffrey and I had become more necessary than ever to each other. To Mother we were her children, she was very proud of us and looked after our health and welfare. But we never grew up in her eyes, and she was never interested in what made us tick. My father was quite different, but he had less and less time with us alone, and after Brightlingsea practically no time. Geoffrey had lost his jolly little boy's smile. He had adjusted himself to realizing he was no longer his mother's first thought. Those first three or four years without a father's influence can do a great deal of harm to some characters. Geoffrey overcame these troubles without obvious scars or bitterness; but 'obvious' must always remain the operative word.

A few weeks before the arrival of the baby we had our largest air operation of the war. A real series of dog fights overhead and at night. We sat in the window watching it all as though it were a fireworks display. My father had me on his knee as well as Mother and Geoffrey. Mother said we would all die together! We saw a plane on fire as it fell to earth over the marshes near St

Osyth, four miles as the crow flies. Later in the morning my father discovered it was a Jerry.

Mother was beginning to wonder if she could stand any more raids, not knowing that that was the last one of that war. Her elder sister Ivy was bringing her youngest child, three-year-old Margaret, from Bristol, to stay with Mother for the birth. She hoped to return so as to be with her sister Winnie, who was also expecting any week. Her husband, a Tasmanian, had just died of wounds. While Auntie Ivy and little Margaret were with us, I had to give up my bedroom. We had fun with Margaret and once or twice I took her out in the large pram we had waiting for the baby.

Although I was 12 years old and brushed my hair out of tangle, I was not allowed to tie it up, because Mother said no one did it properly but her, so I was rather surprised when one Sunday morning my father handed out my brush and comb from Mother's bedroom and I was told I could do it myself. It was 25 August 1918 and we were told that the baby was coming that day. My father took us for a long walk and we returned to the camp, where the cook had been told to save two meals. He was upset when he found the meals were for us, as he said he would have fixed special ones had he known. When we finally returned home in the early afternoon we found Margaret alone downstairs, and could hear a baby crying upstairs. It was a boy! At first I was very disappointed, and then I thought that perhaps it would be rather nice being the only girl. When I saw David Edward – well, both Geoffrey and I thought there was no other baby like him in the world. No parents could have taken greater care of him than we did.

That day, when the Salvation Army came for its services, the first hymn was something about the grass on your grave being mossy! Mother had hysterics. So my father asked them if they would move on to their next station that week, and they did.

The next morning I woke up just covered all over with chicken pox: even in my hair! So I was isolated in my room, and could not see Mother, the baby or Margaret. Mother then remembered that a couple of weeks before Geoffrey had had two spots on his leg (we were not the spotty kind of children). Mother had asked the midwife if she thought it was something and she had declared it was nonsense. It was obvious he had given me chicken pox in the same way that he had given me mumps a few months before. When the scabs came off, the ones in my hair took the hair as well and for the only time in my life my hair was very thin so I wore huge bows of ribbon. Mother nearly had my hair shingled, as it was just becoming the fashion for girls, but she did not. I think I must now have made a record of sorts, because I did not even go inside a hairdresser's salon until I was 64. Not even for a shampoo. Having naturally wavy hair, I have had no perms or sets.

Not long before David was born, my father and one or two other Australian servicemen were made freemen of Brightlingsea, and they were told that when any son of theirs born in Brightlingsea became 21 years old, he could be made freeman too, by paying 13 pence! So far, David has not returned to Brightlingsea to claim his birthright.

My father and his friends bought a pig; it was to be fed and fattened for Christmas and then they would all have an amount of pork each.

When October came my father was told he could have five months' leave and return to Australia, or have two and a half months in England. Naturally he chose the latter. It was decided we would go to Cheltenham to spend that time. Mother also said that we would go to school in Cheltenham, even if it was only for a month, as we had lost so much schooling during the war.

There was a great deal of packing to be done, and Mother said there was no room for Geoffrey's magic lantern, or his bow, and if he wanted them he must carry them himself. Geoffrey planned to do just that. The bow was little problem, as he could put it over his shoulder. He got an

old canvas school bag, cut bits off it so that the lantern would just fit in, and wore that over the other shoulder, leaving his hands free for his overnight bag. (In 1922 when we returned to WA, he sold the lantern and slides for eight shillings, which was quite a good price in those days. Over the years we had had a great deal of fun with it.)

The whole family was quite a cavalcade going across London, with David's pram and hand luggage for us all. The railway by then had made a rule that each passenger was only allowed one lot of hand luggage. There was a time on one of the stations when we left my father in charge of all the luggage while we went to the cloakroom. When we returned we found a porter beginning to get tough with this 'Australian serviceman' about his excess luggage, when we arrived *en masse*. He just grinned and walked away.

In Cheltenham we stayed a few days with Auntie Lena, while we found some very superior rooms for two months.

Cousin Dorothy was going to a small private school run by a Miss New. Miss New took the older class, of which I was one. She gave us very horrible dictation every day. Either bits out of the newspaper, or a dreary story about a silver-barked birch in a forest of other trees.

The first thing we did was go to the same photographer who had taken our family photo in 1912. It was very interesting to notice the difference in the technique in those six years. But then, of course, we were very different too, all of us. There was the addition of David as well. It could be seen that life was now galloping apace. Even my parents hardly seemed the same people.

It was 11 November and Mother's birthday. Miss New was in the middle of 'The slow adventures of the silver birch' when suddenly a great deal of noise went on in the street below. Some of the boys shouted 'It's Peace!' Miss New seemed quite angry and informed us it was *not* but Armistice, and would we please go on with our dictation. No one went back to school that afternoon – quite a number of schools were given the rest of the week off. When six-year-old Dorothy came skipping home from school singing 'It's Peace, Mummy!', Auntie Lena sank to her knees in the garden where she was, and Mother said it was the best birthday present she had ever had.