The Poetic Life

by Edward Upward
from *In the Thirties*

On the paddle steamer halfway across from the mainland to the island Alan Sebrill was already less oppressed by his failure to make progress during the last fortnight with the long poem he had started writing. His fears in the train down from London that he might waste the freedom he had gained when he had thrown up his preparatory school teaching job two months before, and that he might never produce the real poetry he had then believed himself capable of, were forgotten as he looked at the nearing pier-head above the glistering water and at summer trees dark behind the shore. Though he could not yet hope that his visit to the island might help him to continue writing, he felt he was reprieved now from anxiety; and before the steamer arrived against the landing-stage of the pier he was thinking pleasurably of the meeting he would soon have with his friend, Richard Marple, who had invited him down here.

The roof tiles of the pier pavilion, as Richard had said in his letter, were curved like the scales of a fish; and the two gabled huts, one on each side of the turnstiles at the shore end of the pier, did in actuality have finials suggestive of the spikes on Prussian soldiers' helmets. Beyond the turnstiles a dark crimson open motor-coach was waiting, recognizable immediately as the one that Richard had told Alan to look out for, with a bright brass horn fixed just below the brass-framed windscreen. Alan climbed up to sit on the front seat beside the cocky young driver, who wore a cap tilted so far back that Richard must surely have been right in supposing it to be held to his head by some sort of hat-pin, and who waved to a girl in a kiosk before he drove away from the pier. Under trees along lanes where Tennyson and perhaps Turgenev had once strolled, the motor-coach hurried, while Alan remembered phrases and sentences that Richard had used to recommend the

marvels of the place: 'the marine *lueurs* in the sky' (Gallicisms, as well as certain Americanisms, being in fashion with the two of them at this period); 'from where I sit the underside of the verandah roof looks like an inverted clinker-built rowing-boat'; 'come and live the poetic life at last'; 'your bemused friend, Richard.' Sooner than Alan expected, at a point where the road rounded a small hill, the bay came into full and close view. To the right was the Britannia public house, mentioned in Richard's letter, with a balcony supported by wooden Doric pillars. To the left, on a shingle bank, Richard was sitting. He scrambled up from the shingle and leapt over a low concrete parapet towards the motor-coach, his legs apart and his arms thrown upwards in greeting. He was so demonstratively glad to see Alan that he seemed not merely to be expressing his own feelings about him but also to be welcoming him publicly on behalf of all the bystanders and of all the houses around and of the sea itself.

'Thank God you've come,' Richard said loudly as the two of them moved off down a sandy side-lane towards his lodgings. 'Oh boy, it would be impossible for you not to be able to write here. This place is utter heaven ... But I ought to have told you in my letter—there are certain complications. I'll explain later.'

'I suppose I shall be able to sleep somewhere tonight in this town?' Alan asked.

'Oh yes. I've fixed all that with my landlady, Miss Pollock. You can stay as long as you like. And when you find the effect it has on your poetry I expect you'll want to be here for the rest of the summer.'

'Is yours still going well?'

'Wonderfully, though I've not been attempting any during this last week.'

They came to a small white front-gate over which a hawthorn tree had been trained into an arch. A mossed gravel path curved round an ascending lawn to reach the verandah of the house. Glass doors wide open to the verandah revealed a shadowy sitting-room in which an oil lamp with a white glass shade stood on a bobble-fringed velvety table-cloth. As Alan stepped after Richard into the room he noted that the ottoman and two

armchairs were upholstered in red plush; and over the mantelpiece there was a large gilt-framed mirror with swans in green reeds painted on the lower corners of the glass.

'It's marvellous,' Alan said.

'Isn't it?' Richard agreed with a pleased grin. 'But you won't meet Miss Pollock herself till she brings in our tea. She's never to be seen except at meal-times, and even then only for a moment or so. She's rather strange, and very old.'

A few minutes later, when Alan was standing at the window of the bedroom up to which Richard had shown him, and was pouring water from a jug into a wash-basin while simultaneously looking out at a nearby cabbage patch that Richard said was owned by coastguards, he had the beginnings of a new hope about his poem. Trying to think what particular thing outside the window had suggested this hope to him, he spilt some of the water on the washhand-stand; and Richard, who was standing behind him, said with a disproportionately loud laugh, 'Aha, it leaks.'

Alan was startled, momentarily wondering whether the insanity which Richard had often boasted he might one day inherit from both sides of his family had at last come, then asked him to explain the earlier-mentioned complications.

'There were hints in my letter,' Richard said.

'Do you mean Love?'

'Yes, that's it. But what I didn't tell you was that the family were down here for only a week. They went back to London the day before yesterday. The mother invited me to come and visit them any time when I'm back there.'

'Don't you want to?'

'Oh God, yes. I'm utterly in love. The trouble is I don't know how much longer I shall be able to wait. I haven't managed to start writing again since they left.'

'You will.'

'I'm not so certain.'

But Richard soon added, 'I won't put it to the test just yet. I'm not

going to try to write for the next few days. I want to show you round this place. I want you to feel the same astounding delight that I've had here.'

'I shall, I'm sure.'

'I'll introduce you to the inhabitants.'

'Good.'

'I'm thoroughly in with the so-called lower classes here—the boatmen, the hotel workers, a bookmaker's clerk, a coastguard called Mr Hards, a jobbing gardener whom I've privately nicknamed "the Hedger", though his real name is Mr Lillicrap, which is perhaps even better, a Mr Peel who retired from Birmingham two years ago after winning a bit of money in a newspaper competition and who looks every inch the tripper, and a Scotsman who always wears a straw hat but no one knows quite what he's up to when he isn't in the pub, and lots of others. As a matter of fact the mother is a kind of lady's maid, very rafeened, and the father is a broad cockney. The family's holiday is paid for by the rich old woman she works for who comes down to stay here every Whitsun—and who seems rather nice, I must say, though I've never met her. I enjoyed talking loudly to them on the esplanade: it surprised the stuck-up public-school gang staying at the big hotel. I've realized lately that the time has arrived for me to show definitely that I'm against the plus-foured poshocracy, and for the cockneys and the lower orders.'

'I'm for them, too,' Alan said. 'And I've always wanted to get in with them. But I haven't your courage. I am afraid they will despise me. How did you do it?'

'By behaving naturally. They are rather proud of their gentlemanly friend.'

'That's where I always make my mistake. I try to talk to them in what I imagine to be *their* language. But if you introduce me all will be well. I usually make my friends lead me where I haven't the nerve to go alone.'

'You'll do fine, boy,' Richard said. 'And as soon as possible we must get you a girl. There are some promising ones about here. We'll find you someone really beautiful.'

'Good, I'm glad. So long as it doesn't prevent me from starting to

write again.'

'You mustn't let it. Though I admit I'm hardly the person to talk.'

That evening Alan met some of the inhabitants. He did not see any of the poshocrats except in the distance, where they appeared as dinner-jacketed or gowned shapes moving among hydrangeas behind the glass walls of the lounge of the big hotel up on the cliff. The hotel lawn descended to the level of the Britannia's roof, which it seemed almost to touch. Following Richard into the bar, Alan was as excited as though he had already drunk several pints. He was introduced first to Mr Lillicrap, the Hedger, a man of sixty with a square-looking front face, a very small chin and reddish swellings of the flesh at the corners of his jaws below the ears. The Hedger accepted drinks but did not speak much, appearing to be very tired. Once, however, he poked Alan in the side of the leg and pointed at the rumpled white flannel trousers worn by a fat man who bustled into the bar and who, on seeing Richard, exclaimed with the heartiest pleasure, 'Well, if it isn't our Dick.' This was Mr Peel, the Tripper. He took an immediate liking to Alan. He talked a lot, affably recommending excursions to various beauty spots, and he laughed often, throwing his head back and shaking. His face was assertive yet undetermined, rather too pale for the grossness of its shape, and he had butcher's curls. He carried a walking-stick hooked on to his arm. He insisted on ordering drinks for Alan and Richard and the Hedger. The barmaid wore ear-rings, was not unfriendly but never once smiled. Her glance was sharp and black. Her hair was black and waved. She hissed slightly when she spoke, though not from asthma. The Scotsman came in, nodded seriously to them but did not join them. He leant a forearm on the bar-counter, and with his straw boater tilted to the back of his head he crouched staring fixedly and without curiosity at Alan. Then the Hedger began to talk, slowly but pauselessly; and he talked, first, about eggs, having perhaps noticed a few minutes earlier that Alan's attention had been attracted by a bright yellow bottle of advocaat which was standing with other liqueurs on a shelf in front of a long horizontal strip of looking-glass beyond the barmaid's head. The Hedger said that when rats stole eggs they did it in a gang, one of the rats lying on his back and holding the egg on top of him while the others

pulled him along the ground; that hedgehogs would climb anything to get at eggs and would suck out the yolk and afterwards break and eat the shell; that a rook would carry off an egg, suck out the contents and leave the empty shell resting on—for instance—the top of a flint wall. He himself had bred white mice and then guinea-pigs 'for research'. He had worked in a stone quarry, with many steps to climb down, slippery and without a rail to hold on to, very cold, so that he had twice had pleurisy. The slow voice steadily continued, and Alan would gladly have listened to it for the rest of the evening, but the Hedger had to stop when the bookmaker's clerk, a young man with a brickdust-red complexion and a stutter, appeared and was introduced to Alan. Later, outside the Britannia, in the middle distance along the broken esplanade and indistinct in the moonlight, there were girls, beautiful even beyond expectation. As Alan and Richard stood looking towards them a boy named George, who worked in the still-room up at the hotel, came and spoke to Richard. Pleasantly monkey-faced, he wore a dull silver-coloured watch-chain hanging from his lapel buttonhole. He spoke about Basher, a man who—as Richard explained soon afterwards to Alan when they had begun to walk back down the sandy lane towards their lodgings—also worked in the still-room and was George's hero. 'And he really is a hero,' Richard said. 'A hero of our time. Whatever else you don't do, you mustn't fail to meet him.'

They did not continue walking for long. Suddenly Alan started to run, and he ran as fast as he could down the hundred yards or so of lane till he reached the white gate under the arched hawthorn. But the excitement which goaded him was increased rather than relieved by the running. Only one thing could ease it, and that would be to find words which might give his friend some inkling of how he already felt about this place and the people here. Richard was running too, though not quite so fast as Alan had been. The gate made a startlingly loud creaking sound as they pushed it open, and they warned each other by gestures to avoid alarming Miss Pollock. They moved with absurd caution, almost on tiptoe, up the gravel path to the verandah. Miss Pollock had lit the oil lamp and left it burning low. Richard went over to the table and turned the small red-gold-coloured wheel that

controlled the wick, till the light whitened inside the glass shade. They carried chairs out on to the verandah. Alan said, 'Thank heaven you invited me down here. A place like this is what I've never dared to hope for. Now I shall come alive again at last.'

'It'll seem even better when you really get to know it.'

'I wish I could tell you how dead I've been for months and months until now. Not only before I chucked up the school at the end of March and went home to live with my parents. All through April and May I haven't succeeded in writing a single really satisfactory line of poetry; though I've tried to fool myself into believing that because I've at least made a start on my long poem I've achieved the main thing, and that it will improve later.'

'I thought the opening passage you sent me was very good.'

'Perhaps it wasn't absolutely bad,' Alan conceded, pleased, 'but what I've written since is worse, and I've been writing more and more slowly and for the last fortnight I haven't been able to get ahead at all.' With story-teller's relish, as though he were describing a deliberately imagined experience and not an actual one, Alan added, 'I've had some rather nasty moments recently after waking in the mornings. All the feeling seems to retreat out of my arms and legs and to become burningly concentrated in my solar plexus. I've found a meaning for those lines —"Central anguish felt / For goodness wasted at peripheral fault." '

'It sounds pretty distinguished,' Richard said, in the admiring tone they still used at this period when speaking of any seemingly pathological symptom that one or the other of them might produce.

'I shan't wake like that in this house. Because here I shall be allowed to write. And I *shall* write.'

'Of course you will. But tell me why you're dissatisfied with the present opening. Let's get to the bottom of that.'

'It's much much too pictorial. There are no ideas in it.'

'I thought there were going to be some Marxian ideas later on in the poem. You said so when you wrote to me at the end of last term.'

'Yes, but Marx doesn't seem as he did before I escaped from the school. He attracted me then because I was in a fury with the anti-poetic life

I was leading, and because I saw him as the great repudiator of the whole loathly upper-class mystique on which the school was run. He doesn't seem quite so relevant now.'

Richard looked disappointed, though he had to admit, 'I couldn't make much sense out of *Das Kapital* when I began reading it soon after I got your letter about it. The first chapter was full of entities that Ockham would certainly have razored.'

For some reason Alan wanted to defend Marx against this criticism. 'That's what I thought at first. But later I wondered whether my distrust of Marx's abstractions mightn't be due to the bad influence on me of the logico-positivist philosophic gang when we were up at Cambridge, and whether he mightn't perhaps be dealing with realities and not just with words.'

Richard began to be hopeful again. He said almost coaxingly, 'So you might be able to use Marxian ideas in your poem after all?'

'No, they wouldn't be natural to me. But don't worry: since we've been sitting here I've become certain that very soon indeed—perhaps this evening—I'm going to know how to write this poem. The solution is very near. It's in the night air here.'

From before ten o'clock until after eleven they sat out on the verandah, talking not only of Alan's poem but also of the poems Richard had written since he had been staying here and which he now recited, knowing them—as he usually did know his poems—by heart. Without any envy at all, and with happy admiration, Alan recognized that his friend's work was far better than anything he himself had done or ever could do. He sat looking at the black trees that framed the rising shingle bank and the night sea. Through a spray of thin leaves the orange-coloured façade of the Britannia appeared grey under the moon. He seemed to be able to see also, as from some slight distance away, both Richard and himself sitting there on the verandah, the two young poets; and he had the idea that the picture they formed would not disappear when they returned inside the house, was permanent, would continue to exist long after they were dead.

Next morning they went walking, taking sandwiches with them for

lunch. At the bay, as they left their lodgings, the sea-light was reflected in shifting reticulations on the concrete groyne. Almost continuously throughout the day Alan was in a state of elation. All that he saw gave him delight, and he saw with clarity and in vivid detail many things he would not have noticed at other times. As for instance, near the end of the broken esplanade, the tall silver-painted iron lamp-standard whose top was curved over and decoratively curled like a bishop's crozier. Or, along the shore at low tide, sand ridges which resembled chains of buried fish. Or, among lugworms' tangle-coiled sandmounds, the meandering footprints of birds. Or the upper face of the red cliff channelled horizontally by erosion into corridor grottoes and pitted with miniature caves and looking like a section of a rabbit warren or of a wasps' nest. Nearby, the apex of an isolated greensand pinnacle was whitened with bird droppings. Richard used the word 'guano'. A dead guillemot, or so Alan named it to Richard, lay putrefying among rounded stones, emitting a smell as of coffee. A top-heavy black protrusion of cliff was streaked vertically with rust-coloured stains, like a derelict battleship, and at its base an under-sand streamlet was betrayed by an above-sand dendritical figure. Richard spoke the words 'ferruginous' and 'chalybeate'. Elsewhere along the cliff-face a shallow hole narrowing downwards to a neck reminded them of the inside of a ship's ventilator. They spoke geological words—more for sound and for poetic suggestiveness than for scientific meaning—such as sandrock, the Perna Bed, mud-flows, blue slipper, the Gault, the crackers. They named the soft rock of one of the cliffs 'the purple marls', not knowing whether they did so correctly or not, and Alan said that if this was the Wealden outcrop there ought to be iguanodon bones here. They thought of similes and metaphors for the movement and appearance of the waves breaking on the shore: the frail circlets of spume; the spume like fine lace curtains undulating in a black wind, or like the shredded fat hanging down over a bullock's heart as seen in a butcher's shop. Then the miniature waves detaching themselves from the spent breaker and scarcely having the power of individual motion: these flopped on the sand with pause and dip like the rolling of a metal ellipse, or like the movement of the genitals of a naked male runner. Suddenly and inconsequently Richard quoted from a

contemporary American writer: ' "I'm a goner. I'm in love with him, I think." ' The word 'goner' filled Alan with an astonishing joy. It excited him at first because of its strangeness, and next it made him hopefully imagine a time soon to come when he too would be utterly in love, and then it returned once again into his consciousness as a sound, as a word newly coloured and illuminated by what he had just imagined. And many other words that they spoke while they were out walking together went through a similar process. Memory or some not clearly perceived external object would suggest a poetically interesting word, and the word would make them look closely at an object whose own fascination would then be reflected back on the word, giving it a more than doubled beauty and power. They walked in a rapture of imagery. And Alan thought that no other activity on earth—not even making love—could compare with this savouring of words.

On the second evening after Alan's arrival he met Basher. In the moonlight Alan was standing with Richard and George outside the Britannia. Basher approached from inland along the road out of the village. He moved with bent shoulders and with long fast strides, and he had very long arms that swung in time with his legs. There was something palaeolithic about him, Alan thought. George introduced Alan to him in a tone of voice which made quite clear who was being honoured.

'Enjoying yourself here?' Basher asked, kindly.

'Yes,' Alan said. 'This afternoon we went out in a rowing boat in the bay.'

'Rowing, rowing,' Basher said. 'Ah, I used to be very fond of it myself.' He crouched, and, straightening out both arms, made movements as though pulling at oars. 'Then the sculling ...' He continued the movements, but this time on coming to the end of each stroke he turned up his wrists as though feathering the blades of the oars. He was evidently giving Alan a lesson in how it should be done.

Richard asked deferentially, 'You know a bit about boxing too, don't you?'

'That's right.'

Basher at once began to demonstrate, head lowered, left forearm for-

ward, legs apart and knees bent.

'Stand firm on your feet—always,' he said. 'I've done a lot of scrapping. Because I'm fond of women. Not just for the sake of going out with them. I believe in giving them a good turn over.'

'Tell us about the women,' George admiringly begged him.

Basher seemed very pleased. 'I was in Samaria once,' he said. 'I was standing as I might be here and an old man with a beard came past. Behind him was about ten young maids walking in file and all wearing—what d'you call 'em?—yashmaks, you know what, hanging down over their noses and mouths. I touched the last one up as she went by. Quicker'n you can say she pulls out a small dagger.' Basher did not explain what happened next, but went on just as though he had left no gap in the story. 'An old woman arranged it with me by sign-language. Afterwards she threw us a towel over the wooden partition. She was an old woman of seventy. She made signs with her fingers that the girl was thirteen. Then I lifted up the old woman. She was the best I ever ...'

'Show them your tattoo,' George asked.

Basher slipped one arm out of his jacket, rolled up a shirt-sleeve, revealed a blue and red tattooed design of girls with prominent rumps and busts and with wasp waists. He worked the bulging muscles beneath the skin of his arm, and asked, 'Can you see them dancing?' Alan couldn't, but answered, 'Yes.' Basher was thoroughly satisfied and, having at last rolled down his shirt-sleeve again and put his arm back into the arm of his jacket, he said, 'I've been a sailor. Been everywhere in the world. Australia is the best country. I've had something to drink this evening. I've just been with a woman I know here. All the doings. I've got no use for any of those contraptions. I just go right through them. She says I ought to wear leather.'

Alan dared to ask, 'What do you think of the people staying up at the hotel?'

'Oh *them*,' Basher said, seemingly with contempt. But he wouldn't say any more about them. Either the sense that Alan and Richard belonged to the same class as those people prompted him to be cautious in spite of his inebriation, or else he didn't really feel and couldn't simulate the absolute

disapproval which he must have guessed Alan would have liked to hear him express.

Not till the afternoon of the next day did Alan meet someone who not only belonged to the lower orders but was prepared to show a dislike for the poshocrats. After returning from a walk along the shore Richard and Alan were on the shingle bank when they saw the motor-coach arrive, and among its passengers was a red-faced middle-aged man wearing a check suit whose black and white squares were so large that Alan could only suppose he had hired it from a theatrical costumier's. He wore a cap to match, and a blue bow-tie with big white spots. As soon as he had stepped out of the motor-coach he came and stood on the concrete parapet quite near to Richard and Alan, and he began to address the other passengers in a powerful uncultured voice. He spoke of the pyramids of Egypt, of the British Empire, of a dandelion he had picked that morning and now wore in his buttonhole, warned his hearers that they and the motor-coach they had ridden in would wither away like the grass of the fields. He seemed surprisingly hearty for a religious maniac. When he had finished his short sermon he came and stood next to Richard, but without speaking. At that moment a group of guests from the big hotel, blazered young men and striding girls, went confidently past. In their dress, their voices, their every minutest gesture and facial movement, they represented for Alan what he then loathed more than anything else in the world: they were the loyal young supporters of that power which cared only for outward appearances and ceremonies and which despised the living poets and the truth. Richard dared to ask the maniac whether he hadn't something to say about these young people. At once, and to the alarmed delight of Alan, the maniac shouted after them with coarse scorn, 'Tulips, twolips, there you go, there you go. And all you have is nothing.' He ended with a tremendous bawling laugh. The young people, in a way that Alan could hardly help admiring or at least envying, ignored him. The maniac himself then walked quickly off towards the village. Later Richard talked about him to the driver of the motor-coach, who said, 'I suppose he must have been drunk.'

Three evenings later there was an open-air dance at the bay. A small

local brass band, only two of whom wore uniform, brought canvas stools and set them up on the gravel not far from the windows of the Britannia. There were fewer than a dozen couples dancing and some of the girls had to pair off together because there were more girls than men. The dancing was on a sunken stretch of grass below the broken esplanade. Richard and Alan watched at first from inside the bar of the Britannia, but soon they came out and stood on the shingle bank. Alan looked at each of the couples in turn, and he found that several of the girls were beautiful. And suddenly they, and their partners, and the other couples also, seemed more than merely beautiful, were transfigured. The unambiguous emotional music, the soft strong movement of limbs beneath the dresses, the happy seriousness of faces, the pride and the gliding erectness of body and of head, made Alan feel that in these dancers he was seeing the human race as it truly was, sublime, infinitely finer than all the gods and goddesses it had ever invented. No supernatural light shining around these girls and men could, he thought, have given them such a glory as they naturally had now. He was on the point of trying to tell Richard about this when he saw standing at the near end of the esplanade two girls and a young man who were also watching the dancers. The shorter and plumper of the girls had a face that reminded Alan of Rossetti's *The Beloved* in the Tate Gallery. The other had straight coppery hair and eyes that, for no reason he could think of, seemed to him Icelandic. He was aware that he could fall utterly in love with either of them. But the shorter one turned towards the young man and, eagerly catching hold of him by the wrist, led him on to the grass to dance. He had a willing, though rather helpless, look, moved clumsily, and his long black hair was untidy. He might not be her husband yet—her possessiveness would perhaps not have been so ostentatiously avid if he had been, Alan thought—but he appeared likely to be before long. The other smilingly watched them begin to dance. Alan asked Richard, 'Do you know who that girl is over there at the end of the esplanade?'

'No. I'm pretty sure she's not one of the inhabitants. Do you fancy her?'

'God, yes!'

'Go and ask her to dance.'

'She might be posh.'

'Well, even if she is she can only say no.'

'I think I'll wait a bit.'

'She might try to look insulted, but she wouldn't feel it.'

'What scares me is that she might say yes,' Alan explained.

'Come on, boy, she's looking at you.'

'No, I'm not ready. I should seem a complete fool and spoil all my chances. Or, worse, I might find that she was the fool. It's too soon.'

She was in fact looking at Alan—frankly and mildly and with apparent approval. He briefly looked back. The blood thumped in his body. But funk or perverseness made him say to Richard, 'Let's go.'

'Where?'

'Into the pub again. Or, better, back to the lodgings.'

'What about the girl? Would you like me to speak to her for you?'

'No.'

'All right. But promise me that if she's staying here you'll introduce yourself not later than tomorrow.'

'Very well, I promise.'

'Then I shall be able to feel that I've got you properly equipped.'

As they walked away Alan became aware of the pain of the injury which his timidity had caused him to inflict on himself. He was almost on the point of turning back and going to speak to the girl, but the thought of his promise to Richard, which he had every intention of keeping, partly soothed him. Quite soon he was able to remember her without any unhappiness, and even with hope. Then he remembered also the impression that the dancers had made on him; and something of the exalted admiration he had felt for them began to revive in him.

'What is it that makes them so fine?' he asked.

'That's what I was wondering,' Richard said.

'It can't be just sex.'

'No. Perhaps it's beauty, eh?'

'I don't know.'

'Then it's because they're *living*.'

'Yes, that's partly it. But there's more to it than that.'

Richard was opening the white gate under the hawthorn arch when Alan added, 'I've got it.' He bounded forward up the path, then stopped, waiting for Richard. 'It's because they're doomed.'

'Boy, I believe you're right.'

'It's because in ten to fifteen years' time all those girls will be prematurely middle-aged and ugly. And they're dancing now in defiance of the inevitable rot which will come upon them.'

'Yes, that's it.'

Inside the sitting-room Alan went on, 'The band's rhythm made us obscurely recognize it: the historic tragedy of woman. We weren't looking just at a few local working girls wearing their summer frocks, but at the first or second act played over again in sight of a small bay and still cliffs.' With a sense of rising inspiration Alan added, 'But I see now that there's far far more to it than anything I've suggested yet.'

'What?' Richard urged him on.

'The girls aren't the only ones who are fine. People like the Hedger, and Mr Rudge, and the Scotsman, and Basher, and that maniac in the check suit, they're all just as fine, and for the same reason: they're all doomed. Most of them have reached the fourth act already. What makes people vile is being successful or comfortably off. That's why most of the hotel visitors are so poisonous. They are the wicked, the devils. Only the doomed are good, and we must be on their side always.'

Richard, excited by this conception, said, 'Our duty is to live among the doomed and in our poetry we must record and celebrate what they are.'

'We ourselves, in our own way, are doomed too,' Alan said. 'We shall always be misfits, not properly belonging to any social class. We shall never settle down anywhere. We must walk the earth. We must descend into hell.'

They found themselves standing in front of the big gilt-framed mirror. On the mantelshelf to one side of it there was a vase of Cape gooseberries and to the other side a vase of honesty; and in its pewter-coloured

depths, like a view veiled by faint rain, part of the hallway appeared through the open door of the sitting-room. Above the lincrusta dado in the hallway an engraving of Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* was made visible by the dimly pinkish-golden glow of evening. High against the wallpaper a feathery head of pampas grass intruded, the umbrella-stand in which its stem was based being out of sight beyond the door-jamb. They themselves, more vivid in the foreground, stood half-facing each other, at right-angles, both looking into the mirror. They were of much the same height, both rather short. Richard quoted from Matthew Arnold's sonnet on Shakespeare:

> ' "All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
> All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow,
> Find their sole speech in that victorious brow." '

He spoke the lines half-ironically, guarding against seeming guilty of the naive presumption of likening Alan and himself to Shakespeare, but in spite of, or because of, Richard's irony they were conscious as they looked at their reflected faces that there was suffering and victory in those brows too. They were conscious of belonging, however humbly, among the English poets. Awe came upon them as they continued to look at themselves. They saw not merely the two individual representatives but the ages-old and ever-living greatness which was here represented. They would be true to poetry, Alan told himself, no matter what miseries and humiliations they might have to undergo for it, no matter even what crimes they might perhaps have to commit for it.

Next morning, which was the sixth since Alan's arrival here, Richard came down late for breakfast. Alan had finished his, and was sitting on the red plush ottoman reading Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*. There was a glum frown over Richard's face. Alan said, 'You look as though you've had an all-night visit from a loathly succubus.'

Instead of grinning, Richard said violently, 'I can't stand a single day more of this.'

'Of what?' Alan asked, astounded.

‘Of this house, this place.’ Richard became a little milder. ‘I can’t wait any longer. I’ve got to go to London. When I invited you down here I thought I should be able to stay on and write poetry after the family had gone back, but almost as soon as I saw you in the motor-coach—and for heaven’s sake, boy, forgive me for saying this—I had a premonition that even with you here this place could never satisfy me again.’

‘I wouldn’t have guessed it.’

A bitterness rose in Alan, who wanted to say something hatefully contemptuous about Richard’s capriciousness, to call him deserter, to break with him for ever, but who unaccountably was able to say nothing more offensive than, ‘How soon will you be going?’

‘As soon as I’ve had breakfast.’

Suddenly Alan recognized that Richard had a right to leave for London, that it was not desertion, that the relation between them had always been one of mutual independence. His anger weakened, and he said, ‘Of course you ought to go if it’s necessary for your poetry.’

‘It is. I’d never be able to write another line here.’ Richard remembered something important. ‘But you’ll be able to get ahead with your poem here, eh?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘You absolutely must.’

Later, while Richard was upstairs packing a suitcase, Alan became doubtful whether this place and this house would in fact be favourable to his own writing. Perhaps the ‘poetic life’ he had been invited down here to lead might not seem so feasible after Richard had left. Perhaps even it could be lived only by someone who like Richard had enough private means to be able to go where he pleased when he pleased. Alan, waiting in the sitting-room, began to feel afraid, but he checked his fear by deciding that he would try to restart his poem this very morning, as soon as he had said goodbye to Richard.

After seeing Richard off at the motor-coach stop he returned at once to the house and fetched his notebook from his bedroom and went to sit out on the verandah. He gave himself twenty minutes to begin. During the past

two days he had already made up his mind about the sort of detail he wanted in the new opening, and on the previous evening his discovery that only the doomed are good had provided him with what he had most lacked when writing the existing version—a unifying central idea. At the end of twenty minutes, without difficulty, he started the new version. He was helped by a slogan he had made for himself, 'Get it on paper—well if possible, but badly rather than not at all.' By lunch-time he had written five lines. He was surprised to recognize that they were not valueless, that they would certainly do to go on from tomorrow, that they might even be good.

When he had finished lunch he went out to look for the coppery-haired girl he had seen at the open-air dance. He did not find her. But the next day, after writing another five lines of his poem in the morning, he saw her almost as soon as he left the house. She was walking towards the esplanade, and he followed her. She was brought to a halt at the top of the wooden steps by a family coming up from the beach. He stood beside her for at least half a minute, and she saw him, but far from saying anything to her he ridiculously tried to give the impression that he was with her there by mere chance. Although after he had let her go he recognized that this diffidence—like his earlier failure to ask her to dance with him—was a reversion to a former, boyish type of behaviour which he ought long before to have broken himself of, he couldn't bring himself to follow her down to the beach. His next opportunity came two days later on the shingle bank opposite the Britannia, but he was deterred from speaking to her because she was sitting with the other girl and the untidy-haired young man. If there had not been a second open-air dance a week after the first he might never have got to know her.

On the evening of this second dance he began, as he had begun when Richard had been with him, by watching from inside the bar of the Britannia. When he saw her with the other girl and the young man approaching along the road he came out of the bar so quickly that he had to make a detour towards his lodgings and back again in order to avoid walking just in front of them to the dance. They stood as before at the unbroken end of the esplanade, and as before she was left on her own while the young man

partnered the other girl. The fear that someone else might get to her first made him hurry towards her. When he asked her whether she would like to dance she accepted with a laugh which seemed meant to suggest that there was no need for him to try to look as though they didn't already know each other.

Soon she was asking him, 'What is it you're so busy at in the mornings on the verandah of that house over there?'

'I didn't know I could be seen from outside.'

'Well, you can be.'

'As a matter of fact I've been trying to write some poetry.'

Before the band had stopped playing the music for the foxtrot which they were dancing he had told her more about himself, his family, his education, his poems and Richard than afterwards it seemed possible to him that he could have done in so short a time. And in the same time he had discovered that she not only liked poetry but had written some, though her main interest was in painting.

'But Iris—that's my sister—is a much better painter than I am,' she said. 'When this foxtrot's over you must meet her. And her fiancé. He's a 'cellist and has hopes of becoming a professional one. He's very nice, though I'm not sure she's wise. By the way, what's your name?'

'Sebrill. And my other name is Alan.'

'Is that your only other name?'

'No. I've also got a rather fancy one chosen for me by my grandfather. It's Thorwald.'

'That's the one I like. I shall call you Thorwald.'

'What's yours?'

'Halscomb. My other is Althea. Perhaps that's too fancy a one for your taste.'

'Not if it's the only other you've got.'

'In the family I'm called Peg, though no grandfather or anybody else gave me the name at birth.'

'That's the one I like.'

The music had stopped and the couples were moving back to the

edge of the small grass arena.

'The fiancé's name is Willie,' Peg said. 'Willie Buxton. We're all three of us staying with my aunt at her house, which you can see down there in the hollow. And I'd better tell you now that I've got a fiancé too. Not here. I left him behind in London. His firm wanted him because of some quite important contract they're on, so he thought he oughtn't to take his holiday till later in the year.' Before this information could do its full work on Alan's feelings she added, 'It won't matter. You needn't let it worry you. It won't make any difference to us at all.'

She turned towards him as though they were about to continue dancing, and she looked at him. Then the words 'It won't make any difference' became less ambiguous for him. They might have meant 'We can be friends just the same', but her look gave likelihood to another interpretation. He began to be sure not merely that her fiancé did not matter to him but that soon something was going to happen which he had long ago stopped himself from hoping for. The schoolboy's romantic daydream of meeting a girl who was both marvellously beautiful and genuinely fond of poetry was going to be realized with a completeness which the boy's imagination had been too delicately ignorant to picture. Joy and expectation so bemused him that when Peg took him over to Iris and Willie and in an almost serious voice said, 'Allow me to introduce you to Count Thorwald', he made no attempt by word or grin to disclaim the title, and they must have suspected—if they had seen him come out of the Britannia before the dance—that he was drunk. He was soon aware, however, that they both approved of him. And by the time the dancing came to a final stop the four of them had arranged to go for a walk together the following evening.

The walk was in the moonlight along the path up the cliff. Iris and Willie were in front, but Peg would not go slowly enough to let them get out of sight. Alan kissed her, and she said, 'They won't be with us at all two days from now. They're going away to spend the rest of their holiday with Willie's parents in Hampshire. Iris has been sharing a bedroom with me, so on Wednesday night I shall be alone there.'

'But what about your aunt?'

'She won't know, I hope. That means you'll have to come in through the back door—or, no, it had better be through the scullery window because that has a broken catch and she makes rather a point of seeing that all the doors are locked before she goes to bed. But I want you to meet my aunt. You must come to tea tomorrow afternoon. She'll like you.'

'I'll come to tea. Thanks. And on Wednesday I'll get through the scullery window. You'll let me know what time. Have you done this sort of thing before?'

'Only once. And it wasn't with John, my fiancé. I've managed so far to keep my relations with him fairly respectable, though when provoked he's inclined to go wild and bite. It was with a boy whom I warned beforehand that he ought to listen to Yeats's advice and take love easy as the leaf grows on the tree. Afterwards he wanted to kill himself.'

'I hope I shan't want to do that.'

'You mustn't.'

'Are you in love with John?'

'I'm sometimes not at all sure.'

'Then why do you want to marry him?'

'Because I think he'll be good for me. I need keeping in order. He's just the sort for that. But I am sure I'm beginning to be in love with you.'

Next afternoon he went to tea at the aunt's house. Iris and Willie were there as well as Peg. The aunt seemed amiable but a little crazy. Apropos of nothing that had been said in conversation she informed him without malice that neither she nor Peg's parents were rich. On the Wednesday night just after twelve o'clock he went to the house again. From the road he turned quickly in through the tradesmen's gate and approached the back of the house, aware that there was a good chance of his being seen, if not by the local policeman at any rate by some neighbour who would become suspicious. It surprised him that, far from being afraid, he even felt pleasantly excited by the risk he was taking. The scullery window was easy to open, but when he put his hands on its sill and jumped vigorously up to get through it the toes of his shoes scraped the brickwork below and his arms alarmingly hampered him from bringing his leg inside. He got through and had to step

into a slippery sink before putting his feet down on to the scullery floor. Having arrived there, he wondered whether this method of entry had been necessary, whether Peg hadn't wilfully chosen it for him because it seemed more romantic to her than letting him in by unbolting the back door. If so, her romanticism had infected him also and he felt proud of his daring as, following the directions she had repeatedly given him the day before, he went through the kitchen and up the stairs towards the first-floor landing. He went very carefully, but with his shoes on and not too stealthily just in case—as he illogically told himself—he might meet the aunt, whose bedroom was at the far end of the landing. Peg had said that her own room was the first on the left at the top of the stairs. When he stepped on to the floorboards of the landing they gave out an appalling creak. He hurried towards a door and turned the handle. Luckily he did not find himself in the wrong room.

They lay side by side without moving for a very long time. They talked of trivialities, lazily. Bliss came over him like a rising sea. It seemed that he could be content to lie like this all night, as though this alone were the consummation. Only once was anything at all serious said, and by him. 'I have been in love with several girls before now,' he told her, 'and I've slept with several girls before now, but I've never before slept with someone whom I've been in love with.' When they at last did turn and embrace they lay almost as still in one another's arms as they had done side by side, and for almost as long. He postponed movement as though it would have been an affront to her, an impudence, a crudity like overeating. After the climax they stayed awake talking about what they would do next day and what they would do when her holiday was over. She said she would come down at weekends as often as she could for as long as he was here, and that he must also see her sometimes in London.

'But won't John object?' he asked.

'I shan't let him. He'll have to get used to the idea that I intend to have other men friends—and to have them even after I've married him.'

'Don't marry him.'

She laughed, but with a suggestion of displeasure, as though she

guessed that he might mean it seriously—which in fact he did.

There was no excitement for him about getting out of the house in the early morning. Peg expected him to use the scullery window, but he went out by the back door, leaving it unbolted for the aunt to discover and puzzle over if she liked. Opening the tradesmen's gate he again wondered whether he would be seen, but this time the risk gave him a feeling rather of dreariness than of romantic daring. As he walked along the road back to his lodgings he had the thought that many of the romantically tragic love affairs famous in history or in literature would, if they happened today, be merely sordid adventures ending in the criminal courts. He knew now that romanticism was his enemy. He wanted no adventures: he wanted to get married like an ordinary person, but that would be economically impossible for him unless he was prepared to betray himself and give up trying to live as a poet. Therefore what he needed was a bohemian relationship which could become just as permanent as marriage. He decided he would tell Peg this when he saw her again later in the day.

It seemed clear to him at once when they met at eleven o'clock in the morning on the beach that she foreknew what he was going to demand. Her manner was extraordinarily detached, as though she was not the person who had been in bed with him the night before. He found a niche between boulders below the cliff, not less than ten yards from where the nearest other couple were lying. When he suggested they should sit down she agreed with a look implying that somewhere else would have done just as well. He said, 'I wish *I* could marry you.'

'Why?'

'Because I love you and I want to live with you.'

'I love you too. But you're not the marrying sort.'

'We could live together without being married.'

'It wouldn't work.'

'Why not? We have the same kind of nature and interests, and we love each other.'

She was suddenly impressed.

'Yes, you are right. We were certainly made for each other, as they

say.'

'Live with me.'

'No. For one thing, I'd prefer not to have to go out to work. And I'd want children, but I wouldn't want to spend all my time on them and the housework. I need leisure as much as you do. And we wouldn't be able to afford it.'

'I would do the housework.'

He put his arm round her and pressed his head into her deep bosom. She made no response, did not stroke his hair, did not move.

'You must control yourself,' she said.

He sat up again; then, avoiding the phrase 'go to bed together', he said, 'If you won't live with me will you promise that we shall be with each other at least once every week?'

She was more than doubtful even about this. 'I don't think I'm good for you.'

'Or at least once every month.'

'No. You're too serious about it. I warned you not to be.'

'Promise not to abandon me.'

'As for abandoning you, I shall have to go back to London tomorrow.'

'But why? You've still got three days of your holiday left.'

'I think I ought to see John again.'

Alone at his lodgings that evening and that night he was unable to defeat his misery and his despair. But next morning after breakfast he succeeded in convincing himself once again that poetry was what mattered to him most, and that nothing must be allowed to interfere with it. If having a woman was essential to him, well, there were plenty of women about and at worst he could get Basher to introduce him to a quickly willing one. He even managed to settle down for an hour and a half in his chair on the verandah and to write three more lines of his poem. This helped to give him confidence for his final meeting with Peg.

In the afternoon, an hour before she was due to leave for London, they went down to the beach again. At first, as on the previous day, she

showed reserve towards him, but, finding after they had been sitting for a while together that he made no advances, she abruptly reached out a hand and stroked his hair. He did not respond at all. Then she pulled his head down on to her lap and touched his face with her bosom. In this position he had the thought that if, instead of showing the ordinary feelings of a man called Alan, he were able and willing to show the faked feelings of an ideal poet whom she called Thorwald, he might go far with her even at this late moment. Mightn't he at any rate in the future, by disguising his real longing for her and by pretending that everything was on an ideal plane and that they were only playing a kind of poetic game, manage to provoke her to such extremes in her physical advances towards him that she would, as it were, accidentally gratify his desires? No, he thought, it would not be possible. Then he disengaged himself and sat up.

She looked at him with a sadness that did not seem voluntary. She said at last, 'If only we had met each other two years ago we might have had a wonderful *affaire*.'

The thought of it made Alan feel a regret so keen that if he had had to depend on his strength of will he would have been unable to prevent himself from trying to put his arms round her and from begging for her love. What deterred him was his certainty that at the first sign of any advance by him the longing she now showed for him would disappear and she would be happy to repel him. He leant back, farther away from her. He became aware of the sea behind her. Against it she seemed lonely and pathetic. He did not doubt that she genuinely loved him.

'But we must meet again, in London—often,' she said.

'We'd better not. It would make me too miserable.'

He did not go to the motor-coach stop to see her off. He wanted his break with her to be sharp and complete. He recognized that the only alternative to never seeing her again would be for him to become a 'mere platonic cicisbeo', her pet poet whom she could take about with her whenever she wanted and show to her friends. He could not live—or certainly he could not write—like that.

After leaving her he returned to his lodgings and tried unsuccessfully

for an hour to continue his poem. The next day he wrote two lines, and the day after that he wrote ten—which was more than he had yet done at one sitting and more than he was able to do on any of the following days. His average during the next fortnight—excluding Mondays, which he regularly took off from writing—was four lines, but during the third week it declined to two and during the fourth to one. There were consecutive days when he made no progress at all. The anxiety symptoms which he had experienced at home before Richard had invited him down to the island, and which had preceded his total failure to get ahead with the first version of his poem, began to come back again when he woke in the mornings.

One afternoon, when he was lifting the latch of the gate under the hawthorn arch on his way out from the garden towards the beach, he abruptly knew that his poem was no good. And he knew clearly why. Its unifying central idea—that only the doomed are good—was a mere resurrection of an idea which he and Richard had toyed with when they had been at the university together. It was immature and it was silly. It was even a retrogression from the distrust of all general ideas which he had felt when writing the first unsatisfactory beginning of his poem. Fear, similar in its sharpness to the fear he had been having on waking in the mornings, caused him to stand still under the hawthorn after he had opened the gate. But a moment later he experienced, strangely, a certain relief. This, he soon understood, was not solely because he would now be at least temporarily freed from the painful struggle of the last few weeks but also because a plan for a third version of his poem had already been half-formed in his mind before he had recognized that the second version was a failure. As he began to walk up the sandy lane he decided he would do what he had originally intended when he had resigned from the school: he would write a Marxist poem.

After allowing himself five days to think the third version out in detail he tried to make a start on it. He was unable to write a tolerable first line. In his effort to be Marxist he produced nothing but platitudinous abstractions. He decided that he ought not to have expected to be able to start on the new version so soon, and that he needed to give himself at least another week to plan it. One morning, more than a fortnight later, when he

was on the verandah soon after breakfast, he knew there was no point in his trying any longer to write. What was the use of his sitting out here in the wicker armchair with his notebook open on his lap when he was sure he would fail—as he had failed for the past ten mornings or more—to put down a single line? He had sat here with his legs up and his feet resting against one of the trellised uprights that supported the verandah roof, the soles of his shoes pressing the jasmine where it bushily intruded through the interstices of the woodwork, his uninventive mind alert only in noting such details as how the tortoise on the sun-warmed doormat gulped and blinked its lower eyelids, or how, when birds were scuffling once in the Virginia creeper out of sight above him, a small brownish feather fell slowly to the lawn. But this morning the time had come, he told himself, when he must see his situation as it was and take the needed action. The months of freedom which he had gained at the cost of throwing up his teaching job, and during which he was to have justified his life by becoming the poet he had felt he could become, must be brought to an end. He had wasted them, and now the most reasonable thing he could do would be to send a letter to the scholastic agency indicating that he was on the market again and asking to be notified of posts vacant in schools.

He got out of the wicker chair and opened the glass doors which led back from the verandah into the sitting-room. Another teaching job, he thought, might not be easy to find. He stood staring into the shadowiness of the room, at the bobble-fringed velvety table-cloth and at the oil lamp on it with the white glass shade. His most recent job had not been the only one he had thrown up in order to be free for writing poetry, and when he had last visited the agency he had been told with a suggestion of severity that he would be well advised to stay at his next school for at least five years. He stepped from the bright verandah into the room and towards the table, searching the cloth with his eyes, unclear of purpose, not yet fully aware that what he wanted was notepaper for his letter to the agency. Unsatisfied, he turned towards the mantelpiece. The large gilt-framed mirror above this, with white swans in green reeds painted on the two lower corners of the glass, showed him a face for which he could have no sympathy. It was the

face, he thought, of a self-fancying spoilt darling, of the overvalued son from a bourgeois home who had been unreasonably expected and had himself expected to do something exceptional, to be different from the common crowd, to be a great poet, a genius, whereas the truth very probably was that he had no talent at all, that he was a pampered young or no longer quite so young shirker who considered himself too good for the kind of everyday job in which he might perhaps have been of some slight use to the community. Alan stood peering for more than a minute at his own image; and the detail of its features—the effeminate eyelashes and the long-lipped mouth—increased his dislike and his contempt for it.

An incipient auto-hypnotic dizziness caused him to stop peering. Then he became conscious of himself not merely as a mirror-image but as someone apart from the mirror. He himself, no longer the reflected object but now the living subject standing here in this room in front of this mantelpiece, was the shirker and the failure. Fear grew inside him. The image, though he still saw it, became as indefinite to him as if it had been visually blurred, and all his attention was held by the feeling of anguished helplessness which was steadily and uncontrollably developing in the very centre of his body. It was like despair made physical: it was like a translation into nervous agony of the thought that now he was wholly lost and abandoned and that his dearest hope in life was finished for ever. A dreadful icy or burning pang, sinkingly prolonged, was somewhere in his solar plexus or heart or stomach. He wondered if he was going to fall to the floor, and he hadn't the power to put out a hand and clutch the mantelshelf. But he did not fall. He continued to confront his meaningless image in the mirror. He was incapable of movement, might perhaps remain incapable of it always. Or if he did at length move, and if he went and found the notepaper, and if he succeeded in bringing himself to the point of writing a letter to the agency, and if ultimately in spite of his rolling-stone record some headmaster or board of governors could be gulled by his academic qualifications or, more likely, by his classy public-school education into offering him a teaching post, could he bear once again to live as a schoolmaster? Could he, after the final failure of what he had seemed born for, go back to a job which injured and ex-

hausted even those who had an aptitude for it and which would bring him only degradation and slavery?

He would very much rather be dead. And, as soon as he had thought that, a change came over him. He was not helpless any more. There was at least one thing he would be able and willing to do. Though the life of joy and poetry he had hoped for was lost to him for ever, this didn't mean he must go crawling through years of humiliation and dishonour. He could 'do that which shackles accident and bolts up change'. He could put an end to 'the soul that should not have been born'. He stepped back from the mirror and turned again towards the open glass doors. He could row far out to sea or he could walk up to the highest part of the cliff. The cliff would be quicker and better. But he must go at once or Miss Pollock might come in and ask him something about meals. He went out on to the verandah, and with vigour and almost with hope began walking down the gravel path towards the small white front-gate.

Above the hawthorn arch the sun was already very warm in the marine sky. His mood of determination was abruptly countered and crossed by another, a nostalgic and woeful mood. The sun reminded him of the time when he had first arrived here, a few weeks before. A pain of grief, very different from but no less physical than the pain of fear he had felt in front of the mirror, struck deeply into him. He thought of Richard's letter which had invited him to come down here to live the poetic life. He remembered his first sight of the bay and Richard's leap of welcome when the motor-coach had come to a stop outside the Britannia. As he opened the gate now and walked out into the sandy lane he was quite unaware of which direction he was taking. Actually he turned left, away from the sea and the cliff.

No one else was about in the lane. He had had his breakfast early—as usual—in order to give himself a long morning for poetry, and the holiday visitors were not yet out of their bedrooms. But even if a dozen bathers returning from the sea had been overtaking him now, he might not have noticed them. He was thinking of the evening of his arrival here. Much more clearly than the lane's red-brown surface that he was staring down at and walking upon he saw the moonlit façade of the Britannia and Richard and

himself sitting out late under the clinker-built roof of the verandah. The feeling he had had then of being on the point of discovering how to write his poem was re-created so vividly in his memory that he seemed to be experiencing it directly once again. For a moment he even believed, as he had believed then, that it was not deceptive. But the misery of the succeeding weeks of useless struggle to write began very soon to revive in him, and it discredited and drove out the remembered optimism. He became more convinced than ever—though without recovering the zest he had felt when the idea had come to him in front of the mirror—that the one valid action he was capable of now was to kill himself.

He must go up to the cliff and throw himself over. But if this was what he meant to do, why, he asked himself, had he all the time since he had left his lodgings been walking in an inland direction? The narrow road he had taken led across low-lying ground, reedy, sparsely treed and reclaimed from the sea. Here, in June, he had heard the cuckoo change his tune. Here, to the right of the road and on higher ground, was the milch-goat tethered in the wild garden of the house where Peg's aunt lived. He had come here today not to commit suicide but in the absurd hope that Peg might once again be staying in this house. Absurd, because he knew that she was back at work in London and that she wouldn't be likely so soon after her summer holiday to pay her aunt a weekend visit. And the house itself, with the horizontally striped folk-weave curtains half-drawn behind the closed windows of the bedroom where she had slept during her holiday, gave an impression which—though he didn't know why—convinced him that she couldn't be anywhere inside. But even if she had in fact been staying here this weekend, he thought, what good would he have done by asking to see her? She would never have accepted him again as a lover. And yet she would have been ready enough to accept him on her own terms, as a kind of poetic pet whom she could exhibit to her friends. Mightn't that have been worth his while? It was still possible, even though she was not staying with her aunt now. He could write to her. Wouldn't any sort of relationship with her, no matter how abject, be better than losing her altogether? He quoted to himself as he came nearer to the house: 'Hast thou not given me above all that live / Joy,

and a little sorrow shalt not give?' How lucky he had been, in spite of the miseries she had caused him, to have known her. He would write to her and she would answer. He would make no demands, would submit absolutely to becoming whatever she wanted to make of him.

Avoiding the front gate, lest the aunt might see him, he approached the garden fence and walked slowly alongside it, trying to get a glimpse into the downstair rooms through the upper shoots of the untrimmed privet hedge. At one point he had a clear view and he saw nothing to suggest that Peg might be there. But the thought that he could write to her and that she would answer him made her seem physically near. In the air around him there was a tension which increased as he walked on. It was like the tension before a lightning flash or before the expected apparition of the ghost on a theatre stage. He knew that in a moment he would see her, not in reality but with the utmost vividness of which his imagination was capable. And now he did see her. She was standing with her sister and her sister's fiancé at the end of the esplanade in the evening, watching the dancers. But when he tried to view her face in closer detail the picture went out of focus, and soon he was unable to imagine what she looked like at all. Nevertheless the brief apparition, perhaps because it was so real-seeming, made him remember what his relationship with her had in actuality been, and made him recognize how intolerable for him any attempt to renew it would be.

He must put away the idea of writing to her, of offering to accept whatever terms of submission she might impose on him. 'But the idea can never have been serious,' he thought, 'because ever since it occurred to me I have been walking up towards the cliff.' He had been walking up here in order to throw himself over. There was nothing to be hoped for from love. But how little that would matter if only he could write poetry again. How little it had mattered at the time when he had broken with her and had afterwards written poetry. Perhaps even now poetry might still be possible for him. He looked at the leaves of a wayfaring-tree by the side of the chalky path a few paces ahead of him, and their extraordinarily crinkled texture was attractive to him. When he came level with the tree he looked again and found the leaves uninteresting. The sudden hope in him that had allowed him to see

them as beautiful had quickly died out. He knew that he would not be able to write poetry again, and he knew what would happen if he forced himself to go on trying. Already when he woke in the mornings—and he woke very early and did not sleep afterwards—he could hear his heart beating hard and then he could not control the trembling that began in his legs and arms. If he went on trying to write, all he would achieve would be a nervous breakdown. He was defeated, a hopeless failure, and the sooner he was destroyed the better.

He found himself remembering the lines from *Othello* which he had quoted to himself more than once during the past few days. He quoted them again now, aloud, as he walked:

> ‘ “Had it pleased heaven
> To try me with affliction; had they rained
> All kind of sores and shames on my bare head,
> Steeped me in poverty to the very lips,
> Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,
> I should have found in some place of my soul
> A drop of patience.” ’

It seemed to Alan that he too, if any disaster whatsoever had overtaken him other than this actual disaster of his failure to write poetry, would have been able to bear it ‘well, very well’. But he had been hit at the one point where he was mortally vulnerable. He had been deprived for ever of the thing he loved most of all. He continued quoting aloud:

> ‘ “But there, where I have garnered up my heart,
> Where either I must live or bear no life,
> The fountain from the which my current runs,
> Or else dries up—to be discarded thence!” ’

He missed out, as not so obviously relevant, the lines ‘Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in!’ He went on:

‘ “Turn thy complexion there,
Patience, thou young and rose-lipped cherubin,
Ay, there, look grim as hell!” ’

He was now within a few hundred yards of the edge of the cliff. The chalkland grass, short as the grass of a close-cut lawn, sloped downwards before him at a steadily increasing gradient, and only the low sea not far beyond it indicated that somewhere out of sight the land came to an abrupt end. With the recognition that he could reach the edge in perhaps two minutes or even less there came to him also the certainty that he would never be able voluntarily to throw himself over, that he was no more capable of such an action than he would have been of jumping from the bottom of the cliff to the top. He told himself that he would have to find some other method, less sharply horrifying, less dependent on crude physical movement, some gentler process which could be set going almost by the mere intellectual effort of wishing. But he did not succeed in deceiving himself for long. Soon it became clear to him that the misery which had made him want to destroy himself had also rotted away whatever courage he might once have had, and that, even if he could cease to exist by merely wishing it, he wouldn’t have the strength to wish. He would never kill himself. He would go on living in much the same state that he was in at present until some disease brought him to a natural death. And at this moment he remembered how he had suggested to Richard after the first open-air dance that what made the dancers and most of the working inhabitants of this seaside place seem so fine was that they were doomed. Now he himself was one of the doomed, and he recognized the hateful falsity of his suggestion. Only a callous prig, a sham-poetic fancier of quaintness and deformity, could have discovered anything fine about the premature ageing of beautiful girls, or Basher’s pathetic sexual boasting and drunkenness, or the denunciatory madness of the man in the check suit. But worse even than being doomed was knowing that you were doomed, as most of them didn’t know they were and as he now knew he was. This was a state in which he could not bear to continue, no matter

what action he might have to force himself to take in order to escape from it.

He had come within sight of the edge of the cliff, and he was still walking. The edge was not much more than thirty yards ahead of him. If an act of will was required of him might it not be, he wondered, to prevent him from walking on towards the edge rather than to make him throw himself over? With ten yards of grass in front of him he came to a stop, not knowing whether he did so voluntarily or not. Perhaps the sea had surprised him out of his automatism. The bland, sunny sea, unwrinkled from the horizon inwards towards the very beach below the cliff, looking as though it had never drowned anyone. The black wooden top of a breakwater post, which the water's slow swell and lapse rhythmically covered and uncovered, did, however, for a moment resemble a human head. As he stood watching from so near the cliff-edge, he became convinced that fear had not been the only cause of his failure to throw himself over. He had been deterred also by the desire—and the sea had made him aware of it—to go on living.

He wanted to go on living, but not in the same way as now. 'What can be done to make life bearable?' he thought, as he began walking along the path that ran parallel with the cliff-edge. There was no hope in poetry, nor in love. There was even less hope, if possible, in schoolmastering. But if he went on as at present and did not kill himself he would very soon become insane. Perhaps that would solve the problem. He would take refuge in a fortress of the imagination so impregnable that the vile external world would be unable to touch him. But this idea did not attract him for long: he remembered the palpitations he had been having in the early mornings and how, when his limbs at last stopped trembling, all the feeling went out of them and became concentrated in the middle of his body, and how he then lay helpless, like a house-fly whose legs and wings have been bitten off by a wasp. Madness, if it came, would not be a refuge but an intensification and a perpetuation of his present misery. He must find some other way to escape. And now, as the cliff-path began to slope down to the seaside village from which he had begun his walk, he suddenly believed he had found it.

He would turn for help to religion. Often at the university he and Richard had been amused to imagine themselves becoming bogus rectors

with country livings and plenty of literary leisure, but now for the first time he needed religion seriously. He needed a church which he could belong to not as a priest or minister but as the humblest of laymen. Oh why had he kicked against the pricks for so long? Under the shelter of religion he would find release from the dreadful struggle to be a success; and failure instead of being the end of everything would be the beginning of grace. 'In His will is our peace,' he thought. He looked down towards the roofs of the village as he walked and saw higher than most of them the slate roof of the flint-walled Congregational chapel. His grandparents had been Congregationalists, and when as a child he had spent part of his summer holidays at their house he had gone to their chapel on Sunday mornings. He would go to the chapel here next Sunday, and after the service he would ask to have a talk with the minister. He knew the minister by sight, a kind-faced man who was sometimes busy in the front garden of the manse and the skin on whose cheekbones shone no less than the skin on his almost bald and fluff-aureoled head. But Alan had no sooner visually remembered him than he remembered also what it had felt like to go to chapel, and he became aware that he would never be capable of asking to have a talk with him. He would do better to attend some church which would seem wholly strange, such as the Catholic one, visible a few miles inland, with the Italianate tower and windows. Other poets, far better poets than himself, had turned to Rome. The main difficulty would be the first step of getting himself to believe in the premisses on which the Catholic religion was based: after that—so he had read somewhere—he would find that all the rest of it followed on quite logically and reasonably. Yes, but would he ever be able to believe in the premisses? Could he bring himself to go back not only on his grandparents but on the whole progressive intellectual movement which had begun with the Renaissance and the Reformation? Could he really prefer Cardinal Newman and Manley Hopkins to Godwin and Shelley?

How much more easily he could have accepted Marxism than either Catholicism or Congregationalism—if he had not already found that it was of no help to him as a poet. But why hadn't it helped him? Perhaps because he hadn't even begun to be a Marxist yet. 'Philosophers hitherto have

merely interpreted the world,' Marx had said: 'the thing is to change it.' To be a Marxist Alan would have to take action in the external world, which meant that he would have to become a Communist. Then there might be hope for him. Communism was the only force in the world which was uncompromisingly on the side of the doomed and against those who wanted to keep them doomed. It was the enemy of his enemies: it aimed at the overthrow of a society which was dominated by poshocrats and public-school snobs and which had no use for the living poets. It demanded that its converts should believe not in the supernatural nor in anti-scientific myths but in man. If he joined the Communist Party he might be able to write poetry again. After all, was there anything surprising about his present failure to write, considering the evasive 'poetic' life he had been trying to lead and his unrealistic attitude to the necessity of earning a living? His poetry had failed because it had been rooted in unreality. If he was to have any hope of writing again he must change his life. But he mustn't join the Communist Party solely in order to be able to write poetry, because if that was his purpose and it once again failed he would fall into a misery even worse than at present, with nothing at all to turn to then for help. He must join the Party for its own sake, make it his supreme interest, set all his hopes on it. Only if he lived rightly might poetry one day come back to him.

He had begun to walk faster, but just before he arrived where the descending cliff-path broadened into a sunken chalky lane a thought came which slowed him. It was that he might never have the nerve to make contact with the Communists. How could he, a bourgeois misfit, a favoured weakling who in spite of his expensive education and many other undeserved advantages had become a wretched failure, presume to ask to associate with people who, though born into sordid and hard conditions, had not succumbed but had fought back, on behalf of the whole class they belonged to, against their exploiters? He would never have the impudence to knock on the door of the Party rooms. Not that he doubted he would be let in and perhaps even welcomed, if he did knock. Other recruits had been accepted from the middle class before now. Even the founders of the movement—Marx, Engels, Lenin—had been of bourgeois origin; though these could

hardly be called misfits or failures. But if he joined he would cease to be a failure, would no longer be altogether useless. If he did not join there was nothing before him except madness or death.

He was treading on the flints of the sunken lane. Downward and not very far ahead of him the chalk gave place to the greensand, and a pale brown road curved inland towards his lodgings. 'But I am not ready yet to contact the Party,' he thought. He needed time to get to know more about it and to read more of the Marxist classics. Above all he needed plenty of time to build up his courage again, to purge off the sick demoralization which had come over him during the last two months. 'But I shall never do it so long as I stay at this place,' he told himself. He would have to go home and stay with his parents for a while: he was lucky to have parents who could afford to keep him.

When he reached the brown road at sea-level he looked for a moment towards the nearby beach where a few of the holiday visitors had now arrived after finishing their breakfasts, and he noticed the tarred wickerwork of the lobster-pots which were grouped together high up on the banked shingle; then he turned and began to walk back to his lodgings. He would leave for home tomorrow. He would have to let Miss Pollock know some time this evening. It would be awkward, but he could offer to pay for an extra week or even an extra fortnight, and could explain that someone at home was ill. And soon, preferably before he left, but at any rate not later than after he'd been a fortnight at home, he must write to the agency asking to be notified of posts vacant in schools.