

(28) CHAPTER 5.

THE WHOLE world asked the wind, *Why? Why do you roar and howl like this, and why won't you stop?*

Day and night, over four long months, raging winds wrapped the planet in ear-splitting havoc. The seashores were strewn with wrecks, the ocean's surface had become impassable. Our frail balloons no longer dared the agitated sky. Clouds blown up gigantically deluged the continents with rain; rivers forsook their banks, wild torrents washed away the mountain roads. Windswept gardens, plains, wooded parks, forest dells, stripped of leaves, were despoiled of their loveliness. Even our cities seemed to be wasting away beneath this wind. England felt as if a giant wave were being prepared to rise and wrench our island from its roots and cast it like refuse upon the vast wastes of the Atlantic Ocean.

This was more than a crisis of climate, we thought. Sunspots or a like disorder in the heavens must be to blame—or maybe something gone wrong in the very nature of weather itself. How long and how far would humanity be victimized by such destructive powers from outside, beyond our control? Was our survival still secure? In the midst of such questions, Ryland's ascension to the Protectorship was not much noted.

A feeling of awe, a breathless wonder, a painful sense of humanity's degradation, began to grow in every heart. Nature, our mother, our friend, had turned on us with a menacing frown; she showed us plainly, that though she permitted us to systematize her laws and subjugate her powers, she only had to lift a finger and we must quake. Not only England—our whole mountain-fringed globe, girded by the atmosphere in which we and all that lived had our being, could be picked up and pitched like a ball into space, where life would be drunk up, and all humanity's achievements be forever annihilated.

What were we, really, we inhabitants of Earth—one small planet among the hosts of them populating the skies? Our minds could embrace infinity, infinite space; yet the mechanism of our being was subject to merest accident. A scratch disorganized us, an ill-timed infection wiped out our health; none could call themselves truly safe—all of us were subject to the same physical laws. Even so, we lorded it over creation, wielding its elements in humanity's service, believing ourselves to have mastered life and death. We could learn to regard dying without terror when, like some family lineage, the continuity of our species looked assured. With the entrance of doubt, however slight for now, all we could see was our own insignificance.

I remember, after having witnessed the destructive effects of a fire, not even being able to look at a lit stove without a sensation of fear. The mounting flames had curled around the building as it fell: that's what flames did—they embraced and

insinuated themselves into the substances around them, making any impediment to their progress yield at their touch. Could we take integral parts of this power for our own use, and not be subject to its operation and effects? Could we domesticate the cub of a wild beast, and not fear its growth and maturity?

So we began to feel with regard to death, lately so manageable, now so multitudinous. As the titanic winds abated, the plague became our greatest alarm. Because it thrived in the heat, we feared summer's approach. A commercial people, we were obliged to regard plans designed to keep out the invisible enemy, in light of our need to maintain our industries, our shipping, our trade, and our endless streams of foreign visitors; consequently the question of contagion took on the highest importance. Other countries could shut their borders, but for England there was no retreating from the outside world.

To face down the plague, we needed answers on these points: How contagious was it, and how did it travel—that is, how did the plague arise in a certain place and then increase? Unlike some storied predecessors, it showed no proven links to vermin; unlike long-extinct diseases such as smallpox or scarlet fever, it didn't appear to be passed through human contact. We were left with a theory: it must spread through the air. Moreover, some air must be more subject to infection than other air. It was common knowledge that ship crews carrying virulent fevers had been known to leave one port town half in coffins by month's end, and the very next stop's population unscathed; some places were so much more fortunately situated. But how

were we to judge of airs as the plague might, and decide, in one city, *Nothing for me here*, and in another city see a banquet set for death's plentiful harvest? Likewise, factors of physique appeared to be in play. Some individuals might escape ninety-nine exposures, and receive the death-blow at the hundredth; bodies were sometimes in a state to reject the infection, the sickness, and at other times almost thirsty for it.

Wrestling with these reflections, our legislators were slow to decide on the laws to be put in force. The evil was so widespread, so violent and incurable, that no care, no prevention could be judged superfluous which added any chance to our escape. Yet the immediate necessity for caution was in doubt. England was still secure. France, Germany, Italy, Spain, themselves uncontaminated, stood rampart-like between us and the plague. Safe in our island abode, we could have nothing to fear—and we weren't afraid, not openly. Yes, speculation was rife. We proceeded nonetheless in our daily occupations; we bought things and paid our expenses as usual; we kept making plans whose accomplishment must be many years away. No voice was heard telling us to hold back!

Commerce continued. When foreign distresses came to our notice, we set ourselves to apply creative remedies through all available channels. Charities boomed; funds were established for emigrants newly-arrived and in need, and for British merchants bankrupted by failures of trade. The national spirit awoke to its full splendor of activity, and, as it had ever done, set itself to resist the evil foe, and to stand in the breach which

diseased Nature had suffered chaos and death to make in the ordered bounds we'd always known.

By the start of summer, with countless emigrants from plague-struck lands inundating the entirety of western Europe, many thousands had already reached the refuge of our island. A vast proportion were utterly destitute; and their increasing numbers were on course to overwhelm the usual systems and modes of relief. Ryland, who'd pursued the Protectorship so tenaciously, always with the idea of turning the whole force of high office onto the suppression of Britain's privileged orders, tried to minimize the crisis; but from the start he saw his measures thwarted, his schemes interrupted by the new state of things. As trade fell off and slowly failed between us and even our most loyal partners—India, Egypt, Greece, America—the routine of our national life was broken. In vain our Protector and his partisans sought to conceal this truth; in vain, day after day, he appealed for a discussion of the new laws concerning hereditary rank and privilege; in vain he endeavored to represent the evil of the plague as partial and temporary. The pandemic's visible and tangible effects came home to so many bosoms, and, through the various channels of commerce, were carried so entirely into every class and community, that of necessity they became the first question in the state, the chief subjects of our most urgent attention.

From the domestic realm, we turned to the rest of the world with wonder and dismay. Could it really be true—cities laid waste, whole countries annihilated by the recent disorders?

Quito: destroyed by an earthquake. Mexico: emptied by the combined effects of windstorm, plague, and famine. India's fertile plains, China's megacities: menaced alike with utter ruin. Where late the busy multitudes assembled for pleasure or profit, now only the sound of wailing and misery was heard. In that poisoned air, each human being inhaled death, even those in youth and health, their hopes in flower.

In 1348, we recalled, bubonic plague had killed one third of Europe's population. As yet, the western part of the continent was uninfected by this new strain; would it always be so?

O, yes, it was said—it will. Fear not! In the wilds of the fiery weather-tossed Americas, what wonder that plague should be flourishing? An old native of the East, sister of the tornado, hurricane, earthquake, and typhoon—child of the sun, and nursling of the tropics, this plague can't survive our sun-challenged climate. It drinks the dark blood of the south's inhabitants, but it never feasts on the pale-faced Celt; and should we find some stricken Aztecs or Asians among us, the plague would die with them, unspread, harmless to our kind. Let us weep for our brothers and sisters, though their dire fate cannot be ours. Let us lament over the children of this world's pleasure garden lands, and try to assist them. Not long ago we envied them their airy homes, their spicy groves, fertile plantations, and abundant loveliness of being.

But in this mortal life extremes are always matched; the thorn grows with the rose, the poisonous tree and the cinnamon mingle their boughs. For all its gold-draped wealth, the Arabian

Peninsula is now a tomb; even the nomads' tents are fallen in the sands, and their horses begun to run wild in herds. The plague rages up and down the African continent, from Morocco to the Cape of Good Hope. It has desolated far-off Tasmania. Once more, the voices of lamentation fill the valley of Kashmir; its dells and woods and lakesides, cool fountains and gardens of roses, are polluted by the dead. In Georgia and old Circassia, the spirit of Beauty weeps over the ruin of its favorite temple—the form of a Black Sea woman. O, for a medicine vial to purge unwholesome Nature, and bring back our world to its accustomed health!

At home, our distresses increased proportionally as British commerce (despite all Ryland's fictions) traced its rapid decline. Bankruptcies skyrocketed among sectors dependent on trade or financial exchanges—banks, retailers, manufacturers. Jobs and products vanished. Such things, when they happen singly or a few at a time, affect only the immediate parties; but the prosperity of the nation was now shaken by frequent and extensive losses. Families bred in opulence were reduced to begging for loans. Ironically, the very state of world peace in which we'd gloried proved injurious, for it limited employment and also kept too many idle, surplus young men and women inside the country.

Ryland came to Windsor to consult with us. He was a man of strong intellect, capable of quick, sound, and decisive action in the usual course of events. He stood aghast at the multitude of disasters that assailed us; and the solution confronting him—tax

the landed interests to save the commercial economy—went entirely against his grain. To have any chance of doing it, he'd first need the chief landholders, the British nobility, his sworn enemies, to agree. That meant he'd have to conciliate them by abandoning his cherished scheme of equalization; confirm them in their manorial rights; act against the permanent good of his country, in exchange for a temporary hand-out. He must throw his weapons aside, and sacrifice his paramount goal for present ends. Every day he waited only added to his difficulties; the arrival of fresh emigrants, the total cessation of commerce, the desperate starving multitude that thronged around the palace of the Protectorate, were circumstances not to be tampered with. So the deal was struck. The aristocracy obtained all they wished, and agreed in return to pay a special twenty percent monthly tax on all the rent rolls of the country for the next year.

With the infusions of cash that followed, calm was restored to our markets and streets. At Windsor, we returned to the consideration of distant calamities, wondering if the future would bring any let-up. It was high summer, so there could be small hope of relief around our hemisphere. On the contrary, the disease gained virulence, while starvation did its usual work. Thousands died unlamented—for the mourners fell beside the still-warm corpses, mute, dead.

On August 18th, the plague was reported in France and Italy.

Idris and I happened to be in London that day. At first, the

news was only whispered around town, too soul-shaking to talk about or mention out loud. Friends met in the street; one would say, already hurrying on, “You’ve heard!” and the other reply, with a gasp of fear and horror, “What will become of us?” At length the news was reported—a single line dropped in an inside corner of the late edition: *We regret to state that there can be no longer any doubt of the plague having been introduced at Livorno, Genoa, and Marseilles.* Not a word of comment followed; the readership was left to feel like someone who’d heard that their house was on fire, and who’d rushed home, borne along by a lurking hope of a mistake—*not our house, our house will be there when I turn the corner*—only to arrive in time to see its sheltering roof collapse in flames. Advanced from rumor to definite, undeniable, and indelible publication, the knowledge went forth. Its obscure placement on the page only served to render the item more conspicuous: the small print grew gigantic to the bewildered and terrified eye, until it seemed to cover the very universe with a billboard.

Now, in one great revulsive stream, the British expatriate and tourist classes came pouring back to their own country. Crowds of well-off French and Italian emigrants joined them—with Spaniards soon to follow, as plague was seen there, too. Our little island was filled even to bursting. The foreign newcomers, unlike the earlier crowds from further east and south, could afford to pay their own way at first, and local economies were flooded with cash as a consequence. But the uptick was brief; for these people had no means of replenishing

what they spent among us. With the advance of summer, and the plague's spread back home, the rents on the properties they owned went unpaid, and the remittances from their investments and business holdings failed them. Lately so well-versed in modern convenience and luxury, they soon became indistinguishable from the crowds of wretched, perishing creatures who'd proceeded them onto our welfare rolls.

At Windsor, we recalled England's history of hospitable refuge. For over 400 years, people driven from their foreign homelands by political revolutions and wars had found here a generous welcome; our generation could not be backward in rendering aid to the victims of a more wide-spreading calamity. Our own family counted many personal friends among the new arrivals. We sought them out, relieved their immediate wants, and brought many of them home to stay. Our Castle became an asylum for the unhappy. With a small population to support now on his tax-reduced land revenues, Adrian and I imposed some unfamiliar limits on household spending. It wasn't money, though, but basic necessities that became scarce; food, above all. Local livestock shortages turned national; demand could not be met. It was difficult to find an immediate solution. The usual one of imports was entirely cut off. In this emergency, to feed our own resident refugees, we were obliged to convert Windsor's pleasure-grounds and parks into kitchen gardens, grazing pasture, and farmland; along with many trees, even the poor deer—our antlered pets, almost—were obliged to fall for the sake of a worthier cause. As these scenes began repeating

themselves around the country, its overcrowded metropolitan areas witnessed an exodus, as the labor required to bring large estates to this sort of culture employed and fed the cast-off workforce of their shuttered businesses, stores, docks, and factories. People followed the food; and another crisis in the cities was averted.

We had Adrian to thank for this fragile progress. Observing the success of our innovations at Windsor, he at once launched himself into a tireless campaign to convince England's wealthiest landowners to emulate him and likewise convert their possessions; he made them proposals in Parliament to this effect, in speeches whose eloquence did nothing to ingratiate. The earnestness of his pleas and the sheer benevolence that shone through his words proved irresistible. None of his listeners really enjoyed the idea of plowing over their best parkland views, or making drastic cutbacks in the national expenditure on horses kept purely for pleasure and sport. Yet, to the honor of their nation, let be it recorded that after an initial delay, seeing the misery of their fellow-creatures became only more glaring, the landed gentry came through with enthusiastic generosity. Declaring these solutions of Windsor's very obvious, those with the most luxurious lifestyles were often the first to part with their past self-indulgences. Indeed, as so often happened in communities, a fashion was set. Almost no one of high birth rode in carriages anymore, and they'd have felt disgraced to be seen on horseback for any but urgent reasons. The infirm could be wheeled or carried as of old in chairs; for

the rest, it wasn't uncommon to see women of the highest rank going on foot around town, or arriving at some fashionable resort on a bicycle.

Soon, if they possessed landed property, even the most confirmed Londoners had left town for their estates, often accompanied by whole troops of indigents, foreign and native. They'd cut down their woods to build temporary dwellings, and carve up their parks and flower gardens to divide among needy families—many of whom had held high rank in their own nations. Now they were hoeing, weeding. Everyone worked with such a vengeance that Adrian was required to spearhead a new campaign, urging moderation. The spirit of sacrifice must be checked when generosity passed over into lavish waste. Based on earlier pandemics, the plague would probably be gone in a year or two. Better, in that case, that we didn't destroy our fine breeds of horses, or change our most beautifully designed landscapes past recognition.

Winter, the plague cure, wasn't far off. Gratitude welcomed the browning woods and swollen rivers, evening mists, morning frosts. The purifying effects of cold weather were clear and immediate; the mortality rates across Europe dropped every week. Many of our visitors from the south left us, fleeing delightedly from the cold and the tightening rations; even after fearful losses to plague, their native lands were still full of plenty. In England, we breathed again. What next summer would bring, we didn't know; but the present months belonged to us, and our hopes of an end to the plague were high.

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