

CHAPTER I

Taken by surprise – Christmas cheer - Coming to terms – Effect on the children – Solicitor - Custody - Family Welfare - Social Worker – Setting up my own studio – Help at College – Leaving home – Rita’s loan – Mortgage - Finding a new home...

Sally’s reply to my question, “why are you so late?” made me catch my breath... It was not the answer I expected...! All over that Christmas vacation, I gave way to feelings of desolation... Thoughts about all those past exciting, frustrating, and annoying times, twenty-three years of married life, six children and a circle of friends, overlaid now by feelings of anger... I was distressed, felt painfully let down, - and deserted. These negative feelings churned away inside me – destroying hopes, clouding dreams and smothering ambitions...

‘It is strange fact that even though there were all these depressing thoughts running through my head, overlaying them all was a positive, fixed, never to be altered resolve... *there was going to be an end to it all, and I was going to make out...!*’

I did make overtures to Sally, to try to rekindle past affections, but in my heart of hearts I was just going through the motions... nothing – word or deed, would take away those hateful words...! Had her words been the only cause of disagreement I might have gone through a cooling off period but they were not. Sally had no interest in cultural things, no lover of the world’s science, home improvements, or joy at nature’s blessings. Not having any more babies left a void in her that could not, would not be filled... it was an obsession - logic and reasonableness would not counter its grinding daily pressure.

The silence of Sally’s rejection spoke volumes. There is nothing so completely dead to the human spirit as rejection, however much affection there may have been in the past... I could see from Sally’s demeanour, I no longer counted - was a back number. This was no media soap opera, where it was all to come right in the end. This was harsh reality and it hurt. Any hopes of relying on her steadfastness, commitment, fortitude, and onetime staunch Christian upbringing, now dead. My calls for sympathy and kindness answered only by her distant cold stare. During those days and hours - over the Christmas period, the light of hope dimmed further, if that was at all possible... she became even more detached, could only find solace out of the house - away from the demands of motherhood and parental responsibility... away from where no child sought her milk.

I think all the children were in a state of shock... much as I. There had been a slow but definite deterioration in each child’s bond with each other over the last couple of years. As they had grown up the lack of privacy and personal space was to have a profound effect, all became withdrawn - operating in a small world around their own possessions and interests. This affected all at home, except Simon, who was away at university. They looked to me to be strong and supportive, but I was at that moment wrapped up in my own misery, which, coming on top of the stressful conditions at work – having to study technical processes and collect academic qualifications, grated at my inner being. It was a house of tension, where hardly a kind word was spoken.

As Simon was away at university David was the senior child, I looked to him for support...! Rachel, my eldest daughter, was coming up to eighteen – should have been quite capable of taking control of the household, in times of need. It wasn’t that there was a scarcity of adults around the younger ones. The trouble was relationships were fractured. The eldest, should have demonstrate a responsible attitude – giving the younger ones good behaviour to copy; show care and consideration, by being sure and steadfast. Living so close together made for unreasonableness – petty squabbles about personal space – nowhere to go for peace and quiet, the eldest asserting their preferences, by right of seniority.

However, there was no way I was going to be party to this continuing collapse – it was not going to stay that way forever. The final darkness was about to lighten - a glimmer appeared... for

there, right at the end of the tunnel, a pinprick of light... My goal - which was to survive, remained firm... It premised on, staying firm and not giving way. I had to get myself into a position where I could give that care to the younger children without it being undermined.

What a proper pickle - six children, the eldest almost twenty-one, and the youngest coming up to twelve. We had this size of family because it was what Sally wanted – insisted on. ‘Just one more’, she repeatedly said... ‘After all, we don’t have to buy anything, its all here, ready!’ I had gone along with it because she was so adamant - she enjoyed the weaning, closeness, vulnerability, and helplessness of her own babies, toddlers and young children... I stupidly thought this would make her settled, content and committed – devoted to the children, to me, and to family life. However, her mental state demanded more, however detrimentally that decision was to be for everyone else. Her mother and Aunt were very much against a larger family – I most certainly had supporters; but it was no good, it was a challenge and something she craved for - of her own, a score to tot up...

Although concerned about the finances of the family, particularly when it came to extra curricular activities - not for one moment contemplating private education... all my plans - for educational holidays and trips aboard, in jeopardy. We had a camping holiday in France booked which Sally said she wanted to continue with. I could not see how we could possibly go in our present parlous state, so I cancelled the booking.

My first call for commiseration was on Boxing Day. Rita, my mother-in-law, was the only person who knew the family intimately and naturally knew her daughter better than anyone did. I knew that Sally often went round to her mother’s house during her lunch break and it was rare for her not to have weekly contact. I explained to her what had happened. She replied that it did not come as a total surprise - she knew that Sally had been unhappy, frustrated and bored... and could do nothing to dispel those feelings of ‘wanting excitement...’ Rita had had to cope with Sally’s emotional outbursts before... they provoked each other. Over the next few weeks, Rita explained what she knew about Sally’s adventures. I did wonder why she hadn’t relayed them to me before, but it was too late for recriminations.

All over that Christmas period I had numerous conversations with Sally about what she wanted to happen; what she had planned to do; how we were to run the family with her wanting to be with someone else. She could not answer any of my questions other than to keep on repeating that she loved this other man, and that he wanted her; but that in the meantime we should carry on as before, until she had worked out what she intended to do. She wanted me to carry on and do exactly as I had done so for many years except there would be no physical intercourse. I said that I was not prepared to accept that. Sally had told me a number of times throughout our marriage that she preferred more macho, muscular and domineering men – to sexually excitement her. Perhaps this was what she was seeking now.

I resolved to find out about Sally’s hidden life - so I could decide how serious it all was, thereafter, plan... I was in shock... never suspecting, that this had been going on for so long – having placed total confidence in Sally - relying on her to do everything that was best for the family.

Fortunately, I was on college vacation - I could take all day to look into the situation and be able to contact anyone I chose... I met and talked to everyone, the neighbours, her work- mates, past friends and relations. I followed her by car and by foot... to work, from work, when she went to play squash... this over a period of three weeks - the whole holiday period...

I discovered who the friend was and where he lived... parking outside I reached for the front door bell and rang. He invited me in as if expected - exactly as if I were on a social call... He gave me a cup of coffee and a cigarette. We had a long talk - he explained how it had all come about, about his wife’s bad health – her arthritis and subsequent death - after a long illness. He explained about his son’s unhappiness – blamed his father for much of his mother’s distress, to the degree that

he detested his father and lived in his car outside the bungalow - refused to enter... or have anything to do with him.

Michael went on to say that, he worked voluntarily for the Arthritic and Rheumatism Club at Northwick Park Hospital - devising ways to finance the charity. He was the chair of the club and had met Sally when she approached the organization to help with the voluntary work. When it was discovered that Sally worked full-time for the A&R unit during the day - as a secretary, she was asked if she would be the clubs secretary. He said that his and Sally's feeling about each other was mutually held - driven by having similar interests and experiences. She had said to him that she was living a very separate life - from her husband, who was in agreement with her life-style. I explained that this was not so, that I loved my wife and children, and that Sally had given no indication that she wanted a separate existence. However, he continued to say that he was going to do nothing about the situation, 'it was up to Sally', he was quite happy for her to live with him but he didn't want anything to do with the children - he was going to carry with his life in exactly the same way...

It was strange... he was very unfeeling about causing other people unhappiness, and a possible break-up of a family. He was casual and unconcerned. It was a strange conversation; as if he had no concern about how I was feeling, having no regard for the effect this would have on the children. He was in no moral dilemma... he acted as if it was all perfectly normal and natural, had no fear of what I might do, treating the whole affair quite casually, unconcerned as to the effect his actions might take.

I confronted Sally with all my discoveries. I asked her to leave if she wished to carry on seeing him or if she was so unhappy with life at Norwood Drive. She replied that she had no intention of leaving or of giving up seeing her friend that I could carry on doing what I had been doing all along - that I must put up with the situation. I pointed out that there was no way I would do that. She went on to rub more salt in my wounds by saying that all the presents I had given her had pushed her away... It was a parting shot, guaranteed to hurt...! Now I understood the position and where my future was to be found.

Immediately after Christmas, I went to a Solicitor in Rayners Lane who advised me to contact a divorce Lawyer in Uxbridge. I made an appointment straight away... for later on that week. When I got there, I explained the situation. He advised that I should keep a note of all conversations and actions and should seek a divorce on the grounds of unreasonable behaviour. He emphasised, 'I should do nothing contentious'.

At the second interview, he advised, 'not to seek custody, this was rarely granted to the father...' He seemed surprised that I should try... why, he wondered, would anyone want six children. However, if that were what I wanted he would support me believing that attempting a reconciliation rarely worked out, that when relationship had reached this point a separation was the only solution. I accepted the situation and gave him his instructions: I would seek a divorce on grounds of unreasonable behaviour, and custody of the youngest children.

When I returned to work I explained how I was placed and I was fortunate enough to have a very kind and sympathetic Head of Department who said that it was up to me to tell him what hours I could do and what days I needed off and how my teaching programme could be perhaps altered to suit.

I gave up continuing with my studies at Garnet College - dropping out of the degree course, and all the technical studies I was engaged upon. All my charity works I stopped except the Harrow Lyons whose annual charity concert at Kodak I was organizing. My energies were now going to be fully concentrated on making life at home more bearable for the children and preparing for the divorce and aftermath. There was to be no going back...!

I wrote and told my godmother Vera all that had been going on and how I was going to manoeuvre Sally into a position so that I would stay at Norwood Drive and keep custody. Unfortunately Sally opened the letter and read my plan thereby knowing in advance what I intended.

Sally and I had arranged to spend a holiday in Benidorm with our neighbour's the Wrights' that Easter. Now that our relationship had reached such a difficult stage instead of Sally Rebecca accompanied me instead. It was fun, being the sort of break that comes just in time – frees all the mental stress from the family break-up.

A week after returning from holiday a Family Welfare Officer allotted the case. Both Sally and I had interviews. During mine, I explained I was applying for custody, outlining how I had changed my working pattern to fit in with a more school based home life – to be home when the children came home from school. I gave instances how Sally was going out every night only returning well after eleven. Whilst all this was going on, I was resolved to make it clear to the authorities that I had been a good father, for I knew it could be proved - that there were enough people who would vouch for my good character and previous efforts.

Over those first few months, I made many reports to the Social Worker and had at least four interviews. I kept her informed of what was happening who to contact to find out the reality of the situation and where she could get confirmation. I copied in my Solicitor after having various meetings with him. He did remark why I was seeking custody when it was so obvious that life was intolerable; he could not understand why I was bothering, considering the improbability of success. I said that I could not live with myself unless I tried every means to secure my children future, and bring order about.

On my final interview with the Social Worker, I pointed out that I had a very short working week; that I had school holidays off; I was doing the cooking - at least fifty-percent, the cleaning and house maintenance, and that I had the complete support of my mother-in-law, friends and family. She said, 'none of these social and fatherly skills would convince her that I should have custody, and that even if Sally were, for instance, a prostitute, the Registrar, would still grant her custody'. Even with such biased opinions, I still carried on hoping that the Registrar at the Court would see the true situation.

All this time I was in communication with Rita who was a kind friend and supporter. Her house was somewhere where I could go at any time of day or night, food would be provided, a drop of Sherry and a ginger biscuit, a warm fire and peace and quite. Delightful conversation and everything a harassed person might need was the order of the day. My mother-in-law was a lifesaver and confidant. None could have had a better friend or a person who knew the situation as well as she did and who understood the mentality of her daughter. She offered me a place in her house to stay – that I could make it my home and in that way I could be near to the children and it would help her out with the maintenance of the house and garden. I said how grateful I was for the suggestion – “that I would think the offer over, but considered that something more permanent should be what I ought to look for.”

Life continued throughout that Easter term. It was very difficult to concentrate on lectures for many times I found myself listening to what I was saying which is the very worst position to be in as it is most distracting. I was fortunate that I had been made up to Lecturer Grade II sometime before Sally's news destroyed the family's equilibrium...

At the end of each term, lecturers sometimes made up a visit to a work place for the students to see how industry works – so that they might have a better understanding of technical advances and the latest equipment. During one of these visits, I got talking to some of the workers I had known before I went into teaching. They told me they were setting up a small factory and wanted a retoucher to do some of the corrections and would I be interested... At this, I jumped at the chance because it was a good way to find out all the latest methods and to keep one's hand in.

I set up a work place in the garage at home using some of the chemicals from college to start me off. I picked up the positives and a marked up proof sheet and from there started my own business keeping on with teaching to provide continuity.

Play Boy magazine made up the bulk of the work. It was funny to see all these films hanging up on lines, stretched in the garage, to dry, but it did provide cash, which would eventually prove to be essential.

In May 1981, there must have been a disagreement between Sally and her friend because she became most unhappy... It transpired; he had given her an ultimatum - their future was to be with him or with the children, not both. I took my chance to take her out for a meal at the local carvery. During the course of the meal, I asked her, "How the relationship was, and should I call off the divorce, and make an effort to pick up the pieces?" She remarked, "she still loved him, and would not give him up - would continue seeing him."

With those words, I walked out and from that time on, we slept apart, in separate rooms; the course of events that transpired from that time onwards dictated that there would be a separation that would lead to a divorce, and that my life would take a separate course away. I still believed firmly that I had a very good chance of securing custody.

A few weeks later, the Social Worker came round to interview Ruth and Benjamin... to ask, "Whom they wished to have custody by - their mother or father?" Rebecca was not asked - because she was deemed too young to have considered preferences. Benjamin, who was fourteen a month later declared, "I will stay with my mother, who needs my support." He turned to me saying, "It isn't that I love you less it's because I know you will be able to look after yourself."

Ruth, who was sixteen in September - in her final year at school. The Family Welfare Officer said, "Because Ruth is almost sixteen, she is the only child whose opinion would be considered by the court - as being a principal witness - capable of directing a course of action."

Ruth resisted making a choice. She didn't chose, saying, "I do not want the responsibility?" It was not only an invidious position to put any young person into but also expedient, taking the responsibility away from the authorities putting the responsibility onto the shoulders of a sixteen year old. It was a moment that was to have far reaching effects, upsetting the lives of all those who lived at sixty-eight not just for the moment but forever. It was a monumental blunder.

Turning to Sally the Social Worker asked, "Will you stay at home in the evening now? Sally said, "No, I only stay out because my husband is at home." Those words concluded the final interview...

At the last visit to my Solicitor, I told him of the support that I had been offered by friends, neighbours, and relatives - to speak up, and tell the court the facts. That did not change his mind. These witnesses would not be called to give a character reference or to explain the children's living conditions. He went on to say, "the only person who would be listened to would be my mother-in-law, and, would I ask her if she would give her opinion to the court?"

That week I saw Rita and talked it over with her, telling her that I needed her to be in court or else my appeal for custody would have no chance what ever to succeed. She said she that if she told the court Sally would never speak to her again." That was the second person to step back from telling the truth - that sealed my fate!

With that, statement by Rita hopes were dashed, my spirits dropped to its lowest level knowing that I had lost any hope for custody. There was no way that I could prove my point that I was the fittest to bring-up the children - which I would be in the home always to see to their care and safety.

The court hearing, held in Uxbridge, where I had to present my case for custody. Sally, called to the witness box, gave her side of the story, repeating what she had told the social worker. After her explanation, her friend too had to give his understandings of the situation and to say what his

plans were. He declared to the Registrar that he had no intension of getting married to Sally and that he certainly did not want the children, whatever was decided. The Court on the strength of the Social Workers judgement gave custody to Sally. With that, I knew I would have to leave Norwood Drive and all that I had built up over the twenty-five years of work – the family, processions, and all the happy memories, planning the way ahead for each child and seeing to all their needs. This was now at an end.

During all this time, I had been taking Ruth to her riding lessons. On one of these trips through Pinner Green, I happened to notice an estate agent's board up outside a small semi-detached cottage in Pinner Green – Leighton Cottages. It was in a row of a mid Victorian two up two down semi-detached cottages with slated roofs, red sandstone brick walls, rebated white painted windows with cast iron gutters.

Leighton Cottages

Built prominently, at the crossroads Pinner Green stands The Starling public house. This well frequented watering hole is popular with Saturday nighters and weekend cyclists - who populate the tables and chairs placed behind the low wall - giving boundary to the pub's frontage. Lined up along the road opposite a row of early Victorian semi-detached cottages adds country charm to the pub's friendly exterior... Fortunately, these have been kept true to their architectural period: displaying neither plastic covered, picture windows, or painted brickwork.

Number 5, Leighton Cottages is vacant - having been placed on the market by a local estate agent acting for the property's owner. It had laid empty for a number of weeks and the agent was eager to sell...

A white painted wicket gate accesses this neat little house, beyond which a brick path leads to an enclosed porch. Inside, a wood panelled front door is open to reveal an empty room... The agent's details describe a small comfortable parlour... its open fire, and iron grate, set in a tiled surround below a wooden mantle-shelf. The moulded picture rail and ornate skirting compliments detailed architraves - around the doors. Either side of the chimneybreast a shelf, with the lower half draped by small hung curtain hides a narrower shelf below. All these details were the original fixtures and fittings and quite charming. Opposite, another white painted panelled door, opens into a dining room – also provided with its an original black, cast iron, polished grate - shone by frequent polishing. A tightly curved, staircase takes you up to the two bedrooms, entranced by a step-up from a small landing. Downstairs a further door off the dining room leads to a narrow lean-to kitchen with its working surface, butler sink, and draining board lit by windows that look out onto a side passage. At its further end a door reveals a white painted bathroom.

An old ledge and braced door leads out into the garden with brick path, coal shed and garden store - behind which a row of strung raspberry canes. An old cast iron, wooden rolled, mangle gave an eye-catching focus point to the end of the garden. In years past the enclosed area had been planted to form a kitchen garden on both sides of the brick path... it was perfect and represented for me a longed for haven. My task now was to set the wheels in motion to buy it.

Both neighbours were old and very welcoming, inviting me in - on my first visit, for a cup of tea. My immediate neighbour was an elderly woman who told me much history of the area and on

the other side an equally old man who offered to place all my bets for me. Eventually I came to know them well and they made the whole place more intimate, appealing, and home like.

I contacted the Agent and found out that it was on the market for fifty six thousand pounds. I immediately offered the asking price, which was naturally accepted. Now I had to secure a mortgage and arrange a deposit of £500.

I had a long talk, with Rita, who agreed, that living there would make it simple for the children to keep in touch - being within walking distance of Norwood Drive, and if necessary enable some to live there. A number 183 bus stops outside The Starling Public House opposite. A route, which ran from Harrow, through North Harrow and Pinner Green, to Northwood. This was a further advantage. Now I felt I was really making a constructive move to counter the negative effects of the breakdown - in preserving the family unit.

Sally's mother advised not letting it be known what I was intending doing because it would lead to an almost impossible situation at home – pressure from Sally, even though she appreciated that it was the only way to ensure a stabilizing position at Norwood Drive. Therefore, I just had to be patient and let the purchase continue under its own steam. I got out my paints, painted a picture of the cottage, and imagined my future in my very own home and the peace that it would afford me.

I approached National Westminster Bank for a mortgage, who promised that they would lend the money but only after seeing my separation papers. Rita offered to lend me the five hundred pound deposit. My quest was almost over. All I had to do now was to buy the house and move in... How naive I was. A few weeks later just before I was to buy the bank called-in the loan and refused to sanction any payment. The Bank believed that I did not have sufficient capital or salary to warrant such a loan – my security was suspect.

I immediately contacted a friend, Keith who ran an Insurance business – he was also going through his own rather messy divorce settlement, he arranged a mortgage through one of his lenders, Guardian Assurance. I did not fully understand what I was letting myself into because, panicked by the bank and their attitude, I did not fully understand what future hardship this would bring - the crippling mortgage rate. It transpired that the Guardian wanted seventeen and a half percent interest. With that kind of repayment and the maintenance bill, I was volunteering to pay; things were going to be very tight. Still it was a done deal - within a few days I would be the new owner.

I just had to extract myself from Norwood Drive without any theatricals and upsets. Rita suggested that it should be done without fuss and so that is what I tried to do. One afternoon in July, I loaded up the car and left my past behind me. I was very sad to be going especially my not being able to explain to the children why or to say good-bye. I wondered then, 'did I expect any word of support since the disclosure, and if I had will that have been an act of criticism or censure to their mother? I was never to know...!'

That evening, before I left forever - in June 1981, I had a long talk with Sally, to find out if she was still resolved to carry on seeing her friend. I explained what I thought would happen, if the divorce was made Absolute – which I believed would occur in eight months. It was not that I was clairvoyant or trying to be smart but it was obvious to me that it would all end in a great deal of unhappiness, especially for us. Although I said this, and believed the divorce would cause problems, I was resolved to improve my circumstances - to do everything in my power to lead a better life – be happier.

I could see quite clearly that in the event of some if not all the children marrying their offspring would be without the steadying influence of grandparents, and extended family. There would be no joint decision making for their education and no discipline to see to it that they would continue their piano practice and homework.

I also outlined what would be the result to our relationship with our friends— that we would not be able to see them together and if apart would make for divided loyalties and possible friction. She did not believe me, saying, ‘she would be able to cope...’

As to my final words, I said that I loved her and always would; that what had come about was very sad considering all that we had achieved and endured. With those words, we went to bed. The next day I would be moving out to start a new life and hopefully the children would visit me - and perhaps... move in?