

(29) CHAPTER 6.

I HAVE lingered all this while beside the stream of life, dallying on its banks—dallying with the shadow of death about to stretch across its waters like a wasting shoal—cradling my heart in retrospection of past happiness, times when hope existed. Why stop? I'm not immortal. I've barely touched on my marriage, my fatherhood; the thread of my narrative might easily be spun out to the limits of my existence. But the same feeling that first made me dredge my tender recollections, now hurries me on; the same yearning of this warm, panting heart, that sent me after the words to record my vagabond youth, and all the pages that followed, makes me now recoil from further delay. I must complete my work.

So here I stand. The year (then) is 2094, the stream of human life still fleet and flowing. And now away! Spread the sail, ply the oars, past dark impending crags and down steep rapids, even to the sea of desolation I have reached.

On June 20th, circumstance called me to London, where I heard the first talk that plague symptoms had been observed at some city hospitals. I biked back to Windsor with a heavy heart,

reaching the shaded road through the Home Park by late afternoon. A great part of the Castle grounds lay under cultivation, here divided into strips of potatoes and corn. Rooks cawed loudly in the immeasurable boughs of the remaining oak trees, but through their hoarse cries came strains of music. On the park green, I found a small country-style fair in progress, local youth—Alfred’s fellow Etonians included—playing host to the neighboring public. Tents of flaunting colors speckled the lawns, gaudy flags waved in the sunshine, a makeshift dancing platform was crowded with young figures in motion: a gay scene. Parking my bicycle at a rack, I found a shady tree to lean against and watch the dancers, whose feet were given wings by one of the wild Turkish-style airs popular then. I tapped my toe as unconsciously as the rest of the onlookers; for a few moments, the tripping measure lifted my spirit with it; my eyes followed the mazes of the dance with gladness. Then revulsion—heart-piercing steel.

You’re all going to die, I thought.

Already your tomb is built up around you. Gifted with agility and strength, you imagine otherwise: but life’s bower of flesh is frail, and the silver cord than binds you to existence very easily dissolved. The joyous soul, charioted from pleasure to pleasure by graceful well-formed limbs, will suddenly feel the axle snap, the wheels dissolve in dust. Not one of you, O! fated crowd, can escape—not one! not my own ones! not my Idris and her babes! Shriek, you church bells! Howl, trumpets! Pile dirge on dirge; pound out funereal chords; let the air ring with dire wailing; let

wild discord rush in! Horror and misery!

The blue sky and the merry dancers had vanished; instead I saw the park green strewn with corpses, the air dimmed and fetid with deathly exhalations. My ears heard no music, only the windy sound of guardian angels, humanity's attendants, hastening away from a finished task. A melancholy tune started up, and I saw the world weeping over the angels' departure. Tearful human faces distorted with sobs began to stream across my gaze, even when I opened my eyes, faster and faster, countless woebegone expressions thronging around my perceptions, faces marked by every type of wretchedness. I recognized a few. Adrian's countenance flitted past, tainted by death. There was Idris with livid lips, about to slide into the wide grave. Ashy pale, Raymond and Perdita sat apart, looking on with sad smiles. Confusion grew: their looks of sorrow changed to mockery; they nodded their heads in time to the music, whose clangor became maddening.

To throw off a feeling of insanity, I leapt from the shelter of the tree and rushed into the midst of the crowd. Idris spotted me and advanced with a light step. I wrapped her in my arms. What made an entire world to me, I felt, Idris in my embrace, was yet frail as a droplet of dew on a lily's petal when the risen sun begins to thirst. Rare tears filled my eyes. Then more: my boys' joyful welcome, Clara's soft hug, Adrian's handshake; it was all too much for me. They were here, I knew; I felt them near and safe—yet no, methought it all a deceitful vision; they were gone. The earth reeled, the old trees danced on their roots.

Overcome by dizziness, I sank to the ground.

It wasn't easy to allay the natural alarm of my beloved family and friends without mentioning plague; but I knew that once the word passed my lips, they'd construe my perturbation for a symptom, and see infection in my faintness. I'd scarcely recovered my feet and was trying to pass off the episode with smiles, when I noticed Ryland's approaching our little circle.

In his younger days, Ryland had served as Britain's ambassador to the United States, and over several journeys to the far West of that immense continent had gone so far as to choose a site to build on; for many years, he intended to migrate and live on his Wyoming ranch. Ambition turned his thoughts from these designs—ambition, which laboring through every setback and hindrance, had now led him to the summit of his hopes. The present Lord Protector of England might have passed for a rancher even so, or a farmer—a man whose muscles and full grown stature had been developed under the influence of vigorous exercise and exposure to the elements. This was to a great degree the case. A large landed proprietor, of an ardent, industrious, and forward-looking disposition, Ryland had given himself up to agricultural labors on his own estate for some years already.

His countenance was rough but intelligent, his brow ample. Quick grey eyes seemed to be on constant look-out over his own and his enemies' plans. His voice was stentorian: his hand, stretched out in debate, seemed by its gigantic and muscular form, to warn his hearers that words were not his only weapons.

No politician could “crush a butterfly on the wheel” with better effect, and no one excelled him at covering speedy retreats from more powerful foes with the least loss of face—see how he’d conceded that earlier election to Lord Raymond, before any votes could be cast. Beneath his shrewd and imposing exterior lay a cowardly streak and chronic infirmities of purpose that few people, as yet, had discovered—though they might have read them in his unsteady gaze and uneasy glances; in his extreme desire to hear everyone’s opinion; even in the feebleness of his handwriting, the failings destined to undo his Protectorship might have been traced. It was a post he’d canvassed for eagerly, intending his term to become historic by its innovative dismantling of the aristocracy. Instead he found each day monopolized by a global pandemic, a ruinous, convulsive force from nature that threatened everyone. As we had already seen, Ryland was incapable of meeting the crisis by any comprehensive system. He’d resorted to expedient after expedient, and could never be induced to put a remedy in effect, until it came too late to be of use.

Certainly the man who advanced towards us now bore small resemblance to the powerful, ironical, seemingly fearless campaigner for preeminence. Our Native Oak, as his partisans called him, appeared to have been stricken by a premature and nipping winter. He looked half his usual height, and moved as if his joints and limbs could hardly support him. His eyes were wandering in his gray, pinched face; his every gesture expressed debility of purpose and dastard fear. I knew what he would say.

“Plague.” In the midst of the others’ greetings, the single word fell, as if involuntarily, from his convulsed lips. “The plague.”

“Where?” gasped Idris.

“Everywhere,” Ryland said. “We’ve got to leave, now—but then what? Where next? No one knows—there might be no refuge on earth. It’s coming down on us like a thousand packs of wolves—we must get away, run. Windsor, Verney—what do you think? Where will you go? Where can any of us go?” the iron man finished, trembling.

“Where, indeed,” Adrian said. “Where would you run, Ryland? We must all of us remain where we are, and do our best to help our suffering fellow creatures.”

“*Help?*” Ryland’s voice had turned shrill, almost reedy. “There *is* no help!—great God, who talks of help? The whole world has the plague!”

Adrian gave a gentle smile and observed, “Then to avoid it, we must leave the world.”

Ryland, whose forehead was covered in cold sweat, groaned. Some more vigorous soothing on our part was needed before we could get him to explain the grounds for his present alarm. The crisis, it turned out, had come sufficiently home to him, when one of his servants, while waiting on him at table, suddenly dropped dead—from plague, he’d been told by the medical team that responded. We stood there trying to calm him, but our own hearts weren’t calm. I saw the anxiety in the look Idris turned from me to our children, whose eyes were wide with

worry. Adrian was soon absorbed in meditation. For myself, I echoed Ryland's panic as his words rang in my ears: *The whole world*, yes. In what uncontaminated seclusion could I hide and save my beloved treasures, until this pandemic's death spree had passed? We sank into silence.

All this the crowd saw, though our group had moved aside and soon went off together, up the terrace steps towards the Castle. Our collective change of demeanor had been striking; also, a rumor that Ryland had fled London from fear of plague preceded his appearance that day, looking like a man on the run. Any spirit of gaiety eclipsed, the fair wound down forlornly. Its attendees broke up into whispering groups. The music stopped. To the young Etonians, looking around, their own light-heartedness—dressing up, decorating tents, creating so much amusement—suddenly felt like a terrible mistake, a sin against, and some kind of provocation to, a calamitous destiny about to paralyze all hope and life; their merriment both unholy and unlucky. Meanwhile, those fairgoers who were foreigners still living in our parts, plague refugees themselves, had caught on that their last asylum was now invaded. Some whom fear made garrulous found an eager local audience for firsthand accounts of the disease's insidious and irremediable nature, and the many miseries they'd witnessed back home.

Overhead in the Castle, Idris stood at a window and looked out at the park with maternal eyes; though Clara and our own children were safe in their playroom, it was clear how many of the other children were being drawn or swept into the

audiences for these raconteurs of horror. One little girl we watched creeping nearer and nearer until a wild gesture of the speaker's arm accidentally struck her. We both winced, but kept quiet in the silence of the long room. Our reflections were painful. Ryland stood by himself at another window while Adrian, revolving some new and overpowering idea, I could tell, paced the carpet behind us. At length he stopped, turned, and spoke to Ryland:

"I've long expected this. How could we reasonably hope to remain exempt from a universal affliction? This evil is come home to us, even here on our island, and we must not shrink from our fate. What are your plans, my Lord Protector, for the benefit of our country?"

"For heaven's sake, Windsor!" Ryland cried. "Don't mock me with that title. Death and disease level all. I can't pretend to protect anyone, or to govern a hospital—which is what England will quickly become."

"Do you then intend, now, in time of peril, to walk away from your duties?"

"Duties!" The other laughed. "Speak rationally, my Lord! When I am a plague-spotted corpse, where will my duties be? Every man for himself! The devil take the Protectorship, I say, if it exposes me and mine to danger!"

"Faint-hearted man!" returned Adrian indignantly. "Your fellow citizens, your people put their trust in you, and you betray them!"

"You say I betray them," Ryland answered. "I say the plague

betrays me. Faint-hearted! It's easy for you, shut up in your castle, out of danger, to scoff at honest fear. Let someone else take the Protectorship—before God I renounce it!” And for the second time, I saw the insignia of my nation's highest office removed by its wearer and tossed onto a tablecloth. On this occasion, Adrian was ready.

“And before God,” he replied fervently, “do I receive it—myself. No one else will campaign for this honor now, none envy my danger or labors. Put your powers in my hands, Ryland. I've fought with death for a long time, and much” (he stretched out his thin hand) “much have I suffered in the struggle. This I know: it's not by fleeing, but by facing the enemy, that we can conquer. And if I'm to go down in the fight—so be it.”

Ryland would have left immediately, but Adrian was already exhorting him to consider the panic his departure would cause.

“Return to London. Encourage the people by your presence. I'll go with you and incur all the danger. You've always been thought a wise and magnanimous person—would you destroy your own legacy?”

The pair was still talking as twilight deepened, and the last activity dwindled from the park below. A banquet in the downstairs hall for the fairgoers was next on the agenda, and thither Idris and I repaired, after putting on our gala dress, to receive and entertain the small and melancholy numbers who appeared. All the festive touches to the great room only gave it a more solemn and funereal appearance. Idris, framed by looping flower garlands, sat at the top of the half-empty hall, pale,

tearful, almost forgetful of her duties as hostess. All her attention was fixed on Alfred and Clara, whose nervous demeanor showed the effects of what they'd overheard in the park; and on Elvis, the only mirthful creature present, whose bursts of laughter at his own infant fingers and thoughts echoed alone off the vaulted roof.

At last, his poor mother, who'd been struggling to suppress any sign of her anguish, burst into tears, folded the baby in her arms, and hurried out, with the older two at her heels. In their wake a confused murmur rose from the assembled guests. The hall grew louder as more and more began to voice their fears. Several younger people gathered round my hosting seat, to ask my advice; they were anxious about their friends and family in London. I replied as encouragingly as I could. The death toll reported there was still very small; the metropolitan districts' orderliness, good sanitation, and world-class facilities were all in our favor—on the whole, indeed, the outlook for England's cities might be a very positive one. And as for themselves, living close to Windsor like us, the plague could well have lost its venomous power by the time it crawled so far outside the city limits—where our naturally salubrious air would tend to counteract any remaining harm. The pandemic spread's was powered, I explained, by poor air quality. By now, I realized, my remarks had the whole room listening; so I rose to conclude:

“My friends, our risk is common. Our efforts and precautions shall be common too. If the courage to resist can save us, we will be saved. We will fight the enemy to the last. Plague won't find

a ready prey in us; we'll fight over every inch of ground; and, by methodical and inflexible laws, we will raise invincible barriers against our foe. Perhaps in no part of the world has this evil sickness met with so systematic and determined an opposition. Perhaps no country is naturally so well protected against our invader—certainly, nowhere have nature's gifts been better seconded by human ability. We will not despair. We are neither cowards nor fatalists; but, believing that God has placed the means for our preservation in our own hands, we will use those means to our utmost. And, remember, these are our best medicines: cleanliness, sobriety, kindness, generosity and, yes, a good sense of humor.”

In a short while my listeners departed with thoughtful steps, to await the events in store for them. Upstairs, I found Idris in fresh tears. Her brother was with her. In regard to the Protectorship, he'd won a partial victory: to help reassure its frightened populace, Ryland had agreed to return to London for a period of weeks, time enough for everyone to get used to his leaving. Adrian planned to be with him every step of the way. Terrified at the risk he planned to run, Idris saw the situation in a tragic light; he was trying to convince her to trust his judgment.

Strikingly, the sinking sadness with which he'd heard the plague news earlier that day had vanished. His body radiated purposeful energy—I saw strength, solemn dedication, self-belief. His physical weakness, every trace of the old illness, had passed from him, like the fleshly human disguise of a god. Such was Adrian. Apparently given up to contemplation, listless and

averse to excitement, a lowly student, a man of visions—but offer him a worthy theme, and watch him spring to the highest pitch of virtuous accomplishment. At such times his eloquence was hard to resist.

“Finally,” he told us, “I’ve encountered a job tailor-made for me, one requiring no gift for intrigue and no affinity for the labyrinths of human passion. Instead, I can bring what is needed: to the sick, patience, sympathy, high standards of care; to the miserable orphan, to the mourner, hope and a hand back up again. And to the great work of keeping the plague within limits, minimizing the misery it’s bound to cause, I can bring the necessary restraint, courage, and watchfulness.

“Relieve your minds from fear on my account. I don’t plan to overtax my strength or seek out needless danger. I simply feel that I know what ought to be done, and that I need to be there to see it done right—which if anything will increase the care I’ll take of myself.

“Disappointment and sickness have dominated my life; I’ve existed, nearly isolated, under a tyranny of prohibitions. Congratulate me, then, that I’ve found fitting scope for my powers. Many times I’ve thought to go to France or Italy and offer my help among the plague-stricken towns; but I didn’t want to upset you—and, also, I knew this catastrophe was bound to reach us eventually. Now, to England and its people, those mighty spirits, I dedicate myself. If I can save a single one from death; if I can prevent disease in one solitary, smiling cottage, I shall not have lived in vain.”

He went to London. With him went enthusiasm, and firm, high-wrought resolve, and the ability to look death in the eye without faltering. With us remained sorrow, anxiety, and unendurable expectations of evil. *He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune*, wrote Francis Bacon long ago. It did no good to philosophize, or to be brave. Any reliance on probable good was equally vain. I could find a set of scales and pile every bit of logic, courage, and resignation in the world onto one side; it only took a single fear for the lives of Idris and our children on the other, to outweigh everything and kick the beam with an ugly clang.

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