COLIN MIDDLETON MURRY

SHADOWS ON THE GRASS

After the publication in 1975 of Colin Middleton Murry's moving account of his traumatic childhood, *One Hand Clapping*, the author was deluged with letters from readers who wanted to know what happened next. *Shadows On The Grass* is the answer to that question.

As in the earlier book the central theme is the strange, tortured relationship which existed between Colin and his father John Middleton Murry. The story opens as Middleton Murry Senior quits Larling, the battle-torn scene of his disastrous third marriage. He takes Colin and his sister Weg to live with Mary Gamble, the woman with whom Murry has at last discovered his longed-for 'ideal man/woman relationship'. Within a year Murry has established a pacifist farming community on a near-derelict farm in East Anglia. As an agricultural venture it is moderately successful but as an early experiment in communal living it is doomed to failure: Murry proves too remote and preoccupied to retain the loyalty of his youthful work-force. As for young Colin, he has little relish for either farmwork or pacifism. Though father and son both recognise their differences they repeatedly fail to communicate them to each other. We follow Colin's dogged steps away from home, through school, into the Navy, and on to Oxford, first loves, jobs and marriage. Yet the primal ties hold fast: it is as if he is forever pulling away from his father's influence only to be drawn back into an even closer bond.

What gives this book a special dimension and irony is that the author has been able to draw on his father's own version of events as he recorded them in his exhaustive and extraordinarily vivid journals. By setting his own recollections against his father's contemporary version, Colin Middleton Murry has at last succeeded in bridging the gulf between father and son. The result is a story every bit as warm, as humorous and as richly enjoyable as was its predecessor.

Jacket drawing:
Richard Murry

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SHADOWS ON THE GRASS

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(*autobiography*)

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KULDESAK
CLONE
TIME OUT OF MIND
THE TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS
WORLDS APART
THE CUSTODIANS AND OTHER STORIES

SHADOWS ON THE GRASS

by

COLIN MIDDLETON MURRY

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For Ruth, Jackie and Helen
with love

All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of Man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away.

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John Middleton Murry, 1950 (photo: *BBC Publications*)
Mary and John Middleton Murry, 1955
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS BOOK is the sequel to the account of my childhood which I wrote in 1973 and called *One Hand Clapping*. It carries the story on from the time of the break-up of the family in 1942 to my father's death in 1957. For those who have not read that book it may be helpful to explain that my sister Katherine ('Weg') and I (known as 'Col') were the children of John Middleton Murry's second marriage to Violet le Maistre who died in 1931. Mary, my young step-sister, and David her baby brother were the children of my father's third marriage to Betty Cockbayne. When my father finally parted from Betty in 1942, David and Mary remained behind in Norfolk with their mother and Weg and I went to live with my father.

I have been unable to avoid making occasional references to things which I dealt with at considerable length in the earlier book—notably the character of my stepmother Betty and the period of our life together in The Old Rectory, Larling. Since I would be quite incapable of summarizing the whole of that tempestuous period in the few lines available to me here I can only point curious readers in the direction of *One Hand Clapping*, while to those who are already familiar with that part of the story I apologize for some repetition in the first chapter of the present volume.

Finally I would like to take this opportunity to say that it has never been my intention to write a balanced re-appraisal of my father in his various roles as husband to Katherine Mansfield, leading literary figure of the 20's, Pacifist, Socialist, Moralist or whatever. To do so would require gifts which I do not possess. Mine must remain a 'son's-eye view' with, I am sure, all the inevitable distortions the phrase implies. My aim has been to sketch the man I knew by the light of the man I

have discovered since his death. If my smudged portrait does no more than cast some doubts upon the curious caricatures of my father which are apparently still current then I will be content.

C.M.M.

SHADOWS ON THE GRASS

I WAS fifteen years old when my father finally acknowledged that his travesty of a marriage—his third—must be brought to an end. Had he not done so the probability is that he would have left his bones lying on the field of battle. He quit The Old Rectory, Larling, on October 1st, 1941, and was to visit it only once more, in 1950, just before it was sold. 'Each room,' he remarked in his Journal on the day of the sale, 'has its own particular memory of horror. I could go through them all—with perhaps the exception of Col's bedroom—and remember some vivid and horrible thing done by B to me in it: "making some special instant special curst".'

Of his four children, David my three years old step-brother and Mary my nine years old step-sister, remained at Larling with their mother, while my sister Weg and I eventually joined my father at Langham, the village near Colchester where he had set up house with Mary Gamble—ultimately to become the fourth Mrs Middleton Murry.

In *To Keep Faith*, her own account of her life with my father, Mary remarks on this splitting up of the family: 'Now that Weg had made her choice John decided it would be better if his elder son, Col, joined us as well. Perhaps it would have been wiser if he too had been left to make his own decision.' No one would have endorsed that afterthought more heartily than I. However, as far as I know, the question never arose. If it had I am quite sure that I would have opted to remain at Larling. All my deepest roots were there: in the love of my small step-brother and step-sister, and in the sheer familiar beauty of the house set amidst its golden Norfolk landscape. The continuing hunger in me to need and to be needed, these could be fed only at The Old Rectory. My step-mother, Betty, I believed I could cope with. Her wild berserker rages, her insane jealousies, these were directed principally at my father, and, when my father was absent, at my sister. With both of them gone would she have

turned upon me? It was a risk I would gladly have been prepared to take had it been offered to me. No such offer was ever made. I was presented with a *fait accompli.* The amputation—truly it was nothing else—was accomplished swiftly and without benefit of anaesthetics. It left me with the grim knowledge that I had been cast unwittingly in the black role of betrayer by two children who had trusted me and that there was nothing at all I could do about it. The phantom limb of guilt which survived that severance remains with me to this day.

I do not think that my father ever fully realized what he was asking of me. Having 'miraculously' found true love himself he believed, in all sincerity, that around this nucleus his family would re-establish itself 'quite quickly, naturally and spontaneously'. The news that Weg had decided 'of her own free motion' to join him at Langham provided him with the proof he had been waiting for. That I, on hearing of Weg's choice, forebore to make a similar affirmation of intent did not, seemingly, give him pause. Already, though I did not know it, he was making plans to buy a run-down farm in Suffolk and operate it as a community enterprise. He told me a little about it when he came down to visit me at Rendcomb—my boarding school in Gloucestershire—in March 1942. I was ill with mumps at the time, running a high temperature, and only mildly interested in what he had to say—indeed, I couldn't see that his plans really concerned me at all. My 'home' was at Larling with Mary and David. When I told him so he looked thoughtful and promised he would write to me about it.

That letter, when it came, slammed the door shut on Larling for ever. At first I simply couldn't believe it, but the message was plain enough in all conscience. I was to join him at Langham as soon as the term ended. There was no question of whether I wished to do so or not. He said he was counting on me 'to back him up'. Even if it had crossed my mind to defy his edict—and I don't think it ever did—that final injunction would have clinched the matter. I read in it a direct appeal to my love for him; the first, I think, that he had ever made to me. But if Mary and David had been able to express their need

for me in a similar fashion I would in all probability have thrown in my lot with theirs. Of the two parties to that one-sided tug-of-war there is now no doubt at all in my mind as to whose need of me was the greater.

Yet, had I been in my father's position, would I have acted any differently? The choice as it must surely have presented itself to him could only have been between abandoning two of his children and abandoning three. I am not even sure that I *would* have been able to survive on my own at Larling. But neither am I sure that I wouldn't. What I wish I could believe is that in making his decision my father did the right deed for the right reason. I still find myself in two minds about it.

He himself had no serious doubts—at least, not to start with. His Journal at this time is an almost continuous hymn of thanks for his new-found happiness. In this he was surely justified. At one jump he seemed to have vaulted straight out of Hell into Paradise. Mary Gamble adored him and he idolized her. By her love she had given him the strength to make the final break and, having made it, he could only wonder why it had taken him so long. From now on he was to be possessed of an infallible touchstone—'the true man/woman relationship'. It never ceased to astonish him. 'If my relation with Mary is not as good and true and sound and lovely as it is possible for the relation between a man and a woman to be, I'm a Dutchman—or worse.' If a small cloud casts a fleeting shadow it is wafted away. 'It is grim to have had to sacrifice Mary and David for it; but it had to be.' To which one can but add 'Amen'.

In March 1942 I knew Mary Gamble only by repute. The descriptions of her supplied *ad nauseam* by Betty were highly coloured, animated, and anything but flattering. If she had allowed her hated rival even one tiny redeeming feature—something I could have *believed* in—I might have been prepared to give a modicum of credence to the rest. But this she could not do. For her Mary Gamble was everything evil and obscene that her sombre imagination could conjure up. The result was that I simply discounted the lot of it. My father, on the other

hand, had never spoken to me of Mary at all. In our conversation prior to his final letter, he had talked only of 'we' and 'us', leaving me to fill in the gaps as best I might. This, I now realize, was deliberate policy on his part. He was profoundly apprehensive that the graft might not take.

On Monday, March 30th, he met me at Paddington Station, gave me lunch, then escorted me across London to Liverpool Street and put me aboard the Colchester train. He looked tired and ill and, as quite often happened, I felt a sudden upwelling of tenderness and affection for him. I told him not to worry and that everything would be all right. He seemed glad to hear it. We chatted in a desultory fashion for a few minutes more and then I suggested that there was really no point in his standing around getting cold. He nodded, gave me a final grin, and headed for the station exit. As I watched him out of sight I heard the loudspeaker announce that the train for Cambridge, Ely and Norwich was about to leave. It was the one I would have been on had I been going back to Larling. It was a poignant moment.

What my father had neglected to tell me was that I was not yet expected at Langham. He had previously arranged with Mary that I should travel down with him on the Wednesday, but, reflecting that I would be 'bored' spending two days on my own in London while he was at work editing *Peace News*, he had decided on the spur of the moment to launch me solo—a sort of adolescent guided missile. Having done so he sent Mary a telegram from the station warning her of my imminent arrival. The message reached her in the nick of time. She jumped into her car, drove to Colchester, and hurried on to the platform just as the London train was drawing in.

I am sure that she was far more nervous than I was. I realized—none better!—that there was no way back for me now. By joining her and my father I had damned myself for ever in Betty's eyes. It was imperative therefore that I should persuade Mary to like me.

I had no mental picture of her at all. Was she tall or short, dark or fair, pretty or plain? Having succeeded in erasing

Betty's grotesque caricature from my mind I now had nothing left to put in its place. I climbed down on to the Colchester platform and began making my way towards the exit.

Curiously enough I think I recognized Mary a split-second before she recognized me. I gave her an experimental grin and knew I had not made a mistake. She was, in fact, of medium height, rather buxom, with dark brown curly hair, an open, homely face and a ready smile—altogether as improbable a *femme fatale* as it would be possible for a boy to imagine. We shook hands, exchanged greetings, and then she drove me back to Langham. On the way she asked me if I could drive a car and, when she heard that I couldn't, offered to teach me. I felt subtly flattered, almost as though she were treating me as an adult. She also told me that my sister Weg would be arriving next day.

At Adelphi Cottages I was introduced to Ruth Baker—Mary's lifelong friend and companion—and to 'Bessie', a Great Dane bitch of advanced years. I found Miss Baker, whom I soon learned to call Val, undeniably the more *sympathique* of the two. I took to Val at once, wholly instinctively, sensing that here was a person I could trust without reservation. The events of the next five years were to prove that instinct correct. I was shown the room they had prepared for me—a small bed-sitter on the ground floor with its own writing-desk—and I expressed myself delighted. We had tea together and then I took myself off up the road to the Adelphi Centre, about half a mile away, to see if I could find Frank Lea. He was my oldest friend, had lived for a time at Larling, and knew, better than anyone, what leaving it must have meant to me. At that moment I badly needed a familiar face.

The Adelphi Centre, the socialist conference centre which had been brought into being largely as a result of my father's effort and inspiration in 1935, had been disbanded in 1937 when he had embraced pacifism. The buildings were handed over to the Peace Pledge Union and used as a house for Basque refugee children, though the Adelphi School Company, of which my father was permanent Chairman, still remained in

existence. At the outbreak of war, Max Plowman, the Secretary of the P.P.U., had gathered around him at Langham a number of young conscientious objectors who first set about repairing the ravages to The Oaks—the main house—and then began turning the large kitchen garden and the paddocks into a market-garden. The Oaks became a home for evacuees from the East End of London. The smaller house—Little Oaks—was initially Max's headquarters and then, after Max's death in June 1941, the home of The Warden. By this time a dozen of the keenest young c.o's had moved out into a cottage down the road and set about reclaiming a small derelict farm. Frank Lea was one of them.

This Farm Group, all of whom were, I think, in their early twenties, consisted of ten men and two girls. They worked under the direction of one of their number, Geoffrey Phillips, an energetic young Quaker of considerable personal charm, prodigious talents, and quite incredible self-assurance. In all the time I knew him, never once did I hear Geoff admit that he didn't know how to do something. Since he was right most of the time, he usually got away with it.

Living conditions at the cottage tended towards the twentieth-century mediaeval. The laudable aim of the Group was to pay their own way and, as far as I could make out, in pursuit of this aim they subsisted almost entirely on a diet of lentils, porridge, and milk. On my first visit to the cottage, I found myself being reminded irresistibly of *Cold Comfort Farm*.

I soon discovered that Frank was not to be numbered among Geoff's most ardent admirers. Relations between them were indeed a trifle strained. The reason for this, it emerged, was that the prettier of the two girls had recently transferred her affections from Geoff to Frank. Thus, even before I had had a chance to sample community life for myself, I was made aware of one of its perennial problems.

Since our previous meeting some two years before Frank had acquired a dog—a black and white, thoroughbred English setter named Jake. As well as being of aristocratic lineage Jake was highly-strung, boisterous, extremely affectionate and

invincibly stupid—a sort of canine equivalent to P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster. Frank adored him. That first evening we took him for a walk down to the Stour valley and while Jake rushed wildly about the countryside striking terror into the rabbits, Frank and I filled in for each other the gaps in our personal histories. During the course of our conversation he told me that my father proposed to launch his projected community farm using the Adelphi Farm Group as crew.

'So you'll be in it too!' I exclaimed. 'That'll be super!'

Frank said he was still thinking about it.

That evening while I was having supper with Mary and Val I asked them if what Frank had said was true. They agreed that it was and enquired how I liked the idea of living on a farm. The question arose casually enough but I sensed that they were both anxious to hear my reply. My mind flicked back to the cottage I had just seen. 'Would I have my own room?' I asked.

They assured me I would.

'I'm sure I'd like it very much,' I said.

They did not ask me what I felt about the idea of living in a community.

The next day Mary drove me into Colchester to meet Weg. I had not seen my sister since Christmas. She kissed me warmly, then turned and kissed Mary. It was then that I realized they must have met before. It made sense, of course, but somehow I had assumed that Weg, like me, would be a stranger in a strange land, whereas here she was obviously standing on familiar territory. Since she and I hardly ever corresponded there was no earthly reason why I should have known what she had been up to, nevertheless I can still recall quite clearly my vague unease at finding out that she was already committed in a way that I was not. My sense of inner isolation increased by a measurable degree.

As soon as we had a moment alone I asked her what had happened when she had left The Old Rectory. Her account of how she and my father had got her things away and then been pursued by Betty made my blood run cold. 'Thank God that's

all over now,' she concluded with a profound sigh. I could not but agree with her.

For Weg, leaving Larling must have been like waking up from a black and hideous nightmare. The relentless persecution she had endured there had been infinitely worse than anything I had had to undergo. What is more, apart from her time in Belgium, she had never really been free of it, whereas I spent more than half my life away at boarding school. I did not grudge her one iota of her new-found happiness, but neither could I claim it for my own. From now on she would go her way and I mine. The trouble was that I was by no means certain in which direction mine lay.

I had brought with me from school a number of aero-modelling kits and these I now proceeded to assemble. My bed-sitting room was transformed into an aircraft production factory. Balsawood chippings accumulated in drifts and the pungent smell of acetone cement wafted through Adelphi Cottages. Mary and Val regarded my labours with tolerant amusement, but my father was clearly nonplussed. He began dropping hints that I would be far better occupied in helping to tidy up the cottage garden or, like Weg, in lending a hand to the Farm Group. Mulishly I laid back my ears and refused to budge. All I wanted was to be allowed to do something which, however trivial, at least I enjoyed and knew I was good at. My reaction was purely instinctive; I did not connect it in any way with my father's decision to cut me off from Larling. Had I thought about it at all I would probably have said that I just wanted to be left alone.

Unfortunately, for reasons which I did not fully understand, my father could not just 'leave me alone'. I troubled him far more deeply than I was aware of at the time. Having now read his Journal entries covering those first weeks at Langham and seen him attempting to fathom the cause of my odd behaviour I realize that, for all his probing, he never succeeded in getting to the root cause of the problem. The reason, I am convinced, is that it lay at least as much in himself as in me. For some odd reason he really seems to have needed me to endorse his

'marriage' to Mary, to have my absolution and my blessing. Finally, having itemized the various aspects of my behaviour that give him most cause for disquiet he concludes: 'Fourth, there's the horrible feeling that there is no real contact between us. I do not mean conscious "contact"—intellectual talk and the rest—but unconscious "flow". I feel that, so far as Col is concerned, the holiday has just been a failure: almost in fact that he would have been better off at Larling, where he would at least have had David.'

Yet, a few days before making that entry, he had demonstrated beyond a peradventure that he was constitutionally incapable of coming to imaginative terms with my emotional situation. He told me that he had made arrangements for me to go over to Larling along with Geoff and another member of the Farm Group to collect his twelve hives of bees, together with sundry items of bee-keeping equipment, and to take the lot over to the farm which he had now purchased at Thelnetham in Suffolk. When I heard this I simply went numb inside. He went on to explain cheerfully that he was sending me because I knew where everything was. He added, by way of a rider, that Betty had agreed to the expedition.

If she had she soon changed her mind. The day before we were due to set out a series of telegrams arrived from Larling, the gist of them being that she 'would not have Col in the house'. A sort of black, fatalistic gloom descended upon me. That night, lying in bed, I prayed with all my heart that the hired lorry would break down and the whole thing be cancelled. That I could simply have refused to go, never occurred to me. In fact I couldn't. I knew only too well that my father was counting on me and the thought of letting him down yet again was simply not to be borne. Nevertheless, I doubt whether I have ever undertaken any journey with a greater sense of foreboding.

My father decided that Betty's telegraphed injunctions could safely be ignored and, soon after breakfast, Geoff appeared with the open lorry. Maurice Bowley, the other member of the Group selected for the expedition, was sitting in the cab beside

him. I climbed up into the back, made myself as comfortable as I could upon a pile of sacks, and off we went with faint cries of 'Good luck!' floating after us.

It is roughly fifty miles by road from Langham to Larling. For the first half of the journey I was sunk deep in despondency then, for no very good reason, my spirits suddenly began to lift. It was a beautiful late-April day; the sun shone warm; the sky was speedwell blue, dotted with cottonwool clouds; and the crinkled leaves which were just beginning to emerge on the wayside trees were so delicate and tender a green, that, like the Ancient Mariner confronted by the sea-snakes, I found myself 'blessing them unaware'. I remember saying to myself: 'Well, at least she can't kill me', but I don't think I really believed it.

Following our prepared plan of campaign we called first at the bungalow belonging to Mr Hewetson, the poultry farmer whose land adjoined the grounds of The Old Rectory on the south side. He was a staunch friend of my father's and often, in the past, had been called on to intervene when matters at The Old Rectory were getting out of hand. He now greeted us with the news that Betty had barricaded herself in and was threatening to shoot anyone who tried to enter. He added, consolingly, that he was quite certain she was bluffing.

My father's bee-hives were stationed in a corner of the paddock about a hundred yards from the house, and Geoff decided that we would load these up first and then see about the rest of the stuff which was inside the house. Accordingly he drove the lorry across Mr Hewetson's field and parked it as close as he could to the Rectory paddock. Then, screened effectively from the house by a dense clump of trees, we headed for the hives.

The operation went off without a hitch. Of Betty there was neither sight nor sound. In fact, so simple had it been that Geoff was convinced that there was obviously nothing to worry about. For my own part I was rather less sanguine.

The equipment my father wanted—the centrifugal and solar extractors, boxes of foundation frames and the rest—was stored in a room on the ground floor at the back of the house, to

which entrance could be gained by a couple of steps up to a low sash window. I pointed this out to Geoff and Maurice and elected, prudently, to bring up the rear as the two of them strolled with studied nonchalance up the gravel path and peered in through the window. 'All clear,' Geoff announced and tested the sash. To my astonishment it opened at once. Giving me a thumbs-up signal they climbed inside.

As I approached the window in my turn I felt at once that familiar prickling at the base of my neck which always seemed to act as a sixth sense where Betty was concerned. 'Hey! Look out!' I warned.

Hardly were the words out of my mouth than the door burst open and there she was, screaming abuse, with a batten of wood raised high above her head like a broadsword. She launched herself down the steps at Geoff who swung round and caught her deftly by the forearms just as she was about to cleave him from top to toe. 'Now just you calm down, Mrs Murry,' he said mildly.

She made a couple of ineffectual attempts to break free from his grip and then shouted: 'You're a pacifist! You can't hit *me*!'

Maurice took a step towards her. '*I'm* not a pacifist,' he announced in quiet, measured tones. '*I* can.'

The effect of his words was quite uncanny. Betty stared at him and then she began to laugh. 'Well, you are a crafty pair of buggers,' she said. 'Who put you up to it?'

Geoff grinned. 'I don't think we need this, do we?' he said. He took the piece of wood from her and dropped it on the floor behind the door.

Betty caught sight of me peering in apprehensively through the open window. 'Oh, you might as well come in now you're here,' she said. 'I expect the kids'll be glad to see you.'

From that point on she was totally co-operative, even insisting upon giving us lunch. The only price she exacted was to dictate to Geoff a long list of complaints about my father which he undertook to pass on to him.

While this was going on I wandered off with young Mary.

She asked me if I was going to stay. When I told her it was impossible the corners of her mouth drooped pathetically and her huge grey eyes filled with tears. 'I think you're rotten,' she said. 'Why can't you? Mummy says you can.'

'I've got to go back to school, old thing,' I said feebly.

To my relief she seemed to accept this in a resigned sort of way. 'What's it like where you are?'

'It's all right, I suppose. Frank's there.'

'And Weg.'

'Yes.'

She was silent for a long, thoughtful moment, then she sighed: 'It's not the same without you. It's no fun.'

'But you've got Dave to play with.'

'It's not the same. He's little.' She scuffed at the gravel with the toe of her sandal. 'It's not fair, is it, Col?'

'No,' I said, 'it's not fair.'

2

THAT SUMMER term proved to be one of the oddest in my whole school career. Stated baldly, my problem was that I began to be aware of profound doubts within myself as to my own true nature and that of the world about me. I knew I existed all right but I could no longer simply take that basic fact for granted. And on at least three separate occasions I had the truly bewildering experience of seeming to drift—or float—right outside my own body and look down upon it. The feeling this induced in me was very close to blind panic. Like a drowning swimmer I clutched out wildly and succeeded in dragging myself back on board. Since then I have never had the slightest difficulty in conceiving body and spirit as being separate—albeit interdependent—entities.

The only person I ever spoke to about these peculiar illusions was Mr Molineaux my Art teacher, and I doubt whether I would have mentioned them even to him had he

not told me of a strange, near-fatal accident that had occurred while he was serving in the Artillery during the First World War. A shell had exploded in the breech of the gun he was helping to load and he too had undergone the uncanny experience of seemingly being blown out of his body and looking down on it lying on the ground beneath him. He could not explain it any more than I could.

One June morning 'Molly' and I were out sketching in the park when I suddenly became aware that the group of trees I was painting was fringed by an extraordinary ethereal glow, a sort of tremulous attenuated aura, absolutely distinct, as though a strong floodlight had been directed on them from behind. I closed my eyes and opened them again and it was still there. It was then I noticed that the light was not just surrounding the trees but was bathing the crests of the hills behind them and even glimmering along the top of the stone wall too. Since the sky itself was overcast there could be no question of some odd trick of sunlight. I studied the effect with growing curiosity and was finally moved to ask Molly what he made of it. He cocked an eyebrow at me and asked me what I was talking about. While I was trying to describe it I saw the light slowly fading away. 'It's gone now,' I concluded lamely. 'But it really *was* there. As real as I'm here now.'

'Is it the first time you've seen it?'

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'I think maybe I did a long time ago. When I was very young.'

'Does it worry you?'

I thought for a moment. 'No. Not really. It was just strange, that's all. Odd.'

'The whole world's odd,' he said. 'Our trouble is we try to pretend it's not. Now why don't you mix a bit of sienna in with those shadows? Warm them up a bit.'

That afternoon he produced a book containing some reproductions of the Shoreham watercolours by Samuel Palmer and laid it before me. I had never seen anything quite like them and was fascinated. 'What do you make of those?' he asked with a grin.

'They're beautiful.'

'That's all that matters,' he said.

I am now inclined to suspect that there was a direct causal connection between those subjective experiences of mine and the emotional crisis I was going through. Having so recently discovered my own identity—largely through the affection of Sammy Morris—I now seemed to be in real danger of losing it again. I groped about, beset by doubts, and went through periods of intense depression during which I became thoroughly unsociable. At these times it was Molly more than anyone who prevented me from going under completely. He encouraged me to believe that I really did have some talent and that one day I would make the grade. It was at his suggestion that I decided to revive a moribund occasional magazine called *The Crescent*. Under my editorship it waxed and waned erratically for a year or so until the boy who was lending me his typewriter left the school and *The Crescent* sank into permanent eclipse. By then I had learnt that to edit a school magazine successfully one needs to possess, above all else, the gift of dogged persistence. Flattery and cheek are also useful.

While it lasted *The Crescent* provided me with a home-made display cabinet for my own work, and this, I surmise, was what Molly had reckoned on. I soon learnt to turn my hand to anything—editorials, stories, poems, illustrations and cartoons all gushed from my facile pen. Much of it was highly derivative—I absorbed other people's styles as blotting paper soaks up ink—and those writers I most admired I imitated slavishly. Pre-eminent among them was Walter de la Mare. Robin Wilson, my English teacher, had lent me a copy of *Bells and Grass*—the successor to *Peacock Pie*—and I was enchanted both by the verses themselves and by Rowland Emett's exquisite black and white illustrations. In no time at all I was turning out quite accomplished 'de la Mare' pastiche which, naturally, I illustrated with Emett-type pen and ink drawings. The following, which Robin extracted from *The Crescent* and reprinted in the school magazine, appears to be the sole survivor of all that frenetic activity:

Who whispered, 'What is love?'
Who echoed, 'Dreams'?
Who said, 'Where shadows shiver
Dance the moonbeams'?
Were they voices of my sleep,
Children of Fancy,
Or were they merely echoes of
Elfin necromancy?

Who sighed, 'Love is dead,
Slain by Sorrow'?
Who said, 'Make a wreath
Of laughter and laurel'?
Perhaps it was a scudding cloud
Shadowing a churchyard yew,
While on the ancient gravestones softly
Dripped evening dew.

Re-reading it after an interval of more than thirty years I found that I recalled quite clearly the circumstances under which it was written—during a school lecture on 'Shipbuilding in the Kaiser Yards in the U.S.A.', which I was supposed to be covering for the magazine. The poem itself seems to me neither better nor worse than most of the others I was producing at the time. It evokes a mood of rather wistful, moony melancholy which is part and parcel of certain types of adolescence.

Certainly I was no stranger to the mood, but neither was I 'arty' in the public-school sense of the word. If I had any reputation at all at Rendcomb it was probably for being a rather better than average games player. In truth I was neither 'arty' nor 'hearty'. I liked doing the things I was good at and skimped the rest. This led to my being tagged as 'irresponsible' and, more than once, Lee-Browne, the headmaster, was moved to summon me to his study and remonstrate with me. On such occasions I would listen gravely while he catalogued my latest crop of misdeeds which usually ranged from failing to hand in my written work on time to sneaking down to the kitchens after

lights-out and chatting up the maids. Then, when he paused for breath, I would slip in some mildly outrageous observation calculated to break through his defences. If he turned to look out of the window I knew I had made him grin. I remember him once flinging his arms up in the air and exclaiming: 'John, how can I *possibly* make anyone like you a prefect?'

I saw his problem. Here was I, the only member of the Lower Sixth still wearing short trousers. What is more I had succeeded in putting up the backs of most of the prefects either by flagrantly ignoring their injunctions or by satirizing them in the pages of *The Crescent*. By and large they mistrusted me and with fair reason. If they represented the Establishment then I was the self-appointed Court Jester whose compulsion to poke fun, deflate, and 'play the giddy goat' was *plus fort que lui*. Besides I didn't even *look* like a potential prefect. My school uniform was scruffy to the point of eccentricity and my fingers were usually stained with ink or paint. It was not that I was averse to the *idea* of becoming a prefect—indeed, the extra freedom such a promotion would allow me was a very real attraction—but I just didn't see how I could possibly cope with the demands of the office. Like my socks my good intentions had a way of slipping down around my ankles which was almost uncanny. It was no surprise to me or to anyone else when, at the end of that summer term, several moral stalwarts a year junior to me were promoted over my head. Had I been in Lee-Browne's shoes I am sure I would have done exactly the same myself.

I returned to Adelphi Cottages to discover that plans for the transfer to Lodge Farm, Thelnetham in Suffolk, were well under way. Geoff Phillips was our most frequent visitor. Nor did it take me very long to realize that he had fallen for Weg. I knew that they had been seeing a lot of each other during the Easter holiday but I had been too self-absorbed to pay much attention. Now, for the first time in my life, I made a genuine effort to look at my sister objectively. It was an almost total failure. I could see that she was extremely attractive; slim, with big brown eyes, dark curly hair and a smile—well, really it was a

grin—that was so whole-hearted it seemed to light up her face from within; but, *au fond* for me she was still 'Weg' and all that implied. She had a way of looking at me which is all but impossible to describe—as though she expected me to do or say something absolutely extraordinary—and this, depending on your point of view, brought out the best or the worst in me.

At meals over which my father usually presided, very grave, sober and preoccupied, with Mary and Val playing Dog Toby to his Sir Oracle, I would occasionally feel moved to make some mildly facetious observation just to lighten the atmosphere a little. Over the top of *The Times* my father's eyebrows would lift and twitch interrogatively; Mary and Val would exchange glances; and Weg, bless her heart, would emit a sort of throttled squeak of protest. I knew I had her then. In a moment my fantasy would become air-borne. I would watch her eyes grow rounder and rounder until—if I were really on form—she would finally dissolve into hysterical giggles and choke on her pudding. She was my ideal audience and, try as I might, I just could not envisage her as Mrs Geoffrey Phillips.

Surprisingly enough my father could. Early in June he is recording in his Journal: 'Geoff has asked my approval if Weg and he fall in love: which I have duly given. Indeed I know of no young man whom I would sooner Weg should marry.' At this time, in my father's zodiac, Geoff's star was riding high. And with good reason. He was the key figure in the new enterprise which, without Geoff's zest and enthusiasm, would certainly never have got off the ground. For my own part I liked him and admired his practical expertise. Furthermore he was the only person I had met at Langham who took an intelligent interest in my labours on model aircraft. I suppose it is possible that he might have seen this as a means of ingratiating himself with a future brother-in-law, but I don't think so. He was fascinated by craftsmanship and had recently designed and constructed with his own hands a really beautiful harpsichord. This, I gathered, had originally been intended as a gift for Irene, the girl who had since transferred her affections to Frank. The instrument had been reclaimed by Geoff and

was now to be his engagement present to Weg. When I heard this I told Weg that I thought she should stick out for one of her own, but she seemed quite content to accept whatever was going.

I spent most of the first week of that holiday fishing. As a companion I had Derek Thorpe, the son of the local butcher who lived a few doors away. He was a year older than I was and desperately anxious to join the R.A.F. as an air-gunner. There was a huge aerodrome near Langham and sometimes in the evening Derek and I would cycle off to watch the Wellington bombers warming up for their nightly raids over Germany. I recalled 'Paddy', the Irish Sergeant Pilot who, for a short time had rented a couple of rooms at The Old Rectory saying: 'Birds and fools fly by day: bats and bloody idiots by night!' I told Derek this but he only laughed. 'I'll win the V.C. like that Sergeant Hannah and everyone'll stand me free drinks for the rest of my life.' Put that way it did seem a perfectly reasonable ambition.

Just as I was really beginning to enjoy my holiday of fishing, sketching and aero-modelling, my father suddenly decided that I was wasting my time. He informed me that he had made arrangements for me to work with Maurice under Geoff's orders. I took a rather dim view of this, largely because I felt I was being forced into a pattern which was not of my own choosing. The fact that I liked both Maurice and Geoff only made things more difficult.

On the whole the jobs were interesting in themselves—chiefly plumbing, roofing and bricklaying. We also learnt how to horse plough. I say 'we' advisedly. One morning Geoff informed Maurice and me that we were to plough up a meadow. 'There's nothing to it,' he said airily. 'I'll show you how and then you can get on with it.' Maurice gave me a sidelong glance and a faint grin and we marched off in Geoff's wake to harness up the horse.

As a child I had often trudged along behind the plough with Mr Lumley, the old farmer whose barns had formed part of the outbuildings of The Old Rectory, and so I had some idea

of what was entailed. Maurice, whose home was in the Potteries, had, I am sure, no such background. But he did have a wry sense of humour. 'Memories are made of this,' he murmured as the horse lifted its tail just as Geoff was about to slip on the crupper and blew a long and resounding fart right under his nose.

Geoff was not the ideal teacher. He was always in so much of a tearing hurry. Having shackled up the traces to the plough he whacked in a couple of wooden pegs at either end of the field, told us these were our 'headland markers', then shook up the horse and was off. Maurice and I stumbled along on either side of him. 'You aim straight for your peg,' Geoff cried. 'Your first two furrows are the important ones. You take your others from them. Whoa there, old gal! Giddup! Whoa back!' In next to no time we were back again at the other end of the field and two shining furrows were seaming the meadow. 'O.K.,' said Geoff. 'You've got the idea now. Off you go!'

I looked at Maurice and Maurice looked at me. The horse shook its head and snorted derisively. Maurice's eye seemed to say: 'It's a far, far better thing I do . . .' and he gathered up the reins. 'Giddap, you lazy brute!' yelled Geoff cheerfully, smacked the horse across its flank, and Maurice was launched.

Fortunately for us the animal knew what was expected of it. Geoff stood and watched until Maurice had cut his first furrow and then he disappeared. By then Maurice was at the far end of the field, preparing to negotiate his first turn. It seemed to me that his cries of 'Whoa!' and 'Giddap!' had a note of pleading about them quite absent from Geoff's. I saw the horse turn its head and look back at him. There followed a pause then I saw Maurice walk up to the animal's head, grab hold of its bridle and walk backwards, leading it. Having, presumably, shown it what was required of it, he went back to the shafts.

In retrospect I find it quite remarkable, but the fact is that, between us, we did manage to plough that field. Each of our furrows had a way of exaggerating the imperfections of its neighbour so we devised a method whereby, every so often, we

ploughed a special 'adjuster', having carefully marked out with twigs beforehand just how much to slice off and where to slice it. Providing you didn't look too closely the finished effect was really not too bad. So maybe, after all, there was more sense in Geoff's method than I gave him credit for.

If only I had not felt that I was being *forced* to work on the farm I should probably have enjoyed it more than I did. I had a sneaking suspicion that I was being softened up for the life at Lodge Farm. 'The boys'—a term which embraced all the young c.o's of the Farm Group—were frequently held up before me as models of excellence who were 'sweating the intellectual out of themselves'. Since no one in their right mind could have accused me of having anything of the intellectual in me in the first place, this might have been interpreted as giving me a slight edge over them, but I knew it was not so. Once again I was being weighed in the balance and found wanting.

I have sometimes wondered what my father's reaction would have been if I had gone to him and told him that I desired nothing better than to be a pacifist, to live in a community and to work on the land. Not that I could have done it. In my dumb, tortured way I loved him dearly, but that was as far as it went. Unfortunately, as others besides myself discovered to their cost, he could not conceive himself as being in any sense separate from the ideas which he was currently 'proving upon his pulses'. *Cogito, ergo sum* must have been written right across his heart.

The effect his moral pressure had upon me is well described in my father's Journal entry for August 12th, 1942. 'Col's "resistance" is a queer thing. He makes—or seems to make—a point of being a few minutes late in going to work at the Cottage. He sits on at breakfast, doing nothing, knowing that I am expecting him to get going, but (apparently) determined not to go without my telling him. I suppose I ought to understand the causes of this; but I don't.' A moment later, in a beautiful piece of unconscious irony, he is recording how Elizabeth Welch Mackenzie—the weird little Scots visionary who had visited Larling and was now at Langham—has been

'instructed' to tell him to read the verse John 17 from the Bible. He does so, twice, and then quotes it without comment: 'Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify Thee . . .'

How could I *possibly* not love such a man?

3 ALTHOUGH my father's decision to buy a farm and run it as a community enterprise was taken more or less on the spur of the moment, the idea had been hovering at the back of his mind for more than ten years. In *Community Farm* his own fascinating, and, at times, extremely funny account of the venture, he traces the root back to his first reading of Marx's *Das Kapital*. 'I finally came to the conclusion,' he says, 'that Marx was right in holding that capitalism was doomed to perish by the competition which gave it its own demonic energy; but it was not at all clear to me by what, in a democracy which remained a democracy, it could be replaced.' His search for a satisfactory answer to this question was to become the dominant theme of much of his writing throughout the 30's, during which: 'I gradually came to the idea that a new and adequate social incentive in a democracy in which capitalism can no longer work could best be provided through the development of producer co-operatives, on not too large a scale. The members must be able to understand what they are doing and why they are doing it. They must be partners in an enterprise which they can effectively comprehend and in whose total working they can take an intelligent and inspiring interest. What is required is a responsible fellowship of workers, such that their working lives may be an integral part of that education into responsible democracy which is the clamant need of today . . .'

And why a farm particularly?

'I wanted it to be a farm because of my deep feeling that in the last resort the whole of civilization depends on primary production from the land. It is as simple as that with me. I have always had a sympathy with the King of Brobdingnag's opinion that "whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before would deserve better of mankind than the whole race of politicians put together". Just as Anton Chekov felt that he could not go wrong if he planted trees, so I have felt for many years that, in a world in which values have become confused and misty, the man who set himself to restore the fertility and increase the productiveness of a farm was aiming at a *certain* good. He might fail in his effort, of course, but what he was after was incontrovertibly good. It is not so easy, in this complicated modern world, to find immediate ends which have this quality.'

Since he had already decided in his own mind that East Anglia was the place for him, my father's choice of a particular farm was determined largely by the amount of capital available. That he was prepared to sink everything he had into the enterprise and not just sit back in relative comfort and 'urge the necessity' in print of experiments in co-operative living is, I think, greatly to his credit. He paid £3,325 for Lodge Farm, Thelnetham, Near Diss, a substantial amount of which he had to borrow. One hundred and eighty-three acres in extent and badly run down, Lodge Farm was rated 'C minus' by the Ministry of Agriculture. Remembering what it looked like in 1942, I am moved to wonder what could possibly have earned a Min. of Ag. 'D' rating.

I had had my first glimpse of the place at the end of April when Geoff, Maurice and I had deposited the bees there, but it was not until the beginning of September that I got a really good look at it. We drove over from Langham one Sunday taking a picnic lunch with us. It was a lovely day and we approached the farm by a route which gave us a view across the shallow valley which ran roughly from south to north at the rear of the house. A quarter of a mile away, half hidden in

clustering trees, I spied the square tower of the village church. In the water meadows beside the stream a herd of brown and white cows was grazing. Suddenly, unexpectedly, my imagination had discovered something 'to be intense upon'. At that moment I was able to conceive of myself as actually living in this place.

After lunch Mary showed me the room which was to be mine. It was right at the top of the house, approached from the first floor corridor by means of a steep and twisting little staircase which led into a large attic. From this attic a small door gave access to a tiny garret beneath the thatched gable. A leaded casement window looked out over the orchard and across the valley to the hill down which we had driven. Mary asked me what I thought of it.

'It's *perfect*,' I said. 'Absolutely perfect.'

'We thought you could have your desk there under the window. There should be just room to fit your bed in beside it.'

I nodded happily. I simply could not have imagined a room I would have liked better. With its cobwebby beams, diamond window panes and sloping ceiling it might have been designed by Emett himself.

'We'll have it all ready for you when you get back at Christmas,' she said. 'I'm so glad you like it.'

'Like it?' I echoed. 'Honestly I think it's the nicest room I've ever seen.'

As I recall her expression, I realize that my warm approval must have given her almost as much pleasure as the room itself had given me.

I was taken on a quick tour of the rest of the house which seemed much larger than I had expected it would be. Half the rooms did not appear to have been lived in for years, and dead flies were lying in drifts along many of the upstairs window-sills. Foorboards creaked underfoot and our footsteps echoed hollow along the dim passageways. But for all that there was something decidedly intriguing about the place. Like a dozing cat it seemed to have one eye half open, lazily sizing us up, wondering. . . .

Outside we wandered up into Moat Meadow—so named from the still-evident traces of the moated manor which had once stood there—and picked blackberries from the towering bramble clumps which had established ancient squatters' rights over the place. I began to have some idea of how much work would be entailed in getting this farm back to rights. Everywhere you looked there were signs of years of neglect—gates falling apart, sheds leaning at crazy angles, nettles rampaging, and hedgerows which, as Wordsworth would have it, were indeed—

'hardly hedge rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild.'

Strangely enough I did not doubt for a moment that it *would* be done. I was quite sure that one day these knock-kneed gates and fences would stand straight and trim; the outbuildings be repaired; the broad fields ripple with golden corn. But try as I might I could not see myself playing a part in it.

Later, standing beside my father and looking out with him across the meadows towards the stream, I listened while he explained the principle behind ley-farming and, for a brief moment, I really did experience a twinge of vicarious excitement. 'It will be an adventure, old boy,' he said. 'A real adventure. Don't you agree?'

'Yes,' I said. 'And an awful lot of hard work too, I should imagine.'

'Oh, we'll manage it all right. Given time. I feel it in my bones.'

I could not be sure whether I was being included in that 'we'. Nor, at that moment, did I feel inclined to tempt Fate by asking him.

The move from Langham to Thelnetham took place at the beginning of October. I was back at school by then and had no part in it, but I received a long letter from Val and a short one from my father telling me about it. Three members of the Group—Maurice, Irene and the cowman, Vernon Baker—formed the advance party, together with Val, Mary

and my father who had taken a fortnight's holiday from his editorial duties on *Peace News*. There was also a morose young tractor-driver, Jack Elliot, who had been taken on specifically to cope with the autumn ploughing.

On the whole things seem to have gone remarkably well. Maurice proved an all-round tower of strength; Mary discovered she had a real talent for cooking; everybody—with the possible exception of the cowman who was by way of being religious—worked with a will. Improvisation was the order of the day; the atmosphere in the farmhouse was friendly and relaxed; and, at the end of that fortnight, the auguries for the future seemed bright indeed. My father returned to his job in London full of confidence for the success of the venture.

During his absence the other members of the Group who had been superintending the move from the Langham end concluded the packing and came to Thelnetham. Frank Lea who had decided to return to school teaching was not among them. Having lived and worked together for the past two years, the Group knew each other a great deal better than they knew either my father or Mary. Furthermore there was a difference in age of some twenty-five years between them and 'the Big Three' as my father, Mary and Val were to become known. In their own way the Group *had* been living 'community' and 'proving it upon their pulses' since the beginning of the war, whereas, to date, my father had only paddled in the shallow end and talked and written about it. It does not surprise me (though it certainly surprised him) that when he returned he found a marked change in the atmosphere. In *Community Farm* he described it thus: 'Mary and I had the feeling that we were now *de trop*. Manners were never a strong point with these pioneers of community. But when Mary entered the kitchen with a welcome for the two women who had come with the group, even her gaiety was a little dashed by their curious behaviour. They sat by the kitchen fire and continued their conversation: they barely even looked up. Shyness? Gaucherie? Hostility? I felt that we were embarked on a venture indeed.'

He was right.

4 If I had been entertaining any hopes that during the Christmas holidays I would be allowed to retire to my garret and write poetry I was soon disabused. On my first evening home I slipped into Val's room after supper, helped myself to one of her Cypriot cigarettes and asked her if she knew whether I was being expected to spend my vacation working on the farm.

'Do you mind?' she enquired.

'Christ!' I said leadenly. 'What do *you* think?'

'But I thought you'd enjoyed it in the summer.'

'It's not *that*,' I said. 'It's being *expected* to. I don't want to be a farmer. I never have.'

'What *do* you want to be?'

'I don't know, Val. But I *do* know that I'll be called up in eighteen months. Till then I'd just like to be left alone. Does that seem too much to ask?'

'Why don't you talk to Dadda about it?'

'I *can't*,' I said. 'Besides it wouldn't be any use. I know what he *wants* me to do. If I tell him I don't want to do it I'll be letting the side down again.' A thought struck me. 'Lord! He doesn't want me to start *tomorrow*, does he?'

She smiled. 'Oh, I'm sure it'll wait till Monday.'

As it happened she was wrong. At breakfast the very next morning Geoff announced that the threshing machine was due to arrive within the hour. Jobs were allocated. I stuck my nose into my bowl of porridge and tried to look as if I wasn't there. My father beamed blandly down the table. 'Col will lend you a hand, won't you, old boy?'

I nodded. It was as simple as that.

Either by intent or misfortune I got landed with the 'chaff-hole'. There was a cold east wind blowing and the clover we were threshing was of wretched quality, full of dust and thistles. By that evening my eyeballs looked like a pair of pink marshmallows and my fingers felt like pincushions. I also calculated that I must have sneezed at least a hundred times. I consoled myself with the reflection that there could hardly be any worse jobs. Next day I found myself on ditch-digging.

One result of my enforced labours was that any vaguely romantic notions I might possibly have cherished about the happy, carefree life of a farmer's lad were destroyed for ever. Another was that the Group came to accept me in a way that they never really accepted my father. Standing up to your ankles in clayey sludge at the bottom of a ditch while icy rain lashes down at you from the back of the east wind and your fingers set rigid round the shaft of a spade that gets progressively heavier as the day wears on, has a way of bringing you face to face with the grim realities of agricultural labour in a very short time. During that Christmas holiday I became a leading authority upon Suffolk mud. I could have written a Sherlock Holmes-type monograph upon its weight, its colour, its texture and its truly remarkable viscosity. At the end of a day's ditching, trudging back from some outlying field with a cowl of sacking over my head I must have looked a pretty archetypal 'Hodge the Labourer'. I certainly felt it.

In my experience there is nothing the least bit intrinsically ennobling about sheer, slogging physical labour. It exhausts the body and blunts the sensibilities, and that's all there is to it. Theoretically, no doubt, I should have been inspired by the realization that I was serving a worthwhile—even exalted—social purpose. I was not. The concept of 'community' as a desirable end in itself was never made real to my imagination. The result was that I took no more pride in shaping up my gluey embankments than a worker on a Ford production line takes a pride in the nuts and bolts he is required to tighten. In both cases our labour was a means to an end: his a weekly pay packet; mine the beginning of term. Having since read the 'Charter of Lodge Farm' with its stirring conclusion: 'It will have been proved that it is possible to solve the real problem of mass-unemployment in a human, natural and religious way, whereas all the other solutions—based as they are on full employment of machine factories—are inhuman, unnatural, irreligious, and lead straight to greater enslavement, still greater frustration, and still greater wars', I find my own situation in January 1943 exquisitely ironic. Each evening I

scratched out another day on the calendar before falling into bed like a pole-axed bullock. At meal times I took care to sit as far away from my father's end of the table as I possibly could. I hardly ever spoke to him. I simply wouldn't have known what to say.

One afternoon, as a break from the interminable digging, we set fire to the piles of trimmings we had slashed from the hedge. It made a welcome and pleasant change. We crouched over the crackling blaze, warming our frozen hands and watching the flames spurtle and leap as the smoke swirled up to be whisked away over the sodden fields. My companion of the day—a cheerful, sunny-faced man with glasses and a flaming corona of a ginger beard—asked me when I was taking my Higher School Certificate.

'July,' I said.

'Will you get it?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'And then what?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'But you won't be called up till next year, will you?'

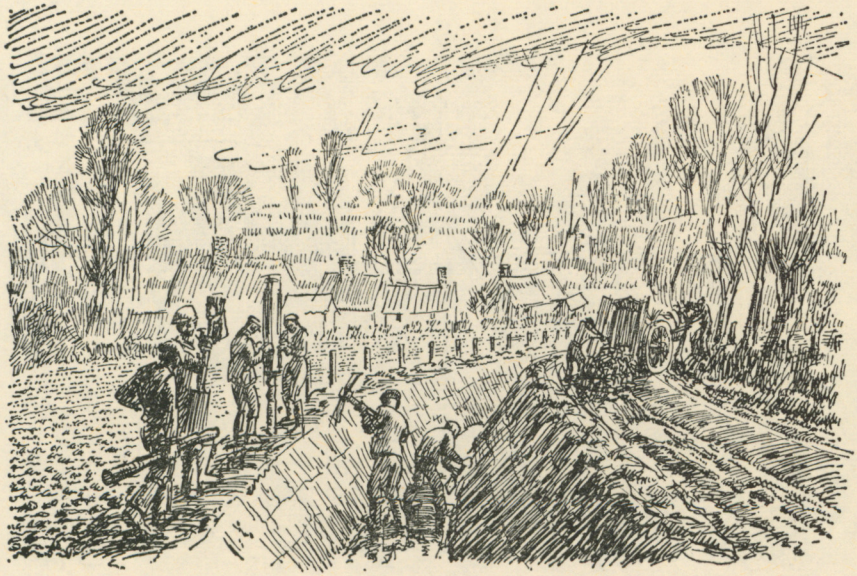
I stared at him. 'Christ,' I murmured. 'D'you know, I've never thought of that.'

He grinned. 'I shouldn't worry. There's bound to be enough ditches to see you through the year.'

That casual conversation had the effect of bringing me up short. Till then I *hadn't* thought about the future. As soon as I did I saw ahead the dismal prospect of a whole year of ditching, or worse. The only alternative I could think of was to stay on at Rendcomb for a further year. But once I had taken my Higher there would be no reason for me to do so. Could I somehow contrive to postpone my exam until the following year? It seemed unlikely but at least it was worth a try. There and then I resolved to tackle Lee-Browne on the subject at the earliest opportunity.

One of my problems at the farm was that I was neither fish nor fowl. Although I contrived to be on friendly terms with the Group and, on the whole, succeeded, I was not a member of it. Nor had I any conscientious objections to fighting as such. In

Val's Cottage

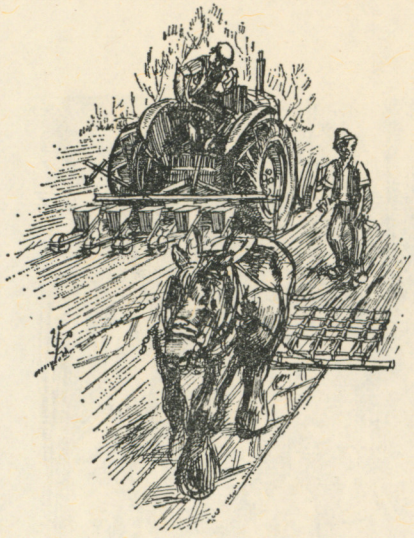


Ditching

FROM RICHARD'S *COMMUNITY FARM* SKETCHBOOK

Orchard Meadow

This little pig went to market



Tractor Yard

this latter respect I fell into the same category as my Uncle Richard—my father's younger brother—who had joined the forces the year before and had now found himself a snug billet as a Marine draughtsman working with the Naval Film Unit in Gosport. I had not yet formally announced my own intention of trying for the Fleet Air Arm. As always my motives were mixed. I knew my father would be hurt by my decision, just as I knew he would make no attempt to dissuade me. For him it would be yet another of those milestones of disappointment which had lined the dusty highway of our relationship for as long as I could remember. In the secret recesses of my heart I still nurtured the belief that one day I would do something to make him proud of me, but the way the signposts were pointing it was beginning to seem less and less likely.

Meanwhile, from my anomalous position on the fringe of the Group, I detected that things were not going as well as they ought to have been. The schism that my father had detected between himself and Mary on the one hand and the Group on the other really did exist. Basically I think it stemmed from the fact that, through no fault of their own, the Group was beholden to him and, deep down, they resented it. By and large this resentment focused itself more sharply upon Mary than upon my father. For all her considerable virtues there is no doubt in my mind that Mary, unlike Val, lacked the common touch. There was something ever so faintly school-mistressy about her attitude which put the other women's backs up. More than once I overheard her being referred to as 'Milady'—or worse. I found myself in the awkward position of sympathizing with both parties: with Mary because I could not but agree that uncouth table-manners and general boorishness made life much less pleasant than it might have been; and with the Group who resented being scolded for their misdemeanours like naughty children by one who, to their way of thinking, was where she was only by reason of her intimate relation with my father. In private one party would accuse the other of 'immaturity' and the other would counterclaim 'bossiness'. The truth is that both were right.

Had my father been a different sort of person he might conceivably have been able to weld everyone together and unite them with a sense of common purpose. Assuredly the Group was better informed as to the aims of the enterprise than I was, but not all that much better. My father had an unfortunate habit of assuming that other people knew what he was thinking. When it became obvious to him that they did not he was inclined to believe that the fault lay in them. Added to this was the fact that, as a judge of human character he was quite extraordinarily inept. He saw in people only what he wanted to see and when, eventually, it was borne in upon him that he had deluded himself he was hurt and disappointed. At such times he tended to swing so far the other way that he frequently ended up seeing black where in reality there was only grey. He himself put it rather differently: 'One of the real curses of being committed to a practical job, and caring deeply about its success, is that it forbids you to be contemplative and detached in your judgments of your colleagues. If they are not with you they are against you.' I can see his point very well, but it is not easy to reconcile this demand for old-fashioned personal loyalty with an earlier, somewhat tortuous observation that: 'Community (as I imagine it and have faith in it) is the translation into terms—of a group living and making its living—of that attitude of mind which Keats described as "making the mind a thoroughfare for all thoughts, not a select party".'

The point is, of course, that sooner or later the demands of 'Community' and 'the farm' were almost bound to come into conflict. When they did he was to discover that the farm was a good deal more important to him than the community.

The fact that he and Mary were in residence for only four days each week did nothing to narrow the gulf between them and the rest of the Group. Allied to this was the misfortune of my father's health. Bürger's disease and a nervous breakdown had left him in no condition to pull his weight physically on the farm, dearly though he would have liked to. As it was he made himself personally responsible for the kitchen garden and did a

magnificent job of it. Katherine Mansfield, watching him digging, had once remarked that he set about the task as if he were 'interring a loved one or exhuming a corpse'. There was truth as well as humour in her observation. He was methodical and conscientious to a degree. And with few and marked exceptions he was the only member of the community who was.

Anyone who has experience of any social unit larger than a family, be it a school, an industrial firm, a branch of the Services or even a commune will, I am sure, have encountered that extraordinary invisible demarcation line which divides public and private property. If a thing is 'yours' then, on the whole, you tend to look after it; if it is 'theirs'—whoever 'they' may be—you don't care. And the larger the unit the less you care. I will not pretend that I know why this should be, other than a widespread lack of imagination, but I have observed that the ratio of 'carers' to 'non-carers' seems to remain fairly constant at about one to ten.

It might be supposed that in a community such as the Farm in which everyone was personally committed to the ideal, an entirely different ratio would emerge. After all, everyone could say with some truth, 'this is ours'. Perhaps they did, but, if so, it was never in my hearing. Of all the men—my father excepted—only Maurice and John Price ('Little John' who had joined the Group just before the break-up of the Langham venture) appeared to care a damn about the farm equipment. More than once I came across expensive tools left lying about outside, forgotten and quietly rusting where they had been dropped. Geoff who, as Farm Manager, should have been setting an example, was a prime offender.

This apparent fecklessness troubled my father deeply and he delivered more than one homily on the subject to the assembled Group at the Sunday evening House meetings. It didn't seem to make much difference, and it occurs to me now that one of the reasons why he failed to inculcate in them a real sense of social responsibility was that, apart from himself and Mary and perhaps Val, not one of the members could have laid a hand on

their heart and said with conviction that they believed the community *was* 'theirs'.

My father's original plan, as he explains it in *Community Farm*, had been that when the community had 'proved itself' as a viable entity he would undertake to sell the whole enterprise to the members at cost—'cost' in this case being his own initial investment plus the accrued interest on any extra capital which he would have been called upon to sink in the venture. He thought it might take anything up to seven years before they achieved a sufficient margin of profit to allow them to begin acquiring it. As he himself remarks: 'It would have been a happier system if this arrangement could have been made quite explicit and formal: but, unfortunately, though the "community" was convinced of its own reality and permanence, I was not.'

Just how explicit he made it I am not sure. For most members of the Group the very idea of 'capital' was an anathema, and as for 'interest' one of them confessed to me with a shudder that it made him feel quite ill just to *think* about it. Furthermore, one of the main magnets which had drawn them into 'community' in the first place was the very human desire to be free of such irksome urban shackles. What most of them would have liked—and some, indeed, expected—was that my father should hand everything over to them, lock, stock and barrel, as a gift the which, by a mere vagary of fortune, he was in the happy position of being able to make. Naturally enough he did not see it in quite the same way. The deeds of the farm were in his own name and there they should remain until, in his considered opinion, the time had come to dispose of them—at cost plus.

As a first step along the road towards responsibility he set about reforming some of the slap-happy attitudes towards finance that the Group had brought with them from Langham. From now on every member was to receive, over and above his board and lodging, ten shillings a week as pocket money. No longer was Geoff to be Keeper of the Common Purse to whom you went if you wanted to buy a toothbrush or a packet of razor blades. As far as my father was concerned, if they chose

to pool their allowances into a common fund that was their affair. What he was anxious to do was to keep a track of the outgoings, if for no better reason than that sooner or later he would be called upon to account to the Department of the Inland Revenue. Some of the Group chose to regard his action as high-handed and an infringement of their hallowed right of self-government and there were dark mutterings in corners. For my own part I would have been only too delighted to draw ten shillings a week for delving in ditches but, since I was neither fish nor fowl, the question apparently never arose.

The night before I returned to school I lay awake in my garret and listened in fascination to the younger brother of the cowman making a fraternal confession of his sins as he lay in bed in the attic beyond. The cowman knew what he was about, probing and peeling with surgical finesse, for all the world as if he were stripping a shy and tender onion. They really seemed to be enjoying themselves. It was an aspect of community that so far had never occurred to me. It seemed rather a shame that only two could play.

5

I HAD been back at school for about three weeks when the Headmaster sent for me. I tried to think of any gross offence that might have been brought to his attention and, for once, drew a complete blank. This did not make me feel any the less apprehensive as I knocked on his study door.

He was seated at his desk signing letters. He glanced up, gave me a cool nod of acknowledgement, then inscribed his name twice more with a flamboyant flourish. Finally he laid down his pen and said: 'Well, why do you think you're here, John?'

'I've no idea, sir.'

He put his hands together, palms flat, rested his chin against

his bent thumbs and stared thoughtfully at me. He sighed, quite audibly. 'I've decided to make you a prefect.'

'Oh,' I said. I was, indeed, astounded, but not wishing to seem unconscious of the honour he was according me I added lamely: 'Thank you very much, sir.'

'I'm backing a hunch that you won't let me down.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I've never demoted a prefect yet and I don't want to start with you.'

'No, sir.'

He grinned and held out his hand. 'I'm sure you'll make a very good prefect, John.'

'Thank you, sir.'

We shook hands and I turned towards the door. As I did so it suddenly occurred to me that I might as well ask him now whether or not I could postpone taking my Higher. I turned back. 'Sir,' I said, 'there's something I've been meaning to ask you. . . .'

On the face of it my request appeared simple enough, but I should have known better. With Lee-Browne it was the nine-tenths of the iceberg below the surface which was of surpassing interest. He set himself to find out precisely what the hidden reasons were for my making such a bizarre request.

I told him, quite frankly, that so long as I was at school I would be able to go on doing the things I liked doing most, whereas working on the farm I would not. He could not accept it. He settled me in an arm chair, sat himself down opposite me, filled his pipe, lit it, puffed a veritable vesuvius of fragrant blue smoke into the air, and then, having as it were tucked a mental napkin under his chin, settled down to the subject of me like a gourmet confronted with a dozen Whitstable natives.

In its eerie way it was quite fascinating; the only trouble was that, try as I might, I simply could not recognize myself. Nevertheless, I kept my sights firmly fixed on my principal objective and let him make whatever he wished of my hidden psychological motives. By the time the last empty shell had

been ranged tidily on the side of his plate I gathered that I had got what I wanted. He undertook to write to my father and suggest that I sat my Higher School Certificate in July 1944.

Before I rose to leave I asked him if he could contrive to put it in such a way that my father would not have to be told of my true feelings about working on the farm. 'I promise I won't mention it,' he said easily. It was then that it dawned on me that, so far as he was concerned, my 'reasons' were not my *real* reasons at all. I did not know whether he was right and, frankly, at that moment I did not much care.

I never did discover precisely what my Headmaster's conclusions about me amounted to, and the fact that I did not make it my business to find out goes a good way towards persuading me that his analysis came closer to the truth than I cared to admit. What I sought above all else was emotional security, or, to use the old-fashioned four-letter word, 'love'. But the kind of love I hungered for was the rarest and purest, which, as Blake knew—

> *. . . seeketh not itself to please,*
> *Nor for itself hath any care,*
> *But for another gives its ease,*
> *And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.*

Now whatever else my father had to offer me I knew it was not that. If he loved me (and I am convinced that he did) then it was in spite of what I was and not because of it. He made me painfully conscious of my deficiencies, not so much by anything he actually said as by what he didn't say. I sensed the groan in his soul rather than heard it, and probably, in my hypersensitive way, I sometimes heard it when it wasn't there at all.

Lee-Browne was as good as his word. Half way through the term I received a letter from my father saying he had gathered that I wished to postpone taking my Higher until the following year and that it was quite all right with him. When he added a paragraph to the effect that he was counting on me to lend a hand with the sugar-beet harvest I rather wished I hadn't made

quite such a point of concealing my true feelings about farm labouring.

I cast about for some way of delaying the inevitable and happened to mention my predicament to a friend, W. P. Thomas, who had the leading part in a play I was producing. 'Willy' Thomas was easily the best actor in the school and was later to make a professional name for himself in Stratford, Ontario. In those far-off days he was well and truly stage-struck and had, I knew, spent a previous holiday 'filling in' at the Unity Theatre. 'How much cash have you got?' he asked me.

'Not much,' I said. 'A couple of quid maybe.'

'That'll do. We'll have five between us if we hitch.'

'Hitch where, Willy?'

'Up to Town, boy. I've got an auntie in Clapham. She'll let us sleep on her floor. We should be able to stretch it to a week. I know a couple of blokes who'll wangle us some press tickets. And we'll eat at Lyons. You get free baked potatoes there, see?'

We saw ten plays in six days, most of them from the gallery. By the end of it I was suffering from incipient vertigo and was so dazed that I kept muddling up the plays in my mind. Willy on the other hand seemed to have no difficulty at all in recalling every detail of every single performance and spent much of the time doing so. We lived almost exclusively on a diet of coffee, baked potatoes and milk. Altogether it was a most weird and dreamlike interlude during which we were constantly being chatted up by army officers on leave. I was all for taking up their invitations, at least on an experimental basis, but Willy was made of sterner stuff. 'We'd miss the last house for sure,' he'd say, 'and we couldn't get anything back on these tickets.'

I went straight from Shaftesbury Avenue to a ten-acre field of sugar beet. Well, nominally it was a field, but so badly was it drained that for the most part it resembled an enormous muddy puddle. In some parts the water was lying so deep that the tops of the beet were all but submerged and you had to fish for them. Geoff, sanguine as ever, kitted me out in an outsize

pair of gumboots, tied a sack round my middle, showed me a sort of thin cleaver with a spike on one end and indicated what was required of me. He placed a foot on either side of a row of semi-submerged beet, struck downwards with the spike of the cleaver, speared a root and heaved. With a reluctant 'glug' the beet emerged, dripping with slimy mud. With his free hand he detached it from the spike, laid it across his knee and with a smart blow of the cleaver removed its crown of foliage. Then he flung the topped root about ten yards ahead of him into the water and spiked another. *Chunk! Heave! Glug! Crunch! Splash! : Chunk! Heave! Glug! Crunch! Splash!* He went at it like a machine. In five minutes he had reached his pile of topped roots and handed me the cleaver. 'Dead simple,' he grinned. 'You'll find it gets a hold of your back after a bit, but you'll soon get used to it. O.K.?'

I nodded and he strode off whistling like a bird. I struck downwards with my spiked cleaver and lugged my first reluctant victim to the surface.

From time to time other people came to join me. I doubt if they volunteered. It really was a terrible job. Mostly I was there on my own. For the first two or three days I was mainly conscious of how much my back ached but eventually, as Geoff had foretold, I got used to it. Then the weather changed. The clouds thickened until they resembled dirty dishcloths and a thin drizzle came creeping in from the north-east. I remember standing there in the middle of that morass and looking about me. It could have been the original slough of Despond. I doubt if I have ever seen a more dismal sight. I tilted back my head, stared up at the dripping sky, and howled like a dog. It was the only way in which I could adequately express my pent up feelings.

One afternoon, after I had been chopping away for about a week, my father decided to come and lend a hand. Considering that he found it really painful to walk for more than half a mile it was a brave decision. He chose a row about ten yards behind me and soon I heard his topped roots plopping methodically on to his pile. Then, after about half an hour,

there was an almighty splash. I swung round to behold him sitting thigh deep amid the gluey ooze. I sloshed my way back to him, helped him to his feet and he limped off disconsolately to change his breeches.

That night there was a sharp frost, and when I reached the field next morning, it was to discover the perfect imprint of my father's corduroyed backside frozen solid into the mud. You could have taken a plaster cast from it. It remained there for days and one by one the members of the Group made their solemn pilgrimage to the spot and stood, peering down in mingled awe and astonishment at this most remarkable sight.

By the middle of the second week I had had more than enough. Mud alone was just bearable, frozen mud was not. I began to get careless. My hands were often so cold that I was gripping the roots more by sight than by feel and to this day I am still not absolutely sure how 'accidental' my accident was. Probably about half and half. Anyway, I swung my trusty cleaver and its blade ended up half way through the top joint of my left thumb. At the instant of impact I hardly felt a thing but there was an impressive amount of blood.

That ended my field work. When I got back to the farm I sought out Val and she bandaged me up. While she was doing it I suddenly burst into tears. I simply couldn't prevent myself. It was, I suppose, a sort of counterpart to my howling up at the sky, triggered off by her natural and spontaneous sympathy. 'I'm not going back there,' I wailed. 'I swear to God I'm not!'

Since my wound would obviously have prevented this anyway my declaration of intent was wholly superfluous. But it did have the effect of making her speak to my father about me. That same evening he sought me out in my garret and asked me what the trouble was. It was a painful interview. I sensed his bewilderment but I just couldn't bring myself to enlighten him. Instead I told him that I intended to try for the Fleet Air Arm.

He was sitting beside me on the bed and the light from my oil-lamp cast a deep shadow across his lined face. He just lowered his head a fraction and stared glumly down at the

floor and then he nodded. I felt exactly as though I had hit him. 'I'm sorry,' I muttered. 'I really am.'

He smiled wanly. 'Oh, I don't blame you, old boy. It's myself I should be blaming—if, indeed, anyone's to blame. Do you want me to write to Lee-Browne and arrange for some extra coaching in maths or anything?'

I shook my head. There was a long painful silence, then he said: 'Maurice has been saying he could do with some help in the workshop. Would you prefer that? When your hand's better, I mean. It would be only four days a week. I think you should have Wednesdays and Saturdays off.'

I turned my head, looked at him, and drew a deep breath. 'I don't mind *what* it is,' I said, 'just so long as you don't send me back into that bloody awful swamp!'

He blinked at me and then his sad face creased up into a slow, vast grin. 'It really is terrible, isn't it? Like Passchendaele! *Worse* than Passchendaele!'

And suddenly the barrier between us was gone as though it had never been. I flung my arms round him and hugged him to me and we both laughed until the tears came.

Looking back on it I am inclined to believe that that interview marked an all-time low-water line in my strange nervous relation with my father. If he had been angry with me and had openly accused me of letting him down, I think I would in all likelihood have quit the farm and gone back to Larling, come what may. It was truly touch and go. And what fascinates me most is that what held me back was something so deep, so tidal, that it overwhelmed us both. It operated on a level far below conscious thought. At moments of crisis when we seemed in real danger of drifting apart for ever, it would sweep us back together again like two drowning swimmers. Again and again it happened. Just when we seemed to have reached the point of total despair, complete non-communication, the barrier between us was spirited away and the flow of life restored and re-affirmed.

My father was at least as baffled by it as I was myself. 'The awful thing,' he noted in his Journal, 'is that I feel so impotent

to help. I know that he is going through a horrible time but I can—it seems—do nothing. But perhaps I do something—quite invisible to myself—by just not getting angry. That's no particular virtue in me now, because I don't *feel* angry with him at all. I just want to help terribly, and am ashamed of my own impotence.'

The outcome was that for the rest of that holiday I divided my time between helping Val with *The Adelphi* (the quarterly magazine which my father still edited and for which she was doing the secretarial work) and assisting Maurice to plumb in two enormous sewage tanks which had been sunk in the meadow at the back of the farmhouse. The tension between my father and me slackened perceptibly; we had gained a respite and, for a while at least, all was well.

6 For my birthday present that year I chose a bicycle. The model I selected was a B.S.A. sports, with dropped handlebars. Being a war-time product it had none of the glittering finish one might otherwise have expected and was, in fact, sprayed a depressing funereal black all over. But it went like a bomb and once I was crouched low over those slinky handlebars I thought nothing of reeling off what now seem to me quite ridiculous mileages in an afternoon. My wheelborne thoughts ranged ever further afield and, early in June, I conceived the idea of inviting Weg to join me in a Youth Hostelling Tour of Wales for our summer holiday. I wrote to her painting the proposition in such alluring shades that she would have been crazy to turn it down. Having received her go-ahead I sat down with a road atlas and set about planning us a three weeks' tour. My draft schedule was so ambitious that we would probably have been hard pushed to complete it in a couple of months, but, luckily, a school

friend who also had a sister, pointed out that I seemed to be expecting rather a lot of mine and helped me to re-plan my tour on more modest lines. We even slotted in a few 'rest days' along the route as a concession to feminine frailty.

To prove to myself that I was in satisfactory physical shape (and to save myself the rail fare) I decided to cycle home at the end of term. As an aid to authenticity I loaded myself up with the gear—or its equivalent—that I planned to tote around Wales. I have no idea how much it weighed but it *seemed* like a hundredweight. By the time I had crawled into Oxford my legs felt more like a couple of warm wax candles than the real thing and I would probably have given up the idea then and there had I not discovered that my bulging saddlebag had been pressing down upon my rear brake and that for thirty-five miles I had been riding with it on. I made the necessary adjustment, remounted, and scorched off down the A40 feeling like Bellerophon astride Pegasus.

I arrived at the farm to discover that the community was in the throes of the first of its many crises. The married couple who, together with Geoff, had formed the hub of the original Group, had been given notice to quit and had, in fact, left by the time I got back. I was not surprised, but I was sorry I'd missed the chance to say goodbye to Margery who had always been very friendly towards me. Black haired, brown eyed, with a dark almost gipsy look about her, she had been a surrogate mother to the Group, ministering to their material needs and poulticing their bruised egos. My father seems to have seen her influence as wholly pernicious and, within his own terms of reference, he was probably right. What he wanted aboard his ship was a Stakhanovite crew wholly committed to a profitable voyage under his command, whereas Margery was committed chiefly to the Mate and the crew. Having, as it were, set her and her husband adrift in the longboat, my father found himself with a mutiny on his hands.

Vernon the Non-Conformist cowman was the first to voice open disaffection and to express the feelings which prevailed among some of the others. Trembling with indignation he

confronted my father and told him that the reason Margery had been given the order of the boot was that Mary disliked her and had determined to get rid of her. My father, equally indignant, denied that this was so. I'm sure he believed it, but my own private observations inclined me to suspect that there was at least a modicum of truth in Vernon's passionate accusation. I certainly knew that Margery did not like Mary very much and, since it is extremely difficult to like someone whom you know dislikes you, it would be crediting Mary with wholly remarkable qualities of saintliness if she had not in some degree reciprocated Margery's feelings. But to attack Mary was, in my father's eyes, a far more heinous crime than to attack him. He put it on record that as far as Vernon was concerned 'the root of the matter was not in him' and thus his ultimate fate was sealed. It was pretty much of a foregone conclusion anyway because he had proved to be no great shakes as a cowman.

Once Vernon had dragged things out into the open two other members of the Group decided they had had enough of such dictatorship and announced their intention to leave. My father sighed and agreed that it would probably be better if they did. He was somewhat surprised when Vernon elected to stay on even though, as he made abundantly plain, he had by now 'lost all hope of the place'. Reflecting on the upheaval some months later my father decided that: 'The Group as a whole suffers from a lack of vocation for agriculture. They have the tempo and mentality of young town dwellers still; and I doubt whether a majority of them will ever get out of it.' The days when he had seen the farm as 'nothing less than the Monte Casino of a new Christian civilization' were fast becoming a fading memory.

One of the gaps left by this exodus had already been filled by the time I arrived home. My father spoke of the new recruit in glowing terms. Bruce was conscientious, keen, and a splendid worker. He was also tall, young and good-looking. In next to no time his eye had alighted upon my sister. She put his professed devotion to the test by suggesting he might care to

overhaul her bicycle. The words were scarcely uttered before her machine was stripped to its frame and every nut, bolt and ball-bearing was being given the full lapidary treatment. From this I gathered, without being told, that Weg's interest in Geoff had already cooled from white hot to a warm, cosy glow.

No doubt it was purely coincidental but I now began to detect unmistakable signs of a similar cooling-off in my father's own attitude towards Geoff. The honeymoon period was coming to an end and the flaws which previously had been overlooked or discounted now began to loom as major blemishes. The most substantial was Geoff's reluctance to apply any real pressure to the other members of the Group. They needed constant supervision and he either could not or would not supply it. He worked like a demented beaver himself and would —and did—turn his hand to anything. But when it came to acting the Farm Foreman and cracking the whip he just couldn't bring himself to do it. The result was that though the constructional work on the farm buildings and the house proceeded apace the work in the fields did not. Cultivations lagged further and further behind and over-ambitious crop estimates had in some cases to be reduced by as much as half. My father totted up the balance sheets and felt understandably glum, but he consoled himself with the reflection that there were still six years left of the seven he had given the farm in which to prove itself.

One sunny morning early in August Weg and I tightened the straps on our panniers and prepared to set out on the first leg of our tour of Wales. Mary, Val and my father came to the front door of the farmhouse to see us off. They looked, I thought, a shade apprehensive. 'Now don't go and do anything stupid, old boy,' warned my father gravely. I assured him I wouldn't and, with a final wave, we were away.

Weg had left the planning of the holiday entirely to me—an act of blind faith which she had excused on the grounds that she was hard at work for her Higher School Certificate—and I had written off to all the Youth Hostels along our route booking us places in advance. Our first stop was to be Houghton Mill on

the banks of the River Ouse just outside Huntingdon. To reach it we had to cycle across the Fens, a distance of some fifty miles according to calculations based on the tricky manipulation of a length of cotton and various pins. What I had not taken into account was the possibility of a head wind. By the time we reached Mildenhall, the breeze which up to then had been merely cool and friendly began to gather strength. It came surging in at us across those limitless, treeless wastes, hissing through the reed beds and honing drearily along the telephone wires. In an odd way it seemed positively to resent us.

After struggling against it for about half an hour Weg called a halt. '*How* far did you say it was?' she panted.

I took out the map and tried to pin-point our position. In that flat and featureless landscape it was not easy, especially since the sign-posts which had been removed at the beginning of the war had still not been replaced. 'I *think* we're about here,' I said. 'We should be crossing a railway line soon.'

'Well, how far is it after that?' she persisted.

I estimated that we were barely half way to Huntingdon but I hadn't the heart to tell her so. 'Oh, about ten miles—fifteen at the most.'

She gave me a thoughtful, appraising look but did not say anything. I stowed the map away and we climbed back on to our saddles.

Those twenty-five miles were the longest I have ever cycled in my life. To this day I still don't know how many hours it took us, but I have a shrewd suspicion that if the wind had not finally relented we would probably still be there with a little roadside cairn marking the spot. When we did finally roll up to the appropriately named 'Doomsday Mill' the sun was low on the western horizon and we were so exhausted we could hardly get off our bikes. Somehow Weg summoned up the energy to cook us a powdered-egg omelette and then we crawled into our sleeping bags and, within a matter of seconds, were both dead to the world.

I don't remember much about the second day except that we were both so stiff and achy that it was an act of the purest

heroism just to get on to our machines let alone push the pedals. We stuck it out somehow and by the third day we found we were actually beginning to enjoy it. We spent that night at Warwick and set off early the next morning aiming to make Kidderminster by lunch time.

The weather was superb, one of those August days when simply to be out of doors is to be half way to heaven. The sky was silver-blue deepening to ultramarine at the zenith and as we pushed our laden bikes up the steep hill beyond Henley-in-Arden invisible skylarks poured liquid songs down upon our heads as if from silver jugs. We stood together at the summit and gazed out towards Worcester hidden in the hazy distance. 'We'll make Kidderminster easily by twelve,' I said. 'It's downhill most of the way from here.'

Weg climbed on to her bike and pushed off, gathering speed by the yard, and I followed close behind her. She flicked in and out of the pools of shadow cast by the roadside trees and the wind lifted her hair and fanned it out over her shoulders like a ripple of dark flame. As I hurtled down after her I glimpsed, half-buried among the bushes, a warning sign. 'Hey! Watch out!' I yelled. 'Steep hill!'

And it *was* steep; a drop of over five hundred feet in something less than half a mile. At the bottom the road swung sharply to the left and, just as it did so, another smaller road joined it from the right. Such was the angle of our approach that it was not immediately apparent that this smaller road was not the main route. Weg, flying down the hill, was caught in two minds. She made as if to go right, then checked and swung sharply to the left.

As it always seems to at such moments everything appeared to happen very, very slowly. I saw her rear wheel drift away from under her; a cloud of silver-white dust floated lazily upwards: and then she was scurfing along in the grit with her bike piled on top of her.

It took me perhaps twenty seconds to pull up and get to her. She was not moving at all. I dragged her bike aside and turned her over on to her back.

For a moment I really thought she might be dead. Her face was the colour of raw dough except around her left eye where there was a mess of blood and grit. I caught hold of her hands and started shaking her wildly. At that she opened her eyes and looked up at me. I saw then that the blood was all coming from a deep gash above her eyebrow and that the eye itself was undamaged. There was a farmhouse a few hundred yards away. 'I'll get help,' I said.

She caught hold of my arm. 'It's all right. I'll be all right. Don't you worry.'

I helped her to sit up. Her arm and leg looked as though a tiger had been stropping its claws on them and each gash was inlaid with grit. She put her arm round my shoulders, struggled to her feet, and hobbled beside me up to the farmhouse. 'It was that wretched back-pedal brake,' she muttered. 'I've always hated it.'

The farmer's wife took one look at Weg, sat her down in the kitchen and phoned for an ambulance. I gathered that my sister was by no means the first victim of that hill. Then she fetched a basin of warm water and a cloth and began cleaning Weg up. I went back up the road and collected the bikes. When the ambulance arrived and Weg had been safely installed I lifted the machines inside, said goodbye to the kind-hearted woman, and we were driven at high speed to the nearby hospital in the little town of Redditch. Weg was whisked off on a stretcher and I hung about dismally waiting for the verdict. This, when it came, was that though she would have to remain in hospital for at least three days there was no really serious damage. I felt suddenly weak at the knees with relief.

There was no Youth Hostel nearer than Birmingham but a sympathetic policeman to whom I had given my account of the accident helped me to find temporary lodgings with a family in the town. That evening I phoned home and broke the news to my father. 'It wasn't anyone's fault,' I said. 'It was just an accident. It could have happened to anyone.'

This observation was greeted with one of those thoughtful

silences of his which said so much more than mere words. 'When will she be fit to travel?' he asked finally.

'In a couple of days they said.'

'You'll let us know what train you'll be coming on.'

'Oh, but I'm going on,' I said. 'I've talked it over with Weg. We booked ahead, you see. It would be a shame to waste it. She'll be quite all right on her own as long as you meet her at the other end.'

'Are you quite sure of that, old boy?'

'Quite sure,' I said.

And so it was that one morning, three days later, I accompanied Weg into Birmingham and put her and her bike on board the train for home. Apart from a technicoloured bruise above her left eye she didn't look too bad. By the time I had settled for my lodgings and paid for her ticket I had only a few shillings left. I told her to be sure and send some more on to me at Corris in Wales, the hostel which was to have been the turn-around point in our ill-fated tour. She promised she would. I kissed her goodbye and waved as the train drew out. She grinned cheerfully back at me, called out: 'Good luck!' and that was that.

By two o'clock I was on my way again. I was now well behind schedule and had some eighty odd miles to make up. When at ten that night I doggedly zig-zagged my way up the flank of Long Mountain above Welshpool I had made up the deficit and felt absurdly pleased with myself. As I was about to sign the register I noticed a letter for Weg tucked into the hostel notice board. I recognized the handwriting and the green ink as Bruce's. I took down the envelope, re-addressed it, and dropped it into the mail box.

Corris is in the heart of the slate-quarrying area of Mid-Wales. Its hey-day had been during the great Victorian building boom and when I visited it it was already far into its decline. To reach the Youth Hostel which was in an isolated house some three miles north of the village, you followed the track of a disused slate railway which wound beside—and often high above—a rowdy little torrent the colour of draught

Guinness. It rushed foaming and gurgling from its source high up on a tawny peak called Waen Oer to join the River Dovey at Machynlleth. Every now and again this stream leapt down in a small boisterous cataract above which the spray rose in faint misty clouds to condense in twinkling drops along the berried branches of the rowan trees. When the sun shone the steep little valley was a magically beautiful place, filled with flickering lights and sliding shadows, but the clouds had only to gather and thicken and the change was truly dramatic. Now the peaty torrent hissed and growled among the black slate slabs; the mountains seemed to press in threateningly on all sides; and more than once I seemed to detect a strange and sinister flapping as if of dark, invisible wings sailing through the mist in search of me. At such moments it was all I could do to prevent myself from bolting headlong down the track at the very real risk of a broken neck. I took good care to see that I never travelled that path after dark.

I spent over a week at Corris. It was no part of my plan to do so: I was simply flat broke. By the end of my third day I was down to one solitary halfpenny. One morning wandering disconsolately through the village I had the misfortune to pass by a bakery just as a fresh batch of bread was being taken out of the oven. It was as though an invisible arm had reached out, grabbed me, and dragged me into the shop. I laid my halfpenny on the counter and asked if I could buy a bun. The girl looked at me oddly. 'Buns is a penny,' she said in that lilting Welsh sing-song that can make even the most mundane statement sound as if it's hovering on the borders of poetry.

'I'm afraid that's all I've got,' I said, and my head was spinning like a catherine-wheel with that incredible scent of hot, crisp crust. 'Couldn't I have half a bun?'

'We don't sell any half buns.'

I gazed at her and I'm sure my eyes were watering at least as much as my mouth. 'Please,' I said. 'I'm so hungry.'

She stared back at me. She was at least two years younger than I was, raven haired and with April-sky eyes. Then she glanced swiftly round, seized two buns from the wooden tray on

the shelf behind her and thrust them at me. 'Quick!' she whispered. "Afore my Da sees.'

I'll swear that first bun was down inside me before the shop bell had finished jangling. Fortunately, in those days I was blessed with a digestion which would have challenged a Bedouin goat's.

Every morning I waited for the postman. He brought two further letters for Weg which I duly forwarded. On the back of the second one I scrawled 'S.O.S./L.S.D./R.S.V.P.' But nothing happened. Finally the warden's wife at the hostel took pity on me and offered me a regular evening meal. The first time she did so I tried to restrain myself but it was no good. In an eyeblink that plate had been licked so clean of mutton stew that she must have wondered whether she'd ever put any on it in the first place. By the next morning I was hungry all over again. I spent my days scrambling up and down the mountains but I was thinking about food all the time.

One day, towards the end of the week, I teamed up with two girls for an expedition to the summit of Cader Idris. The weather was lovely, my companions were funny and friendly, but I didn't really enjoy it as much as I might have done because all the way up I was wondering how I could tell them that, by an unfortunate oversight, I had neglected to bring any lunch with me. We stood in a row on the peak admiring the breathtaking views and then, as they unfastened their knapsacks they noticed that I was without one and insisted on sharing their lunch with me. Never have I tasted anything more delicious than those warm marmalade sandwiches! Afterwards, lying stretched out in the hot sun, I told them of my predicament and one of them said: 'Well, why don't you just 'phone home and reverse the charges? They can telegraph you some money to Corris.' So simple a solution and it had never occurred to me.

On the way back to the hostel I went into a 'phone kiosk, got through to the farm, and explained to my father what had happened. He seemed surprised. Weg, it appeared, hadn't mentioned anything about it. She had simply forgotten. Next

day I breezed into the Post Office at Corris and emerged clutching five one pound notes. Curiously enough, at that very same moment, I stopped feeling hungry.

7

THE SHAKE out in the community had left gaps which needed to be filled and during that summer and autumn a number of newcomers dropped anchor in Lodge Farm. One of these was a tall, baby-faced Scotsman with curly hair and spectacles whom I recalled having met when he had paid a brief visit to the farm in the spring. He now returned accompanied by a young wife and a baby daughter and they were installed in one of the outlying cottages. I took to Dugald at once. Certainly he was a very different character from the original members of the Group. A thing I found most attractive about him was his bubbling sense of fun. He had spent a number of years doing leg-work for the Socialist Party in Glasgow during which he had accumulated a fund of hilarious stories. Furthermore he had read a great deal and really seemed to have grasped what my father was driving at. I honestly think he was the only person I ever met at the farm who had. When Dugald spoke about the Farm I sensed that he was seeing it not as a means to an end but as an end in itself. Since no one else, not even Geoff, spoke of it like this it gradually dawned on me that Dugald had already committed himself to the enterprise in a way that none of the others was seemingly prepared to. Nevertheless, I could not help wondering how he would hit it off with Geoff.

Another newcomer was James. He too was quite unlike the original members of the Group but in a very different way from Dugald. Whereas the others did at least *look* like farmhands, James, even when he was working in the fields, somehow contrived to appear as if he had just stepped out of

Harrods Menswear (Agrarian) Dept. I once saw him strolling off to a muck-spreading session with a pitchfork draped artistically across his shoulder. He was clad in immaculate white shorts, white open-necked shirt, a loosely knotted silk scarf at his throat, knee-length hose and ox-blood brogues. On Sundays he usually wore a suit of superbly tailored heather-mixture tweeds.

Unlike the other members of the Group, James tended to gravitate naturally towards what had now come to be called, *sotto voce*, 'the First Class Accommodation' i.e. that section of the farmhouse occupied by my father, Mary and Val. James liked his creature comforts and soon he, Weg and I, had formed around Val a sort of sub-group of our own which we called 'The Club'—or, more accurately, taking our cue from one of James's astrakhan hats, 'ze Cloob'. In the evenings we used to gather in Val's room. There we drank Cona coffee, smoked Turkish cigarettes, and laughed at the idiosyncrasies of some of the other 'communiteers'. My father faintly disapproved of these goings on which, though harmless enough in themselves, could hardly have been said to constitute 'Community' as he had conceived it. As far as I was concerned 'The Club' was the one cosy oasis in what would otherwise have been a rather dreary desert.

At about the same time as James appeared another couple joined the Group. Their names were Dion and Erma. They were engaged on a different basis from the rest because they paid £1 a week towards their board and lodging. Erma helped in the house and Dion in the garden. They were both small and inclining to the rotund. Erma was a war-widow and Dion was—well, I'm not quite sure *what* Dion was. He claimed to be a professional market-gardener and had been taken on in that capacity by my father, but it soon emerged that Dion's acquaintance with the practicalities of market gardening was tenuous to a degree. My father having set him to double-trench part of the kitchen garden and even shown him how to do it, returned a few days later to find that Dion had all but vanished from sight at the bottom of a vast chasm he had

excavated. On the point of exploding with justifiable rage, my father was suddenly overcome with laughter at the ridiculous sight, and, once Dion had confessed abjectly that he really didn't know the first thing about practical gardening, they got along very well on a teacher/pupil basis.

It would have been almost impossible to dislike Dion anyway. As well as being one of the most impractical men I have ever met, he was unfailingly good-tempered and willing to accommodate himself to almost anything. He was both a natural crank and a Nature crank. You had only to mention some esoteric society and Dion was almost certain to be a life member. He was a Man of the Trees and a Leaping Leopard and a Sun Worshipper and a Compost Buff and God knows what else. And in one minor department at least he was supreme. From time to time play-readings were organized on Saturday evenings and here Dion's star shone gloriously. I have yet to hear Chekov's 'Sorin' or Wilde's 'Dr Chasuble' better rendered.

From my standpoint on the sidelines the advent of James and Dion appeared to mark a subtle change in direction so far as the community was concerned. For one thing it was quite obvious that neither of them was seriously contemplating making a career in farming. When the war ended, or perhaps even before, they would return to their previous occupations from which, viewed in autumnal retrospect, their time in the community would seem just an odd aberration. At the most they were in 'for the duration'. That my father was prepared to accept them on these terms suggests to me that already some of the pristine glow of his community ideal was beginning to dim. Not so his belief in the farm itself. Though there were times during the early years when he did think about packing it in the eventuality was only 'an intellectual possibility, not a real one'. Such thoughts never lodged in his heart.

That autumn there was a warm scent of ferment in the air. Vernon the cowman who, for some months past, had been paying hopeful court to Irene was formally rejected by her and vanished to reappear shortly afterwards with a brand new wife

whom he installed in the only available cottage. No longer would I be able to eavesdrop on the fraternal confession sessions in the attic adjoining mine. There were compensations however. Vernon's brother Chris, left to himself, promptly fell in love with a pretty young land-girl who had joined the Group while I was away. She occupied the room directly below my garret and the plumbing system which Geoff and Maurice had recently installed acted as a remarkably efficient speaking-tube from engine-room to bridge. I had only to lift the wooden cover of the empty galvanized storage tank to be regaled with the warm whispers of reciprocated passion. Having done this a number of times I found that the endless repetition of familiar endearments was beginning to pall. One evening, on a purely experimental basis, I quietly removed the wooden lid, climbed inside the tank, put my lips to the opening of the pipe and groaned: 'I love you too, darling. Oh God, how I love you.' But either they were too engrossed in each other to hear me or perhaps the system only worked one way. Anyway, nothing happened and, feeling a little ashamed of myself, I climbed out again and replaced the lid. When I returned to my room at Christmas the new pumping system had been installed, the tank was full of water, and Chris and Mabel were married.

Since I was no longer being expected to work full time on the farm it might reasonably have been supposed that I would settle down more easily to the regime. I am sure my father *did* expect it but, if anything, I felt even more of a fish out of water than before. Conscious all the time that I was not giving him the backing he wanted from me I found my thoughts were homing more and more often to Larling and my young step-sister and step-brother. The only person I could talk to about this was Val and even with her I was aware that what I was really doing was talking to myself out loud. The truth is that I did not know who I was or what I wanted. I was a classic compound of negatives.

At last, in a roundabout way, my troubles were brought to the notice of my father. Val spoke to Mary who mentioned it

to him. He sought me out and told me that he was prepared to arrange for me to pay a visit to Larling provided that I would give him my promise not to stay there. Whatever happened I must realize that I was 'on his side'. Having, as it were, made sure that the invisible leash was firmly attached to my collar, I was allowed to go.

I cycled over to The Old Rectory one crisp morning in January. As I turned in to the bottom of the long tree-lined drive the sheer natural beauty of the place exerted all its old spell. I got off my bike and walked slowly up the drive. Every tree, every bush was familiar to me. At the top of one towering beech, now bare of leaves, I could see a tattered remnant of rag, all that was left of a flag I had once tied there to mark my conquest of the summit. On the trunk of another I could trace my own initials linked with Weg's which, nine years before, I had carved into the bark with my first pocket knife, all but amputating a finger in the process. In the drifts of dead leaves a cock pheasant was scratching and strutting. A blackbird fled shrilling alarm. On the surface nothing appeared to have changed. Yet everything *had* changed. *I* had changed.

It was a strange, uncomfortable afternoon. Betty, who looked tired and ill, was consumed with curiosity about my father and Mary. It gnawed at her from within like some vicious corrosive. I dodged and parried and pleaded ignorance but after a couple of hours of her relentless cross-questioning I was quite worn out. Only when I went wandering off round the grounds with young Mary and David did the tension relax. Mary told me that a group of Polish Air Force officers often came over in the evenings. Some of them were all right but on the whole they were 'a soppy lot' always clicking their heels and kissing your hand. David informed me that he was going to drive a sugar-beet lorry when he grew up. I told them I would be joining up in the summer.

I returned to the house for tea and another session in the witness-box. What was the food like at the farm? Who washed my clothes? Did 'the Old Drunk' (Betty's pet soubriquet for Mary Gamble) do any housework? How did she get petrol

coupons for her car? What was that sly little bitch Weg up to? Why didn't I come and live at home? When the time came for me to leave I felt as though she had been hitting me over the head with a sandbag stuffed with ancient obsessions. If only she could have let things be. But she couldn't. Nor could I tell her to.

Mary came down the yard to see me off. In the gathering darkness I kissed her sad face. 'You will come again, won't you?' she whispered. 'Promise you will.'

'I promise,' I said.

As I bumped away down the flinty drive and turned out into the Harling road I was suddenly gripped with such a pain in my stomach that I had to get off my bike and crouch down beside the verge. The way back to the farm lay before me; I knew the route blindfold; but I knew too that from every other point of view I was utterly and hopelessly lost.

Looking back on it I am pretty sure that, in spite of everything, I had subconsciously been keeping Larling open as the ultimate option if all else failed. I was now forced to admit that I had been deluding myself. If I returned to live at The Old Rectory I knew that, within a week, I would be ground down into a grey, gritty pumice by Betty's implacable inquisitorial mill. She would never leave me alone. She *could* not. The force that drove her would not permit it. Her life was wholly given over to the single function of frustrating my father. It was her sole *raison d'être.*

My mood as I cycled back that night was one of black, leaden despair. I knew my father would want to know how the visit had gone but I just didn't want to talk about it. To use one of his own favourite phrases I simply wanted 'to crawl away and lick my own wounds in darkness'. But that was not possible. I went upstairs to his room, knocked on the door and told him I was back.

'Come in, old boy. How did it go?'

I shrugged. 'It was all right. She didn't lose her temper with me.'

'And Mary and David?'

'Yes. They were pleased to see me. Mary's quite tall now.'

'Did you see Bodge?'

'No.'

The conversation faltered to a stop.

'You're glad you went though?'

Was I? I just didn't know the answer to that one. Perhaps I would one day.

8

EARLY IN March I registered for the Fleet Air Arm. I would not be eighteen until May but I needed to apply for deferment until I had taken my exam in July. I travelled down to Bristol with Angus Primrose, a school-friend who was crazy about boats and was hoping to join the Navy. Together we presented ourselves for the 'Y' Scheme Selection Board. I spent an hour or so working my way through a series of psychological and aptitude tests; was given a medical examination; and finally ushered before the examining panel.

It consisted of five members. The Chairman was an R.N. Commander with a trim little grey beard and one of the most ferocious squints I have ever seen in my life. Half the time I couldn't be sure whether he was looking at me or at one of the other officers on the Board. He sniffed loudly, picked up a buff-coloured form from the table in front of him, glared at it and barked: 'Your name Middleton Murry?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

'Any relation to the conchie?'

'My father's a pacifist, sir.'

'The devil he is! What are you doing here then?'

I was beginning to wonder that myself, but I told him I hoped to become a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm.

'Do you, be damned! And what's he think about that?'

'I haven't asked his opinion, sir.'

'Does he know you're here?'

'Yes, sir.'

He twisted his head from side to side, scanning me with that incredible basilisk eye, then he grunted something to one of the others who stood up, walked over to the wall, and began cranking at a sort of windlass. A small, black plastic model of a Messerschmitt 109 emerged from a hole in the wall and began jerking its way along a wire suspended over their heads. 'Friend or foe?' yelped the Commander.

'Foe, sir. M.E. 109.'

A Dornier, a Wellington, a Hurricane and Heinkel followed in quick succession. I recognized them easily enough thanks to my aero-modelling activities. The Commander sniffed again. The other officer stopped cranking and resumed his seat. One of the others leant forward and said: 'I want you to imagine you're piloting a Barracuda. Right?'

I nodded.

'Time 0600 hours. Your air-speed 150 knots. Steady wind blowing east to west at 7 knots. Your base carrier 50 miles due south, steaming north east at 15 knots . . .'

But already I was quite lost. He prattled on, firing more and more information at me, and finally asked me what compass course I would fly and where and when I would expect to make contact. They were all gazing at me expectantly—even, I think, the Commander. I knew the moment of truth when I saw it. I was done for.

'Sir,' I said gravely, 'I can only hope that my navigator will know his business as well as I'll know mine.'

There was an awful numb silence and then, like a war-horse scenting the battle from afar, the Commander began to laugh: 'Hyok-hyok-hyok-hyok!' an extraordinarily Upper Class sound, almost impossible to convey phonetically. One by one the others joined in. I grinned weakly.

They then began asking me questions about my hockey. While this was going on a white-jacketed medical attendant came in and handed a folder to the officer at the end of the

panel. He glanced at it, whispered something to the one next to him and the file was passed to the Commander. He opened it, peered inside, swivelled his incredible eye around and then said to me: 'I'm sorry, laddie, but your eyesight's ten per cent below par. Bad luck.'

And that was that.

For the better part of half an hour I was bitterly disappointed, then I joined up with Angus and we went into a pub and each had a double whisky. By the time we got back to Rendcomb I was more or less reconciled to my fate. That it should have been my eyes and not my maths which had let me down, struck me as decidedly ironic, since, for the greater part of my childhood, my eyesight had been quite exceptionally acute. Possibly the fact that during the past two years I had been doing a lot of reading had something to do with it.

There was nothing systematic about my reading, but it was certainly varied. I was prepared to try anything. Robin Wilson's bookshelves were always at my disposal and the school library was well stocked. Furthermore, delaying my Higher for a year meant that I had to cope with a new English Literature syllabus. This I enjoyed, and to my repertoire of pastiche I had soon added various Victorians. Then, all by myself, I discovered Sidney Keyes. Browsing through a stack of books which had been sent in to my father for review in *The Adelphi* I came across a slim green volume of poems entitled *The Cruel Solstice*. Not knowing what a solstice was I opened the book at random and read—

> *The evening thickens. Figures like a frieze*
> *Cross the sea's face, their cold unlifted heads*
> *Disdainful of the wind that pulls their hair.*
> *The brown light lies along the harbour wall.*

It was pure magic. I felt my skin gather itself up into goosepimples. I flicked over a few pages and my eye was caught and held by the strange name *Glaucus*—

The various voices are his poem now.

Under the currents, under the shifting lights
Of midway water, rolls his fleshy wreck:
Its gurnard eye reflects those airy heights
Where once it noted white Arcturus set.

Gull swift and swerving, the wet spirit freed
Skims the huge breakers. Watching at the prow
Of any southbound vessel, sailor, heed
Never that petrel spirit, cruel as pride.

Let no cliff-haunting woman, no girl claim
Kinship with Glaucus, neither sow
The tide with daffodils, nor call his name
Into the wind, for he is glorified—
The cold Aegean voices speak his fame.

Once again the immediate effect these lines had upon me was curiously physical. '*Sow* the tide with daffodils' really made me shiver. The voice within them was one I recognized instinctively even though I had never heard it before. It touched some deep-seated nerve within me—the same perhaps which had always responded so swiftly to fairy tales and ancient legends—and filled my imagination to overflowing with brilliant visual images which seemed to shift and shimmer and would not go away. When I got around to reading the blurb on the dust jacket and learnt that Keyes was regarded as a 'war poet' I was astonished. To my way of thinking war poets belonged behind the barbed wire of 1916, and whatever else Sidney Keyes might be I was quite certain he wasn't another Wilfred Owen.

I took *The Cruel Solstice* back to school with me, showed it to Robin Wilson and got him to agree with me that Keyes had a genuine and remarkable talent. At the end of the spring term I started work on a sort of poetic fantasy/drama which, as usual, owed a lot to other writers—Keyes among them,

naturally—but perhaps rather less than any of my previous efforts.

During that Easter holiday—my last—I was allowed to follow my own devices. The formal reason given was that I was supposed to be working for my forthcoming exam. The truth of the matter is that my father had finally faced up to the fact that if he and I were to have any sort of tolerable relationship the psychological pressure he had been exerting on me to work on the farm must be abandoned. Besides, Maurice had left the Group just before Christmas and with him gone there was no longer any urgent call for my services as a 'brickie's mate'.

The effect this relaxation had upon me was surprising. I shut myself up in my attic and worked from morn till dewy eve, often indeed till late into the night. I must have produced at least a hundred drawings and paintings. And when I wasn't drawing or painting I was writing. Sketches, stories, fairy-tales, poems—the stuff simply poured out of me like water through a breached dyke. I was happier than I had been for years, and almost every story or poem I wrote was downright miserable. The ones which weren't miserable were wildly, improbably farcical. There was no middle ground. My creative pendulum swung dizzily back and forth from one extreme to the other. All that mattered to me was that I should somehow get it down on paper. Indeed it often seemed that the words were using *me* rather than the other way round.

After I had been hard at it for about a fortnight I received a letter from Frank Lea inviting me to bring my sketching equipment and spend a few days with him at the residential co-educational boarding school where he was teaching in Surrey. I hadn't seen Frank for more than a year and jumped at the chance. Oddly enough this excursion was to prompt one of my father's infrequent Journal entries about me. The 'Richard' referred to in it is, of course, my artist uncle. 'Richard came back with us on Wednesday night. Since I had carefully planned that Col should be here at the same time so that Richard would give him some criticism and help with his painting, I am disappointed that he has gone off to Frank

Lea's. Although Mary asked him specially to come back on Saturday, he has not done so; neither has he sent us word. I suspect some complicated psychological process at work to shield him from encountering Richard's criticism.' Then, in brackets, and in a different ink, he had added '(It appears to have been a young lady!)'

That the 'young lady' might also have been part of 'some complicated psychological process' does not appear to have crossed his mind. Nor did it cross mine. I would have been delighted to discuss my painting with my uncle but not at the cost of missing a chance to kiss a pretty girl. And while I am fairly certain that my father would have approved of my scale of priorities, I know for a fact that my uncle did. Years later I was to weave something of Rosamond into the web of a novel called *The Golden Valley* together, incidentally, with a three-quarter length pen-portrait of my father, a background of the countryside around Larling and a whole lot more besides, but that still lay far ahead in the un-dreamt of future.

By the time I got back to the farm, Richard had left. I was sorry to have missed him and wrote a letter of apology in which I explained as much as I could of the circumstances. His reply contained a postscript in the form of an hilarious cartoon in which an artist was shown flinging aside his brushes and palette and setting off at high speed in pursuit of his fleeing model. It summed up the situation to perfection.

I had promised young Mary that I would go and spend a weekend with her at Larling before I joined up, but I could not pretend that I was looking forward to it. Some months previously my father had initiated proceedings for a divorce but, in the myopic eyes of the Law, his case was far weaker than it deserved to be. When he discovered that Betty was preparing to use a series of passionate love letters, which he had written to her long ago, as evidence that he was 'a morally worthless person' he shuddered to the depths of his soul and decided that enough was enough. The news that he had abandoned the case reached Larling the day before I arrived. I am very glad it did. Betty was jubilant and, largely as a consequence, did not

subject me to the kind of relentless third-degree I had been expecting.

I spent the weekend playing with Mary and David and in painting up the canoe I had built five years before. Betty seemed delighted to have me around and did her best to persuade me to stay on. She knew that the children loved me and that I loved them and, in her own tormented fashion, I really believe that she too was fond of me. But I had no defences to set against that core of elemental darkness which dwelt within her and which was liable to explode in mindless frenzy and annihilate whoever happened to be standing in her path. And it really *was* elemental. Being with her was like living on the lip of a volcano. Even when she was on her very best behaviour it was impossible not to be aware of those subterranean stresses threatening chaos and destruction. I do not think she was in control of them at all: it was something which possessed her and used her for its own dreadful purposes. In the end it was her utter unpredictability which defeated me. I was never able to come to terms with it and I never found it anything less than wholly terrifying. Even though, on this particular occasion, nothing untoward occurred, when I left the house and returned to the farm I knew with absolute certainty that only in my memory would I ever live at The Old Rectory, Larling again.

While I was away a visitor had arrived at the farm. This was the novelist Henry Williamson who had known my father in the early days of *The Adelphi* and had recently renewed the acquaintance. He had been farming in north Norfolk but had now given it up and was negotiating the purchase of a house in the nearby village of Botesdale. He was lodged in the room immediately below mine. Now that Chris and Mabel were married and installed in a cottage of their own this was serving the Community as a temporary guest room. In spite of his vaguely military appearance—short hair, close-clipped moustache—Henry struck me as being a rather shy, nervous sort of man, who covered up his shyness by telling wildly exaggerated anecdotes against himself. He never seemed to stop talking at

all. I gathered that he had matrimonial problems and two teen-aged sons whom he found it difficult to get along with. No doubt these common difficulties helped to draw him and my father closer together.

Once back in my garret I picked up my pen and made an all-out assault on the poetic fantasy I had begun at school. In two days it was finished. I read it through, thought it brilliant, and decided to type it out preparatory to submitting it to Robin Wilson for his opinion. It was a laborious undertaking but I stuck at it doggedly, tap-tapping away into the small hours.

At lunch the next day Henry fixed me with a mild brown eye and remarked to no one in particular: 'It's either woodpeckers or death-watch beetle. Must be one or the other.'

'What's that, Henry?' enquired my father.

'All night long,' said Henry. 'Tap-tap, tappity tap-tap. Couldn't sleep a wink. I should get the Rentokil people in if I were you, Jack.'

I flushed. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I forgot there was anyone below me. You should have knocked or something.'

My father glanced from Henry to me and back again. His eyebrows rose and hovered. 'What's he been up to?' he asked.

Henry shrugged and gestured across the table at me. 'Why don't you ask him?'

'It's nothing,' I muttered. 'Just something I'm doing for school.'

And there, mercifully, Henry let it drop.

But that evening there was a knock at my door. 'Hello, old boy,' said my father genially. 'Just thought I'd drop in.' He sat himself on the bed, picked up a folder of my drawings and began leafing through them. 'You've certainly been busy,' he said. 'And you're making a lot of progress. Richard thinks so too.'

I felt absurdly pleased but I was reluctant to show it. I mumbled something self-deprecatory.

He laid the folder down and eyed the sheaf of typescript lying on the desk beside me. 'What's that?'

'A sort of play,' I mumbled. 'In verse.'

'May I see it?'

I looked down at the slender pile of script and all my confidence in it suddenly evaporated. It was the old familiar story. More than anything in the world I longed for his approval, his praise, and yet when it came to the point I simply couldn't believe it was possible that I should ever win it.

'I'd really like to read it,' he persisted. 'If you're agreeable.'

Suddenly I had scooped up the typescript and thrust it into his hands. 'Don't forget you've asked *me*,' I said. 'I hope you like it.'

'Well, I hope so too,' he said and winked at me.

I heard him slowly shuffling his way down the narrow stairs and all at once I felt as weary as if I had just scrambled nonstop to the summit of Cader Idris. In a manner of speaking I suppose I had.

His verdict was recorded in his Journal entry for May 5th, 1944, 'Last night Col, very reluctantly, showed me a poetic fantasy on which he had been working. It was far better than anything I could have written at his age. The purity of the diction was quite remarkable. I am inclined to say it shows real promise.'

When he handed my script back to me and told me this I was so overcome I couldn't think of anything to say at all.

9

UNTIL THAT moment if anyone had asked me what I wanted to be in life the one profession which it would never have occurred to me to offer would have been 'writer'. At different times both Lee-Browne and Robin Wilson had hinted that this was my likely destiny and I had simply laughed it off. I was not being coy, merely realistic. I had no rosy misconceptions of *La Vie de Bohème*. Writing for one's living, as I understood it, meant shutting yourself up in a room for weeks on end and becoming a martyr to unromantic complaints like haemorrhoids and indigestion. I had read

W. H. Auden's sonnet on 'The Novelist' with its grim concluding couplet—

> *And in his own weak person, if he can,*
> *Must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man.*

and I had taken the message to heart. Furthermore I had been meeting writers of one sort or another all my life and not one of them had appeared to be what I should have called 'happy'. Indeed, the most famous had often seemed the most miserable, complaining endlessly about the iniquities of publishers and Income Tax authorities. That there were compensations I did not doubt, otherwise why should anyone choose to become one, but I could not believe that they outweighed the disadvantages. What I did not realize—or was only just beginning to realize—was that you did not *choose* to become a writer, you were chosen. Some genetic accident marked you out from birth and, twist or turn as you might, short of death intervening, this was your fate. I confess that, even now as I am writing the words down, the idea does seem rather extraordinary.

It would create an entirely false impression if I were to suggest that my father's approval of my work immediately convinced me that I was born to be a writer. All it did was to bring the notion within the bounds of ultimate possibility. But only just. It glimmered fitfully on the remote horizon, sometimes dimming to the point of near extinction, but never quite going out altogether. Nor was it ever associated in my mind with the possibility of material success; indeed, with my father's example before me, I was half persuaded that the two concepts were mutually exclusive. The nearest I could come to uniting them was when occasionally I indulged myself with the dream that one day I would be famous. Such fame, if and when it ever came, would naturally be posthumous. What I desired above all else was to be able to present my father with a work which he would be proud that a son of his had written. When I returned to Rendcomb for my final term at the beginning of May 1944 that dream, though still infinitely remote, no longer seemed wholly impossible.

I had been back at school for only a month when the Allied invasion of Europe began. We listened to the news bulletins, studied the maps in the newspapers and speculated on whether it would all be over before we were called up. For my own part I was easy either way. Since my hopes of zooming around the skies in a Seafire had been so brutally dashed I had not succeeded in working up any great enthusiasm for the Armed Services. The best that could be said for them was that what they had to offer seemed preferable to being sent down the coal mines as a 'Bevin boy'—the fate that had recently befallen Willy Thomas. As for helping to extricate Europe from beneath the heel of 'the Nar-zee jackboot' that just didn't seem to relate to me at all. Churchill's exhortations could scarcely have fallen upon ears more deaf than mine. It wasn't so much that I didn't think the Allied cause was just, but that I simply didn't think about it at all; the scale of the thing was altogether too vast for me. In taking this view I now suspect that I was fairly typical of the majority of my contemporaries in the United Kingdom.

If I could work up little enthusiasm for the war, I could manage even less for my now imminent examinations. The more history I read the less I seemed to understand. When J. C. James, my teacher, pointed out that, from a purely practical point of view what mattered at this stage was not understanding it but remembering it and getting it down on paper, I realized sadly that I had reached the end of yet another road. I spent three weeks mugging up the answers to questions which he had 'spotted' for me and, thanks entirely to his remarkably accurate forecasting, I was able to persuade the examiners that I was adequately informed as to the causes of the Thirty Years' War; Elizabeth Tudor's Foreign Policy and all the rest of it. The English Literature papers presented me with no insurmountable problems and I found the Art most enjoyable. All that remained now was for me to say my farewells.

I had rehearsed and polished a wry little speech on the lines that if ever I caught myself maintaining that my schooldays

were the happiest days of my life I would know that I had wasted my life. This I had intended as my Parthian Shot. But when it came to the point I found that I could not fire it because those it would have hit were all people I liked too much to wish to hurt. So I just said goodbye and promised that I would come back and see them one day. I never did. Now they are all dead: Robin, Molly, Lee-Browne, J. C. James, and I feel sad when I think that they will never know how deeply I appreciated them all, how important they were to me.

Before returning to Thelnetham I spent a week with Frank Lea at Cranleigh and took advantage of the chance to renew my friendship with Rosamond. My visit coincided with the V1 flying-bomb campaign and I discovered that one of the 'doodle-bug alleys' ran close beside Frank's school. One afternoon while he and I were out sketching we heard the now-familiar *put-put-put* and looked up to see a bug chugging asthmatically along a mile or so away. It coughed and spluttered and then picked up again and staggered off towards the north. A minute or two later there was the sound of a distant explosion and we learnt afterwards that the bomb had crashed into the flank of Leith Hill. I thought little more about it until, on my way back through London I was held up by an air-raid alert while travelling in a tube train over a stretch of line that ran above ground. It was the slack time in the middle of the morning, and there was only one other person in my carriage. As the air-brakes stopped hissing I clearly heard that same ominous *put-put-put* coming towards us. Suddenly the sound cut off. At that precise instant, my fellow passenger—a neatly dressed, middle-aged woman who was sitting a little way down the carriage from me—began to scream. I found it far more frightening than the silence of the invisibly gliding bomb; a high-pitched strangled sort of shriek which seemed to screw itself up higher and higher until I felt that my head would shatter like a wineglass.

I didn't know what to do. Should I yell at her? Slap her face? Fling my arms round her? I got up from my seat and had taken a couple of paces towards her when the bomb exploded.

The train rocked a bit and my ears popped but that was all. I peered out through the spy hole in the netted window and saw a cloud of brown smoke rising from behind some tenements on the far side of the tracks. The woman had stopped screaming at the instant of the explosion. Now, as I returned my attention to her, she lifted her pale, strained face, looked directly at me and then turned her head quickly away. It was just as though I had caught her in the act of doing something she was ashamed of. I asked her if she was all right but she didn't say a word. I stood for a moment, gazing at her, and then I turned and made my way back to my seat feeling totally inept and useless. It is now over thirty years since it happened and yet that scream of hers is still vibrating somewhere inside me—a sort of distilled quintessence of helpless human suffering.

Before leaving the farm in the spring I had suggested to my father that it was high time we all had a holiday together. I knew he enjoyed holidays even though he felt guilty about taking them, and I was pleased when he had written to me at school to tell me that he had arranged for us to spend a fortnight in a friend's guest house on the tiny island of Gigha off the west coast of Scotland. We were due to depart in the middle of August and I spent the intervening time scribbling poems and short stories. While I was hard at it one day there was a tap on my door and Weg appeared. 'Are you terribly busy?' she enquired deferentially.

'There's plenty more where this is coming from,' I said. 'What can I do for you?'

'It's the eggs,' she said.

'What about the eggs?'

'I've missed collecting them for a day or two and the stupid birds have been laying all over the place. Would you help me hunt for them? The van's coming to pick them up tomorrow.'

I grinned. I knew she had been put in charge of the poultry while Francis—the official poultry-man—was away. I knew also that she was enjoying a fairly intense and exciting emotional life. In any such choice of priorities my sympathies

were wholly pro-Weg and anti-chicken. I laid aside my pen and followed her down into the kitchen. We equipped ourselves with a large basket apiece and proceeded into the yard. 'Where shall we start?' I asked.

Weg looked a trifle vague. 'I *think* there may be some in the orchard,' she said, 'but it's awfully nettly.'

We made our way through the kitchen garden and started walking down the meadow. A couple of hens dashed out squawking from under a thorn hedge. I forced my way in and found two nests each containing about a dozen eggs. Weg seemed surprised to see so many. We moved on, finding more and more nests, and then my eye was caught by something brown in the fork of an ancient hollow elm tree. It was a duck! I'd never seen a duck up a tree before. It seemed somehow unnatural. I pointed it out to Weg. She frowned. 'You don't suppose it's got a *nest* up there, do you?'

It had. A vast, snug, down-lined cavern containing close on two dozen eggs! And so it went on. We found nests in the most unlikely places and each one had a quite extraordinary number of eggs in it. Some of them looked rather old to me. We filled our two baskets and then a third. As we carted them back to the farm I suggested tentatively that we ought perhaps to test them before we sent them off to the packing station. Weg agreed that, in the circumstances, it might indeed be prudent.

We got a milk pail from the dairy, filled it with water and began dropping the eggs into it. The first one we tried shot up like a cork from a champagne bottle. Weg looked at it in astonishment. 'Do you think it's all right?' she asked.

'Well, we can soon find out,' I said and picking up the bobbing duck's egg I rapped it smartly against the rim of the pail. It didn't crack or just break, it *exploded*, which, in a way was a pity because that single egg would undoubtedly have been worth a small fortune in a Cantonese restaurant. I've never smelt anything quite like it. My head swam; I rocked back on my heels; and the yard seemed to quiver all around me as though I was viewing it from under water. Through tear-filled eyes I peered up at my sister. Her face had gone as

white as chalk with a slight greenish tinge over the cheekbones. 'Oh, *God*!' she choked. 'Isn't it *awful*!'

In the end we retained about a third of our haul. The rest I interred gingerly in a hole I excavated for the purpose in the orchard. It was like burying nitro-glycerine. The thought that I might inadvertently crack one of them with my spade made me wobble at the knees.

I never did discover exactly what Weg's official position was during the year she spent on the farm. Her childhood experiences at Larling had made her secretive to a fault and, no doubt wisely, she did not choose me for her confidences. But now and again she would apply to me for help to get her out of a jam. She and I never quarrelled, never even argued, and were content to go our separate ways. In some respects we were like two war veterans who having against all the odds survived a long and arduous campaign felt no desire to fight over again the battles of long ago. We did not need to expose our scars to one another. We knew they were there.

Three days before we were to set out for Scotland, Mary, Val, Weg and I drove into Norwich for some last-minute shopping. We returned at tea time to be met on the stairs by my father. In his hand he held a telegram which had arrived that morning. It was a message for me to report to H.M.S. *Royal Arthur*, Skegness, in three days' time. I was quite prepared to ignore it, reasoning that if we had all left for Scotland a couple of days earlier it would have missed me. But my father had already decided that such a course would be unethical. I cursed his tender conscience but bowed to the inevitable. In fact I should have trusted my own instinct. It wouldn't have mattered a scrap.

On the final morning we all drove into Bury St Edmunds and boarded the train for the north. At Lincoln I got out and waved them enviously on their way. They all looked suitably glum but not one of them looked half as glum as I felt.

10

H.M.S. *Royal Arthur* was a surprise. I am not sure what I had been expecting exactly but certainly not a Butlin's Holiday Camp pretending to be a ship. Yet that is what I found. We queued up for our medical inspections and uniform issue in halls that had been got up as 'Snow White's Cottage' and 'Ye Olde Pig & Whistle' complete with plaster dwarfs and plastic straw thatching, while the loudspeaker system which had once urged happy campers to present themselves for the 'Knobbly Knees' and 'Most Glamorous Granny' competitions now reverberated to bugle calls, shrill bo'sun's whistles, and mysterious injunctions like 'Liberty Men, Fall In!' and 'Fo'c'sle Division to Make and Mend'.

I was allocated a two-man 'cabin' which in happier days would have been called a 'chalet' and should by rights have been called a hutch. My cabin mate was a sad, bewildered youth called Arnold Botley who confessed to me shyly that his ambition was to transfer into E.N.S.A. To add substance to his claim he did endless impressions of Charles Laughton as Captain Bligh in *Mutiny on the Bounty* while I lay on my bunk and pondered upon the implication behind the enigmatic message which I discovered pencilled across the woodwork beside my head: 'Sell the pig and buy me out, Mother.'

Along with about twenty others Botley and I were handed over to Leading Seaman Gentle, a Royal Navy veteran with over twenty years of active service. He had been torpedoed three times and after the last had spent seven days drifting alone in the Atlantic on a Carley float, an experience which, he informed us, was 'bloody paradise compared to nurse-maidin' you bleedin' lot'. His favourite expression was 'Cor, fuck a rat!' which he employed frequently to express his feelings about us. He taught us how to lash up our hammocks, how to fold our blankets in the prescribed manner, how to address an officer, what the different watches were, and how to cope with the intricacies of our uniform. Most valuable of all he gave us some basic instruction in the strange vocabulary employed in the Navy. The most important word was 'pusser'.

It rhymed with 'fusser' and meant, roughly, 'according to Naval Regulations'. Its converse was 'tiddly'.

By the end of the first week we had all been kitted out with uniforms and assigned to our particular branch of the Service. I was one of four who, because we had originally applied for 'Y' Scheme entry, found ourselves singled out for the Air Arm. We were called 'Naval Airmen' which gave us a certain (and certainly undeserved) cachet among the mass of stokers, cooks, mechanics and general oddbods who made up the bulk of the intake. The Personnel Selection Officer—a terribly 'keen' Wren 3rd Officer with a voice like an embroidery needle—tried to persuade me that I had the makings of a potential Sub Lieutenant, but, after only a week of the Navy, I already knew better. Furthermore I had taken Leading Seaman Gentle's sage advice to heart: 'There's jest two kinds of idjit, my sons, an' bofe of 'ems a fuckin' volunteer.' Ten days after entering H.M.S. *Royal Arthur* as a civilian I left it as 'Naval Airman 2nd Class Murry, J.M. FX/723426' bound for a Part I basic training course at a 'secret' destination which everyone in the draft knew was Malvern in Worcestershire.

The object of Part I training was, I assume, to turn us all into proud, physically fit and mentally disciplined members of the Senior Service. As a first step in this direction we were given haircuts which made us look like inmates of Alcatraz and was possibly intended to ensure that we would strike terror into the hearts of the enemy. The immediate effect was that our caps no longer fitted properly and developed a tendency to slip down over our eyes when we were square-bashing. We did this endlessly, lashed on by the forked tongue of Petty Officer Warren, our Course Instructor, whose professed aim in life was to see that our class passed out as 'Top Squad' at the end of the six weeks' course.

P/O Warren was not a lovable man and he made the grave mistake of picking on a tall, sleepy-looking Northerner whom we knew as 'Lofty', and singling him out for a lot of heavy-handed sarcasm. Lofty, who was very far from being sleepy, bided his time until one damp afternoon when we were all

marched off to practise boat-drill down at a local lake. This consisted of swinging a whaler out on its davits and then lowering it into the murky water some ten feet or so below. P/O Warren climbed aboard the boat and shouted his instructions to the two squads who were handling the ropes. Everything seemed to be going smoothly, the davits swung outwards, the whaler hung poised and then, without warning, one end suddenly dropped. Our mentor was left clinging precariously to a thwart, roaring abuse, and swearing that he'd have our guts for garters. His words had the effect of unnerving the innocent squad on the second rope who now let go of theirs too. The whaler crashed down into the lake, showering us all with muddy water and leaving our lord and master sprawled in the bottom of the boat nursing a broken upper denture.

We spent the rest of that afternoon pulling the whaler round the lake with P/O Warren seated in the stern vowing that he'd keep us at it until he'd found out who was responsible for the accident. But he never did and, wise in his own fashion, he left Lofty alone from then on.

By the end of those six weeks my hair had grown a bit and I had learnt a proportionate amount of basic seamanship. I had also been told that I wasn't being 'paid to think' by a Chief Petty Officer who was nominally in charge of an 'Initiative Course'. The tentative opinion of the Senior Service which I had formed at Skegness had by now become a fairly firm conviction. It was absurd to a degree. Everyone seemed to be engaged in an elaborate charade. It began first thing every morning with a shattering bugle blast over the Tannoy loudspeaker system and a strident voice yelling: 'Wakey wakey! Rise and Shine! The morning's fine! Yo 'eave-oh, lash up an' stow!' and continued until 'Lights out—pipe down!' in the evening. In between everybody conspired strenuously to pretend that we were aboard a ship. If you were off-duty and went 'ashore' you became a 'liberty man' and went via 'the liberty boat' which was the bus into Malvern. Doors metamorphosed into 'hatches' and there were no more floors only 'decks'. Even the road around the camp was a deck, and the

square of asphalt, prinked out with geraniums and white-washed stones over which towered the sacred flag-pole, was 'The Quarter Deck'—no doubt modelled upon the very one where Horatio Nelson, our patron saint, had breathed his last.

The further up you went in the hierarchy the more seriously everyone took it. The glorious climax was the Sunday 'Divisions' when we all put on our best 'Number One' uniforms and paraded before the Quarter Deck under the watchful eyes of our Captain and his minions. The Marine Band blasted away at 'A Life on the Ocean Wave', the gold braid winked and glittered, and a Lieutenant wearing shiny, black, patent-leather, calf-length boots pranced up and down with a gleaming cutlass held upright before his nose. Gilbert and Sullivan could not have done it better. Finally the Padre stepped forward and said his piece and then we all bawled out some martial hymn to the God of Battles. Everybody with gold braid on his sleeves saluted everybody else who had gold on his, commands were fired like salvoes, and with a rousing *oom-pah! oom-pah!* the band broke into 'Bollocks, And the Same to You!' while we all right-wheeled and were marched away to our respective barracks which, of course, were not called barracks but 'mess-decks'.

Having survived our Part I training we were now ready to undergo Part II. This was designed to fit us for whatever lowly position in the mighty hierarchy was deemed most suited to our questionable talents. Mine was apparently to be 'Safety Equipment', but before I joined the course I was first sent down to the Fleet Air Arm headquarters at Lee-on-Solent where I found myself attached to the 'Ship's Company' of H.M.S. *Daedalus*. This turned out to be a vast, sprawling complex of nissen huts and hangars situated a couple of miles from Gosport. Here captains were as thick on the ground as sub lieutenants had been at my previous establishments and Sunday 'Divisions' was like a coronation in Ruritania. Standing in line on parade, 'pussered-up' to the nines, I used to relieve the tedium by mentally undressing the various assorted rear-admirals, commodores and what-nots who were ranged before

me on the distant saluting base. The result was that for much of the time I had a slightly inane grin on my face. Fortunately I was altogether too insignificant a form of animal life for this to be noticed.

After loafing around for a week I found myself co-opted into the Camp Guard. I was issued with a rifle, five rounds of live ammunition, a webbing harness and a pair of canvas gaiters, then marched off to guard a rusting jetty which poked out forlornly into the Solent. Nobody ever came near the place. The only signs of life to be observed were the seagulls which used to line up on the broken railings and eye me pityingly. Any company being better than none I took to stuffing my jumper with bread-crusts and feeding them surreptitiously. The word soon got around and within a matter of days my approach with the Corporal of the Guard was the signal for hundreds of ravenous birds to gather and swirl around my sentry box screaming their heads off.

Then I was transferred to Night Duty and the boredom and utter uselessness of what I was doing began to get me down. In the early hours of one morning when I heard Leading Seaman Shorrocks, the Corporal of the Guard, approaching on his inspection round, instead of giving the correct formal challenge I yelled out in exasperation: 'Oh, come off it, Shorry, for Christ's sake! We both know this is bloody ridiculous!'

The approaching footsteps did not falter and I suddenly beheld, looming out of the fog, not one person but two! It was Shorrocks all right but for some unfathomable reason he was accompanied by the Officer of the Watch and the bastard was wearing rubber-soled shoes! I rattled off the old: 'Halt! Who goes there! Advance three paces to be recognized!' but it was too late. A voice like a steel nutmeg grater demanded to know my name, rank and number, and, when I gave them, snarled: 'Have this rating put on a charge, Corporal!'

'Aye-aye, sir,' responded Shorrocks and away they vanished into the swirling mist.

Shorrocks was sympathetic when, a couple of hours later, he

reappeared with my relief. 'That Jackson's a right bastard,' he said. 'Pusser as all get out. I'll do what I can for you, mate, but I can't promise anything.'

After breakfast he marched me before the Officer of the Day and the Master-at-Arms on 'Defaulters' Parade'. The charge against me—'that he did fail to issue a correct challenge while on sentry duty'—was read out. The young O.O.D., an R.N.V.R. lieutenant pilot, surveyed me curiously and then turned to Shorrocks. 'What happened, Corporal?'

'I didn't hear clearly, sir. Sounded rather like a fit of coughing to me.'

'Did he *make* a challenge?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Was it correct?'

'The challenge was, yes, sir.'

'I see,' said the Lieutenant, who quite obviously did nothing of the kind. 'Well, what have you got to say for yourself, Murry?'

I looked him straight in the eye. 'Well, sir, the fact is I hadn't seen a single human being for more than three hours and I was overcome with excitement. I'm sorry, sir.'

Disbelief mingled with grudging admiration for such a barefaced lie flitted like a December sunbeam across the seamed face of the Master-at-Arms. The Lieutenant started to grin and then hastily composed himself. 'Well,' he said, 'there does seem to be an element of doubt here. What do you think, Master-at-Arms?'

'I think two days Number Elevens should meet the case, sir.'

'Two days Number Elevens,' echoed the Lieutenant dutifully.

'On caps! About turn! Quick march!'

As the door closed behind us I heard the Lieutenant and the Master-at-Arms hooting with laughter. 'You jammy bastard,' grinned Shorrocks. 'Two fuckin' days! If that'd been Jackson you'd have got fourteen for sure.'

'I won't forget it, Shorry,' I said. Nor have I.

A fortnight or so later, in the middle of November, my draft to Eastleigh came through and I found myself back at school again. It made a pleasant change from listening to the oily waves slopping against the stanchions of that dismal jetty. For six weeks I learnt how to pack parachutes and rubber dinghies. It was not very demanding intellectually but at least I could see *some* point to it. Everything was proceeding smoothly when I had the misfortune to fall foul of a certain Leading Seaman Brogan who occupied some sort of permanent position on the Ship's Company.

Brogan was the Naval Area Boxing Champion at his weight, which was about eleven stones. He was also a bully. While the rest of us queued up docilely for our cups of tea or coffee at the N.A.A.F.I. it was his habit to saunter up to the counter and get served first. One evening I happened to have reached the top of the queue and was just about to collect my cup of coffee when Brogan reached out and took it. 'Hey!' I yelped. 'I've just paid for that!'

'Ta, mate,' he said easily, and turned away with it.

'You thieving bastard!' I protested.

I suspect that was just the reaction Brogan was hoping for. He pivoted slowly. '*What* did you call me?'

The whole canteen had gone deathly quiet and so tense with expectation that it was like a physical pressure. I felt as though my insides had turned to water. 'A thieving bastard,' I repeated and, to this day, I still can't understand how the words contrived to emerge so clear and distinct.

Brogan's dark eyes flicked along the hostile queue. He gave a faint, lopsided grin. 'Oh, sorry, mate,' he said. 'Was this yours? My mistake,' and he replaced the cup on the counter.

Quaking inwardly I picked it up and went off to join a group of my class-mates. 'Bloody 'ell, Johnny,' they murmured. 'You'd better watch out for yourself. That Brogan's a right killer.' And they proceeded to retail with relish numerous gory anecdotes about him which, even though they were almost certainly apochryphal, did not make me feel any happier.

When I left the N.A.A.F.I. accompanied by a friend about

half an hour later there was no sign of the enemy and I breathed more easily. But as we were making our way back to our hut Brogan suddenly materialized out of the shadows and came sauntering towards us. ''Ere, just a minute, you,' he said. 'I've got a bone to—'

I didn't wait to hear what that bone was. I put my head down and charged straight at him like a bull. I hit him slap in the chest, bowled him over backwards and fell on top of him. Then, wild with fear and rage, I grabbed him by the ears and, with all the force I could muster, bashed the back of his head against the concrete path. I had managed two further whacks before hands were laid on me and I was dragged off.

Brogan heaved himself up dopily on to one elbow and twisted his bullet head slowly from side to side. He was obviously concussed though how badly I neither knew nor cared. I daresay that if I had not been pulled off him I would have gone on battering his skull against the concrete until he was either totally insensible or dead. Even now I was anxious to press home my precarious advantage but my 'oppo' Bernie had the good sense to hustle me away.

By the next morning the whole camp seemed to know what had happened. I realized, sickly, that it was just a question of time before Brogan caught up with me and beat me into an unrecognizable pulp. But I hadn't reckoned on the psychology of bullies. From then on he completely ignored me and, at the beginning of December, I learnt that he had moved to some other station. That was my only fight in the Navy and, in one way or another, I think I learnt at least as much of value from it as I did from all the rest of my three years on the Lower Deck put together.

My course ended just before Christmas. I was now a qualified 'Safety Equipment Assistant, Class 2' and as such ripe for despatch to any unknown squadron which had need of my skills. While I was waiting to hear which one it was to be I was granted a week's leave.

Frank Lea's school had recently moved back to London and Rosamond had moved with it, so I invited myself along for

Christmas. After an enjoyable three days I caught a dose of 'flu which had soon developed into acute tonsilitis. Rosamond's mother—the school's Matron/Housekeeper—called in a doctor who pronounced me too ill to return to camp. I sweated and shivered my way into the New Year and eventually returned to Eastleigh to find that all my companions had departed. The Medical Officer read the letter I had brought from the doctor in Hampstead and advised me to go into hospital and have my tonsils removed. 'There's nothing to it,' he assured me, 'and if we leave them in you'll only go on getting them infected.'

'How long will it take, sir?'

'Ten days to a fortnight. And we'll see if we can't fiddle you a spot of sick leave when you come out.'

Convinced of the sound wisdom of his words I stowed my kit and reported to the Naval Hospital in Winchester.

The operation proved to be a good deal more unpleasant than I had been led to believe, and a few days after it was over, when I should by rights have been striding off down the high road to recovery, I caught some infection that sent my temperature rocketing through the roof. I was whipped off into a side ward where, for a hazy week, I was given round-the-clock attention which I felt far too lousy to appreciate.

All in all I spent eight weeks in that hospital. For the last two I was transferred to the convalescent ward and allowed out in the afternoons. This meant that I had to wear 'hospital blues', a strange, distinctive uniform, consisting of an ill-fitting, sky-blue suit, white shirt and scarlet tie, all of which I wore with my service cap. To the civilian population of Winchester this fancy dress marked me out as a wounded war hero. I had only to board a bus into town for some dear old lady to stagger to her palsied feet and offer me her seat, while if I as much as poked my nose around the door of a pub the whole clientèle would seemingly vie with one another in offering to buy me free drinks. I felt an utter fraud. Unknown men clapped me on the shoulder, thrust tankards into my hand and cried: 'You've given red blood for your country, Jack! It's the least I can do', or 'Where did the bastards get you,

son?' I blushed and shook my head helplessly only to find that this evoked such sentiments as: 'Bloody marvellous, isn't it? The silent service! There's modesty for you! You're a credit to us all, lad!' In the end I simply couldn't face going into pubs and spent my afternoons skulking round the cathedral or haunting the bookshops.

On my return to Eastleigh I presented myself once more before the Medical Officer. 'Good Lord!' he exclaimed. 'What have they been doing to you? You look like a stand-in for Lazarus.' And without more ado he packed me off home for a fortnight's sick leave.

II

SINCE MARY and my father were still spending part of each week up in London there was no one to meet me at Diss station when I arrived, and I decided to hitch-hike. Lodge Farm is well off the beaten track, to be reached only through a labyrinth of country lanes, but a *matelot* in uniform was something of a rarity in that part of East Anglia and I got a lift on the first vehicle which happened along. It was a delivery van. 'Where'er you a-goin', sailor?' asked the driver in broad Suffolk.

When I told him he seemed surprised. 'Tha's conchie farm, innit?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I suppose it is.'

The man glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. 'But you ain't a conchie.'

'No,' I agreed.

'On a holiday, like?'

'I live there,' I said. 'When I'm on leave, that is. It's my home.'

His brow furrowed. I could see he was struggling to fit together the bits of information I had given him with some he

already had. It was obvious he was not succeeding 'My father owns the farm,' I said.

Comprehension flooded in like a spring tide. 'Owwhh. So you're Mr Murry's *son*, are you?'

'That's right.'

'And you're a sailor?'

I could hardly deny it.

'Well, if that don' beat the lot.' He shook his head over the unfathomable mystery of the world. We drove on in silence for a while, then: 'Tha's a right rum ol' sorter place, innit?'

'Not half as rum as the Navy,' I retorted.

But this was altogether too subtle. He just eyed me blankly, said 'Arr' in a vague sort of way, shook his head several times and lapsed into silence. He dropped me off at the turnpike near the village shop and I set off down the road to the farm.

From the outside everything still looked much as it had in August but I soon discovered that all sorts of changes had taken place among the personnel. Vernon had departed and his place as cowman had been offered to Dugald; three stalwart newcomers, on whom my father had been resting high hopes, had already announced that they were leaving, giving as their reason that they were unable to work with Geoff. Of the original Group now only Geoff himself, Vernon's brother Chris, John Price, and Francis the shepherd/poultry man remained, and Geoff's own star was but a feeble ghost of what it had been a year before.

Val gave me a vivid description of the House Meeting at which Hugh, the thirteen-stone leader of the newcomers, had indulged himself with an excoriating off-the-cuff analysis of the psychological weaknesses of everyone else until, unable to stand any more of it, she herself had rounded upon him and done the same to him. At this he had leapt to his feet, knocked his chair flying and fled upstairs to the dark sanctuary of his dormitory. It all sounded too 'Russian' for words. I gathered that Dugald was now emerging as the white hope of the enterprise and that another couple, Joan and Paul Hobson, showed signs of 'having the root of the matter in them'.

This upheaval—the second major crisis in the Community's fortunes—marked, I think, a distinct turning point in my father's own attitude towards the venture. Looking back on it in 1951 he was to write—'I had seen more clearly than ever before the nature of the bond that was required to unite people in such an enterprise. The degree of mutual trust demanded was much greater than I had imagined. In retrospect it began to appear to me inordinate that I should have supposed it could exist in a chance-formed group of young pacifists—either among themselves or between themselves and me. It existed, indeed, between Mary and Val and me. What was required was the same sort of thing—due allowance made for age—between us and the Group, or that portion of it which could see the venture through. It could be carried through only by a group of proven friends.'

The shift of emphasis from 'loyalty to an ideal' to 'loyalty to me' is there quite explicit, yet when, in a private conversation with the best of the three newcomers, that young man had said he thought my father was asking him to have faith in *him*, my father professed himself wholly mystified by the notion. I do not really see why he should have been. In the circumstances, personal loyalty seems to me a perfectly natural thing to ask for—always provided, of course, that the asker does not expect to receive it automatically. But instead of facing up to this issue fair and square my father was strangely embarrassed when Dugald, following a dust-up with Geoff, announced that he was prepared to carry on as cowman, 'but only', as my father put it, 'on the understanding that he stayed on as *my* cowman, finally responsible to me alone'. It was as though, having got from Dugald just what he had been asking for, my father could not yet bring himself to accept that he really *had* been asking for it.

For some thirty years—ever since his meeting with D. H. Lawrence—my father had been haunted by the dream of a community of friends all actively engaged in a common social and moral purpose. It had inspired and informed much of his best work in the between-wars period and had provided a

substantial part of the impetus behind the foundation of The Adelphi Centre. It is, I believe, a noble dream, and the fact that history is littered with the ruins of failed communes of one sort or another does not make the dream itself any the less admirable. But the bricks out of which such enterprises are constructed are mere mortal men and women, and the cement which must bind them together is, as my father rightly observed, trust—trust in one another and in the ideal upon which the enterprise is founded. In successful agricultural communes the ideal is usually either overtly religious (e.g. the *Brüderhof*) or religio-political (e.g. the *Kibbutz*); in the case of Lodge Farm it was something altogether more nebulous namely 'service to the land'. This, as my father saw it, was the one 'unconditional good' to which men and women, adrift in a sea of moral relativism, could devote themselves heart and soul; it was a realizable substitute for a 'deep common conviction, of the spiritual or religious order'. But 'service to the land' is what all good farmers have given since Adam first delved and, as my father clearly realized, if that had been all he wanted to do he would have taken a farm and tried to run it with a foreman on traditional lines. His loyalty to his dream demanded that he try to establish 'a new and better social relation in farming than the old traditional one of master and man'. Yet what was beginning to emerge at Lodge Farm was something which was growing to look more and more like the traditional one—at times, indeed, it must have seemed to my father as if the land itself were demanding it.

I spent that leave writing stories—mostly fairy tales. There was nothing to distract me. Weg, who had stayed behind on the island of Gigha until Christmas helping to run the guest house, was now up in London training to be a nurse. My father told me that he would have to go into hospital in the spring for an operation on the nerves of his other leg. He was philosophical about it but it was plain that he was not relishing the prospect. I gave him a tin of 'tickler' (Navy tobacco) together with an edited account of my own experiences to date. He was highly amused, particularly by the Naval *patois*. There is no doubt in

my mind that, of all the Armed Services, my father reserved a particularly soft spot for the Navy, perhaps because without it —as he would have been the first to admit—British democracy and, ultimately, the Pacifist movement itself, would almost certainly never have come into being.

Just before I left I plucked up the courage to ask him if I might be allowed to review *The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes* for *The Adelphi*. While in Winchester I had discovered that this volume was due out some time in the late spring. He promised me that when it came along he would hold on to it for me and, on that optimistic note, I bade farewell to 'Conchie Farm' and returned to Eastleigh.

12

I HAD been back for less than a week when I was summoned to the Divisional Office and told that I was 'on draft' to R.N.A.S. Arbroath.

'Where's that?' I asked.

'Scotland. East Coast. Where the kippers come from.'

'Is anyone else going?'

The Wren clerk consulted a sheet of paper. 'Yes. One more. S.E.A.2. Church R. Do you know him?'

I shook my head. 'Are we joining a squadron?'

'Ship's Company complement,' she said.

I hunted out 'Church R.' and found Bob, a whey-faced, Arthur Askeyish youth with close-set eyes framed by horn-rimmed glasses and ears that stuck out like pink handles. He knew no more about R.N.A.S. Arbroath than I did and was deeply offended that he wasn't 'going foreign'. 'We'll be stuck in a fuckin' packin' shed along with a bunch of gigglin' skirts,' he moaned. 'An' there's bound to be an old cow of a Wren P/O in charge to see we don't lay a fuckin' finger on 'em.'

Bob's melancholy forecast proved to be remarkably accurate.

Until our arrival the Safety Equipment Section at Arbroath had been staffed by thirteen Wren ratings, a Wren P/O (invariably addressed as 'Chief'), and an ancient, wispy, three-badge parachute packer known to all and sundry as 'Stoksie'. A Wren officer was in charge of the lot. The atmosphere inside that Section was a sort of uneasy blend of *Il Seraglio* and a girls' boarding school.

Chief regarded Bob and me with deep suspicion. Someone, no doubt hoping to ingratiate themselves with her, had once told her that she had 'a heart of gold'—I know this because she told me so herself, more than once—and she manifested it by an indefatigable mothering of 'her girls'. Unmarried herself she nevertheless claimed to be an authority upon all aspects of matrimony. Her philosophy was based on the unshakable premise that 'all men are animals and only interested in ONE THING'. Trapped within the steamy confines of that Section it was not long before I was beginning to wonder whether she might not have a valid point after all.

I soon realized that in turning down my chance to become a Sub Lieutenant I had committed a grave error of judgment so far as getting myself a share of Chief's 'ONE THING' was concerned. By and large, unless you had a gold ring or two on your sleeve you were, to all sexual intents and purposes, quite invisible to our Wrens. Any acned Midshipman with more than his fair share of buck teeth and the profile of a King Cobra had a better chance of making out with these coy maidens than we had. In fact if one of the girls *did* stoop to the folly of walking ashore with a rating she ran the risk of being branded as little better than a self-confessed nymphomaniac by her own mess-mates.

That apart we all got along very well together. Chief excepted they were a friendly lot, and even Chief, once she had assured herself that Bob and I were not waiting till her back was turned to leap upon her chicks and ravish them, became almost human. Our worst enemy was boredom. Bob whose boredom threshold was lower than mine was constantly putting in Requests for a foreign draft and trying to persuade me to do

the same. I recalled A/B Gentle's wise words and restrained myself.

To help pass the time I joined the Station hockey team. The other members were all either officers or N.C.O.s which made things a bit embarrassing at times. However, they very decently agreed to overlook my deficiencies so long as I went on scoring goals. One day the Commander who played inside-left to my centre-forward breezed into the Section, caught sight of me, and so far forgot himself as to address me as 'Johnnie'. The effect this had upon the Wrens who were present was electrifying. They gaped at me as though I were a frog who had suddenly been transformed into a prince. Even so it still took me several months of hard work before I managed to persuade one of them to go out with me.

Bob and I shared a nissen hut with a miscellaneous bunch of photographers, fire-tender crewman, and clerks. Our Senior Hand was an immemorial, three-badge regular A/B called 'Geordie' Rivett. In retrospect Geordie has come to stand in for all those extraordinary ancient mariners I met during my time in the Navy. He was an incredible eighty-three years old! When he was born Inkermann and Balaclava were still fresh on men's lips and I don't doubt that the American Civil War had played its part in his childhood. He had sailed further than any man I have ever met and he could remember less about the countries he had visited than a monkey in a travelling circus. He was as bald as a bollard and held us all in a contempt so profound it was impossible to plumb it.

Only once do I remember him ever going on leave. He had a relative—a niece I believe it was—who lived in Chatham, and apparently he took it into his head to visit her. Nobody saw him go. It was not until that night that anyone said: 'Where's Geordie?' That was typical of the man. We missed him as one might miss a familiar article of furniture. We discovered that he had been granted fourteen days and he was back after seven. When we asked him why, he turned on us slowly and rumbled: ''Ave you henny *hobjections* may I harsk?'

Once I saw him unearth a faded yellowing photograph from

the bottom of his kitbag and dared to glance over his shoulder. It was the portrait of a moon-faced youngster in the straw hat and wide silk scarf that adorned the Naval uniform of three quarters of a century ago. 'Christ!' I exclaimed. 'Is that *you*, Geordie?'

He turned his pale, washed-out eyes upon me. 'Hand *what* hif hit was?'

'I just wondered,' I said hastily.

He grunted and replaced the picture in the bottom of his sack. He was one of the most taciturn men I have ever met and there was a quality about him that I can only call magnificently indestructible. I don't think I would be utterly astonished to learn that he is still alive somewhere to this day.

V.E. Day found me packing parachutes in Scotland and my father lying in hospital in Haywards Heath recovering from his second sympathectomy. He noted the event in his diary. '3.20 p.m. Winston Churchill has made the announcement followed by a singularly hollow and unconvincing service of thanksgiving. Perhaps it's more appropriate to spend the day in hospital than elsewhere.'

Had I read it at the time I would certainly have echoed that rather gloomy sentiment. To my mind the war, far from being over, seemed only too likely to drag on for years and to take me with it. The knowledge that Japan was still fighting probably accounted for the fact that the victory celebrations in R.N.A.S. Arbroath were distinctly muted. I caught a bus out to the coastal village of Lunan and then walked back along the top of the cliffs till I came upon a ruined castle of red sandstone. There I nested myself down in a sheltered cranny and, while the wind honed mournfully among the honeycombed rocks, read Sidney Keyes' *The Wilderness*—

> '*This is my calling, to seek the red rock desert*
> *And speak for all those who have lost the gardens,*
> *Forgotten the singing, yet dare not find the desert—*
> *To sing the song that rises from the fire . . .*'

It made me feel as miserable as sin and I regretted that I had

turned down Bob's friendly invitation to join him in the canteen and get quietly pissed out of our minds on N.A.A.F.I. beer.

The months between V.E. Day and V.J. Day were largely taken up by my unsuccessful attempts to seduce a Wren in our Section. Nineteen years old, dark haired, with eyes the colour of treacle toffee, a wide, warm mouth, and a figure which might well have been designed by Aphrodite herself, Alison drove me half out of my mind with sexual frustration. It wasn't really anyone's fault; we simply couldn't help ourselves. But neither could she bring herself to relieve my torment. And torment it truly was. Sometimes after an evening's clandestine kissing and fumbling in the Dinghy Section I could hardly manage to stagger back to my hut. It was both comic and ridiculous. Alison was terrified that if she allowed me to have what we both so desperately wanted she would become pregnant, and yet she knew as well as I did that this need not happen. Ah, if only the Pill had been invented twenty years earlier! In the end Chief found out what was going on and we were denied the luxury of those stacks of half-inflated dinghies. I cursed her bitterly for an interfering old cow but for all that she may well have saved me from a rupture of the *seminal vesicle*.

While my honeyed torment was away on leave I wrote my essay on Keyes for *The Adelphi*. My father had offered me four hundred words but by the time I had finished it was well over a thousand. I contrasted Keyes with Richard Hillary as 'spokesmen for their generation' and when I'd finished I still didn't really know whether or not I believed what I was saying. Having just re-read it I realize that I was writing what I hoped my father would like. The essay seems decidedly glib to me now, but I was pleased enough with it at the time. I copied it out neatly, sent it off to him and crossed my fingers.

I do not know what he had been expecting but *The Quest of Sidney Keyes* certainly came as a surprise to him. He snipped off the opening paragraph, let the rest stand, and printed it as an article in its own right. I chose the pseudonym 'John le Maistre' partly as a tribute to my mother and partly because I

thought it sounded rather interesting and romantic. I quite overlooked the built-in disadvantage that it is not at all easy to pronounce it correctly.

Then, at the beginning of August, I was informed that I was being drafted out to Chittagong in Burma, prior to joining a front line squadron. When Bob heard the news he was almost beside himself with envy and frustration. I was simply resigned. I was told I would have to report to H.M.S. *Waxwing* at Dunfermline from whence I would, no doubt, be sent off on embarkation leave. A few days before I was due to quit Arbroath, the Americans dropped the first atom bomb on Hiroshima. Truth compels me to admit that my feelings on hearing of this obscenity were of pure, unadulterated relief. A week later Japan had surrendered and this time there was nothing half-hearted about our victory celebrations.

I was drunk more or less continuously for three days and three nights. I arrived at Dunfermline twenty-four hours adrift and no one paid the slightest bit of notice. I put in for embarkation leave immediately and was granted it without a question asked. On my return, ten days later, I was told that my Burma draft still held but was being delayed. In the meantime I was to be seconded to the Ship's Company.

H.M.S. *Waxwing* was a transit station. Aircraft carriers returning to the Firth of Forth from the Far East disgorged their ratings who were rushed through our camp and sent off on 'de-mob' leave. I was given the job of stamping out new fibre identity discs for those who had lost theirs. It was not what anyone could have called a demanding occupation but after three weeks of it I found myself being afflicted by a series of withering headaches. They always came on in the late afternoon. By the early evening I would be forced to retire to my bunk where I lay swathed in blankets alternately shivering and sweating so violently that my mess mates would gather round curiously to watch me steaming. It made a change from their endless games of pontoon. By the morning I would be all right again. Then, as regular as a ship's chronometer, by four o'clock in the afternoon the cycle would recommence.

After a week of this I had had all I could take and one evening, instead of crawling into my bunk I tottered down to the sick-bay. A young Sick Berth Attendant took my temperature, found it was over one hundred and two, and told me to collect my kit and report back. A mess-mate helped me to lash up my hammock and stow my kit and, with him beside me, I reeled off down the hill.

There followed a grotesque period of several weeks during which they tried to find out what was the matter with me. Eventually someone had the bright idea of sending a sample of my blood to Edinburgh for analysis and back came the answer that I was suffering from some obscure form of tropical viral fever. Since the closest I had been to the tropics was *The Hawaiian Bar* in Dundee this seemed both unfair and unlikely.

The outcome of this episode was that I found myself categorized as being 'unfit for foreign service', though by then I had been pumped so full of vaccines and antibiotics of one sort or another that I would probably have proved a match for every virus known to medical science. When I emerged from Sick Bay some two and a half months after entering it, they sighed with relief and promptly pushed me off on convalescent leave. Perhaps they hoped that I would catch bubonic plague and quietly expire in the fever-ridden swamps of East Anglia.

13

As was now my practice I spent most of that leave writing short stories, breaking off only to organize the Christmas Party. The highlight of this entertainment was an elaborate charade in four acts called *Total Annihilation*, a wild skit on life at the farm, in which I played my father, Weg (now having abandoned nursing in favour of reading for a degree in Modern Languages at Exeter University) played Mary, and my father was cast as 'Gruff

Jollocks' the Farm Manager. Undoubtedly he stole the show. He loved acting and, once he had decided really to let himself go, anything could happen. The one drawback to having him in your cast was that the rest of the performers were usually so thrown by his brilliantly comic ad-libbing that they not only forgot their own lines but, rendered helpless by laughter, were quite incapable of enunciating them even if they did remember them. I have, alas, long since forgotten most of that tragic masterpiece except for the final scene in which, like the last loyal soldier of the annihilated legion, Gruff Jollocks makes his final 'farm report', announcing to his despairing general how his companions met their grotesque ends and then, overcome with emotion, expires himself. Gruff's death agonies, punctuated by a series of superb 'last lines' and posthumous 'afterthoughts' remain one of the most dearly cherished memories of all my days at the farm.

Although our charade was pure farce there was a hard substratum of truth underlying it. Early in the New Year Geoff announced his intention of leaving. It marked the end of the Old Order. My father, reviewing the situation in a Journal entry dated April 18th, 1946 wrote: 'More epoch making (as our epochs go) is Geoff's decision to leave. His initiative, intelligence, and all-round capacity, have been counterbalanced ever since we came here three and a half years ago, by his egotistic individualism and his complete failure to establish a decent human relation with his fellow-members. He has been a good farm-planner, an amazing worker, and a thoroughly bad farm-foreman. The original 'Langham Group' were simply his yes-men, who followed his lead in everything. With our coming to Thelnetham the position was gradually revolutionized: first, because I was now ultimately in control, and second, because men came to the place who were primarily my followers—like Dugald, Paul and Bryan—or with a Holton Beckering background. A steady current of criticism of Geoff began. The weaker vessels, having failed immediately to dislodge Geoff, departed—Bruce, Hubert, Alan, Bryan. The others went through a bad time, but stuck it. Now, besides

Geoff himself, of the old Langham Group only Little John (John Price) and Francis remain, and they also have become critical of him. So it has become inevitable that Geoff should go. . . .'

Three years later, in *Community Farm*, he was able to take a more generous view of Geoff: 'I was inclined to remember only what most needs to be remembered about Walter (Geoff): that, but for the assurance of his help, I should never have embarked on the venture at the farm, and but for his unwearying labours I should have been in a much worse position than I was. Since, even in my blackest moments, I never regretted the venture, I owed him much . . . we parted good friends, and wiser than when we met.'

Geoff apart, 1945 was to be, for my father, a period of painful reappraisal and reassessment. The end of the war had brought in its wake horrific revelations of the truly diabolic nature of Nazism which could no longer be discounted as Allied propaganda. These things had happened and, in Russia, were still happening. What attitude was a pacifist to take? The problem, in his view, broke itself down into 'two deep-seated doubts: one, whether pacifism has any answer to totalitarianism; two, whether one pacifist in ten has honestly faced the problem.' Auschwitz, Belsen and the Katyn Forest massacres had, as he saw it, 'changed the whole frame of reference within which modern pacifism was conceived.'

His awareness of this change led to his increasing dissatisfaction with the Peace Pledge Union—a dissatisfaction which he made only too clear in his articles in *Peace News*. Inevitably this led to friction which culminated in an open attack upon his editorship of the paper at the P.P.U. Annual General Meeting. Partly relieved, partly sickened by it all, my father announced his resignation as Editor and retired thankfully from the scene.

Any similarity between this disillusionment and some of my father's previous intellectual crises is genuinely superficial. Now, for the first time in his life, he was not alone. Things 'out there' might fall apart but the centre could—and did—hold.

This centre was his love for Mary and hers for him. Their trust in each other was absolute. Neither wavered. As he saw it, after a lifetime of heartache and anguish he had been vouchsafed a miracle. One entry in his Journal written at about this time encapsules his own childlike sense of wonder better than any of a multitude of others: 'Our love is absolutely simple, yet it is surpassing. I can say with literal truth that every waking moment of every day is somehow transfused with it. I live—we live—in a quite new dimension of experience, in which the ordinary is magical. And so we have lived now for over five years—or is it six?—during which time the love has grown richer, more all-pervasive, from month to month, from week to week. That is the simple fact. On any showing it is marvellous. Were I to die tonight, this miracle has been. . . .' Only those who have never fallen in love themselves would deny the validity of that experience, but to me the true essence of the miracle lies in the fact that they were to remain just as much in love with each other until the day he died.

14

For me 1946 was also to be something of a year of reappraisal, less profound I'm sure than my father's, but genuine enough for all that. The Navy, which had been just tolerable as long as the war lasted, now became wholly tedious. I was transferred from Dunfermline to Belfast and, later in the same year, from Belfast to R.N.A.S. Eglinton, near Londonderry. By then I had learnt the ropes well enough to be able to organize my life to my own best advantage. I read voraciously, played some hockey, explored the countryside on a bicycle along both sides of the Border, and carried out my Safety Equipment duties just efficiently enough to ensure that I was up-graded into a slightly higher paid category. Even so I would certainly not have

survived as successfully as I did had it not been for the Finnegans.

When he learnt that I was to be transferred to Eglinton my father wrote to me and suggested I called on a friend of his—a Professor Tom Finnegan—who, besides being a pacifist and a Classical scholar, was also the Principal of Magee University College, Londonderry. Because I was shy I delayed my first visit for several months. This was foolish of me since I thereby denied myself the chance of a longer acquaintance with one of the most delightful families I have ever known.

Tom was in his middle forties, an outstandingly handsome man with bright humorous blue eyes, light brown hair and a moustache. He would certainly have been offered a part on sight as an Arizona cattle-rancher by any Hollywood film director with an eye to the box-office. His voice might have militated against him though. It was soft, gentle, Northern Irish, and, in stark contrast to all one is nowadays inclined to associate with such an accent, he never spoke anything but tolerant good sense—at least not in my hearing. Agnes, his wife, was small, dark, vivacious and very pretty. They had four enchanting children. Ruth, thirteen years old, the eldest; Dairmid ten; David seven; and Clare, the baby, two and a half. Within a month I was infatuated with all of them—yes, even Tom!

It is quite clear to me now that what drew me so strongly to 6, College Avenue, Londonderry—their rambling, red-brick Victorian house which faced down the steep hillside to the Foyle estuary—was really no particular individual but the family itself. Here I dimly recognized the very thing I had tried so hard to make Larling into and what it had never been and never *could* have been. I simply adopted the Finnegans as my family surrogate and they, out of natural generosity, responded by adopting me. I was lent an attic room at the top of the house and there I would escape to write poetry, or simply to sit with my elbows propped on the windowsill, gazing out across the flickering estuary to where the sunlight winked from the windows of the waterside houses in distant Moville. And

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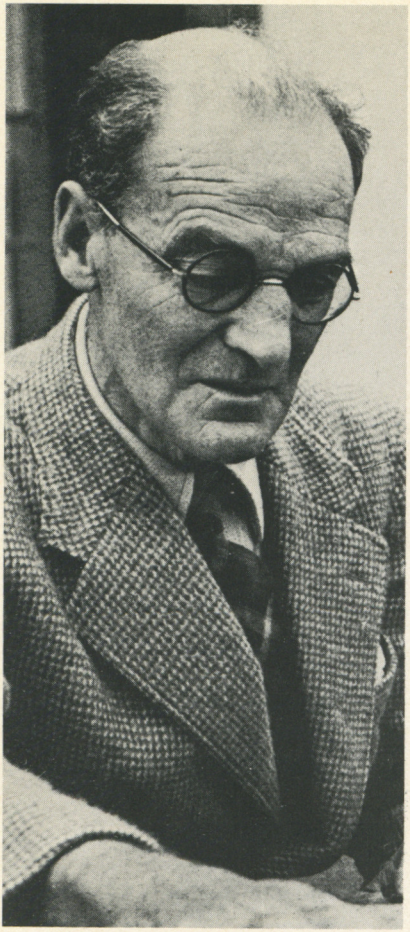
b

c

d

e

a. J. C. James, 1950
b. H. U. Molineux
c. D. W. Lee-Browne
d. Robin Wilson, 1939
e. Rendcomb College



a

b

a. John Middleton Murry, 1950
b. Mary and John Middleton Murry, 1955
c. Lower Lodge

c

a

b

c

d

a. Ruth and Colin Murry, London, 1948
b. Colin, Jackie, Helen, Italy, 1956
c. Weg, 1948
d. Ruth, October 1948

a

b

c

d

a. Uncle Richard and Victor Callaghan, 1950
b. Naval Airman John Middleton Murry, Ireland, 1947
c. John Harris, 1950
d. Frank Lea

gradually, inevitably, in a moony, hopelessly romantic sort of way, I fell in love with Agnes.

She was perplexed, wholly sensible and, I am sure, more than a little touched. She made an excellent 'Candida' and gave me lots of sound advice which, at the time, naturally I pooh-poohed. But at least she took me seriously—an act of real kindness for which I have never ceased to be grateful. Tom, understandably, did not. This irked me, but since the only alternative course of action open to him would have been to give me a hefty boot up the backside, I endured it stoically. Besides, I liked him enormously. His one overwhelming defect in my eyes was that he was married to Agnes.

This was the only period in my life when I kept a Journal. It lasted for three months. Re-reading it after an interval of thirty years has been a curious—even a chastening—experience. Was I *really* like that, or did I only think I was? The work seems to have been inspired by Barbellion's *Journal of a Disappointed Man* which Agnes had lent me—at least there are various references to Barbellion scattered among the first few entries—but I found the Tragic Key hard to sustain and, early on, transposed into the pseudo-profound. Ah, those tortuous musings upon life, love and death! Death above all. I made a point of recording dreams in which I was either already dead, or actually in the process of dying, or just about to die. For one with as healthy an attachment to life as I had this strikes me as a rather bizarre preoccupation. However, these morbid introspections cease abruptly at the end of May with a brief entry recording a half-hearted attempt I made to gas myself. The truth is that, inadvertently, I came so close to succeeding I damn nearly *frightened* myself to death! When I had stopped vomiting (it went on for hours) and had collected my scattered wits I took stock of my situation. Since I was plainly stuck for life with my lamentable personality the only course of action left open to me was to alter my appearance. Plastic surgery being beyond my means I decided to follow the example of Theodore Gumbril Jnr. in *Antic Hay* and to grow a beard.

To do this I had first to request permission to 'Discontinue

Shaving'. Accordingly I filled out a request form and in due course appeared before the Station Commander. Now, by an odd coincidence, the only other man with a beard on all that vast Air Station was the Commander himself—a giant of a man topped off by a superb set of blond whiskers of which any Viking chieftain would have been proud. I came to attention before him and listened to my request being read out. He looked me slowly up and down and his thin, thoroughbred nostrils twitched disdainfully. 'So you wish to grow a beard, do you?'

'Yes, sir,' I said, with what I hoped was true masculine firmness.

There was a long, ego-shrivelling pause, then: 'And do you really think you *can*?'

How is it possible to convey all the infinite reverberations of humiliation which he contrived to load into that one little word? It was absolutely masterly. Like Phlebas the Phoenician I passed the stages of my age and youth and entered the whirlpool, and all in the space of a single second. 'Yes, sir,' I squeaked. 'I think so.'

He sighed. 'Oh, very well. Request granted. Report to me again in a month's time. No'—he smiled faintly—'perhaps we'd better make that *two* months.'

As I whipped on my cap, saluted and marched out, I felt every bit of two inches high.

I went into self-imposed purdah for a month and emerged with a very presentable set of auburn whiskers. They made me look remarkably like the sailor on the *Player's* cigarette packets. They also ensured that everyone on the Station recognized me on sight. This was by no means a disadvantage. In some odd fashion once I was bearded like the pard everyone seemed to look upon me as a familiar acquaintance—they knew me *ergo* I must know them. I became a 'character' and, as such, was allowed far greater licence than I would otherwise have been. Had I realized that this was going to be the result I would certainly have applied to grow hair on my face the moment I joined up.

Ever since I had met them Agnes and Tom had been urging me to go to University when the time came for my 'demob'—now due at the end of 1947. I was not particularly attracted to the idea until I discovered that if I succeeded in obtaining a university place I could apply to have the date of my release advanced by several months. This put an entirely different complexion on the matter. I made the necessary enquiries, wrote off to Mr Stallybrass, the Principal of Brasenose College, Oxford, and was invited to present myself for the entrance exam. I applied to the Captain of the Station for permission to attend, found him remarkably sympathetic, and, in due course, rolled up at B.N.C. Rather to my surprise I was accepted by the college as a suitable candidate to read English Literature. However, before I could do so, I was informed there was the minor formality of Latin to be overcome. On hearing this I said that we might as well call the whole thing off at once since, as far as I was concerned, Latin was an absolute non-starter. Their response was to offer, as an alternative, Physics and French. What bearing these subjects could possibly have upon English Literature was beyond my comprehension, but since everybody was obviously trying so hard to be helpful it seemed churlish not to agree. Accordingly I allowed my name to be entered for Responsions at the end of September and began, in a desultory way, to renew my slender acquaintance with Ohm's Law and the Pluperfect Subjunctive.

To help things along (and, incidentally, to interpose the width of the Irish Channel between myself and Agnes) I applied for a month's 'Further Education and Training Course' at H.M.S. *Cabbala*. This turned out to be yet another nissen-hutted encampment moored in the Cheshire countryside just outside Crewe. It was an easy-going place; the weather that June was delightful; and I soon discovered how little French I knew. I worked quite hard but my heart wasn't really in it. My trouble stemmed mainly from the fact that I was by no means convinced that I *did* want to go to Oxford. Somehow I had allowed myself to be manoeuvred into the position by taking the line of least resistance. If I had thought about it a bit more

I believe I should have thrown up the whole idea and opted for Art School instead. But by then it was already too late. My father had expressed himself delighted when he heard I was applying to B.N.C. and I knew, only too well, that if I backed out now it would, in his eyes, constitute still further evidence of my already grievous moral degeneration.

I had been back in Ireland a bare two weeks when the order for me to report down to Lee-on-Solent for demobilization came through—almost exactly three years to the day since I had wandered disconsolately through the gates of H.M.S. *Royal Arthur*, Skegness. In those three years I had been taught how to pack parachutes and rubber dinghies and had learned how to roll cigarettes by hand. In retrospect it seems a somewhat slender return for the investment.

15

In October 1946 my father and Mary had moved out of Lodge Farm into a pretty little house called The Poplars three hundred yards down the road. The move had been timed to coincide with my father's handing over of the editorship of *Peace News* to Frank Lea and, though it marked the end of his actual physical presence in 'the community', it also meant that he was now able to take up a more immediate supervisory role in the day to day running of the farm. At about the same time Val had moved into a vacant cottage which stood roughly half way between the farmhouse and The Poplars but rather closer to the latter. In this it neatly reflected the position she herself occupied in relation to the two establishments. Paul and Joan Hobson moved into the farmhouse with their two small sons where, with varying degrees of success, they endeavoured to provide a stable nucleus for the odd assortment of 'irregulars' who now constituted the Group.

A month after moving into the new house my father started work on *The Free Society*, the book which was to become his final 'thought-adventure'. In it he states his object quite categorically. 'With this book, which is the first-fruits of my continuous thinking during the war, I discard my pacifism, and deliberately enter the political arena, in the hope that I may persuade my countrymen to make their political purposes completely unambiguous, and make it plain to all the world that they will contemplate war for one purpose and one purpose only, which they will declare with absolute clarity, and from which they will not deviate: the abolition of war, in the only way war can be abolished, by the establishment of a free society of nations.'

As T. S. Eliot pointed out in his review of the book: 'When a writer convinces you that his primary concern is to get his own ideas right, rather than to persuade the reader; and when, in so doing, he reveals the struggle which he has had to make, in altering his beliefs, the results may be something that can be called, in a wholly eulogistic sense, a "confession".' Since much of my father's best work is 'confessional' in Eliot's sense, he was perhaps justified in hoping that *The Free Society* would make a genuine political impact and help to usher in the millennium. It didn't. No sooner had it appeared in the bookshops than Malcolm Muggeridge leapt into print in *The Daily Telegraph* and in a superb example of the pot calling the kettle black, lambasted my father for being 'at different times almost everything, but nothing long'. Some others followed in more or less similar vein, but generally speaking, the book was ignored. The main reason, I believe, is that *The Free Society* could hardly have appeared at a less propitious moment. By advocating, as he did, that the Western powers should threaten the Soviet Union with the atom bomb in order to get Stalin to participate in Baruch's 'International Atomic Authority'—if necessary going to the ultimate point of fighting 'the one just War' to achieve their aim—he badly misjudged the spirit of the time and paid the penalty.

When eventually I came to read the book for myself I

confess that I too gagged at the thought of actually dropping atom bombs on innocent people no matter how just the cause might be. It seemed to me that, from the best of motives, my father had inadvertently fallen into the trap which, a few years later, was to claim pundits in the Pentagon—in short his imagination had failed him. But now I am not so sure. Maybe he *was* right and, if the chance had been seized firmly while it was still available, the Gulag Archipelago might simply have withered away without the dropping of a single bomb. I can't help wondering what Alexander Solzhenitsyn would have advised.

As far as I was concerned the move to The Poplars (soon to be re-named Lower Lodge) had much to recommend it. Fond as I had been of my garret at the farm I had never felt myself to be a bona fide member of the community. What I hungered for was a family in which I did not have to *earn* the right to occupy a place. When, in October 1946, I had come home on leave to find I had been given a pleasant, ground floor room in the new house, complete with knee-hole desk, bookcase and bed, I had celebrated my good fortune by writing half a dozen short stories which, I knew, marked a real advance on anything I had done so far. As soon as I had finished one I would trot round to Hill Cottage and try it out on Val. To her I confided all my hopes, my ambitions and my doubts. And she responded by encouraging me.

By now I was beginning to see my work appearing in some of the little magazines which had sprung up like mushrooms during the war. They never paid me more than pin-money but this did not worry me particularly. For the time being it was sufficient reward just to see my own name in print alongside O'Flaherty, Williamson or Bates. I was quite certain that it was merely a matter of time before my stories appeared between hard covers and the reviewers fell over each other in the mad scramble to acknowledge my talents.

When I arrived home on 'demob' leave at the beginning of August 1947 I lost no time in getting back to my desk and committing to paper a new crop of stories. The realization that

I would not have to break off to report back from leave gave me a new and heady sense of freedom. I wrote from early morning until late at night and blissfully ignored the fact that I should have been employing the time swotting up French and Physics. As far as I was concerned I was kissing the Joy as it flew and living in Eternity's sunrise. My father, unfortunately for us both, did not see it in quite the same way. He began to drop acid hints that I was frittering my time away. An electric tension began to build up between us reminiscent of the old days when I had been working on the farm. Mary, who found herself caught in the middle of it, must have wondered what was happening to her 'perfect family'.

A contributory factor to the general unease was that my father had contrived, in the teeth of Betty's intransigent opposition, to obtain for young David a 'presentation' at Christ's Hospital. David, whose schooling had been woefully neglected, failed the simple entrance exam and my father had undertaken to coach him for a second attempt. He did this at the house of a friendly doctor in East Harling. The strain of this renewed contact with Betty was terribly wearing on him but, for David's sake, he was determined to go through with it. It was, as he truly remarked, 'a *crime* that I cannot have him (David) to myself. He still has all the makings of a charming and intelligent little boy. He has simply been neglected. It is pure vindictiveness that has kept me from contact with him for six years.'

August was three parts over when I reluctantly laid down my pen and picked up my French Grammar. My father suggested I might do worse than to prepare some unseen translations which he would go over with me. After a fortnight of this the static charge which had built up between us would have felled a full-grown ox. By September 13th my father was noting bleakly in his Journal: 'There is no doubt that the relation between Col and myself is wearing in the extreme, and that it would be far better—indeed, necessary, if there is no change—that he should not continue to live here.' Ten days later he commented: 'Col has gone off to Oxford to take

Responsions. I cannot help feeling it will be a minor miracle if he passes.'

No one would have endorsed that view more heartily than I, especially when, in conversation with a fellow candidate, I discovered to my dismay that, of the three subjects I was required to take, the English Literature was on set texts—three of which I had never read!—and that there was also a Physics practical exam. I rushed into Blackwell's, bought copies of the books, and 'read' them in the four hours still available to me. As for the Physics practical there was nothing for that but to pray.

My prayers were not answered. On the final afternoon I reported to the laboratories, was escorted to a bench and handed a slip of paper on which was printed a request that I should forthwith set about determining the electrical resistance of various lengths of wire and, having done so, plot these upon the sheet of graph paper provided. I surveyed the jumble of ammeters, voltmeters, junction boxes, and rheostats piled before me and realized that the game was finally up. On the point of abject surrender, curiosity overcame me. I began to connect everything up into one vast and involved circuit. It took me the better part of half an hour to complete and I was just about to attach the last lead to a three-pin plug, preparatory to inserting it in the mains socket and switching on, when a hand descended gently but firmly upon my shoulder and a voice murmured in my ear: 'I really *do* think that would be *rather* unadvisable in the circumstances.'

From my father's viewpoint this fiasco was but a further confirmation of my total lack of responsibility. I did not attempt to justify myself—how could I?—but I promised him solemnly that I would devote the next two months to redeeming myself. John Price was persuaded to give me some coaching in Physics Theory and it was arranged that, for one morning a week, I would cycle into the nearby market town and study Practical in the laboratory at the Grammar School. For the rest I concentrated upon French. When the details of my first abortive attempt came through I discovered that I had passed in

English, just scraped along the borderline in French, and failed hopelessly in Physics. Considering that I had read *Comus*, *Samson Agonistes* and *The Pardoner's Tale* for the first time on the morning before taking the English paper I did not feel too discouraged. My father kept his opinions to himself.

By December, thanks entirely to his patience and perseverance, my French had improved beyond recognition, but he and I had come perilously close to mutual homicide. We ground against each other like a couple of mill-stones. For some strange reason he found it all but impossible to give me any *positive* encouragement. My progress was marked by the grudging diminution of negatives. Three days before I returned to Oxford to re-sit the exam I handed him an unseen which, apart from one small grammatical error, was virtually faultless. He had spent three minutes hammering away at that solitary error when I could take no more and walked out leaving him in the middle of his sentence. Undoubtedly it was a relief for both of us when I left home.

This time I was sure I would pass but once again Fate decreed otherwise. Twenty minutes after entering the Physics Lab. for my Practical I was racked by a violent fit of vomiting—the direct result of an ill-advised over-indulgence in an Indian curry lunch. I had no option but to abandon the paper. Ultimately this turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me, but at the time I really felt as if all the Gods of Olympus had lined themselves up on the opposition benches.

When I got back home and told my father what had happened he looked as depressed as I felt. Sure enough, just before Christmas, the doleful news arrived. I had failed in the second of my Physics papers and would have to re-sit the whole exam. Mary, no doubt fearing some awful Greek tragedy was about to be re-enacted before her very eyes suggested that it might be better if I went up to London and worked at a crammer's for my third and final attempt. I accepted the offer with alacrity and fled at the beginning of January.

My father, at least as relieved as I was, noted in his Journal:

'It has been a shock to me to discover how little mental discipline he has acquired, how superficial is his grasp of his subjects; and a still greater shock—though, I think they are connected with one another—to realize what a weak character he is: how lacking in integrity and moral independence. His life on the lower deck of the R.N. must have had a thoroughly bad effect on him, and confirmed all his habits of escapism: his continuous flight from responsibility.' No wonder he was glad to see the back of me!

16

THE CRAMMERS we had pitched upon was Carlyle and Gregson's, better known in the trade as 'Jimmy's'. It occupied a peeling Victorian mansion in Earl's Court. Here, for a fee, the proprietors undertook to coach almost anyone for just about anything. A poet acquaintance of my father's, a Mr Ross Nichols, was the resident teacher of English and it was through his good graces that I was taken on at such short notice. He was a kindly and diffident man who suffered unduly from his inability to maintain discipline in his classes. I attended his lessons for a week or two, then, realizing my time could be spent more profitably elsewhere I elected to concentrate upon my French and Physics.

The Senior French class was run by a Mr Techela—a tall, gaunt and embittered man with a striking facial resemblance to the actor Louis Jouvet. He had no problems with discipline. After a week he informed me that my command of French was quite adequate for the purposes of Responsions and put me on to translating Victor Hugo and Baudelaire. I enjoyed the experience, not least because I realized how much he enjoyed talking about poetry. Behind his horn-rimmed spectacles his pale eyes would gleam with pleasure as he murmured—

Son parfum doux comme un secret
Dans les solitudes profondes.

How he came to be teaching at Jimmy's was a mystery. I gathered that he lived in a small private hotel in Kensington where he carried on a war of attrition against a group of ancient female residents to whom he referred collectively as 'the tabbies'. His favourite fantasy was that they were conspiring to waylay him on his way to the bathroom, drag him into a bedroom and there wreak a terrible revenge upon him. The precise form he expected this to take I never discovered, but he left me in no doubt that it would be *malveillant* in the extreme.

I spent the first fortnight of my stay in London at a Polish hotel which was just down the street from Jimmy's. Apart from myself the whole clientèle seemed to be composed of Polish ex-servicemen. Their English was rudimentary and social intercourse was limited to nods, shy smiles, and conversations with the four-year-old daughter of the proprietor. She used to visit me in my room, lay her heavily swaddled teddy bear on my bed and inform me gravely that he 'ver' ill, 'mos' *dead*'. Unable to ignore such an appeal to my humanitarian instincts, I scrubbed his snout vigorously with my tooth brush and restored him miraculously to life, but by the following evening he was always at death's door again.

From the Polish hotel I moved on to a room in nearby Nevern Place. This I shared with a boy who was studying radio technology at Hammersmith Polytechnic. His name was Henry Arthur Soames but for some obscure reason he preferred to be called 'Bash'. He was a good-natured chap but he had only two subjects of conversation—food, and short-wave radio. He was always hungry. It was fatal to leave any half-finished tin around for, by the morning, it would be empty. He just couldn't help helping himself. Sometimes, I think, he did it in his sleep.

A little way down the road from our house there was a large Residential Club. One evening when I got back from Jimmy's I was greeted by Bash with the news that he had found us a

splendid room in the Club at £2 10s. each a week, breakfast included. This was a full £1 a week less than we were already paying and that, to Bash, meant another £1 for *spaghetti alla Bolognese* at Bertorelli's.

The room was right at the top of one of the three adjoining houses which comprised the Club and from our windows we had a view across half of London. Bash was beside himself with excitement. In next to no time he had strung up an aerial between the chimney pots and had installed enough radio equipment to furnish a medium-sized control tower. Then, at about midnight, he would get down to work. 'KTG 32 calling XVP 27! KTG 32 calling XVP 27! Are you receiving me, XVP 27?' On and on through the night it went. His favourite 'contact' was a fellow 'ham' in Bolton—his home town—but even when they were in touch they rarely seemed to be able to think of anything to say to each other. Bash's life's dream was to pick up a 'Mayday' distress call, but he never did while I knew him.

After a fortnight's ineffectual pleading I could take no more. At three o'clock one morning I leapt out of bed, seized the cable of his earphones and wound it tight around his throat. As his cheeks began to turn puce I relented and released him. 'Eh, you daft booger,' he croaked. 'You might have killed me!'

'Next time I will for sure,' I said grimly. 'Are you receiving me KTG 32? Well, over and out!' That was one Mayday message that got through.

Although I was working away industriously at my French and Physics my social life had managed to get itself into an almighty tangle. I had taken advantage of my residence in London to renew and intensify my friendship with Rosamond who now had a job at the Courtauld Institute and was living with her mother in Hampstead. Then, out of the blue, I received a letter from the girl who had almost driven me distracted in the dinghy section at Arbroath. She informed me she was now studying nursing in London and would very much like to see me again. Who was I to turn down such an invitation? Meanwhile, among the residents at the Club I had found

a friendly and attractive girl who soon made it perfectly clear to me that we had more interests in common than just playing table-tennis in the evenings. Within a matter of weeks I had succeeded in plaiting all three of them into such an intricate emotional noose that it might well have done for me had I not discovered, right under my nose in the Physics Lab. at Jimmy's, the very person I had been searching for all my life.

It has often occurred to me that the key word in Marlowe's rhetorical question: '*Whoever loved that loved not at first sight?*' is really 'sight'. To see someone clearly, to isolate them from all the multifarious background clutter, to stop the film and cry: 'Hold it there!' and give to the still picture the whole of one's undivided attention, that is 'first sight'. When, one sunny afternoon in early March, I raised my eyes from the variable resistance which they had been contemplating with very little enthusiasm and saw, standing on the far side of the table from me, a girl wearing a white blouse under a primrose yellow cardigan, I stopped the film. She was not looking at me but down at the piece of apparatus before her and the torrent of afternoon sunlight streaming in through the dusty window fell full upon her face and transformed her eyelashes into arcs of misty gold. Our instructor's voice droned on and I let my eyes rove across her face like tipsy bees, exploring the curve of her downy cheek, the curl of her hair, the delectable line of her lip. Eventually, as though the very intensity of my absorption had drawn her attention to me she glanced up, stared at me with wide grey eyes for a long, startled second and then looked down again. I saw a faint sunset flush colour her cheeks and the tips of her ears, and at last I became aware that my heart was beating again.

At that time there were only three girls at Jimmy's; Barbara, who was in Mr Techela's class studying French and Latin; Mavis, whom we knew as 'the Bishop's daughter'; and Ruth. At lunch time the three of them would troop off in a chattering convoy to a nearby café escorted by a potential medical student called Jeff who had the interesting distinction of possessing one brown eye and one green one. I patronized a

rival establishment in company with an enormously tall ex-sailor I called 'Wings'. Between ourselves Wings and I referred to Jeff's entourage slightingly—and somewhat enviously—as 'the harem'. Now having seen Ruth clearly for the first time I made haste to transfer my allegiance to the other café and persuaded Wings to join me. From there it was but a short step to joining Jeff's group and, at the first opportunity, inviting Ruth to have tea with me after classes ended. She gave me a thoughtful look and then, rather hesitantly, agreed.

I had learnt from Barbara that Ruth's full name was Ruth Jezierski, that she was eighteen years old, and that she was retaking some Higher Level science subjects. I now set about building upon these slender foundations and discovered that she was the only child of Russian Jewish parents and that her father ran a wholesale tobacco business and was a prominent Zionist. I was far from sure what a Zionist was and, not wishing to confess my ignorance, asked her why she had chosen to study science.

'I didn't choose exactly. It just sort of happened.'

'Don't you like it, then?'

'Some of it's all right.'

She then began asking me about myself. Was it true that I was a writer? (this was something I had told Barbara). Did I write poetry? Had I read Louis Aragon and Lorca? She thought Lorca was terrific. What did I think? Naturally I thought that Lorca was terrific too. And Aragon? Yes, he was certainly terrific—this, mind you, on the strength of one translation of *Les Yeux d'Elsa* which I had read in a magazine and hadn't understood, but what the hell! It was to emerge later that we had both read the same popular translation of Lorca and that neither of us spoke a word of Spanish. No matter, it was heady stuff, and when I steered the conversation around to Sidney Keyes whom I was able to quote at length, I could see I was making a real impression. I promised to lend her my copy of *The Cruel Solstice* and my article on Keyes and then it was time for her to leave. I walked with her to the bus stop, waved her off, and remembered I had promised to take

Rosamond out to the cinema. I had been looking forward to it. Indeed, I still was, but perhaps not quite so eagerly as I had when I had first made the arrangement.

In retrospect it strikes me as curious that instead of becoming simpler my emotional life now became more complex and involved than ever. I rushed madly from one girl to another assuring each one how deeply fond of her I was. I wasn't lying either. I just couldn't bear to let any of them go. There they were, so warm, so loving, so obviously happy to have me around: and there was I basking in the sunshine of their pleasure. I really did want them to *enjoy* my making love to them; those little, inarticulate moans of pleasure; the way they shivered and rolled up their eyes in pure sensual abandonment, this was the very breath of life itself to me. Even so, I think I realized that, sooner or later, something would have to give somewhere.

At the end of March I went back to Oxford for the third time. I was lent a room at the top of the Old Quad in B.N.C. The electric fire was on the blink and gusts of rain exploded against the leaded windows like fistfuls of gravel. Nosing disconsolately in the back of a cupboard I found some sheets of crested College notepaper and squatting cross-legged before the fitfully glowing fire I wrote a letter to Ruth, warming my chilled hands upon her in my imagination. I wasn't sure if the girl I was talking to really existed, and half-suspected that my letter would come winging back marked 'Not Known At This Address'. Even so, in some obscure way, I must have sensed that the eventual outcome could well be infinitely more important to me than the examination I was about to sit. When I had finished my letter I walked out into the High Street and posted it. The moment I let it drop into the letter box I felt a sense of relief so profound that it seemed to bear almost no relation at all to anything I had actually said to her.

The examination itself was something of an anti-climax. I knew I had passed from the moment when I picked up the slip of paper asking me to perform an experiment which I had carried out successfully three days before at Jimmy's. I could

have written it up, results included, without even laying a finger on the apparatus. When it was over I returned to B.N.C. had a celebratory drink with a cheery ex-R.A.F. fellow candidate, and caught the first available train back to London.

From the Club I phoned Ruth at her parents' flat in Belsize Park and told her I was coming round to see her. Then I hurried out and caught a bus to Swiss Cottage. She met me at the door and led me down the narrow hall into her own room. 'Well, how did it go?' she said.

'All right. I'm pretty sure I've passed. I was dead lucky in the practical.'

There was a pause which seemed to drag out to infinity. 'Did you get my letter?'

She nodded and glanced at me sideways out of the tail of those grey Muscovite eyes—a strange, disquieting, speculative look. It brought me up short. For a second I seemed to see myself as she was seeing me. It made me go cold inside, 'Well?' I prompted.

'Well, what?'

'You didn't—well, *mind* my writing to you like that?'

'No.'

I breathed again. 'Oh, come on,' I said. 'Let's go for a walk.'

For an hour or so we wandered round the streets of Hampstead. There was a suspicion of fog in the air and the lamps all had fluffy haloes. Like our route our conversation seemed to have no direction, no purpose. And at last, in no particular street, for no particular reason, I suddenly discovered where it was I had been going. I stopped, placed my hands on her shoulders, turned her face towards mine and asked her to marry me.

Whatever she might have been expecting me to say I now know for a certainty that it wasn't that. After all, from any sane point of view, it would have been far less risky for her if I had proposed that she shut her eyes and jumped off the Tower Bridge. But she hesitated for barely a second before she grinned broadly and said: 'All right.'

I could hardly believe my ears. 'Christ!' I exclaimed reverently. 'You *will*?'

She began to laugh, then she put her arms round me and kissed me. 'Do you know what?' she said. 'Before you came round this evening I'd more or less decided to tell you it was all off between us. Isn't that strange?'

17

So it came about that on a misty evening in late March, 1948, I finally discovered where I was going, and why I was going there, and who I was going there with. Or, to put it another way I had at last found a girl who believed in me (*ME*!!) and was prepared to trust me without reservations. Having done so I was not going to let her out of my sight if I could help it. That meant finding myself a job up in London. I dashed down to Norfolk, was greeted with the news that I *had* passed Responsions, and persuaded my father to write me a couple of brief letters of introduction to Dick de la Mare at Faber and Faber and to Jonathan Cape. Armed with these I presented myself in the hopeful guise of a willing lad at 30, Bedford Square and 24, Russell Square.

Neither of the august gentlemen seemed to see me as the answer to their prayers, but Mr Cape, after spending a full half hour telling me just what a parlous state publishing was in and how nobody was buying books any more, concluded his doleful litany by offering me a job as a junior assistant in his packing department at £3 10s. a week. I accepted gratefully, though even *my* mental arithmetic was up to telling me that after paying £2 10s. for my room at the Club I would not have much left over for riotous living.

After six weeks in Cape's basement it had become very clear to me that unless I could somehow contrive to push my salary

up to £4 I would sink without trace. Even counting the odd fifteen bob supplement gained by an occasional night's dish-washing in Lyon's Corner House, I was still left floating so low in the water that the merest unexpected ripple was sufficient to submerge me. To save fares I walked whenever I could only to discover that the cost of shoe repairs negated my economies. Finally one day I screwed my courage to the sticking point, and went to see a junior director to whom I blurted out my request for a modest rise. He didn't even bother to hear me out. 'This isn't a charity institution, Murry. You're probably not worth what we're paying you as it is. Close the door behind you.'

I stared at him. He reminded me overwhelmingly of all the jumped-up little jerks I had had to endure for three long years in the Navy. Worst of all I knew he was relishing every moment of it. A favourite phrase of Bob Church's danced on the tip of my tongue—'a third-class prick acting the first-class turd!' but, alas, I was too cowardly to say it. I just walked out and kept on walking.

So ended my first paid job. On my way back to Nevern Place I called in at the local bookshop and asked the proprietor whether he had any use for an assistant. He eyed me doubtfully, while exploring the hairy cavity of his right ear with the point of a propelling pencil. 'Do you know anything about book cataloguing?'

'Of course,' I said.

To my astonishment he took me at my word. He drew a cyclo-styled pamphlet out of a drawer of his desk and handed it to me. 'I've got a load of second-hand stuff down in the cellar. It needs cataloguing before I can circularize it. Use that as your model. It shouldn't take you more than a fortnight. I can pay you fifteen pounds for the job. All right?'

So I became a book cataloguer. With the aid of a ruler and the back pages of *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* I had soon mastered the technical jargon and could rattle off 'Demy oct. slt fxng. gd cp.' as though I'd lisped it in my cradle. But I had completed the job in ten days and Mr Bowles had no more

work to offer me. So I put on my one and only suit and began touting myself around the bookshops in the Charing Cross Road.

To start with I was all forelock-tugging diffidence, but as the days ticked by and it became obvious that I was getting nowhere my attitude began to change. Not that it made much difference but it saved quite a lot of time.

When I was down to my last thirty shillings I marched into Bumpus's in Oxford Street. By now my skin had thickened to a tough carapace. I had also discovered the advantage of making a few discreet preliminary enquiries. 'I've come to see the manager,' I announced, looking the shopwalker right in the eye.

'You have an appointment, sir?'

'I'm sure Mr Wilson will see me,' I countered.

The man's eyes flickered. 'Could I have your name, sir?'

'Middleton Murry,' I said suavely.

It worked! 'Will you come this way please, Mr Middleton Murry?'

I followed him through to the back of the shop where he knocked on a door, nodded to me to wait and then vanished inside the room. A moment later he was out again. 'Mr Wilson will see you now, sir.'

He held the door open for me and in I went.

A little balding man with a grey moustache and gold-rimmed spectacles was sitting behind a large wooden desk which was elbow deep in papers and magazines. All around him were stacks and shelves of books. Behind the glasses a pair of sceptical blue eyes twinkled at me. 'Aye,' murmured a very Scots voice, 'you *could* well have been him—thirty years ago! The resemblance is quite remarkable. You *are* his boy, I take it?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

He smiled. 'And what can I do for you, laddie?'

'Mr Wilson, you can employ me.'

'Oh-h-h, so you want a *job*, do you? Well, what can you do?'

I told him I had just finished preparing a book catalogue and that previously I had worked at Jonathan Cape's. Like Marmite I made a little go a long way, and, in the words of the immortal Dr Fagan did not hesitate to 'temper discretion with deceit'.

He heard me out and then he laughed. 'Well, it just so happens that I *could* use someone to do some cataloguing. When we were bombed out a lot of our stock was simply shovelled up and dumped here. Some of it's still lying where it was dropped. Come on, I'll show you.'

He extricated himself from behind his fortress of a desk and led me into a nearby room where heaps of books were lying all over the floor. There were more books piled on the chairs and on the desk and stacked higgledy-piggledy on the dusty shelves. Mr Wilson stooped and picked up a large vellum-covered volume. 'Do you know what that is?' he asked.

I peered at it and shook my head.

'The Kelmscott *Chaucer*.' He chuckled and laid the book down on the cluttered desk. 'Well, what do you think? Shall we let you loose on our Augean Stable?'

I looked round the room and my heart sank. 'I just wouldn't know where to begin, sir,' I said.

'Och, it's nothing near so bad as it looks,' he said cheerfully. 'We'll give you a set of index cards to work with and we'll show you what to do. You'll soon get the hang of it.' He bent down and blew a puff of dust off the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. 'The job's yours if you want it.'

'Thank you very much,' I said.

'Well, that's fine then. You can start at nine on Monday.'

I nodded.

He looked up at me with his head cocked on one side. 'And are you not going to ask me what I'll be paying to a gentleman of your . . .' he paused, momentarily, as if searching through a box of *mots justes* with a pair of tweezers '. . . "professional" experience?'

I looked at him and laughed.

'Shall we say £8 a week?'

He probably never knew how close he came then to being kissed!

I worked at Bumpus's until the end of August. Everyone was extraordinarily kind and considerate to me—no one more so than John Wilson himself. When business was slack in the afternoons he sometimes used to wander into my little office to gossip about his early days in the bookselling trade and the great men he had known and befriended. He had a passionate, almost religious, faith in books—'The foundation of our civilization'—and, unlike a lot of booksellers, he both foresaw and welcomed the imminent 'paper-back revolution'. Just before I left he suggested to me that when I had taken my degree I should come back and join the firm, and really learn the whole business from the bottom up. I felt deeply flattered, but I knew that I would never do it.

I doubt whether I earned my keep for John Wilson but I did unearth a number of treasures—among them a rare first edition of *Paradise Lost* which he believed had been destroyed in the Blitz. And there was one very odd discovery which is perhaps best described in this entry from my father's Journal which is dated July 10th, 1948.

'Col came to meet him (David) and to see him off—primarily to help deal with Betty if she turned up. He was in a most delightful mood: I think the very best I have known him in. At any rate I feel that I have had more plain simple pleasure out of the one and a quarter hours we had together than I have ever had from a meeting with him before. He gave me a letter written by Aldous Huxley to Catherine Carswell in October 1931, which, by a truly extraordinary coincidence he had found inside a volume of Lawrence's *Letters* which he was cataloguing at Bumpus's. It is a denunciation of my *Son of Woman*, and is a document well worth preserving.

'I still believe my *Son of Woman* is a good and essentially true book: much the profoundest criticism of Lawrence that has yet been written. Of course it ought to be. I was much more deeply *involved* with Lawrence than any of his other friends. For good or ill, in attraction or repulsion, he had a much

greater influence on me than them. The objection of Huxley (like that of E. M. Forster) to it is really because it took Lawrence *seriously* in a way they could not bear or dare to do. It was outside their frame of reference that Lawrence should really have meant what he said. As Huxley put it (from his angle) in this letter:

' "*It is one of the most odious and also one of the most extraordinary things I ever read—a vindictive hagiography, malice expressed in terms of worship. And that horrible Snuffling Stiggins tone! Horrible. But it's done with great ability, of course. And the master-stroke of ignoring the fact that Lawrence was an artist!*"

'The implication being that Lawrence, being an artist, did not mean what his books so plainly said. All his doctrines, all his conscious or unconscious themes, the intense underlying drama of his books considered as the working out of the great debate within his soul—all this is irrelevant, a kind of intellectual postulation of possibilities, of the same kind as that in which Aldous Huxley himself, or even more ably, E. M. Forster, himself indulges.

'It is they who diminish Lawrence—not I. For Lawrence was *not* an artist, in that sense at all. He *was* a genius. And although, no doubt, I see him too exclusively with the same kind of vision that he applied to his predecessors (in *Studies in Classical American Literature*) and do not give attention enough to the sheer "magic of style"—the creative evocation of his writing—my emphasis is right where theirs is wrong. I can leave what they want done to others to do—they could do it very well themselves. I did, *for* Lawrence, what only I could do.

'The shocked shrieks have died down now—whether of those who want Lawrence comfortably reduced to another "artist" like themselves, or those who (like Catherine Carswell) were in love with him: but I think the substance of my book will stand. Indeed, it has never been seriously challenged at all.

'And I had good reason to write the book. I had to continue my struggle with Lawrence—to make up my mind, to make up my *being* rather, whether he was *right* or *wrong*: That was a

matter of vital concern to me. It didn't matter a damn to a Huxley or a Forster. *Il y va de ma vie.*

'It comes back to me all the more forcibly as I have been working patiently through Katherine's letters, and become the more conscious of the absolute antithesis between what Katherine and I were and stood for and what Lawrence was and stood for. (Notably, Katherine was more violently offended by Lawrence than even I was.) I think, at that time, we were authentic polar opposites, and *both* wrong. The intensity of Katherine's exquisite spiritual love was as extreme, and ultimately as unlivable, as Lawrence's plunge into animal darkness. . . .'

The reference to 'working patiently through Katherine's letters' alludes to his definitive edition of Katherine Mansfield's correspondence with him which he was then preparing. It was to take him the better part of a year to complete and, to judge from the occasional comments he made in his Journal while he was working on the book, it caused him an appalling anguish of the spirit. One entry will suffice to show what I mean. 'Tuesday, August 10th. . . . Today I resumed transcribing K's letters. It is notable how I still shrink from any in which she is disillusioned in me—no matter how familiar they are. I still go sick in the belly with apprehension of them (e.g. those where she is hurt by my failure immediately to go to Paris from Montana, which I am now transcribing) even though *I know* that in a day or two it will be all over, as though it had not been. God! how terrible are one's failures in *love*. They haunt the secretest places of one's soul for years and years—*for ever*. Even though they are, in a sense, tiny and almost trivial, they are enormous and *absolute*. And what good would it do to "open them to God"? God himself cannot pardon them. That is my feeling; that my experience. But what do I mean by saying that?

'Of these offences against Love, it corresponds to nothing in my experience to say that God will or can forgive them. With whatever content *I* can fill the word "God", it is irrelevant to say—by any metaphor—that God can or does forgive these

offences. If He does (so to speak) I don't care: it makes no difference to me. *I* cannot forgive them; and that is the important thing. They are offences against Love, and as such, somehow unforgivable.

'I don't know whether "unforgivable" is the word. The fact is these offences are little raw incurable wounds—in me: in the Love which is the better and the only precious part of me. And it would not be even true to say (as I was tempted to) that only Katherine herself could forgive the offence and heal the wound. She did so—absolutely. I know that. There is no doubt about it. But it makes no *difference now*, though (of course) it made all the difference then.'

Why then did he not publish his own side of their correspondence along with hers? He was in a position to do so and the book which would have resulted would have been of far greater value to posterity. The answer, I believe, is that by letting Katherine have not only the last word but *all the words*, he was deliberately punishing himself for what he must surely have seen as his own sins against the Holy Ghost.

Towards the end of August I quit Bumpus's and travelled to the south of France to join Ruth who was on a cycling holiday with her French cousins. By then we had made our engagement official—a matter of far greater concern to her parents than to mine. As lifelong Zionists the Jezierskis had assumed, not unnaturally, that their only daughter would marry a Jew, and though they seemed to like me well enough as a person, this was one condition I was unable to fulfil. Mr Jezierski, who was surely one of the kindest and least egotistical men I have ever met, was plainly upset and bewildered by what had happened. But he made no attempt to forbid it, and as it became apparent to him how happy we were he finally came to accept me as a tolerable future son-in-law. Since my material prospects were negligible this can be taken as a fair indication of how much he loved his daughter.

When we returned from Provence I invited Ruth down to Norfolk to meet my family. Although she was scared stiff at the prospect she seems to have passed her test with flying colours

as far as my father was concerned. I really have no idea of the kind of girl he thought I might fall in love with—indeed, he had earlier expressed the opinion that I was far too cynical for such a thing ever to happen—but he judged Ruth to be 'essentially fine' and noted in his Journal that there was no doubt in his mind that I had vastly improved since meeting her.

A week later he returns to the theme again. 'Sunday October 3rd 1948. I am still deeply impressed by the extraordinary, the miraculous improvement in Col's relation with me. Almost without noticing it, since he came home this time, I have felt more and more *natural* with him. That awful "consciousness", that acute and bewildering sense that he was subtly but fundamentally hostile to me, seems to have dissolved away. Almost without my noticing that it was going, it is gone. I cannot help speculating whether this radical change of attitude has been made possible by his falling in love with Ruth. In her presence he blossoms. She gives him a sense of his own validity. Judged by the effect upon him she is just the girl for him. I am profoundly glad.'

Truly we had come a long way in nine months!

18

Although, looking back, it seems strange and even rather ungrateful, the truth is that no sooner had I succeeded in getting in to Oxford than I was longing to be out of the place. To spend three interminable years acquiring a degree when all I really wanted to do was to explore Ruth and to write stories struck me as a gross inversion of priorities. The discovery that I would also be expected to acquire a working knowledge of Anglo-Saxon and—far worse—somehow contrive to persuade the university examiners that I had done so, came close to convincing me that I was making a truly disastrous mistake. I sought out John Lawlor, my tutor,

and laid my case before him. He listened sympathetically. Although there was no way of escaping Anglo-Saxon altogether there was, it appeared, a short cut available to me. As an ex-Service undergraduate I could opt for a 'Shortened Honours' course. This would mean cramming all my Anglo-Saxon into my first two terms and taking an examination in the spring, the result of which would eventually count as part of the Finals I would then sit at the end of my second year. The one drawback to this alternative was that if I failed to satisfy the examiners in 'Sections' I would find myself out on my ear. It took me about ten seconds to decide that the risk was worth it.

Under this extra academic pressure and with my spiritual centre of gravity firmly fixed in Hampstead I was not in the best position to take full advantage of all that the university had to offer. It was, in any case, a curious time to be up at Oxford. Most of the male students were ex-Service types whose primary concern was to gain their degree and then to set about making up for lost time. These studious and sober veterans who had long since sown their own wild oats in distant parts of the world took a dim view of the handful of fluffy-chinned striplings who, freshly shucked from the pods of their public schools, got noisily drunk on college ale and were then noisily sick on the stairs afterwards. The gulf which divided the boys from the men in 1948 sometimes seemed so wide as to be all but unbridgeable.

The system prevailing at Oxford meant that I would be sharing a weekly literature tutorial with another B.N.C. undergraduate. I found myself paired off with a man whom I had first met eighteen months earlier when we had both come up to take the College entrance exam. Victor Callaghan was an ex-Sub Lieutenant/Pilot in the Fleet Air Arm, a few years older than me, married and with two infant sons. Having been signed on as a boy-seaman in the Royal Navy he was virtually self-educated. Realizing that his only hope of breaking free from the Navy lay in winning a commission from the lower deck and then resigning it he had done just that. His accounts of the six month 'Upper Yardman's' course which was designed

to convert him from an uncouth rating into an officer and a gentleman were both nightmarish and hysterically funny. His opinion of the Navy chimed perfectly with my own and we became inseparable companions.

Victor was blessed with more native intelligence than I was but, initially at any rate, lacked my gift for expressing myself gracefully on paper. Each essay he was confronted with seemed to rear up before him like the North Face of the Eiger. I found it difficult to appreciate his problem. When we discussed a topic his observations were invariably lucid and original, and often profound; but no sooner had he taken up his pen than his thought-stream seemed to coagulate. His trouble stemmed partly from the fact that he already knew *too much*; fascinating analogies between literature, psychology, anthropology and various other fields of knowledge were always bubbling up and distracting him from the job in hand which, more often than not, would be a dissertation upon some totally uninspiring topic like pre-Shakespearean comedy. Unquestionably I learnt more from our wide-ranging discussions than he did. All I had to offer in return was my conviction that he deserved to get a First. This, reiterated at frequent intervals over the course of the two years during which we studied together, may ultimately have had a beneficial effect.

I don't think that either of us ever felt ourselves to be anything other than outsiders at Oxford. In the circumstances this was perhaps only to be expected. In our different ways we had both learnt that when it came to the crunch we had to rely upon ourselves. We also tended to distrust fashionable critical opinion and were easily bored by pedants. Very soon we had stopped going to Literature lectures altogether. The breaking point came when, having attended an address by a visiting American professor, we heard him roundly declare that English Literature had been in a state of steady decline ever since the glorious reign of Alfred the Great. As it dawned upon us that he genuinely believed what he was saying we knew that we were wasting our time. Thereafter we limited ourselves to

dropping in on the occasional epicurean performance by such noted eccentrics as the ancient and bewhiskered philologist Professor Onions, whose bat-like twitterings were inaudible beyond the first row of his audience and incomprehensible even there.

My weekly Anglo-Saxon tutorials took place in All Souls and were shared not with Victor but with an amiable American student named Chris Booker. Blond, plump, and with vague, baby-blue eyes, Chris seemed permanently bewildered by the English academic system. He informed me that he already had a degree from his State university back home and had assumed that this would qualify him for an Oxford post-graduate course of some kind. During his initial interview with the Senior Academic Tutor he had produced his Mid-Western B.A. Certificate as credential evidence. 'He looked at it,' Chris told me, 'and then he wrote something down on my form. I got to read it upside-down, and what do you think the crumb-bum had put?'

I shook my head.

Chris grinned. 'Where it said "Degree", he'd written in "No degree". Just like that. Some cool snoot, heh?'

When I was half way through my second term it struck me that unless I took some sort of violent evasive action I could well find myself lost with all hands on the reef of 'Sections'. Accordingly I set myself to learn off by heart all my Anglo-Saxon grammar and prescribed texts in the three weeks which still remained to me. The task was roughly equivalent to memorizing the whole of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* except that *The Martrydom of Saint Edmund*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Grammar* and so on could in no sense be said to correspond to Shakespeare. That I managed to do it at all strikes me today as worthy of wonder; that I should have been *required to do it* seems the only comment called for on the absurdity of the Oxford English Literature course. With the honourable exception of *The Seafarer* and *The Wayfarer* there is demonstrably nothing in the whole of Anglo-Saxon writing (*Beowulf* included) that is genuinely worthy of

study *as literature*. Why then are students of English Literature still compelled to study it? The answer, I can only suppose, is that a considerable number of comfortable university jobs depend upon their doing it.

It was during that second term at Oxford that I made my first meaningful connection between the work I was studying and my own experience of life. The breakthrough came with the poetry of John Donne. I remember reaching down a copy of the Everyman edition of the poems from the shelf in Blackwell's and reading on the very first page:

> *I wonder by my troth what thou and I*
> *Did, till we lov'd . . .*

It was as if I had been caught up by the scruff of the neck, lifted a couple of feet from the floor and shaken violently. Long before I had reached:

> *Who is so safe as we? Where none can do*
> *Treason to us, except one of us two*

I knew I had found what I had been looking for without ever being aware, until that moment, that I *had* been looking for it. What Donne provided me with was a touchstone of excellence; living proof that intensity of feeling was the very life-blood of great literature, and that the man within the poet was no less important than the poet within the man.

When, some months later, John Lawlor, seeking to deflate me, remarked with a sly grin: 'Goodness me, Murry, you'll be telling us next that it's no good unless you feel it down here in your solar plexus, like D. H. Lawrence', I was able, thanks to Donne, to look him straight in the eye and say: 'I don't mind *where* I feel it, sir, just so long as I *do*—somewhere.'

Neither Victor nor I ever really managed to come to terms with John Lawlor. Without being exactly Hilaire Belloc's 'remote and ineffectual don' he never succeeded in convincing either one of us that he regarded literature as being anything more than an interesting academic exercise. From behind his formidable critical barricades he peeped out at us, smiled his

shy sly smile and loosed off the occasional sniping shot which either pinged off us unheeded or hummed harmlessly past our ears. Once, when I had expressed pleasure at the prospect of writing an essay on the precursors of Romanticism he told me I was 'a very con-*ven*tional young man'. It was one of the few shots that got home, though to this day I am still not sure exactly what he meant. It has just occurred to me that he might even have intended it as a compliment. He was that kind of a man.

The rooms I occupied in B.N.C. were on the ground floor of the New Quad and my windows looked out directly on to the High Street. At about two o'clock each morning skeletal lorry chassis used to start roaring past on their way either to or from the Pressed Steel works at Cowley. At first, what with the thundering traffic and the multitudinous and unco-ordinated Oxford chimes I thought I should never again enjoy a night's sleep, but I soon got used to it.

The rooms immediately above mine were occupied by an ex-R.A.F. Pilot/Officer, John McLellan-Shields. I had first made his acquaintance when we were up for Responsions together. I knew him as 'Mac' and we shared a common grievance in 'Charlie' our ancient and rascally scout. Mac was an urbane and engaging character who was reading History. He led a far more active social life than I did and tried his best to persuade me to join the Oxford Union. Although he was unsuccessful in this he did inveigle me into taking part in an Inter-College cross-country run, even lending me a pair of his own shoes to run in. They were at least a size too small for me and by the time I had limped across the finishing line an ignominious three hundred and sixty-eighth behind the winner, Roger Bannister, my toes had swollen up like over-ripe aubergines. Three days later my toe nails had turned black and dropped off. Thereafter I restricted my sporting activities to playing hockey for the College.

It was through Mac that I was introduced to a picaresque individual called Mike Wise. He was an ex-Lieutenant in the Parachute Regiment, stood well over six feet and was nominally

studying Jurisprudence. I never saw him doing any work. Usually he was 'under the weather' recovering from a hangover. According to Mac he used the term-time for 'resting up' after his strenuous activities during the vacations. I never learned precisely what these were but I gathered that Cyprus and Israel and motor boats and contraband of various sorts, featured in them. Certainly Mike always seemed to be remarkably well-heeled.

One evening in April I was invited out to a party being given by the writers Maurice Cranston and Francis King who, it transpired, had recently read a story of mine in an American magazine. It was a cheerful—even gay—affair, but being a law-abiding citizen I felt constrained to leave when the fun was at its height. I trundled back into B.N.C. a few minutes before the gates shut at midnight and bumped into Mike Wise in the Lodge. Recognizing a strayed reveller when he saw one Mike asked me where I'd been and was horrified when he learnt that the party was still in full swing. Seizing me by the arm he scooted me straight out through the gates and back through the town to the scene of the action.

Some hours later when all the drink had been consumed Mike hauled me to my feet, dusted me down, and informed me that we would now climb back into B.N.C. via the Rector of Lincoln's garden. By then I was in no condition to argue and, like a balloon on a string, bobbed along tipsily in his wake as he strode off whistling down the empty, echoing alleys.

When we reached our destination he told me to follow him and to watch where I was putting my feet. The words were scarcely uttered before he himself had tripped full length over an empty dustbin. The noise in that confined alley was almost unbelievable. Within seconds a light had flashed on above us, a window screeched up, and a head in a mob nightcap had emerged and was demanding shrilly to know what was going on. It was so like a scene out of *The Pickwick Papers* that I began to laugh uncontrollably. Mike picked himself up, saluted the irate figure above us and announced gravely: 'Sanitary detail, madam. Early collection. Pray don't disturb yourself.'

By now I was laughing so much that my eyes were full of tears. Mike grabbed my arm, hoisted me up on to the top of a low wall and contrived somehow to steer me along it till we reached a row of spiked railings which divided the Rector's property from the ablutions block of B.N.C. 'What happens now?' I gurgled.

Mike stretched up, seized two adjacent railings and heaved them apart as though they were made of boiled macaroni. I squeezed through the aperture and emerged on to the slate roof beyond. 'O.K.,' he said. 'Now you hold them.'

I grabbed the rails, took a deep breath, and pulled. The instant he let go they twanged straight again. I doubt whether I have ever been closer to hysterics. Mike swore. 'We'll have the fucking riot squad along in a minute. Try using your bloody feet.'

I did, but it was no use. In the end he had to risk castration by standing on me and clambering over the top. We ended up in his rooms at five in the morning drinking—if my memory serves me correctly—vodka and blackcurrant juice cordial. It seems quite improbable enough to be true.

I had only one other occasion to climb into college. I had been up to London to see Ruth for the weekend and had returned to Oxford by the late train on Sunday night. For some reason it was delayed and I arrived back at B.N.C. at five minutes past twelve to find the gates locked. Enraged at the prospect of having to pay a sizeable fine through no fault of my own I stalked round into the High Street which was still brightly lit and busy and attracted Mac's attention by throwing a penny up against his first floor bedroom window. When he looked out I called to him that I was coming up. It was not a particularly difficult climb and I was soon inside. Mac was most impressed by my audacity and thereafter made use of the route on several occasions. Unfortunately it was not the kind of secret which could be kept for long and soon the High Street entry into B.N.C. was almost as popular as the tourist trail up Snowdon. Mac grumbled that he was having to do a porter's job (unpaid) opening his window all night long for an endless

procession of drunks. Even so, he was outraged when, on his return for the summer term, he found that the college authorities had screwed bars across his window and sealed it off. He blamed it on 'that incorrigible old rogue, Charlie', who, he maintained, had been angling for a bribe to keep his mouth shut.

1949 TURNED out to be one of those years when the peripheral pattern of my life underwent a subtle readjustment. The centre remained as before, steady as a spinning gyroscope, my love for Ruth. My father had been right when he observed that she gave me a sense of my own validity. I was beginning to believe in myself in a way I had never done before. But elsewhere the old order was changing.

On July 5th Weg married a young Belgian actor, Jean De Coninck, whom she had met while studying at the Sorbonne the previous year. I was appointed Best Man and Official Photographer for the ceremony. Film being hard to come by I had to make do with whatever I could get. The result was that when the pictures were eventually developed a number of the guests emerged looking as if they had been caught in a sooty blizzard or had contracted smallpox. That was the only hitch. The sun shone warm, the roses bloomed, and Weg drifted around in a sort of dopey golden haze of happiness. This at last was her day and no one was going to take it from her. Later, looking back upon the long and shadowy trail which had brought them both finally to this place and time, my father reflected: '. . . My faith is realized. The love that held us together then, the love of which I was conscious and she was not, is now come to consciousness in her. She will pass it on. It lives and moves and has its being—a golden thread in the

pattern. Love was in her making and in her nurture: through love she suffered—those nights when I held her crying in my arms in the dark at Larling—through love she now has her happiness. All is well. . . .'

Among the wedding guests were several who knew just how dark at times the trail had been—Bodge, our gardener and faithful friend from The Old Rectory; Mr and Mrs Hewetson our Larling neighbours; Frank Lea and my uncle Richard. Their knowledge must have lent real substance to the toast they drank to the happiness of the bride and bridegroom.

That same month Betty finally quit The Old Rectory and moved to a village near Winchester. Early in September I cycled over to Larling and saw The Old Rectory for the last time. I felt like a ghost as I wandered through the empty rooms furnishing them all from my memory. Mellow afternoon sunlight streamed through the uncurtained windows and splashed upon the bare board floors in the drawing-room and my father's study. Bluebottles buzzed against the window-panes, and upstairs, in what had been my own bedroom, a tortoise-shell butterfly fluttered. I opened the window and let it out. When I closed the sash again the silence was almost palpable.

I made my way out into the walled garden. Change and decay in all around I saw. Paths overgrown; espaliered apple trees, their trunks now as thick as my own thigh, branch-torn and broken; wasps pillaging the rotted fruit; grass waist high in the meadow; weeds rampaging everywhere. And yet in spite of the evidence of long neglect it was home to me in a way in which the farm or Lower Lodge would never be. I knew every corner of this house and garden, had made them so much a part of myself that even today if I need to visualize a landscape or even a mere room it is these that claim me first, importuning me, demanding their rights. It is as though I have first to pass through them and acknowledge them, before I can go beyond. They belong to me as I to them. And when my time comes I shall surely return to haunt them, like Mr Polly's ghost —'a sort of diaphalous feeling—just mellowish and warmish like. . . .'

After leaving Jimmy's, Ruth had found herself a job in the Cancer Research Department at Hammersmith Hospital where she spent her days injecting white mice with radio-active pink dyes. She enjoyed the work and was not in the least thrilled to hear that an earlier application she had made to read Science at University College, Leicester had finally been granted. Her parents, on the other hand, were delighted. No doubt they reasoned that a university degree on her own account would be a useful insurance policy if I failed to come up to scratch as a breadwinner.

A fortnight before her term was due to start she phoned me in acute dismay and told me she was almost certain she was pregnant. Our relationship being what it was this seemed only too likely. Having barely succeeded in persuading her parents to accept me as a possible son-in-law she was naturally aghast at the prospect of confronting them with such irrefutable evidence of my moral worthlessness. Yet, since at the age of twenty she was still technically under age, their permission would be required for an early marriage. The situation was, as they say, extremely delicate.

I laid our problem before Mary. She could not have been more sympathetic. She arranged for Ruth to see a doctor friend of hers in London and then to come down to Thelnetham the following weekend. I set about reconciling myself to the prospect of becoming a father rather sooner than I had intended. When Ruth appeared, tearful and depressed, my father put his skills at our disposal and drafted a consolatory letter to her parents; Ruth dried her eyes and, in slightly better spirits, we all trooped off to attend the Harvest Supper up at the farmhouse which, considering the circumstances, could hardly have been held at a more appropriate moment.

Then, such is the way of the world, that same night Ruth was afflicted with violent stomach cramps and, by next morning, much to everyone's relief the crisis had manifestly been averted. The draft of the letter to her parents was destroyed and, a fortnight later, she was up at Leicester studying Botany and Zoology and I was back at Oxford studying the Romantics.

But it was not quite the end of the story. My father who had behaved with instinctive kindness and understanding in the face of Ruth's very real distress had gone on to ponder the matter. The result of his cogitation was that some weeks later he wrote me a letter in which he suggested that, before I committed myself finally, I should ask myself whether Ruth really was the right woman for me.

My reaction on receiving his letter was just as instinctive as his own had been when he had found himself confronted by a distraught and distracted girl. I was, as he noted in his Journal, 'deeply offended'. I think I was right to be. Perhaps in his ideal 'man/woman relationship' Ruth would have reacted differently, welcoming her unsought pregnancy with cries of joy and libations to the God who was Love. The point is she didn't. Her circumstances being what they were she had reacted both humanly and naturally. And the more I reflect upon my father's reflections the more convinced I become that he *never saw women as they really are.* One and all he insisted upon idealizing them, transmuting them in his imagination into incarnations of some eternal Feminine Principle. Many of them played up to it. Betty was, of course, the notable exception. Of the rest, Katherine Mansfield, my own mother, Helen Young, Mary, even Weg all tended to put on what I called a 'teeny-weeny' act for him.

By an odd coincidence my father's letter reached me just when, for the first time in my life, I had at last begun to acknowledge his own true stature as a critic of literature. At the beginning of that term—Michaelmas 1949—I had discovered Wordsworth. By some peculiar fluke I had completely passed him by in my previous forays into poetry. The only poem of his with which I was familiar was 'The Daffodils' which I had learnt by heart when I was at elementary school. The result was that I came to *The Prelude* at the age of twenty-three with virtually no pre-conceptions about it whatsoever. One October afternoon I purchased a copy of the O.U.P. edition of the '1805' version, took it back to my digs off the Botley Road, opened it and read—

Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky: it beats against my cheek
And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.

It was like listening to my own heart beating.

The Prelude was a revelation and a wonder to me. I read it right through from beginning to end then I turned straight back to the beginning and read it through all over again. It was almost as if I were drunk. From there I sailed straight into the *Poems of the Imagination* and found myself, quite literally, shivering over *Tintern Abbey*. But it was the incredible *Ode—Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* which really stunned me—

Such a holy calm
Did overspread my soul, that I forgot
That I had bodily eyes, and what I saw
Appear'd like something in myself, a dream,
A prospect of my mind.

I still think that the *Immortality Ode* is arguably the greatest single poem in the English Language. Certainly it is a masterwork by any conceivable reckoning. But what fascinates me today is the realization that from the very beginning I was not consciously reading any of Wordsworth's poetry as 'literature', that is to say as a part of my course to be specifically studied and criticized. The closest analogy to my experience that I can think of is of listening to a traveller recounting his adventures in a country which, previously, the listener had believed was known to himself alone. The very tone of the man's voice was confidential—almost conversational—and the expression was, at times, downright clumsy, as if he were striving to make the reader *comprehend with his intellect* what could only be *apprehended by his soul*. But best of all I loved him when he was being oblique, allusive, hinting at the unknowable, telling me of—

. . . those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realized . . .

Ah, that was indeed familiar territory!

I still had to write my essays for John Lawlor and that meant reading the critics too. By and large I found the experience almost as depressing as the poetry itself had been exhilarating, though Walter Pater and Herbert Read both impressed me in their different ways. Then it occurred to me to write and ask my father who he could recommend. His reply was to send me by return of post a copy of his own *Katherine Mansfield and Other Literary Portraits* which had been published that year. With it he enclosed a diffident note suggesting that I might possibly be interested in the study of *Wordsworth and Coleridge* contained in the book.

This long and beautiful essay had, though I did not know it then, been written in 1935. It is the nearest my father ever came to writing the full length study of the two poets which he had projected more than once and which he would surely have done better than any man alive. It would have made the perfect complement to *Keats and Shakespeare*. When, in 1954, his *Jonathan Swift* was published and received with an acclaim which genuinely astonished him I was moved to ask him why he had chosen to spend three long years struggling with Swift while I was still waiting for that definitive study of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He blinked at me and said with surprise —and, I think, genuine regret—'Oh, I *do* wish you'd told me that three years ago, old boy. It might have given me just the nudge I needed.'

Although I am sure he meant it I do not think it would really have made any difference. He chose Swift because he wanted a figure who was indisputably a writer of genius but who was also someone with whom he could not possibly identify. The relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge,

with its all-too-obvious parallels between his own friendship with D. H. Lawrence, would have demanded from him an emotional involvement which he no longer felt capable of sustaining. And it is precisely this intense imaginative identification which is the hall-mark of all his best criticism. Reflecting upon it himself he was to write in 1952 '. . . I am one of those to whom the *summum bonum* lies in the personal—the achievement of personal relations. And that has been my differentia, and no doubt my handicap as a literary critic. I have sought a personal relation with the great ones: and they have been great because a personal relation, by means of the imagination, was possible with them. . . .' On another occasion he remarked to me that he derived the greatest happiness from his criticism when it allowed him 'to bring out the best in the man'.

If there is any one single quality which can be said to distinguish my father's literary criticism it must surely be 'generosity'. 'Plus values only' had always been one of his favourite Chekovian maxims and, wherever possible (*pace* Aldous Huxley), he applied it to his own interpretations of other men's work and gave them the benefit of the doubt. He had his own private pantheon of heroes among whom Keats was pre-eminent. I am quite sure that Keats was real to him in a way that no living writer (Katherine Mansfield always excepted) ever was. With Keats he had achieved the 'vital reciprocity between the critic and the work criticized'. Thus he rightly saw himself as working within the tradition of Coleridge and Hazlitt and hopelessly at odds with the 'Cambridge School' as represented by F. R. Leavis, of whose work he remarked, 'I have the feeling that a vast web of super-subtlety is being woven in which the eternal human values of literature are obscured and lost'.

My instinctive sense that Wordsworth *was*, with Keats, the perfect subject for my father's talents is, I think, borne out by a series of entries in his Journal made forty years ago, in December 1937. I make no apology for quoting them in full.

'*Dec. 8th. Wednesday.* I got so excited over the idea of the book on Wordsworth and Coleridge which came to me yesterday

that my stomach has been half upset all day: which I have spent (very illegitimately) in re-reading *The Prelude*, with the excuse that I want to add a short essay on Wordsworth to my book (*Heaven and Earth*). How profoundly true is Keats' description of Wordsworth's "poetical character" as the "egotistical sublime", with equal emphasis on both terms! How true, too, is the implied profound affinity with Milton!

'It occurred to me, as I re-read *The Prelude*, that the very compulsion which was upon him completely to falsify his own history in writing that poem—to commit the grim dishonesty of "Vaudracour and Julia"—is probably the final occasion of his degeneration. It is as though I had told lies about my passion for Margueritte in *Between Two Worlds*: whereas I, by telling the truth, somehow expiated my cowardice, Wordsworth indurated his. I think there is a real clue here.

'*Dec. 10. Friday.* Och, och! it comes over me more and more that one can't *judge* Wordsworth. And it would be well to keep the unhappy beginning of an essay on him which I began—and abandoned—today as a *memento mori*: a witness of my own presumption. It came over me forcibly and finally when I read a sonnet which I have probably never read before on *The Spinning Wheel* (XIX of *Miscellaneous Sonnets*, Part 1)—

> *Grief thou hast lost an ever-ready friend*
> *Now that the cottage spinning wheel is mute . . .*
> *Even joy could tell, joy craving truce and rest*
> *From her own overflow, what power sedate*
> *On those revolving motions did await*
> *Assiduously—to soothe her aching breast*
> *And, to a point of just relief, abate*
> *The mantling triumphs of a day too blest.*

It's lovely in itself, and it bespeaks such a simple, subtle sympathy with the humble—a *real* sympathy, a fellow-feeling, an exquisiteness of common humanity. I *cannot* criticize this man.

'And truly (though I think much of his later work is mediocre indeed) I don't know that it's not a kind of nonsense to speak about Wordsworth's decline. If he had been a pure poet (if such

exists) it would be legitimate. But essentially he is a man with a vision—more exactly a man who emerged from a period of bitterness and scepticism by a mystical experience, a great "at-one-ment". The vision endured in plenitude for three years. Then came, in 1801, another period of inward doubt—and Love made way for Duty. May it not have been he who deliberately broke up the association of himself, Dorothy and Coleridge, with more than an inkling of what it would cost? Is it not probable that he tried, so far as he could, to obey his vision—to accept the lordship of "a few strong instincts and a few plain rules"?

'*Thursday Dec 16* . . . I am struggling with an essay on Wordsworth—an extraordinarily difficult man when you come really to grapple with him.

'*Friday Dec 17* Ah no—I find I *must* judge Wordsworth after all—in spite of myself, so to speak. The Lord judges him. The more zealously and more patiently I try to defend him, and *do* defend him, the more I am compelled to judge him in the end. With a real imaginative effort I have absolved him over Annette Vallon, only to be forced to condemn him the more at the end—as though he had corrupted the very truth that there was in breaking with Annette. Crabbe Robinson was right: he had lost his love of humanity. No, C.R. did not say that, though I do. C.R. said: "Wordsworth lost his love of liberty, not his humanity, but his confidence in mankind."

'*Monday Dec 20* . . . "Wordsworth and England" finished at last—a long struggle, but at the end it turns out good, I think.'

I feel that any comment of mine would be an impertinence. So much of my father's outstanding quality as a critic of literature is there—the 'vital reciprocity', the delight he found in 'bringing out the best in the man'. But oh how I wish that he had written *that* book instead of *Jonathan Swift*!

20

At the beginning of May I met my step-sister for the first time since 1945. My father had written to tell me that she was staying with some friends at a place near Oxford called Eynsham while she was taking a course at a secretarial college. I cycled out to see her. It was a truly dismal meeting. I could see Mary was hovering on the very verge of tears and I felt wretched and guilty and helpless. There was just no natural common ground left to us any more; she was such a mass of raw, hurt feelings. She did not openly accuse me of having abandoned her, but it seemed to me that I could sense it there all the time. Perhaps in this I was being hyper-sensitive. I remember asking her how she was enjoying her course at Miss Sproules' Academy and she told me that it was awful and that she was hopeless at it and could never remember anything. I did my best to cheer her up and, now and again, she seemed to flicker into life when I reminded her of some of the happy times we had shared in the past, but it was all so far away and long ago that for her it must have been like remembering a dream. I don't recall either of us mentioning Betty's name even once.

Mary has since told me that the time she spent at Oxford was just about the most miserable of her life. By then she had become firmly convinced that she was no good for anything and never would be any good. She just could not believe in herself at all. Yet, though she could not have known it, she was even then on the point of rounding the last bend in the tunnel and glimpsing daylight at the end. Within six months she would start training to be a nurse and would discover to her astonishment and delight that she had a real gift for it. Eight years later she was to become the youngest Nursing Sister on the staff of St Mary's Hospital, Paddington. Her long night was drawing to its close.

About a week after that sad meeting I received a note from the novelist Joyce Cary inviting me to have dinner with him. He had, it emerged, been corresponding with my father (as Oxford undergraduates they had once shared rooms) who had mentioned to him that I was now up at B.N.C.

Cary lived in an imposing Victorian house overlooking the Parks. The inner walls were covered with pictures, many of them pastels and crayons executed by himself. He was a small, intensely alive man, with a prominent hooked nose, receding hair and darting, bird-bright eyes which, I'm sure, missed nothing. He seemed to know everybody who was anybody and he talked nineteen to the dozen. This was just as well because, to start with, I was rendered mute by shyness. However, by the time I had finished my third glass of Beaujolais I was sufficiently sloshed to be able to tell him that I doubted whether he would ever write another book as good as *A House of Children*. This had the effect of bringing him up short. He stared at me long and hard, lifted the bottle to see how much was left in it, and then said: 'There speaks a Middleton Murry. Go ahead and tell me why you think so.'

For a good five minutes I talked virtually non-stop about the book while he sat sipping his wine and nodding his head and looking remarkably like some ancient Roman general just returned from a successful desert campaign. I think he was pleased by my unfeigned enthusiasm. We went on to talk about Donegal (the setting of *A House of Children*) and, from that, to my experiences in the Navy. He was a good listener but an even better talker, bubbling with anecdotes, many of them—alas!—unprintable. Although he was by then probably at the peak of his international fame he certainly never made me feel that he himself was particularly impressed by it. Just as I was about to take my leave he said something which lodged like a seed of thistledown in one of the crevices of my memory: 'Oh, fame's pleasant enough, but the rapture lies in the writing. You'll see.'

The first contention I have perforce to take on trust: the second I now know to be absolutely true: but it was that 'You'll see', which really enchanted me.

As the date of my Finals approached I was mildly astonished to find how calmly I was contemplating the prospect. Such anxieties as I felt were all centred upon the finding of a job afterwards. I had applied to a couple of grammar schools in

Leicester for a post as assistant English master but they had expressed nothing more than mild curiosity.

It was, I think, John Lawlor who suggested I might apply to the Leicester University Education Department to take a Teaching Diploma course. I did so and was invited to attend for an interview with Professor J. W. Tibble. That meeting reminded me of nothing so much as my first encounter with John Wilson at Bumpus's. A little, twinkling, nut-brown man—a sort of cross between a benign gnome and an oriental mandarin—eyed me quizzically from behind a large desk while I did my best to convince us both that I wished for nothing more in the whole wide world than to learn how to become a school teacher in his Education Department.

When I had run out of steam he smiled, twitched his eyebrows and murmured: 'Now tell me why you *really* want to come here.'

I burst out laughing and confessed the truth which was that I would be marrying Ruth in six weeks' time and had been unable to get a job in Leicester.

'I think that's a perfectly valid reason for joining us,' he replied. 'We'll look forward to seeing you in October.'

It later transpired that he had known and befriended my sister Weg when she was at Exeter University which may possibly have had some bearing on the matter.

Finals were the familiar sort of anti-climax. Everybody else seemed to write at least ten times as fast as I did. Diversion of a sort was provided by a girl candidate who entered the Examination Hall just in front of me, sat down, picked up her question paper and promptly keeled over in a faint. I kept myself going on a supply of energy tablets which I had thoughtfully extracted from unserviceable 'survival at sea' kits during my days in the Navy. By the time I reached my last paper I was screwed up so tight I would probably have rung like a musical glass if anyone had flicked me with a fingernail. When John Lawlor asked me how I had got on I realized that I had absolutely no idea at all. Indeed I could barely recall which questions I had attempted, let alone anything I might have said in my answers.

Our wedding was fixed for the afternoon of July 27th at Hampstead Registry Office. Victor Callaghan was to be the best man. A week before the ceremony was due to take place I was informed that I would have to present myself at the Oxford University Examination Halls for a *viva voce*. The day selected for this ordeal turned out to be the very day of my wedding.

I travelled down to Oxford and spent the night of the 26th with Victor and his family at their flat in Headington. The daily time-table for the vivas was not published until ten o'clock on the morning of the examination. When Victor and I reached the Examination Halls we discovered that mine had been scheduled for two thirty—the precise moment when I was supposed to be getting married.

I sought out the Chief Clerk and pleaded my case with such eloquent pathos that he said he would put it before the Board on compassionate grounds—adding that, of course, he could promise nothing. However, if I called back in an hour's time he might possibly have some news for me.

Victor and I stooged around the town killing time. When we reported back to the Clerk he told us that Professor Wren, the Chairman of the Examining Board, had agreed to my interview being brought forward to twelve thirty. This was still cutting things pretty close but, with a taxi at either end, I reckoned that we would probably just manage it. I telephoned Ruth and told her that everything was under control. By now I was feeling slightly hysterical and the moment the pubs opened we scooted into a nearby hostelry and ordered brandy and soda to calm our nerves. With two of these inside me I was able to take a more philosophical view of my situation and when the time finally came for me to present myself before the Board I felt positively sanguine. I bowed, took my seat, smiled round benignly at my interrogators, and the questioning began.

Everything was going satisfactorily until I got myself enmeshed in some abstruse speculation I had apparently made in one of my papers concerning the various 'Pardons' of Langland's 'Piers the Plowman'. The more I strove to extricate myself the more hopelessly snarled up I became. I lifted my

eyes to heaven in silent prayer and heard a sympathetic voice (was it Dorothy Whitelock's or Helen Gardner's?) murmur: 'Wedding bells, eh, Mr Murry?'

My gratitude was presumably plain to see. Everyone started chuckling and then Professor Wren informed me that my ordeal was over. As I stood up and bowed he asked me to wait outside for a moment.

In the ante-room I found that another sacrificial lamb had appeared in the guise of a small female student. She asked me in a quavering whisper what it had been like. I was just starting to reassure her when the huge double doors of the Examination Hall were pulled open from within and there in the doorway stood the Chairman resplendent in his velvet pancake hat and scarlet robes, and arrayed in a grinning row behind him were all the other members of the Board clapping their hands. Professor Wren beamed down upon me. 'On behalf of us all, Mr Murry, may I offer you our very warmest congratulations and our sincere best wishes.'

I thanked him gravely: he bowed: I bowed: and the doors closed. I heard a sort of throttled squeak behind me and there in the corner was this little girl gaping at me pop-eyed. Presumably she thought I'd been awarded a Treble First with Diamond Cluster or something equally fabulous. It would have been a shame to disillusion her. I wished her good luck and fled. In fact I got a Second which, as my father remarked, was 'considering the circumstances, creditable'.

21

THE YEAR Ruth and I spent in Leicester was remarkably happy. By an incredible stroke of good fortune we managed to find a couple of unfurnished rooms to rent. These we embellished with about a thousand books I had acquired over the years and with sundry oddments of furniture given us by my father. Most of these had been left

behind at Larling by Betty. Among them were a small 'writing table' which had once belonged to Katherine Mansfield and five rush-seated chairs which my father was reputed to have once painted a symbolic and funereal black when he and Katherine had gone to join the Lawrences at Zennor in 1916.

We had been given £200 by our parents to set ourselves up with and it seems to me all of a piece with our general attitude to life that we immediately splashed out a third of it on an ancient and box-like Morris Minor. Its two letter numberplate would today probably fetch a great deal more than we paid for the entire machine. No sooner was it in my possession than I took Ruth out for a celebratory spin. As we were rattling merrily through Bradgate Park at our top speed of about thirty-five miles per hour the ignition key dropped out and fell through a hole in the floor boards. We never found it again. Luckily the engine was still running and when we got home I bought a lamp switch in Woolworth's and wired it into the ignition circuit. When we eventually came to sell the car I even contrived to pass off this makeshift device as a subtle anti-theft contrivance. I developed an intense love/hate relationship with that vehicle. It was always breaking down—usually in the rush hour traffic—and having to be pushed home. Then something went wrong with the speedometer so that it persistently registered about twenty miles per hour faster than you were actually travelling. Since the machine always *sounded* as if it was doing about sixty I soon acquired a reputation as a speed merchant among those friends of ours who were prepared to put their necks at risk by travelling with us.

One of these, John Harris, had been at Exeter together with my sister and Professor Tibble. He was a few years older than I was, had been a sergeant in the R.A.F. and had already been married and divorced. This lent him an aura of slightly sinister fascination in the eyes of some of the younger female students on the course. John was a sensitive writer, very amusing and intelligent, and never more happy than when confronted with the challenge of some new form of I.Q. test. He was also unique in my experience in that he actually

wanted to be a school master. His ambition at that time was to teach French at Dartington, a post which he later obtained.

Like ourselves John was financially dependent on a government grant, or, in other words, perpetually hard up, and we were always discussing possible ways of obtaining money. His reasoning was simple: we are intelligent and poor; others are stupid and rich: *ergo* it is merely a question of adapting our intelligence to the acquisition of money. One evening he appeared on our doorstep brandishing a magazine called *John Bull* which, he had discovered featured a weekly £500 prize competition called 'Bullets'. This, he informed us, was *it*—money for old rope! All we had to do was to take the words or phrases supplied, add a few more of our own choosing to produce therewith a pithy, punning aphorism. We studied the examples together and then set about producing our prize-winning pellets of polished prose. The trouble, as we soon discovered, was that we both had a natural penchant for the *double-entendre* and all our best and wittiest efforts were quite unprintable. Thus, sadly, we deprived ourselves of the mind-boggling experience of having our winner's cheque delivered to us personally in the slavering jaws of a bandy-legged mastiff called 'Johnny Goodbullet'.

We also dabbled briefly in the football pools but the modest weekly outlay which was all we could afford was wholly incommensurate with the elaborate permutations we favoured. We did, however, hit upon an infallible method of winning the jackpot. To do this you simply become a charlady in Bootle; form a syndicate with a dozen other like-minded charladies; invest a shilling a week on an idiot's permutation based upon your birthdays and then wait patiently until your combined ages total over seven hundred and fifty. Statistics have proved conclusively that if you follow these directions you cannot possibly fail.

The Department which Professor 'Billy' Tibble had gathered around him, and in which John and I found ourselves, contained one or two lecturers who have since gone on to make names for themselves in the World of Education. They must

have been more impressive on paper than they were in the lecture hall. Billy, who was physically about a head shorter than most of his staff, simply towered over them in vision and intellectual stature. He was 'progressive' in the very best sense of that much abused word, always ready to encourage initiative and experiment and to challenge comfortable pre-conceptions. In his presence I occasionally experienced the odd twinge of guilt that I was not a more conscientious student; I felt he deserved better of me.

One Sunday, about a fortnight after I had joined the Education Department, Ruth and I, together with John and a few others, were invited along to tea with Billy and his wife Anne at their college house in the suburb of Stoneygate. Within minutes of being introduced to Anne I knew that I had found someone who was absolutely on my own private wavelength. So certain of this was I that when a little later she made some observation with which I disagreed I roundly told her that I thought she was talking nonsense. Instead of giving me the retort discourteous or the snub direct which I surely deserved she gave a sort of little gasp of shocked delight and burst out laughing. It was the unlikely beginning of a friendship which has now lasted for over a quarter of a century. She is still, unquestionably, the youngest person I know.

It was to Anne that I confided my dreams of one day becoming a professional writer. She did not seem to think it a ridiculous ambition. She had read some of my short stories and had been encouraging about them. I needed all the encouragement I could get just then for most of the little magazines which had flourished during the war had disappeared and those that were left could pick and choose from among the ranks of the already famous. By 1950 I had published perhaps a dozen stories, poems and articles of one sort or another. Had I been told then that it would be all of eight years before I sold another word I simply wouldn't have believed it. It would not have made sense. Somewhere deep down inside me I was *convinced* I was going to make the grade—I *had* to—if not today then tomorrow. Each set-back I received instead of

discouraging me served only to make me the more determined.

In the spring of 1951, at Anne's instigation, I sent a batch of recent stories to my father and asked for his opinion of them. Though I don't suppose that either of us would have guessed it the letter I received in reply was to become a sort of life-belt buoying me up over the long, empty years ahead. 'I've read all your stories (he wrote) taking them quietly—one every evening. On the whole they are good: and I congratulate you. One —"Windfalls"—I liked *very* much, and shall not easily forget. But not one of them is poor; and I feel pretty sure that if they had fallen into my hands as a volume, I should have been impressed by them if they had come to me anonymously. I should certainly have accepted "Windfalls" with a whoop for any magazine I ever edited. Probably too "The Quick and the Dead", for all its awkward length. But, as I say, they are all *well* above the average; and, in bulk, they make me reasonably certain that you have the root of the matter in you, and that you will make your mark as a writer one day. Which is, I suppose, really all that matters.'

I wonder what my reaction would have been if he *hadn't* liked them.

For most of that spring term, when I should by rights have been knuckling down to my teaching practice in Mundella Road Boys' Secondary Modern School, I was up to my neck staging a production of Chekov's *The Seagull* for the College Dramatic Society. In those days there was no theatre at the university and the official attitude to drama seemed to run on the lines of 'Let's ignore it and it may go away'. When the Registrar informed me coldly that the Main Hall was not considered a suitable place in which to rehearse 'theatricals' I was so incensed that I rushed straight in to see Professor Attenborough the Principal of the University and, incidentally, the father of the actor Richard Attenborough. I don't suppose anyone had ever consulted him on such a thing before but he swallowed his astonishment manfully and, after I had poured out my troubles, agreed that he really couldn't see why we should not be allowed to use the Hall. Armed with this 'go

ahead' I zoomed back to the Registrar and had the pleasure of seeing a man actually go pale with anger, something I had previously imagined happened only in inferior novels. Since then I have always made a point of starting as high up every ladder as I can possibly reach. It saves so much time and frustration.

The secret of getting the best out of amateur actors is somehow to succeed in persuading them that they *can* do it. I went around exuding confidence like b.o. until, gradually my cast began to believe in themselves. It was hard work but worth it and John Harris was an outstanding 'Trigorin'. Of the three performances we gave, two were fair to middling and one was definitely good. On that second night everyone seemed to act with about twenty per cent extra conviction. Why this should have been I have no idea, unless it was something to do with the audience. But I do believe that Chekov *responds* to amateur artlessness in a way that no other great dramatist does. Is it because his plays so often seem rather like dress rehearsals for real life? Nothing goes quite right in them; chances are missed; lines are fluffed; pistols misfire. It's all so thoroughly unprofessional and *natural*. I think it is conceivable that we caught something of this authentic spirit.

While I was enjoying myself in all sorts of novel and interesting ways—John and I had elected to present an experimental language-teaching puppet film as a joint diploma thesis—Ruth was drudging away among her test tubes and formalin and getting more and more browned off with Botany and Zoology. When she should by rights have been diligently mugging up the life histories of obscure invertebrates as like as not she would be helping me to construct puppets or taking part in one of my stage productions. The truth is her heart was never really in science. She was yet another innocent victim of the abominable academic system which demanded early specialization. By rights she should have been studying languages, for which she had a natural aptitude, but in those days there was very little hope of changing courses in midstream, and none at all if you were two-thirds of the way

across. Now, confronted with Botany (Subsidiary)—the penultimate hurdle before her Finals which were due in 1952—her heart sank. The situation was patently ridiculous and I told her so firmly. I could see absolutely no point in her grinding away at something which no longer gave her any pleasure. If she failed she failed, and that would be the end of it. Reassured she returned with cheerful relief to the fascinations of film-making.

In July we sold our car for slightly more than we had paid for it and on the proceeds joined Ruth's cousins in the south of France. From time to time, in a rather desultory fashion we discussed our immediate prospects. We still had just enough money left to see us through till Christmas but it was obvious that, when we got back to Leicester, I would have to start applying for teaching jobs. The time between interviews I would use to write a novel. Without either of us ever actually saying so we both took it for granted that Ruth was finished with Science for good.

On our return I wrote to a couple of teaching agencies and, from the dozen or so 'confidential notices of vacancy' I received I selected the only one which looked even faintly possible. It read as follows: *Aaron Jacobson, Esq., M.Sc., of Massada College, Brighton, Sussex, informs us that he is requiring an Assistant Master to join the school in January.*

WORK: to take charge of the English in the Senior Forms and to teach the subject up to Scholarship standard. There are a few boys each year taking the Certificate of Education Advanced Level, several to Ordinary Level and occasionally a student for University Scholarship.

Massada is a Private School for Jewish boys, but the staff are non-Jewish.

The post will be non-resident and the salary in accordance with the revised Burnham Scale.

I sent off my letter of application and, within a week, had received an invitation to attend for an interview at the Piccadilly Hotel in London.

I had been waiting in the reception lounge for about ten minutes before a substantial, patriarchal gentleman with a

mane of white hair and horn-rimmed spectacles came trundling in, caught sight of me and demanded: 'You are Mishter Middleton Murry?'

I rose to my feet. 'Mr Jacobson?'

'Yesh, yesh. I'm sorry I'm late. Lunching with the Israeli ambassador.' He pumped my hand briskly and wriggled his eyebrows. 'Shall we have a drink? What would you like? A whishky and shoda?' A large pink box of 'Passing Cloud' cigarettes had mysteriously appeared in his hand. He proffered it, helped himself, ordered drinks, subsided opposite me and announced: 'In educational matters I am a firm believer in the orthodox method.'

'Yes, sir?'

'But make no mistake, I am in no shense a narrow-minded man.'

'No, sir.'

'At Massada we aim to achieve a shinthesis of English and Hebraic cultures.'

'Yes, sir.'

'*Mutatis mutandis* if you follow me.'

The drinks arrived. Mr Jacobson paid for them with a five-pound note. He handed me a glass and raised his own. '*Loh chaim*, young man.'

'*Loh chaim*', I responded.

'Now tell me shomething about yourself, Mishter Murry.'

I did my best. A long ash formed on Mr Jacobson's cigarette and tumbled unheeded down the equator of his waistcoat. He nodded sagely. 'And you really think you could handle the job?'

'Yes, sir. I do.'

'You sheem, if I may shay so, rather young, Mishter Murry.'

'Well, so was William Pitt, sir.'

'Eh?'

'Pitt, sir. The Prime Minister.'

'Ah.' He helped himself to another 'Passing Cloud' which he lit from the stump of his first. 'Massada College is a Jewish school, you know.'

'Yes, sir.'

'That does not bother you?'

'No, sir. Why should it? My wife's Jewish.'

'Is that so? And what's her name?'

'Ruth. Ruth Jezierski.'

Mr Jacobson jerked up as though I had stuck a pin in him. 'Jezierski? Not *Isaac* Jezierski's daughter?'

I nodded.

'But that's really mosht extraordinary! I know Jezierski very well! A mosht remarkable man! And you're his son-in-law?'

'Yes, sir. Ruth and I were married last year.'

Mr Jacobson's face wreathed itself in a vast and absolutely charming grin. '*Mazeltov*, young man! I shall be very happy to have you on my shtaff. I will shend you a letter of confirmation when I return to Brighton. And now, if you will excuse me, I have to attend a reception for the Israeli football team.'

He heaved himself to his feet, scooped a sheaf of cigarettes out of his box, thrust them into my hand, patted my arm, beamed down upon me like an amicable lighthouse and padded away into the foyer where he vanished from my sight.

I sat there for a full minute feeling elated but decidedly dazed. What on earth was the 'Orthodox Method'? No doubt I would discover soon enough. The main thing was that I had been offered the job. Nevertheless, I could not help wondering whether my experiences at Mundella Road Boys' Secondary School were likely to be of much help to me at Massada College. It seemed unlikely.

22

I WROTE my first novel in six weeks. Like the author of 'Endymion' I 'leaped headlong into the sea'—and sank. My story (surprise! surprise!) was about a young student falling in love with the wife of his

professor. It was exquisitely 'sensitive' and aimed vaguely at a Hogarth Press readership. The best bits in it were when I managed to tear myself away from my fascinated contemplation of the personality of my priggish young hero who, I seem to recall, spent whole pages at a time thinking profound thoughts about the nature of life, love and death. I called it *Before the Snows*. Today the significance of this choice of title eludes me but I feel safe in assuming that it was highly symbolic. Needless to say, at the time, I was fairly certain I had written a masterpiece.

When I had had it typed out I sent it off to my father who had expressed an interest. His reaction goes some way to persuading me that my first attempt at a novel was not quite so awful as I have suggested. 'With certain reservations (he wrote) I think it good. First and foremost of its good qualities is that, once it gets going, it holds the reader. True, in making this judgment I have to discount my natural curiosity about *your* first novel; but I think it is objective enough. The characters are well drawn—Mary in particular—and one really wants to know what is going to happen . . . I think you have been a little too lavish over Felix, and that a more sub-ironical attitude towards him in the beginning would be a definite improvement. . . .' In an entry in his Journal dated January 9th, 1952 I find the following: 'Col sent me his first novel, which I have read: it's only moderately good, yet, probably, *for* a first novel, satisfactory; but *not* quite as good as I had hoped.' This rather cooler assessment was, I think, the more accurate.

Having given me the benefit of his own criticism my father now committed the grave error of handing over my novel to Mary, Ruth and Weg and eliciting their views. These were considerably less charitable than his own had been. He summarized them for me in a second letter which followed hard on the heels of his first. But what I could take from him (just) I could not take from them. What is more, his second letter was framed in such a way that he appeared to be endorsing their opinions and thus—I assumed—reneguing on his own. This

was altogether too much for me. I shot off an immediate reply which was really a squeal of anguish at what I chose to see as a gross betrayal. I have forgotten exactly what I said but I find my father sucking his pricked fingers and complaining: 'His letter had the same overwrought tone as his reply to my letter before he married Ruth—exactly the same.' Since they had both been generated in the very quick of my being I am sure he was not mistaken.

My contact with my father through the medium of my writing was now the strongest tie I had with Thelnetham. Once I was married my home was with Ruth and our visits to Suffolk became increasingly rare. We both sensed in some indefinable way that we were slightly *de trop*; the delicate clockwork of what we called 'the Thel. routine' was liable to be thrown out of gear by our failure to arrive by the most convenient train, or to present ourselves for meals on the dot, or by my unwillingness to break off an interesting conversation with my father just because it was the ordained time for bed. The remarkable efficiency with which Mary managed their household seemed somewhat alien to us, though I must say that my father took it equably enough. No doubt when he considered the storms he had weathered in the past, such minor inconvenience as derived from subservience to the routine would have seemed a small price to pay for peace and tranquillity.

Weg was a much more frequent visitor at Lower Lodge than we were. Her bond with my father had always been much closer than mine and though she was married and living in Brussels she had never really put down deep roots in Belgium. Two months before Ruth and I were married she had had her first baby, a boy, and shortly afterwards she had become ill. When he had visited her in Belgium at the end of September that year my father had found her 'alarmingly thin' but withal 'the same precious Weg—there can be few children who twine themselves about one's heart as closely as she—and her sudden burst of tears at parting was hard to bear'.

For my father his grandson, Johnnie, was a revelation and a constant source of delight. In him he beheld that precious

golden thread of Love that he always traced back to Katherine. In an entry in his Journal for October 9th, 1950 he wrote: 'And this heritage of love I *saw* renewed, incarnate, in Weg's little baby boy. I am as convinced as I am of anything important in this life that Katherine's spiritual heritage has been passed on. I always felt, quite simply, that Violet's daughter was Katherine's daughter, and I named her accordingly.'

When, early in December, a letter came from Weg saying that she was again feeling unwell, he wrote back at once and begged her to come with the baby for a *long* rest. She came in January and stayed for seven weeks. When I learnt of this I was surprised that she could bear to be parted from her husband (and he from her and the baby) for two months. It certainly wasn't *my* idea of the man/woman relationship—or Ruth's. But no one else saw it that way and there is no reference at all to her husband Jean in my father's record of Weg's stay. Nor is there any doubt that he was delighted to have a baby in the house or that he felt a chill intimation of his own mortality when they eventually departed. ' "Every parting is a little death". I have always felt as Goethe felt about partings; now they begin to be really serious. I begin to whisper to myself: perhaps I shall never see him again. It begins to be a real possibility—remote, no doubt, but real. And so I feel sad at their going. . . .'

It may be only my imagination but I seem to detect in his Journal at this period an increasing anxiety for the well-being of young Mary and David. It is almost as though his baby grandson had re-focused his attention upon them. Not that he had ever relinquished his bitter struggle for their welfare. Thanks to his efforts David was now at Christ's Hospital and doing 'as well as could be expected'; Mary growing in self-confidence week by week through her nursing and able to write 'sweet and friendly little letters' to him from London. These went straight to his heart. 'Mary has been running in my mind these last few days and, thinking of her, I came once more to the conclusion that the one and only horror of my leaving Larling finally in 1941 was the awful sense I had of

betraying her trust in me. Weg and Col were old enough to understand, David too young to feel anything [*sic*]: but Mary was of an age when she could feel, and could not understand. And it was a real *agony* to me. Now, at long last, it seems that she is beginning to be an independant being, and to think for herself, and the seed of trust she had in me is beginning to sprout again. May God send it rain and make it grow.'

But perhaps what I detect—or imagine I detect—is, after all, simply the expression of the whole shift of emphasis in his life, a product of his own happiness in love and of his success as a farmer. He never ceased to be astonished at the extraordinary reversal of his fortunes and he never took it for granted. Occasionally, I think, he felt a faint twinge of nostalgia for that excitement familiar to the artist in full creative flow, which informs all his best work; the times when he was so intensely aware of 'the faculty of disinterested love' which is the human imagination. 'Is there'—he mused in *Community Farm*—'anything to correspond, in farming, with the desire to express an unformed thought, or to make communicable the elusive truth, which is distinctive of the only kind of authorship I know anything about? Probably not.' But the compensations were undeniable: 'My struggle to master the thoughts which enter my head—to grasp them, to order them, to express them—is wholly inward and personal. Even when the thoughts are most recalcitrant, most objective and disturbing, they are in some intimate sense my own. My own, in this sense, the farm can never be. It is always a creature out there, over which I have acquired a temporary and precarious right of persuasion, like a mahout on an elephant. And I am conscious that this right of persuasion is a privilege. I used to be impressed by a line of a French poet, now probably forgotten, Charles de Pomairols:

'*C'est un très grand honneur que de posséder un champ.*'

That was before I possessed one. Now I possess twenty. I am conscious of the honour; but dubious about the possession. I possess my thoughts; I do not possess my farm. It would be

much truer to say that it possesses me. And that, I think, is a salutary reversal of the subjectivity to which I was accustomed.'

But if, by 1952, the farm was flourishing as never before, the Community had all but vanished. Dugald and Nan Ferguson, and Paul and Joan Hobson, together with their children were all that survived of the brave experiment. 'What has emerged,' my father reflected, 'can best be described as a sort of family. It is obviously quite different from the family created by blood-kinship, for it is a relation which we have entered into consciously and, in a sense, deliberately, though none of us had any idea what it would turn out to be. But the feeling is extraordinarily like that of a family, in the plain, unvarnished meaning of that grossly sentimentalized word.'

As a 'family' the farm came to be accepted in the village in a way in which the original community never was. The village fête—originally instituted to raise funds for a village hall and held in the garden and meadow adjoining Lower Lodge—became a justly popular annual event and 'The Lodge Farm Players' soon gained a remarkable reputation for their performances in the villages round about.

Thus it was that my father, who had once described himself most perceptively as a '*social deraciné*', finally put down roots into his native soil and learnt to describe himself as 'author and farmer'—happily, in that order.

23

RUTH AND I managed to find ourselves a small unfurnished flat overlooking the seafront in the Kemp Town area of Brighton. It was up sixty-seven stairs and contained a large, bay-windowed bed-sitting-room, a kitchen and a bathroom. The rent was two and a half guineas a week. Whenever a south-westerly gale was blowing the carpets had an unnerving habit of humping themselves off

the floor, flapping eerily and then subsiding. Coupled with a weird, sepulchral, underfloor moaning, this could be extremely disquieting if you weren't expecting it.

Early in January I started teaching at Massada College and within a week I had realized that not only was this school quite unlike any other I had encountered in my own limited experience but that it was also quite unlike anything I could have imagined. My first discovery was that I had been engaged on a misunderstanding. The English master I was coming to replace had never formally given in his notice and had since decided not to leave after all. He pointed out to me that there was more than enough work for two and suggested we might do worse than split the job between us. Since nobody else appeared to raise any objections and my salary was not affected I was happy to agree. This somewhat unorthodox arrangement worked very well in practice and lasted until he left the school some twelve years later.

Apart from the two men who taught Hebrew and one part-timer who taught some junior French and English the permanent teaching staff were not Jewish. The Assistant Head was a Welshman who was known familiarly to everyone as 'Eld'. He was a pacifist and had joined Massada when the school had been evacuated to South Wales during the war. Eld was responsible for the day to day running of the school as well as the teaching of Senior History and Geography. Besides being a gifted teacher he was a passionate Socialist, a lecturer for the W.E.A., an examiner for the Welsh 'O' level board, and a leading member of the local Welsh Society. Had it not been for him the school would almost certainly have degenerated into complete chaos within a week. As it was everybody confidently expected it to and it never did—quite.

There were about a hundred and sixty pupils in the school when I joined it. Their ages ranged from ten to eighteen and they came from all over the world. A school roll-call sounded rather like a cast-list for a production of *The Arabian Nights* with its Abdulezers, Alaghbandzadehs, Djanoglys, Behroozis, Atraghjis and Ebrahimzadehs. These were leavened with

sundry Cohens, Rosens, Lewins, Samuels, Jacobs and Rosemans. They spanned the whole range of intellectual ability from near genius to downright dim and, by and large, they worked a great deal harder than I would have believed possible.

I was made aware of this on my very first morning when, after having introduced me at assembly, the Head called me into his study and announced: 'The boys are too idle. They do not work hard enough. You mushst set them plenty of written work. At leashst two essays a week. Thish is the Orthodox Method. I mushst inshist upon it!'

So for the first six weeks I staggered home each evening under teetering pagodas of exercise books and sat up correcting them into the small hours. Finally my health began to crack. I sought out Gerald, my co-English colleague and confessed that I was beaten. His expression when he heard my tale mingled astonishment, pity, and incredulity in roughly equal proportions. 'Good Lord!' he exclaimed. 'You *are* a nit! No one in his right mind takes Jake's pronouncements *seriously*! That was just said to impress you—to let you know he's got his finger firmly on the pulse. All you needed to do was nod your head and say "Yes, sir. Of course, sir. Three bags full, sir," and he'd have been perfectly happy.'

Like several other members of the staff—myself among them—Gerald's real interests lay in a different sphere altogether. He was a composer, a disciple of Vaughan Williams, and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of music—particularly of British folk songs. Towards the end of my first term he mentioned casually to me that some works of his were being broadcast in a B.B.C. programme devoted to West Country composers. I listened to it and was both impressed and surprised. His music was gay, lyrical, and wholly enchanting, whereas he himself, though extremely able, was at times irascible, boorish and reactionary. To everyone's astonishment he had got married just before I joined the school and, over the years, he gradually mellowed. I don't think he and I ever quarrelled but he had several lively spats with other members of the staff.

Barry, the young Irishman who taught French and Latin, had his heart set on becoming a professional playwright. He was almost exactly the same age as myself and during the last year of the war had toured in a repertory company run by Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson. He wrote a weekly serial for Radio Eire on the lines of 'Dick Barton'. It was entitled *Michael Sullivan—Detective* and ran for years. He also wrote vast numbers of three-act plays, some of which he produced with local amateur dramatic societies in Brighton. I recall one of these being staged in a church hall beneath a railway viaduct. Ruth and I went to see it. The plot was extremely involved and centred around a pair of identical twins who, such were the vagaries of his casting, turned out to be anything but identical. Confusion was compounded when, every ten minutes or so, a train would rumble past overhead and completely drown the actors' voices. We never did disentangle that plot.

Whatever his shortcomings as a dramatist, Barry was an excellent producer of school plays and achieved near-miracles on the little concrete box which was tacked on to the end of the Gym/Assembly Hall and served the school for a stage. Occasionally he even ventured upon joint staff/school productions which were enormous fun. Then one day the Head had the bright idea of commissioning him to write a series of dramatized documentaries on Zionist themes. Ibsen and Molière gave way to Theodore Herzl and Chaim Weizman as interpreted by Barry in the lead role sporting a series of remarkably luxuriant false beards and supported by casts which seemed to include the whole school and often the staffs' families as well. Jake was delighted with the results, but since, to the untutored eye, each play was very like the previous one, the local audience became ever less enthusiastic and eventually dropped away altogether.

The two outstanding events in the school calendar were Speech Day and the Arts Festival. For Speech Day all the stops were pulled out. While Mrs Jacobson, a most formidable lady built on the lines of a battle-cruiser with a voice like a salvo of six-inch guns, harassed the gardeners and the domestic staff,

the rest of us climbed into academic hoods and robes (hired for the purpose) and assembled sheepishly in the Headmaster's study where we sipped glasses of warm sherry while we waited to be introduced to the Guest of Honour. This in itself could prove a nerve-racking experience because you could never be quite sure that the Head would get your name right. I have a vivid memory of standing in line next to Barry and watching the eyes of an amiable Peer of the Realm glaze over with sudden doubt as he reached for my hand and Jake announced: 'And this is Mishter J. M. Barrie—the shon of J. Middleton Barrie.'

One of the feature spots of the crowded Speech Day programme was the Hebrew Play. These were invariably written (pseudonymously) by the Headmaster, and never more than a day or two before the performance. They tended to follow a dramatic pattern that had served well over the years. The setting was usually the Negev desert (no scenery required) or a Kibbutz. A character would appear on stage and make a long speech to the audience in Hebrew. A second character would then appear, exchange a brief '*Shalom!*' with the first and make another long speech. This routine continued with more and more '*Shalom's*' until there was no more room left on the stage, at which point the cast would all link arms and dance the '*Horah*' while the curtain came down to loud applause. On one memorable occasion the leading actor had the misfortune to break his leg on the morning of the performance and was wheeled on to the stage in a plaster-cast to recite his lines. It didn't seem to make much difference and may even have added a touch of welcome novelty to the proceedings.

There was a quality of inspired improvisation about Massada which I found most appealing. It is symbolized for me by my memory of arriving late at the school one boiling hot morning in June during my second term and coming unannounced upon a semi-circle of small boys squatting cross-legged before a black-board and easel which had been erected on the lawn. Standing, pointer in hand, in front of the black-board, clad only in blue and white striped bathing trunks and wearing his

mortar-board was the Headmaster giving an Algebra lesson. It was a sight I shall carry with me into Eternity. That same morning he summoned up a fleet of motor coaches, informed us that it was far too hot to teach, and invited those of us who wished to do so to spend the rest of the day porpoising around with him and a hundred and sixty boys in the open air swimming pool at Blackrock at his expense.

When I joined the school it was, in fact, just entering upon its Golden Age. Naturally no one was aware of this at the time. Pupils were always asking me whether I was going to leave at the end of term. From them I discovered that the staff turnover rate had been pretty hair-raising in the recent past. Certainly Massada College was no place for the average 'career' teacher. But for those who retained a sense of humour, a taste for the bizarre and the unexpected, and simply enjoyed teaching their chosen subject to small classes of friendly children, this extraordinary establishment had a great deal to offer. It suited me perfectly. I made many friends and was, I am sure, far happier there than I should ever have been in any more orthodox institution.

Some of the characters who found their way on to the staff were odd indeed, and one at least seemed to have stepped straight out of the pages of *Decline and Fall*. Besides running the School Cadet Corps he also did some junior teaching. He had a very smooth line of chat, an impressive military bearing, and was rarely without his swagger stick. I was prepared to allow him the benefit of the doubt for a shifty eye until I happened to overhear him giving a junior History lesson on Ancient Greece, with specific reference to a triumvirate of personages whom he referred to as 'Plateau', 'So-crats' and 'Al.C.Bides'. Not long after this he 'put up a bit of a black, old man' and vanished.

Then there was a young Irish maths teacher who reduced even the Head to stunned silence by asking in a staff meeting one day: 'Sorr, what are we supposed to do whin de young divvils climb up on to de desks and start trowin' de ink-wells at us?'

Scandals of one sort or another were always simmering but rarely boiled over. During my first term a senior boy was severely reprimanded for being caught *in flagrante delicto* with one of the maids, and there was one well-heeled Scandinavian youth who actually rented a small flat down in the town which he used to sub-let to his friends at ten shillings an hour. This did not come to light, however, till after he had left the school. Occasionally a boy would be expelled only to reappear again at the beginning of the following term as if nothing had happened. It was indeed rumoured that the Headmaster had once threatened a miscreant with: 'Thish time I exshpel you! Nexsht time I fine you five pounds!'

In spite of this crazy-gang atmosphere—or maybe even because of it—the general academic and cultural standard at Massada was remarkably high. And undoubtedly a major part of the credit for this must go to Mr Jacobson. He assumed as a matter of course that a pupil would progress from the sixth form to the university. What is more he rarely, if ever, interfered in the classroom. There is no doubt at all in my mind that teaching in the sixth form at Massada was the most enjoyable employment I have ever had. The Advanced Level English classes were small; never more than six; most of the senior pupils were well above average intelligence, and even those who weren't were eager to learn. In such conditions, assuming that he had the capacity to do so, a teacher could hardly fail to 'grow with the job'. Certainly I learnt more about literature and about what literature was about during those first five years of teaching than I had in all my own formal education.

Meanwhile during the school holidays I was writing industriously. I started work on a new novel during the summer holiday in 1952 and was half way through it when I had to break off and return to teaching. Although I did not realize it at the time, this break was to prove fatal. If I am anything at all I am an *organic* writer. I tell myself the story as I go along. I want to find out what happens next; what my characters are going to do and to say. Thus each novel is in the nature of a

voyage of exploration. *Time to Recover*—my second attempt—died from lack of nurture just when it was bursting into flower. So involved in the story had I become that I went on writing the book in my head while I was back at school teaching again. When eventually I came to take up the story where I had left off, the vital impulse had died. I knew what was going to happen and there was nothing left for me to discover. The sense of real *loss* I experienced might well have been comic if it hadn't been so painful. But at least it had taught me a valuable lesson about the *kind* of writer I was. Next time, I vowed, I would get it right.

24

HAD I been familiar with the theory of 'seven-year cycles' I would probably have been prepared for 1954 to usher in something special for my twenty-eighth year. Certainly the signs were all pointing towards it. During the previous summer Ruth, who had taken a secretarial course and was now working in a local bookshop, started feeling sick in the mornings. At the beginning of August I was able to write to my father and tell him that he could expect to be a grandparent for the second time by the following spring. He was delighted to hear it. We then began hunting around for a more convenient flat, only to discover that, so far as the Brighton landladies were concerned, pregnancy was tantamount to leprosy. By the end of November when we were beginning to feel desperate a colleague at school suggested we might try advertising in the local paper. Within a couple of hours of our S.O.S. appearing a man had telephoned to ask whether we would be interested in taking over the tenancy of an unfurnished semi-detached house for a controlled rent of twenty-seven shillings and sixpence a week! Our caller could scarcely have replaced the receiver at his end before we were

round knocking on the door of 12, Craignair Avenue, Patcham. Three weeks later, still hardly able to believe our good fortune, we were installed in the house which was to be our home for the next seven years.

We spent January and February decorating. Ruth who by now was beginning to resemble an outsize golden egg in an egg-cup painted the middle sections of the walls; Pat, a friend of Ruth's, painted the skirtings; and I made myself responsible for the tops of the walls and the ceilings. The finished effect was a good deal better than might have been expected.

We had completed two rooms when a letter arrived from Lower Lodge. It told us that Betty had died on February 6th in the Royal County Hospital at Winchester of a cerebral haemorrhage and 'malignant hypertension'.

Even at the time my immediate reaction on hearing the news seemed curious. I believed it right enough—that is to say I was quite sure that Betty *was* physically dead—and at the same time I was half convinced that she still existed. In the letter I wrote to my father I find I tried to describe my feelings thus: 'Strange how I felt when I heard your news—like a child who has seen a nightmare and, even when the light has been switched on and he has been convinced that there is nothing there really, still cannot wholly believe it. . . . Even though I have not seen her for years, a part of me was always tuned in to her wavelength, ready to warn, always on the alert, and I can't switch it off. One day perhaps, but not yet. Not for a long time yet. . . .'

But if I found it difficult to come to terms with the fact of Betty's death, my father found it at least as difficult to come to terms with what had passed for their married life together. Her death should, he believed, 'mark an epoch' in his life, yet, when it came to the point he discovered that he could feel very little indeed. It was all grit and ashes in his memory, though he records how, at the funeral service—'a momentary wave of sadness at what I must imagine to be the misery of her life swept over me: to have been condemned to go on hating and thinking evil of one who (she must have known) had done his

best to live with her for fifteen years, is a grim destiny which one would shrink from inflicting on one's worst enemy. Yes, with all my heart, I hope her soul is now at peace. It never was when I knew her, and I cannot believe it ever was after I left her.'

The nagging question—how much had he himself been to blame?—returned to haunt him in the days immediately following the funeral. I do not think he ever found a satisfactory answer, but it was not for want of being honest with himself as this Journal entry shows: '. . . I do wish I could understand what happened to her. I *feel* that it was something in my own peculiar make-up that exacerbated her condition. When I first knew her, she was not ungenerous—rather reckless, but not ungenerous; and I certainly felt she was sincere when she wanted to leave me before Mary was born. I forget exactly what she said, but the drift of it was that she wasn't fit to share my life; she would have my baby and be quite content to keep herself and it. As I say I felt she was sincere; and I know I had to plead passionately with her not to do it, and I felt, alas, that I was overbearing her against her own instinct. I seem to remember that she insisted that she must go away, *because* she loved me, and knew she would spoil my life. It's easy to say now that I ought to have let her go; but I know I felt then that it was a terrible idea. I was already passionately attached to the unborn child; and it was wonderful to me that Betty should really desire to have it—so different from Violet. I *could* not have behaved otherwise than I did, nor indeed could I now, if the same situation was conceivable. But perhaps I came nearer then than I ever did again to a glimpse of the real, hidden Betty: who somehow knew that for us to live together as man and wife would be fatal, that I would make a demand on her that she could not fulfil, and that it would drive her to a frenzy. Perhaps that is the memory of her I ought to cling to. But how could I have let the unborn Mary go?'

With Betty gone there was no longer any obstacle to my father marrying Mary, and the wedding date was fixed for March 10th. By a strange coincidence this was the very day

chosen by Nature for the birth of our daughter Jacqueline. I rang my father after breakfast to pass on the glad tidings and to wish them both joy. My news seems to have made his cup brim over, providing him with—'an almost comic super-abundance of happiness—the glorious day, the granddaughter, the doves, the crocuses in first flower, the prospect of the gathering together of my whole family, the very wedding itself after nearly fifteen years: it *is* extraordinary.'

Four days later he drove down to Brighton with Mary, Val, and Weg, for the long-anticipated family reunion. They picked up young Mary and David from Horsham and arrived at about tea-time. I had not seen my step-brother since a brief meeting in London when I was working at Bumpus's, but at least I *had* seen him, whereas Weg had not set eyes on him since leaving Larling at the beginning of 1942. David did not remember her at all and she was deeply upset when she discovered this. Seemingly he had drawn an impenetrable veil across all the memories of his early childhood. Now a tall sixteen-year-old, he seemed in many ways far younger, adrift in a day-dreamy world of his own that appeared to bear only a tenuous relation to the real one. I remember talking to him about skin-diving and being amused when he asked me, quite seriously, if I'd ever found any sunken treasure. But I know that I was not alone in feeling that the whole gathering was an ordeal which I would rather have missed. It was somehow forced, unnatural, and I believe that David was the only one among the four of us who felt in any sense at ease. Perhaps—as my father had so devoutly hoped—a time would come when we could indeed be gathered around Mary and himself in happiness: he believed it had come to pass that afternoon, but at least three of his children knew otherwise. Above the surface all seemed well enough but in the shadowy depths below the currents and the counter-currents were running chill. We knew too much, and too much of what we knew we dared not speak about. Like Houseman's lovers, we looked at one another and we looked away.

Yet that meeting, unsatisfactory though it was in so many

ways, inadvertently provided me with the catalyst for my third novel. The idea had no sooner occurred to me than I was wholly possessed by it. I would take Larling as my scene and re-create it as I wanted to remember it—i.e. minus Betty. The rest—a story of adolescent love would perforce be wholly invented, but I sensed that it would grow quite naturally out of the setting.

And so it proved. *The Golden Valley* wrote itself. From the opening sentence it flowed as smoothly as the river which wound through its pages and it sustained its imaginative intensity to the very end. It dictated its own length—about fifty thousand words—and when I had written the final sentence and laid down my pen I knew that the days of my seemingly interminable literary apprenticeship were over at last.

Three days later, at the end of August, we loaded Jackie into her carry-cot and travelled down to Calstock in Devon for a week's holiday with my father, Mary, Val and David. David had just finished his first term's training for the Merchant Navy at H.M.S. *Conway* in Anglesey. That he had been accepted for the course was something in the nature of a minor miracle. Judging from my father's Journal entries covering the period while he was attempting to coach Dave for his entrance examination, what had taken place was little less than a battle for the boy's soul, an exhausting struggle 'against a fearful power of evil, making for chaos'. Knowing something of the circumstances I think my father was perfectly justified in seeing it in these terms—as the final battle of that elemental war between himself and Betty which had raged for over twenty years. He knew that David had to be liberated from Betty's 'living influence' on his psyche or he was doomed. The struggle for possession left my father ill and utterly exhausted—'as if I had had every drop of virtue drained out of me'—and though, for Dave's sake, he was happy at the result, he could not really believe that the war had finally been won.

At the end of September I sent my father a copy of my novel which Ruth had typed out. I was supremely confident that he

would approve of it. How could he not? After all, I knew it was in a different class from any of my short stories and he had praised those. His verdict when it came hit me with the numbing force of a shrewdly directed sandbag landing smack behind my ear. In his considered opinion not only was *The Golden Valley* not a novel but a *nouvelle*, and a rather thin one at that, but withal of such dubious quality that it would probably be in my own best interest to put it away in a drawer and forget it since, if I sent it to my agent, it might conceivably do me harm. He concluded: 'There is one thing I would like to say. If humanly possible let your next effort be on a theme quite remote from your own autobiography: let all the characters be entirely invented. Construct a plot that interests you quite objectively and do the best you can with it.'

To say I was depressed would be carrying understatement to the point of mendacity. I simply *couldn't believe it.* It took three days before his message finally sank in, and three weeks more before I tumbled to the significance of that concluding paragraph. By then I had received another note from him which ran as follows—'It struck me suddenly this morning that I did not make it perfectly clear why I had such a *strong* objection to your appearing to make Larling identifiable.

'It is inevitable, if the book were to stand as it does and be published, that the identification should be made—and made in detail. I shall be identified with "the Father" and "Angela" with Betty. And unless you make Angela a *vastly* more unattractive character than she is at present, I shall—quite justly on this evidence—incur the condemnation of having left a woman with whom I could have led a tolerable life. My own conduct will appear as capricious and indefensible, which I do not believe it was: neither, I think, do you.'

Since the portrait of him which I had drawn was not only true to life but wholly sympathetic it became clear to me that what he was doing (albeit unconsciously) was striving to protect Mary from the malice of spiteful tongues. In a letter to Henry Williamson written at almost exactly this time he counsels: 'The moment her lip begins to tremble, throw down all your

weapons, don't care a tinker's curse what masterpiece you may be spoiling, what plan upsetting . . .' So my inoffensive little book, written with all the 'disinterested love' I could muster was consigned to the flames before the altar of the ideal man/woman relationship. I can smile at it now, but at the time, overwrought and wretched, I saw it as the ultimate act of rejection.

25

THE FOLLOWING summer (1955) Ruth, Jackie and I were invited down to Thelnetham for a holiday. Weg, Jean and Johnnie were joining us later. Since David was also there and young Mary put in a brief appearance, it was the nearest we ever came to that genuine 'family reunion' my father hankered after. He himself was far from well and apologized for being such poor company though, in fact, he was nothing of the kind. And how he relished having his grandchildren around him! He really did *love* little children. I treasure a jewel-bright memory of him sitting in the garden with Jackie on his lap and, very slowly and deliberately, folding up his pocket handkerchief into a 'rabbit' which was in truth a sort of floppy sausage with rudimentary ears. As he handed it to her and she examined it gravely he remarked to me with a grin: 'I remember being extraordinarily impressed by old Thomas Hardy making one of those for Weg when she was about Jackie's age. And after he'd done it he turned to me and said: "D'you know, I haven't done that for over fifty years!" '

By then most of the sting of his dismissal of *The Golden Valley* had worn off, thanks largely to the warm praise the story had received from Frank Lea, Anne Tibble and Victor Callaghan. Frank, who understood him perhaps better than anyone, explained my father's reaction to the book thus: 'I fancy,

though I don't know, that he may have been blinded by two things: (a) such autobiographical or seemingly autobiographical references as there are, which would naturally loom larger in his eyes (and Mary's) than another's; and (b) a strong reaction against anything subjective (not necessarily autobiographical) in literature, which is apparent in both his reading and writing at the present time. It is difficult otherwise to account for what seems to me so manifest a misjudgement.'

I did not discuss my own writing with my father—in fact I never did so again—but I did talk with him about his own—particularly to express my regret that his *Jonathan Swift* (which had now appeared and been widely acclaimed) had not been a book on Wordsworth and Coleridge. He responded with the remark which I have already quoted to the effect that he wished I had told him three years earlier. I felt appropriately flattered. He spoke also about Robert Gitting's book *John Keats—The Living Year* and asked me if I had read it. He told me ruefully that his carefully argued essay in refutation of Gitting's 'monstrous' theory about Keats and Isabella Jones had been rejected out of hand by the O.U.P. and that he had been able to get it accepted by Jonathan Cape only by agreeing to forgo all royalties on the first fifteen hundred copies of the new edition of his *Studies in Keats* in which it was to be included.

As always when he spoke about Keats it was as though he were talking about someone who was at least as real to him as was the person he was talking to and, very often, a good deal *more* real. There is no doubt at all in my mind that if anyone really wished to *wound* my father—and many did—they had only to direct their attacks at those he loved, both the living and the dead. Personal vilification he simply shrugged off as being not worth bothering about, maintaining, in the face of our indignant protests, that time would take care of all that.

Those were the last real conversations I had with him. A month later Helen, our second daughter, was born, and immediately following her birth, Ruth became seriously ill and had to go into hospital for two months. Our vague plans for

spending Christmas at Lower Lodge had to be scrapped and the following summer we took the children camping in Italy. During this holiday I kept a diary and find recorded in it an intensely vivid dream about my father. When we returned home I discovered a postcard from him waiting for me. The message read simply: 'Don't give up, old boy. Take heart from the Abbé Galiani's words to Mme d'Epinay: "*Continuez vos ouvrages, madame, c'est une preuve d'attachement à la vie*".' I was not in the least surprised to see that the card was dated August 25th—the day after I had had my dream.

We exchanged letters from time to time. Re-reading his today I detect a distinctly autumnal quality in them. 'You must have your hands pretty full. Now I come to think of it so were mine at your age, thirty—that was 1919—oh, yes, my plate was full, with the knowledge that unless Katherine went into a sanatorium and stayed there, she could last only three years more. The only bright spot was that I had just been given *The Athenaeum* to edit, and so, for the time being, I had an income. But it's all far away and long ago: I seem to have lived *three* quite separate and distinct lives since then.'

I sent him a copy of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, wondering what he would make of it. He replied: 'It's a powerful little book; not cheap. Still, I ask myself what it comes to beyond the old "the world *is* full of pain, misery, heartbreak and oppression." I can only say to myself "Yes, but not *quite* so full as it was" . . . on the bigger issue. Of course there isn't much one can be *sure* of. But what one *can* be sure of, it seems to me, is a big thing because it's generically different from all that makes one unsure. I mean love. "And love alone can lend you loyalty." I can't say like Paul "Love never faileth". Under certain easily imaginable circumstances, no doubt, I should behave like a beaten animal: but I should know I had failed; in my heart of hearts, so long as I retained consciousness, I should not attempt to excuse myself. And the fact of the concentration camp, because it makes me see how utterly precarious is the acquired faculty of love in *homo sapiens*, makes me the more determined to do what I can to defend the

flame. That's a very simple creed, you may say. I agree. But it's good enough in that I can live by it without despair.'

In the last letter of his I have—though I am almost certain it was not quite the last he wrote to me—he told me that he had just finished correcting the proofs of an essay on 'Christianity and Tragedy' which was to form the final section of a book called *Love, Freedom and Society*. He commented that he now felt he had said all he had to say 'of any consequence whatsoever'. Of this study (subsequently re-titled 'Beyond the Prophets') which I did not read till after his death, Frank Lea has truly said: 'Into this lucid, profound and beautiful essay he distilled the quintessence of all his thinking—religious, literary and political. It was a fitting last word.'

26

My father died of a coronary thrombosis in the early hours of the morning on March 12th, 1957. I was not there when it happened but those who were have assured me that he came close to fulfilling his own desire 'to cease upon the midnight with no pain'. To Mary, who was at his bedside and tried at first to persuade him to go on living, he said: 'I should not have asked Katherine to go on: I should not have asked Lawrence to go on: I should be so happy to die tonight.' As she herself has expressed it: 'I realized at once that he was sure the time had come for him to die—that indeed he was ready to go. He seemed to be taking complete responsibility for his own death.'

He had pondered too long and too deeply on the nature of the inevitable mystery for Death to hold any terrors for him. In a Journal entry made at the beginning of May 1954 he had this to say:

'*Why* is it that the blessed experience of love, and in the midst of it, makes one regard death with absolute equanimity?

In all logic it seems one should say as Keats did, when he contemplated the possibility of the perfectibility of human existence: "But who, in such a case, could bear with Death?" But it is not so: it is the very reverse: nearer indeed to Keats's feeling at the voice of the nightingale:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.

But it is not that either. One does not *want* to die, possessed by Love. It is simply that it seems utterly natural to die, when death comes (as indeed, of course, it is). But the full fruition of Love makes this logical "natural" seem really natural, as though now Life in oneself had really been fulfilled. There is nothing more to ask, or to experience—essentially nothing. *Nunc dimittis servum tuum.*

'But, maybe, it is deeper than that; maybe, it is an indication that, as Whitman says,

To die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

Maybe, the condition of Love, complete, fulfilled, utterly reciprocal, abounding in absolute trust, rich in the sense of simple incessant miracle, is in itself an assurance that Death must be the gate of Life, of some equally simple but unimaginable kind. But this assurance is so profound and so secret, so consubstantial with the condition of Love, that it is untranslatable, unformable, inexpressible: so completely elusive indeed that it is quite impossible to say that I have it. The utmost that I can *say* (which is also the least I can say) is that the condition of Love, fulfilled, is accompanied by the feeling that Death, when it comes, will be *good.* What that signifies, I can only conjecture: and one conjecture seems as likely to be true as another, apparently its opposite.

'Thus, it may be that Death is the gate of a new Life; it may be that Death is really the end of all personal existence. Both these possibilities seem to me, in the condition of Love, to be equally *good.* So there is nothing to be said beyond celebrating the fact.

'Or, finally, why should it not be that the knowledge of the simple mystery and miracle of Love gives one, as it were, the freedom of the mystery and miracle of Death? That is a metaphor, but it has meaning.

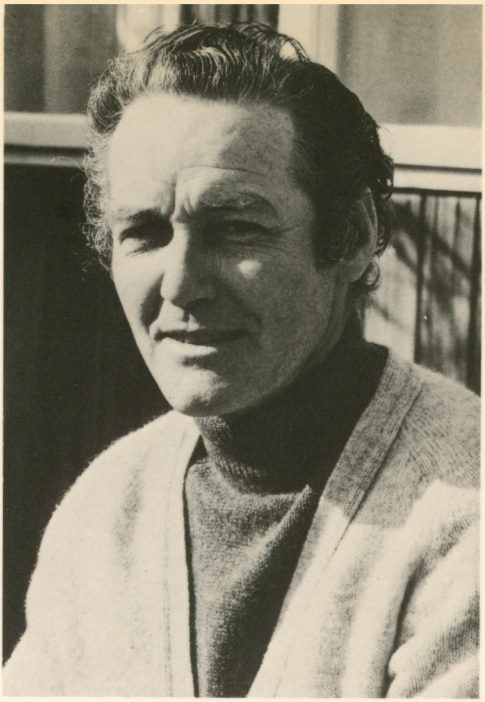
'And then, to get things as clear as I can, I must ask: Is death, to one in the condition of Love, more than a word? I can, do, and must say that I contemplate Death with equanimity. But does that mean more than that I feel no fear of Death, now? How can one contemplate Death, without dying, and, dying, how can one? But it is certainly true that the anticipation and fear of Death can occupy and tinge a man's thoughts, even to the extent that he is obsessed with it. That, anyhow, is quite alien to me. What apparently I have to say is that, in the condition of Love, I find myself frequently thinking of Death, and that, as far as I can think of Death, it seems to me good, and not at all to be feared. That seems to me as near as I can get to the truth.'

But if my father could accept the fact of his own death as being something as natural as the fall of an autumn leaf, I could do no such thing. I recall most clearly the truly sickening moment of pure panic I experienced when I saw the coffin containing his body being lowered into the ground in Thelnetham churchyard. Six feet underground doesn't *sound* much, but as I peered down into that cavernous, blank-sided slit and imagined all the ponderous weight of Suffolk clay being shovelled in on top of him I felt as if I too were being buried alive. It was the sole instant of true identification I experienced during the whole ceremony—a cold, sick shudder of panic. And I remember feeling in some numb, obscure way that he had no *right* to be dead without asking my permission. I wasn't ready for him to go. He had sneaked off and done it behind my back. Why, he hadn't even waited to see Helen! What sort of proof of 'attachment to life' was that supposed to be? Indeed, my feelings of grief were, I now realize, nothing more than an expression of my old familiar theme—a variant of the accusing cry I had been directing at him all my life: 'It's not fair!' Better than anyone I knew how badly I still needed him and,

rather than relinquish him now, I simply clung on the tighter, refusing to let him go, and 'raged against the dying of the light'.

When I got back to Brighton I found, lying on my desk, the script of *The Golden Valley* which nobody seemed to want. I opened it and re-read one of the passages in which I had described my father. Why hadn't he been able to see what I was saying there? Why hadn't he understood? At that moment I swear my hunger for him, for his love, was a physical pain so intense it made my head swim. And then, all of a sudden, it had gone. In its place there came flooding in what I can only describe as 'an awareness of his presence' so overwhelming that it simply could not be denied. It seemed to flow all over and around me like a warm and cherishing tide, and in that timeless instant, I *knew* that *he* knew. I found myself recalling a moment, forgotten until then, when I had stood alone on a river bank after my friend Gordon had been killed and I had experienced a similar reassurance, a conviction that, come what may, I was *not* alone.

And there it must end, though of course, in a very real sense, it never will end. Just as my father himself 'knew' that Katherine's love survived her own physical death and was a constant reality to him ever afterwards, so too do I believe that I have in some inexplicable way come into a share of that inheritance through him. I do not ask anyone else to believe it but to deny that *I* believe it would be to deny *him*. That I cannot do. Instead I offer this to the memory of the man I loved—wherever he now is—but dwelling I feel sure in some calm realm of the spirit 'where everything is forgiven—and it would be strange not to forgive'.



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