

Written 1968



December 16th. 1967

1.

The boys went back to Johannesburg on the afternoon of Sunday. The date was October 22nd. 1967, but you did not know it. They went back to arrange their affairs, but they knew they would be returning soon. R S. took them to the airport so that I could stay with you. To my surprise he returned about six, and said, this is the time you always have your drink, and I thought you might like company. I half thought of offering him a drink in the lounge, because on your face could be seen the imminence of death. Yet I had sat in your room, our room, ever since the day you could no longer leave it.

So we sat in your room. I wondered if I should have brought in a screen. But I didn't. I did not want any screen between us on the last night of your life, our life. When R.S. had gone, Q. came on duty, and said to me, father I'm going to sit in the room tonight. I got up four times to look at the oxygen. You were breathing shallowly but easily, not with that painful exertion, that terrible rhythm, like a box rising, staying up a moment, then falling with a bang till it rose again, a spasm that made the heart of the watcher fit to break. It was as though nature, having struck you the second and irremediable blow, withdrew her attention from the first affliction.

At six in the morning I looked at the oxygen for the fourth time. Then I slept. At five minutes to seven Q. called me and said, father, she's gone. And you had gone too, oh most brave and faithful one. I kissed your still warm face, and said, sleep well, my love. I prayed, may her soul rest in peace. I did not weep. I set about the business of preparing your funeral.

December 16th. 1967

When did I first meet you? I would think some time in February 1925, on the tennis-court in Ixopo. I remember you as something like an urchin, full of mischief and zest and repartee, playing with all your heart, triumphant in victory and determined in defeat. You were 28 and married, to a man that your family had not wanted you to marry, because his tuberculosis was far advanced. I was 22, a young, eager, clear-eyed virgin, full of mischief and zest like yourself. I was a teacher at the Ixopo High School, whose staff, except for old Mrs. Humphreys, were all young like myself.

Your sister Rad was 26. You were worried that she was not married, and I think you would have liked us to fall in love. You asked us both to dinner at your house, but if you had had such expectations, they were not advanced that evening. ~~When~~ we had gone, your husband said to you, that youngster's in love with you. What you replied, I cannot now remember. But what he said was true.

In what sense was it true? It was for one thing the purest love in the world, for it did not desire to possess you. I do not remember that I ever thought of touching you; I certainly did not ever try to touch you. I, not knowing it fully, had given my heart into your hands. Although I laughed and teased you on the tennis-court, I was virginal and shy. I have a picture taken of me at that time. There was no guile in that face.

February 4th. 1968

3.

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd
And the great star early drooped in the western
sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning
spring.



These lines have been haunting me for days, and I did not know why at first. Then suddenly I knew. It is because the tibouchinas, the mauve and the pink, are bursting into bloom, and the Zanzibar balsams at the gate are magnificent, a glorious bed of white and pink and salmon and red. The last time they bloomed you were in King George V, not knowing that your life was coming to its end. Some days you were ill and in great distress, and other days you were bright and eager like that girl on the tennis-court, so full of hope, so eager to get home again, so eager to have a real bath again, so eager to wean yourself from the oxygen from which you could never be weaned.

Each time that I went to the hospital and each time that I returned home; if it were still light, I would see the tibouchinas. So now, when I see them again, they speak to me of you. I see you too, in your hospital bed, with your eager face and your determined voice, and I hear you say to me, I am going to get well, and I am going home, and I am going to get into the bath - you must help me, Alan - I want to feel the water on my body, you don't know what it means to me to feel the water on my body.

Yes. I know what it means to you, my love. And I see your eager face, and I wish my face could be eager too, and I wish I could say to you, Yes, you're coming home, and you're going to get into the bath - yes, I'll be helping you - and you're going to feel the water on your body again. But I can't do it. There's no eagerness in me, only grief. When I say goodnight to you, I say, sleep well, my sweet, and it surprises me, for never before in my life did I call you my sweet.



I wanted to write a letter to you, to thank you for the blessings of our common life, and for your courage and gaiety and zest, and for your contempt of cruelty and cant, and for your belief that man is not born to go down on his belly before the State, and for your crossness when we were playing games, and your unfailing rising to the bait when we were teasing you. But they wouldn't let me write it, because you would ask, why do you write such a letter? Is it because you think I am going to die? No, they wanted you to go on hoping these empty hopes.

And I think they were right, for you were afraid of dying and of death, and had been ever since I knew you. You never liked me to say, when I pop off, you'll be able to do what you like, pick all the flowers in the garden, and not have books lying about the house. You would say, please Alan don't joke about it. So I did not write my letter.

Yes I was distressed to think we could not talk about the culminating event of our married life. Once when you were in King George V, you said to Murray Dell, I think I'm coming to the end of the road. You never said to him, or to me, am I coming to the end of the road? If you had asked me, I wanted to be able to put my arms around you, and to say, yes, my love. But they all said No.

There is one thing for which I can be thankful. When Aubrey Burns, the first person ever to read GRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY, in his house at San Rafael through which those four redwood trees were growing - when he came at last to visit us he wanted of course to see Ixopo and Carisbrooke and the hills that are lovely beyond any singing of it. When we had seen it all, I took him into the church where you and I were married, on 2nd. July 1928, and there I knelt and gave thanks for our married life. That evening he and I went to to visit you at King George V. and I told you what I had done, and your whole face lit up with joy. So you were told it after all.

There is another thing that I remember, one night at King George V when your old gaiety suddenly returned. I was saying goodnight to you, and you said to me in Afrikaans, as mischievous as ever you were, slaap lekker, slaap alleen.*

And yet another thing. When you came home at long last, some night

*sleep well, sleep alone



in June or July, you suddenly said to me, you're not a bad old stick.
When you were well, you were warm and smiling. Dr. H. said to me,
your wife is a wonderful woman. And I said to him gravely, that is true.

These are the lights along a dark and sorrowful road; and by the
grace of God, it is the lights that one remembers.

February 10th. 1968



I am here in Nigel, and am staying with Ruth, and we have been recalling one of the things that so endeared you to your family, and that was the way you got so angry when playing cards. Our favourite game was "reformatory bridge", which was based on a game called HAUL, but ours we thought was better. If there were four players, each received 13 cards, and the dealer might say, I call 5 hearts. That meant that any player taking 5 tricks added 5 points to his score, but any player taking less or more diminished his score by the number by which he had fallen short or exceeded the number 5. We all started with 20 points to avoid scoring in minuses.

Sometimes you would get a good hand, and you might say, I call 7 clubs. In such a case each of the other players would try to take no tricks at all, unless of course one of them thought he might make the 7 himself. How furious you would be if you led the ace of clubs and one of the others, having no clubs, threw away the ace of diamonds on it, and how much greater your fury would be if that player was myself.

You would say, Alan you are the meanest, dirtiest player I have ever met. Perhaps you would switch to diamonds immediately, and play the 4, and David would play the 3 and Jonathan the 2, and I, having no more diamonds would throw away the ace of spades. By this time your fury knew no bounds, You might throw down your cards and say, I refuse to play, and your face would be wearing a sulky look, and how much of it was real and how much was not, was something we could never be sure about. You might say to me, everyone thinks you are generous, but only we know just how mean you are. Then Jonathan might say, But, Mrs. P., in this game one plays to be mean, and you would reply, accenting every word, one does not play to be mean, one plays to have a happy evening. And then I might say, that is exactly what we are not doing. The impudence of this remark, and its coming from such a source, would rekindle your passion, and you would say, And why? And why are we not having a happy evening? Because of your dirty play. Then the gale would suddenly blow itself out, and you would pick up the cards defiantly, and play another, as though challenging us to commit any further act of meanness. The sulky look would go, and if you were feeling generous, you would favour

us with a half-willing, half-unwilling smile.



Sometimes Ruth and Dick would be staying with us, and if you put up one of these exhibitions, Ruth would look at you with a mixture of amusement, because it was funny, and affectionate sympathy, because you were her much-loved sister, and apprehension, because of the uncertainty as to how much of it was real and how much was not. As for Dick, who never experienced such exhibitions at home, he would laugh his head off, and at the same time be filled with admiration that such a blend of love and denunciation could exist at all.

I would imagine that this happened once out of every three or four times we played. Sometimes we would bring it on, by some complacent or boasting remark about our skill and strategy, but at other times if your luck was really shocking, we would all keep silent knowing that there was thunder in the air. Then suddenly the storm would break over our innocent and not altogether unwilling heads. You had proved true to form after all.

I do not remember that a game ever ended in anger. The thunder would boom and the lightning crackle and the rain come down, but at bedtime the stars were out in the sky. And not one of us would have had you any different.

In a way you were only maintaining the family tradition. For we would remind you - if it were safe - that once your Grannie Gold, sitting by the fireside at Eskdale, playing bridge and losing, suddenly swept up all the cards and threw them into the fire.

It has suddenly occurred to me that we have not played our game of "reformatory bridge" since you died. This is not out of respect for your memory, it is because some irreplaceable spice has gone out of the game. Not one of us can produce that same blend of denunciation and love. Not one of us stands in the same relation to the others as we stood in relation to you.

8



March 7th. 1968

5.

Anoxia of the brain. A lack of sufficient oxygen supply to the brain. Your lungs struggle ceaselessly to supply it, to oxygenate the blood, but in their present state they cannot do it. Although you breathe in pure oxygen 24 hours a day, you cannot breathe in enough of it to feed your brain. You wake trembling and frightened, anxious over the new day that has to be fought with and suffered and endured. Most often you do not waken me; you lie with your anxiety alone. But sometimes your hands' trembling is uncontrollable and frightens you, and you ask me to come to calm you. And my heart wishes to break, because it is not words you need, not love, but oxygen. One morning I said to you, I wish I could give you one of my lungs. But you did not even smile at me; your fear was too great. You were like a woman on a vanishing spit of island in a raging river, and I was like a man on the bank, desperate but safe; and I could not touch you, and if I cried out to you, you could not hear.

Sometimes you were impatient with me. Once you said to me, I know I am a burden to you, and when I protested, you said, I am a burden to you all.

You wrote to Ruth on January 22nd. 1967:

I might say I'm such a hypocrite that when Dr. H. suggested a week in King George V I meekly and cheerfully agreed, but as soon as he'd gone, the storm of repression and depression broke loose on poor Alan..... Really I deserve to be shot for pre-judging so erroneously and grumpily, after all the blessings God has bestowed on me all my life.

Dr. W. said to me, You must expect such things to happen. Your wife cannot be blamed for it in any way. It is a condition she is powerless to prevent. She may even turn against you, and you must keep your patience.

Once when D. and V. were visiting us, the tape holding the catheter tube in place against your cheek came loose. I had fixed the tape many times, but this time you would not let me touch it. You said, don't touch it, I want D. to fix it.



[9]

If I did become cross or impatient, I was filled with remorse. I used to pray, with great earnestness, Lord, make me the instrument of Thy love, and let me speak no angry or hurtful word.

On March 17th, 1967, you wrote to Ruth:

I am trying hard to overcome my depression and regain my courage.... I know this will take time, but I am determined to make it work. I so long to be up and about again. Also when I do start getting up, I'm going to get dressed. Then I'll really feel on the road to recovery.

On April 2nd. you wrote in your diary, "Alan managed to come earlier. Feel so homesick when he goes". On April 3rd. you wrote "I am obviously lacking in determination and perseverance".

You were not lacking in determination and perseverance, you were lacking only oxygen. You never lacked in determination and perseverance your whole life long. Everyone but yourself thought you one of the bravest of women.