

(35) CHAPTER 9.

THAT SUMMER, an uncommonly hot one, stretched itself into October. On the 18th, the temperature dropped. Plague took its accustomed pause once a winter frost set in. Less than half of England's population was left alive to stand and catch its breath; as if we'd been shipwrecked on a barren rock and now, at the sight of a distant vessel, hardly daring to hope, we fancied salvation first coming nearer, then again bearing from view. Uncertain as it was, this promise of a renewed lease on life saw rugged natures turn to melting tenderness. The softer-hearted, by contrast, were liable to be filled by harsh and unnatural sentiments. While it appeared that everyone was going to die, we'd grown somewhat reckless of the how and when for ourselves. With the plague in intermission, its virulence so mitigated as to raise the possibility that some might after all be spared, each person was eager to be among the elect, and clung to life with selfish, dastard tenacity. Instances of desertion became more frequent; and even murders, sickening to hear about, where horror of contagion had armed loving blood relations against one another.

But these domestic tragedies were about to yield to a mightier concern. The calm our temporary freedom from infection might have promised was swept away in a tempest born from human passions and nourished by our race's direst, most violent impulses.

A number of people from North America, the relics of that populous continent, abandoning their native cities and plains, had set sail for the east from a mad desire of change. Around the beginning of November, several hundred landed in Ireland, which they found no less afflicted than their own country. They took possession of such vacant habitations as they could find, seizing upon surplus food and stray cattle; as they exhausted one spot, they went on to another. At length they began to interfere with the inhabitants, some of whom they ejected from their dwellings, and robbed of their winter supplies. Such incidents roused the Irish to attack the invaders. Some they killed, but the major part escaped through quick, well-ordered maneuvers and subsequent care that impressed their attackers; meanwhile the enemy's manner of life, apparently given up to freedom's enjoyment, made many more locals envious. The Americans permitted a few to join their band, and before long the recruits outnumbered the originals, a majority making no attempt to imitate the admirable order which, preserved by the Trans-Atlantic chiefs, rendered the strangers so effective. Across the countryside, the Irish followed their adopted track in disorganized multitudes, each day increasing, each day more lawless. Their behavior spread famine.

The North Americans, eager to escape from the monster they'd created, embarked for England as soon as they reached the eastern shore at Drogheda. We'd hardly have felt the incursion, had they come alone; but Ireland united in a collective will to follow.

East and west, the harbors of its desolate seaports were filled with vessels of all sizes, from merchant ships and superyachts to small fishing boats and catamarans; some had been rotting there on the lazy deep for two years already. The emigrants embarked by the thousand. Few among them were experienced sailors, and their rude hands made strange havoc of canvas and rope. A surprisingly large number, even among the smaller craft, achieved their watery journey in safety. One contingent, in the true spirit of reckless enterprise, boarded a naval destroyer, and managed to get its vast hull away from the dock. The tide's drift took them out of the bay; then the hapless crew labored for hours to get under sail. But the ship was no longer seaworthy: one fresh breeze and a hard rocking opened cracks on both sides. The bay was crowded with vessels, whose crews, for the most part, had been observing the comedy of the idle destroyer. Now they saw her gradually sink—the waters rising above her lower decks—her upper decks—before they could believe their eyes, she'd utterly disappeared—they couldn't even tell anymore where the yawning jaws of the pitiless ocean had closed around her. A few on board swam to safety, the rest went down clinging to cordage and masts, rising only when death loosened their hold.

Some witnesses of this event and others like it (in kind, if not in scale), must have been dissuaded from leaving dry land to make their own attempts. But these were few, compared to the numbers who actually crossed. Many went up to Belfast for the shorter route, then journeyed south through Scotland; poor and desperate Scots joined them at every point along their migrant trail; and all streamed with one accord into England.

In towns where enough English people were still alive to feel it, these surprise incursions bred fear—for communication had been so fractured and paralyzed as a result of plague that no one had warning. Truthfully, our hapless country by then held room enough for twice their number, had they been peaceful. But the lawless spirits they let rule them, made these invaders violent. Taking anything they wanted, even throwing people out of homes along their way, they delighted most in chances to seize on some luxurious mansion and the well-supplied seclusion of its wealthy, plague-fearing occupants—who'd be forced into servitude or worse while the intruders stayed around. As soon as one place was completely ruined, they removed their locust visitation to another. When unopposed they spread their ravages wide; facing danger they clustered, and by dint of numbers overthrew weaker foes. They moved south; their course appeared aimless, but unquestionably their goal was our unhappy London.

By the time we got our first reports of their presence, they'd already reached Manchester, having swept the country like a conquering army, burning—laying waste—murdering. Vaga-

bonds and others of the English underclass joined in. We heard that someone had collected a militia at Derby to try and beat them back; but panic seized its thin ranks at the fight's outset. This brief opposition only served to increase the horde's audacity and cruelty. They talked of taking the capital and conquering England, the oppressor state. Mostly destitute and all adrift, Irish, Scots, English, North Americans could each produce long, detailed lists of historical injuries suffered and needing redress from our capitol.

Waves of terrified people who'd fled their advance began arriving at Windsor. We heard vastly exaggerated accounts of the invading force's numbers, fury, and cruelty—the distortions of rumor and fear, active since human time began. The strange, appalling, and impossible attributes assigned to the migrant army, marked a final evolution of the Gorgons and Centaurs, of sea monsters, dragons, werewolves. Panic spread, and tumult filled formerly quiet suburbs. Families deserted their homes, escaping with no idea where they might go; those prepared to stay and fight stood trembling, not for themselves, but for their defenseless loved ones. In London, crowded up into the higher buildings around town, anxious watchers imagined they could see distant smoke and flames spread by the enemy.

As Windsor lay squarely in the path of the onslaught, I moved my family into a suite at the Tower of London assigned us by the Protectorate. Once assured that Idris and the children were comfortable and safe, I left to join Adrian, and act as his Lieutenant in the coming struggle.

With only two days to prepare, we made good use of every minute. Brought out of storage and into firing condition were ample weapons and ammunition. A general call-up supplied the remnants of enough regiments to muster and put under arms, with that appearance of military discipline which must intimidate the disorganized multitude of our enemies, while encouraging our own side. Banners floated in the air. Even music wasn't wanting: fife and trumpet shrilled and blared forth proper martial airs. The soldiers marched in time. True, a keen ear might have detected many unusually faltering steps breaking their unison; but fear of the adversary wasn't the cause. Our fighters stumbled under burdens of disease, of sorrow—and of those fatal premonitions and prognostications which often weighed most heavily on the bravest hearts.

A careworn Adrian led the troops. Small relief to him that our discipline should gain us victory in this conflict; while plague was still around to equalize conqueror and conquered, it wasn't victory that he desired, but bloodless peace. As we advanced, we encountered bands of civilians coming from the north whose almost naked condition, whose despair and horror, testified at once to the ferocity of the enemy we went to meet: with insane fury, blinded by the senseless spirit of conquest and the greedy thirst for spoil, they'd drowned the country in ruin. The sight of the military restored hope to those who'd fled, and in whom vengefulness now took the place of fear. Their shouts and cheers inspired the soldiers to change their last languor to ardor; our slow march turned speedy. Yet the hollow murmur of

the multitude of refugees kept pace; gradually, inspired by one, deadly feeling, it filled the air, drowning out the clang of weaponry and battle tunes. Adrian began to fear it would be difficult to hold back our forces from making a furious attack on the Irish and their allies. He rode through the lines, charging the officers to restrain the troops, exhorting the soldiers, restoring order, and quieting in some degree the violent agitation that swelled every bosom.

We had our first sight of the enemy in the late afternoon, at St. Albans—a few stragglers who retreated at the sight of us. Gathering numbers of their companions on the way, they kept falling back till they reached the main body; where tidings of an armed and regular opposition recalled everyone to a kind of order. Making Buckingham their headquarters, they sent out scouts to ascertain our situation; doing the same, we spent the night at Luton. Our advance movements the next morning were simultaneous.

We converged on the grounds of an abandoned golf course east of Bletchley. It was dawn, and the air, impregnated with the fresh odors of dead leaves and overgrown grass, seemed to toy with our banners in an idle, mocking mood. The same breezes carried our marching band music and heavy boot steps across to the enemy lines, and so inspired surprise not unmingled with dread among our undisciplined foe; for these sounds spoke of other days, of days of concord and order, before the present pandemic—a time when humanity lived outside or beyond the shadow of extinction.

The pause was momentary, though. Soon we heard their disorderly clamor, the barbarous shouts, the roil and rattling steps of thousands coming on in disarray. Their troops poured from the woods onto the long, undulating field that lay between us; we advanced across it to a rise and halted, with superior sightlines and position. Those in charge on their side also gave word to halt, and tried to form their chaotic ranks into some imitation of the military discipline they saw facing them. With only stolen guns and horses, they could achieve no uniformity, and little obedience; but their shouts and wild gestures showed the untamed spirit that inspired them. On command, in perfect order, our soldiers started their advance in quick-time. Their mechanical precision, the gleam of their polished bayonets, their rigid silence, and looks of sullen hate, were more appalling than the savage clamor of our far more numerous foe. Both sides came on, the howls and shouts of the Irish increasing. The English proceeded in obedience to their officers, and halted once more on command. But now the first line of infantry were close enough to distinguish the faces of their enemies. The sight inspired them with fury. With a single cry that seemed to tear through heaven, they rushed forward with fixed bayonets, almost disdaining to fire in their zeal to slash and spear. Spotting a gap in the ranks, one of our artillery teams fired a cannon, whose deafening roar and blinding smoke filled up the horror of the scene.

Adrian had ordered the halt a few moments previously. I was nearby, observing his deep meditations as he formed a plan of

action, to prevent bloodshed. The sudden sounds of battle and cannon fire startled us. Eyes flashing, Adrian exclaimed, “Not one of these people must perish!” With a plunge of the rowels into his horse’s sides, he dashed towards the conflict. He didn’t swerve from the bullets that passed near him, but rode immediately between the opposing lines. We, his staff, followed to surround and protect him; obeying his signal, however, we fell back somewhat. The English fighters paused in their assault when they saw him there. Silence followed uproar. About fifty men and women lay on the ground, dying or dead. Adrian raised his sword, and turned to address his own troops:

“By whose command,” he cried, “do you engage? Who ordered it? Fall back! These misguided people shall not be slaughtered while I am your general. Sheath your weapons. These are your brothers and sisters, do not commit fratricide. Soon the plague won’t leave a single life for you to glut your revenge upon: will you be more pitiless than pestilence? As you honor me—as you worship God, in whose image all these too are created—as your children and friends are dear to you—shed not a drop of precious human blood.”

Then, turning to our invaders with a threatening scowl, he commanded them to lay down their arms:

“You see us wasted by plague, and think to overcome us? The plague is also among you. Lay down your arms, barbarous and cruel individuals whose hands are already stained with the blood of the innocent, whose souls are weighed down by the orphan’s cry! When you’ve been crushed by famine and

disease, the ghosts of those you've murdered will rise to see you dragged to hell. The victory must be ours, for right is on our side—you know it, I can see it in your faces. Lay down your arms, my fellow men! my sisters! Pardon, aid, and fraternal love await your surrender and repentance. You are dear to us, because you wear the frail flesh of humanity; each one among you, I promise you, will find a friend and host among these English forces.” He gestured, to ask both armies: “Or shall we continue to wallow in violence, while plague, our common enemy, laughs and triumphs in our butchery, even crueler than its own?”

All was still. On our side the soldiers grasped their weapons firmly, and shot anger from their eyes at the Irish forces—who hadn't thrown down their weapons, either, more from fear than any wish for battle. The two armies eyed each other, stalemated. Adrian threw himself from his horse, and approached one of the Irish fighters on the ground. “This was a man,” he cried, “and he is dead!” He waved an arm at the English line.

“Quickly—quickly, bind up the wounds of the fallen—let them not die—let not one more soul escape through your merciless gashes, to tell the story of your sinful fratricide before the throne of God; bind up their wounds—restore them to their friends. Cast away the hearts of tigers that burn in your breasts; throw down those tools of cruelty and hate. Destiny already exterminates us. So then let each living one be guardian and support to the other. Away with those blood-stained blades, and some of you come bind up these wounds.”

As he spoke, he knelt on the ground, and raised in his arms a woman from whose chest the warm red tide of life was gushing. The poor wretch gasped—so still had the scene become, that her moans were distinctly heard across the old fairway; and every heart, though just now bent on massacre, now beat anxiously in hope and fear. The fate of the world seemed bound up in the life or death of this one woman. Adrian had torn off his military scarf and pressed it to the wound. It was too late. The woman heaved a deep sigh, her head fell back, her still limbs drooped.

Adrian spoke. “She’s dead.” As the corpse fell from his arms to the ground, he bowed his head in sorrow and awe.

With that, both sides, deeply repentant, threw down their arms. The English veterans wept. While a gush of love and deepest amity filled every heart, the erstwhile adversaries joined hands. All talked of how the two forces might assist each other. As one body, they obeyed Adrian’s order to proceed towards London.

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