

(41) CHAPTER 3.

I SLID from consciousness again. Soon Idris awoke, alas! to misery. She saw the fatal signs on my face and berated herself. How could she have let the whole night pass without trying to find—not cure, that was impossible—but something to ease my sufferings? She had Adrian called and my couch was quickly surrounded by friends and specialists; I was administered such palliative treatments as were customary by now. It was the singular and dreadful distinction of our 21st-century plague, that no one had ever survived it. The first symptom of the disease was the death warrant, no pardon, no reprieve. My friends had no gleam of hope to cheer them.

Idris never moved from my side. Administering to all my wants, she neither slept nor rested. Resigned to the inevitable, she didn't watch for symptoms of recovery. Her one thought was to nurse me to the last, then lie down and die beside me.

Three nights in, I stopped breathing. I had no pulse. To the eye and the touch, I was dead.

“He's gone, Idris.”

Adrian, alone with his sister in this vigil hour, took her shoulder and tried to draw her away. Idris shook her head and wiped another tear from her sunken cheek. He urged, begged, protested, exhausted every argument in favor of her surviving child's welfare and his own; he came near to threatening the use of force. But she insisted on being allowed to watch over me this one more night, only—with such affliction behind her sincerity that Adrian yielded. Stepping back, he sank into a chair. Idris stayed where she was, beside the couch, silent and motionless, except when, stung by intolerable remembrance, she kissed my closed eyes and pallid lips, and pressed my stiffening hands to her beating heart.

The dead of night found Idris bent across my body, in bitter mourning for the loss of all the love towards her that my heart had held enshrined. Her hair was disheveled, the long tresses fell on the bed and hung across her face. She noticed one curl gone an ashy gray, in seeming motion, slightly stirred, as if by breath. *But no*, she thought, *for he will never breathe again*. Without emotion, she watched the phenomenon for a minute; till the whole ringlet waved and tumbled, and she thought my chest heaved. Deadly fear gripped her, cold sweat burst from her brow. She watched my eyes, saw me blink. She would have exclaimed, *He's alive!* but the words were choked by a spasm; blood filled her throat and she fell to the floor.

Mine had been initially a torpor of fever. Then came heavy pains to sit like lead on my limbs and make me gasp for breath. Lost to my surroundings, I continued insensible to everything

but pain, and at last even to that. Night three I spent in a state of suspended animation; on the fourth morning I awoke as from a dreamless sleep with a nagging thirst, too weak to move. The pain was gone. Across the chamber Adrian gave a cry, and I saw him start up from his chair where he'd been dozing. Our eyes met. From his own shock, her brother understood why Idris lay senseless, weltering in the bright gore that streamed from her mouth. The surprise, the burst of joy, the instantaneous reversal of ever sentiment and expectation had been too much for her frame, already worn by long months of worry, lately shattered by every species of woe and toil.

She was now in far greater danger than I, whose life-springs had surged up from their brief suspension. Though for a long time, no one believed I could be healthy again. As if survival so unprecedented must be some kind of trick, people eyed me closely, watching for the dread symptoms to manifest again. I convalesced almost overnight. Health spent her treasures upon me; I felt myself an oak in springtime, fresh green breaking forth from wrinkled limbs. As the live sap rose and circulated, my frame's renewed vigor, my blood's unblocked currents, inspired me to cheerful endurance and pleasurable thoughts. Indeed, from being the leaden weight that bound me to the tomb, my body had become exuberant with health. Nothing uncommon seemed beyond its reviving strength and the new elasticity of my limbs, nor could anything be missed by senses so refined and susceptible. Methought I could have matched foot speed with a racehorse. Objects appeared visible to me at blinding distances.

The hidden processes of nature reached my ears and pulsed there.

Idris, who'd been sunken-cheeked and emaciated even before the ordeal and collapse at my sickbed, offered a more problematical case. The vessel wall in her chest which her extreme agitation had caused to rupture, failed to entirely heal. Drop by drop, the blood to her heart leaked away through the breach. Her appearance was ghastly; her eye sockets were pit-like; her cheekbones, temples, jaws and gums jutted out fearfully; you could see every bone in her skeletal frame. Her hands, mere strings of cartilage set in transparency, hung powerless. It was strange that life could exist in what was wasted and worn into such a close semblance of death.

But I counted hope among my other blessings of those days. If I could only wrap my adored girl in my unwearied attentions; if I could take her away from these heart-breaking scenes and lead her to forget the world's desolation in the simple novelty of travel; if I could get a chance to nurse her failing strength in the mild and sunny climate towards which our journey aimed, I might restore her.

All the more eagerly then did I renew the preparations for a departure interrupted and delayed by our joint illnesses. On November 25th, as planned, two-thirds of our people—England's people—all that remained of us—had quitted London. Adrian delayed to follow with his division until her doctors said Idris could travel, and the first group had already been some weeks in Paris, when on New Year's Day, 2098,

some three hundred people on single and passenger bicycles, Adrian at their head, rode out along the Embankment and across Waterloo Bridge in the direction of Dover. The ex-Queen, Countess of Windsor, an inveterate winter cyclist, travelled with her son. The party's ox-cart baggage train had left the week before, and rest stops had been prepared along the way. The remaining horses supplied a number of passenger carriages that followed Adrian's riders. My family occupied one, very commodious for the four of us now and a nurse attendant. I was glad to take a place near the end of the line and spare Idris any hurry, crowding, or clamor; I couldn't do much to dispel the sadness of ours being the last human eyes to see London from above the Thames.

But to my surprise, Idris was all smiles. She sat up cheerfully, one arm around Clara's shoulders, the other holding our Elvis in a close embrace; but they'd had to raise her strengthless arms to place them there themselves. "Don't let my temporary weakness deceive you," she said. "I'm getting better this time—I can actually feel the health return." She told us to expect a full recovery. But she must have read my half-doubtful expression as I eyed her face: it was burning with fever. Her smile deepened. "Trust me, dearest, I shall neither leave you, nor my brother, nor these dear children; my firm determination to remain with you to the last, and to continue contributing to your happiness and welfare, would keep me alive even if grim death were actually at hand."

My hopes excited by her words, I had no fears of an

immediate catastrophe; nay, I persuaded myself that she would ultimately recover. *We might even have more children!* The thought crossed my mind as cheerfulness reigned in our roomy carriage. Idris conversed animatedly on a thousand topics. She drew charming pictures of the tranquil, beauteous locale we'd find to settle, and of the simple manners of our little European tribe to come. In her vision, universal and cooperative human love was destined to survive the ruin of nations. Enchanted by her voice, we withdrew our thoughts from the present, just as we turned our eyes from the dreary landscape outside. Winter reigned in all its gloom: bare, motionless trees unrelieved by a colorless sky; unplowed cornfields patched with ice and weeds; the ground snaked with frost, the lanes overgrown; huddling livestock tenanted desolate cottages. The wind turned bleak, and a mix of sleet and snow added to the melancholy of the scene.

One night's shelter was arranged for us at Rochester. But there, alas!, a circumstance occurred that changed our plans. While at dinner we were approached by a couple of rain-sodden cyclists from Adrian's division. Delayed by weather during a last nostalgic swing around the Chiltern Hills, they'd missed the group departure by a day and had only now overtaken us. One bowed and spoke somewhat nervously. "Lady Idris, we've got—we bear a letter from someone known to you."

The neighborhood of Windsor lacked many poor families. Lucy Clayton, the eldest and prettiest of five children, came from one of them. Though no scholar, she grew into a bright

light: good-humored, sociable, benevolent, beloved as well as honored in her little community. Romantic admirers were never lacking either; but here young Lucy was unfortunate. She loved and married a man who lacked a fortune, and wound up living instead with a drunken brute who owned a flourishing hotel in nearby Datchet. Lucy's motivating care in all things and her strongest human tie was with her mother, a semi-invalid and long-time widow, perennially distressed since Lucy's childhood. Idris had known the two forever. Before Plague conquered the world, we saw Lucy now and then at the hotel's excellent dining room which she ran very capably. Like her marriage, the second union was childless. Her mother stayed for free in a junior suite upstairs, an arrangement the hotelier was always threatening to end. He'd get rid of her mother—but Lucy was firm here—she would not part with her—if the mother went, she'd go too, and beg bread for both of them—she'd die with her mother, but never desert her. Unable to afford the loss of her restaurant management skills, and still strongly attracted, the man would back down. When drunk, though, he beat Lucy more than once. She never left him.

While preparing to leave Windsor for the last time we'd made sure to visit this ill-starred acquaintance. Much had changed for her by then. The ever-unsuccessful husband who'd kept popping up for years had been among the plague's first English victims. Lucy's four siblings followed one by one. The hotel failed, of course, and its brutish owner ran pleasure-mad to London where he died. We found Lucy destitute and

smiling. The mother and her thousand health complaints were still going strong: she was a delightful old woman in her way, fully as kind and devoted to her daughter as Lucy was to her. A perfect confidence and friendship existed between them. Together they were happy but entirely inert, without any idea of going to London for the emigration. Idris helped them decide on a plan, we told them how to arrange everything. With our own removal from Windsor and our subsequent catastrophes, the pair had slipped from our minds. We'd thought them safe.

"Lucy Clayton!" Having opened the letter, Idris exclaimed at the signature.

"Isn't she in France already?" I asked sharply. I felt a strange agitation. Idris shook her head, reading. The cyclists explained in quiet tones:

They'd been headed back to London as fast as the worsening weather allowed, when a sudden ice storm caught them in the open. They made for the first shelter they spotted, which they described as a pretentious hotel, where to their astonishment and relief they found a log fire blazing in the big lobby fireplace. The woman proprietor who'd admitted them was stranded alongside it with her rheumatic old mother and their luggage; having gotten downstairs, the mother couldn't walk another step; so they'd missed their ride to London. And they were running out of firewood. This the cyclists had replenished from a supply out back; otherwise all they could do was wait out the storm while Lucy penned this plea for help, and agree to deliver it into Idris's hands—hands almost too weak to

hold the page she held out to me. I glanced it over: dated 12/31/2097, “Honored Lady,” it began. Apparently old Mrs Clayton still expected a “replacement ride” to come. The last part read:

Will you not send someone to us? I am sure we must perish miserably as we are. My mother does not know our state; she is so ill, that I have hidden it from her. I can hardly write—I cannot stop my tears—it is not for myself; I could put my trust in God; and let the worst come, I think I could bear it, if I were alone. But my mother, my sick, my dear, dear mother, who never, since I was born, spoke a harsh word to me, who has been patient in many sufferings; pity her, dear Lady, she must die a miserable death if you do not pity her. People speak carelessly of her, because she is old and infirm, as if we must not all, if we are spared, become so; and then, when the young are old themselves, they will think that they ought to be taken care of. It is very silly of me to write in this way to you; but, when I hear her trying not to groan, and see her look smiling on me to comfort me, when I know she is in pain; and when I think that she does not know the worst, but she soon must; and then she will not complain; but I shall sit guessing at all she must be dwelling upon, her dear mind full of famine and misery—I feel as if my heart must break, and I do not know what I say or do. My mother—Mother, for whom I have borne much, God preserve you from this fate! Preserve her, Lady, and God will bless you; and I, poor miserable creature that I am, will thank you and pray for you every day of my life.

I was alarmed to find Idris so moved by this letter. She proposed, on the spot, that we get in our carriage, drive off to collect the Claytons, and bring them back with us to Rochester: a sixty mile journey either way. I balked, insisting that Adrian would happily send a skilled rescue party; but no, Idris was adamant. Strangers, however instructed, might carry out their duties with coldness or inhumanity. Nor would she hear of my going in her place. What a world of good must it do mother and daughter instead to see friends, to see Idris herself, respond to their call. “Lucy’s life,” Idris said, “has been one long act of devotion and virtue. Let her now reap the small reward of finding her excellence acknowledged in her hour of need by persons she respects and honors with her trust.”

I should never had done it, but Idris always ruled me: as soon as I realized her kind heart was set on it, I agreed that she and I should be the ones to go. Adrian, equally helpless to dissuade, could only get his sister to agree that our children were best left safe and warm in Rochester with the nurse and a small colony of attendants he’d leave there to await our return. The carriage we’d arrived in was far too cumbersome for the pace I meant to set, so I’d asked Adrian to requisition and equip us a fast one-horse wagon with a canvas top and leather flaps, along with a groom (Idris wanted no other attendants). We’d travel with three horses, changed out and rested often on those wintry roads; lanterns would enable us to ride by night; I’d sleep an hour or two at a time. This plan had us reaching Datchet in under twenty-four hours, back in Rochester with the Claytons

in three days or less. Too much longer and we'd risk delaying the Dover crossing for everyone: fine weather came rarely and unpredictably this time of year.

Joining the inn-yard scene at our dawn hour departure, the Countess of Windsor made a last effort to dissuade her daughter from the trip. "You need nursing, not adventure," she said. "What can be so important about little Lucy Clayton to require this much of you?"

Idris said, "You didn't see her letter."

"So, show me." And Idris handed it over. The Ex-Queen broke off reading with a bitter laugh. "Guilt! *Jah!* That is what sends you on this crazy mission—the guilt you feel over how you've treated me, how you've rejected me, your own mother."

Idris scoffed angrily and before I could object the Ex-Queen continued: "Yes, that guilt of yours sends you—to your death, Idris. My only daughter. I feel it, I know it! For God's sake, just look at yourself." Emaciated, faded, pallid: her point was clear for all to see. Idris only kissed her cheek and said farewell.

My own mind misgave me again when Idris had to be lifted into the box seat beside me. I whispered to her, "Please, ignore your mother—but stay here with the children and keep indoors. Let me make this drive alone." But she was in high spirits, full of hope. She declared that she couldn't tolerate even a temporary separation from me; anyhow, the motion of the wheels did her good, and the distance to be covered was trifling.

Which was untrue: we had first to retrace our entire route from London, crossing Hammersmith Bridge this time to reach

the Western Road and continue almost to Windsor; sixty miles along roads in general disrepair, at the darkest time of winter, heading west into snowstorms and a northerly wind, was no trifle. As for the good Idris said our excursion was doing her health, I saw no sign of any. Thinking back, I must have observed the fever burning her cheeks and her strength draining away, for I recall these details; death advanced openly, right before my eyes. Was I blind? How could I have kept on risking her safety? But Idris said she was better; and I believed her. Hour by hour, I saw a being still witty and vivacious, whose frame was endowed with an intense, and I fondly thought, a strong and permanent spirit of life—my mind could not accept its possible extinction. Who, after a great disaster, never looked back with wonder at their own inconceivable obtuseness? What we could but vaguely understand and never perceive, were the many minute threads into which fate wove our destinies and caught us; all we knew were the toils of the inextricable nets that enmeshed us completely.

That first day, we were nearing Dartford when the neglected road gave the wagon a series of violent jolts. I heard Idris gasp, and yanked the horse to a stop: the perishing frame beside me was almost destroyed. We could have turned back—I wanted to, but she wouldn't hear of it. Consequently the groom, a most able one, Worthy by name, was required to ride ahead to find the easiest detours for us, even clearing debris at points; all of which consumed additional time. The formless agitation that had gripped me since the letter's appearance only seemed to

increase. At one lengthy stop, the damage to my plans and my nerves drove me to gripe:

“Once more, Idris, you observe that Lucy Clayton has made her mother into an excuse for her own passivity and inaction.”

“What does that matter now, Lionel?”

I was lost for a reply.

Over a day behind schedule, West London’s wastelands weren’t behind us until late afternoon. Night closed in quickly, far more quickly than I was prepared to expect. By now there was no mistaking it: my beloved companion grew sensibly worse in health, though her spirits were still light, and she kept trying to cheer me out of my anxiety with comical remarks—to little effect, however. Leaning full yet almost weightlessly against my side, she drew a deep breath and said, “I love the smell of snow. “As her words met the air, the first flakes fell. We rode on, our lanterns setting us within a globe of living crystal, through a wonderland. But not for long, as the snow turned steadily heavier and the scene around us less and less transparent. When I urged her to go inside the wagon where we had mattresses and furs, Idris declined: we were amply protected on the driver’s box by the leather flaps and canopy; wrapped in an additional layer or two, she declared herself perfectly comfortable. Her liveliness of manner continued. Fixed straight ahead upon the curtain of snow whose churning lamp-lit folds concealed the way before us, her wide gaze glowed. Her fever reached me from the skin of her face in gusts.

Weeks earlier, amid the confusion attendant on my illness,

the task of interring our darling Alfred had devolved on his grandmother, the Ex-Queen, and she, true to her ruling passion, had caused him to be carried to Windsor, and buried in the royal family vault beneath St. George's Chapel. I'd visited him there in the first flush of my recovery, cycling out and back on this very road we took tonight—a journey Idris had been judged too weak to undertake before we left. She was still too weak and sick for it. *Is she dying?* The thought pierced my brain over and over, though I kept driving it away as if it were a symptom of insanity.

Some relief from these painful reflections came when the groom rode up alongside to suggest a new detour. We and the horses needed food and rest, and a slight swerve from our course would take us to a certain stately home where the stables had once been famous. We agreed: leaving two horses with the wagon, Worthy should ride ahead and try to get a fire going indoors while we followed at our slower pace.

Idris and I knew the house and the family whose deaths from plague had left it vacant. We were trading recollections when a long, ghastly, ragged human scream reached us through muffles of distance and snow. I cracked the reins and shouted, sending us plunging through snow drifts, until the horse reared up at a set of ornamental gates open too narrowly to admit us. I took a lantern, leapt into the snow and staggered off to follow the hoof prints leading up the drive. At a turn past some shrubbery, I saw light ahead: Worthy had carried a lantern. There it was, on a low wall. The screams had stopped but sounds had not. A few

steps closer and I saw the dogs, twenty or more, mostly low slung and tawny; the lost family had bred their pedigreed progenitors, and though the past few years had seen some mixing with outsiders, the line ran strong, like corgi jaws. Worthy's blood was steaming on the ground. The starving pack snarled and whined and snapped those jaws as it fed amid horrible tearing noises. I dared not approach closer. The horse Worthy had been riding was nowhere to be seen and must have run off in terror, with canine pursuit; we wouldn't see that horse again. I turned to retrace my steps to the wagon—and found Idris lying in the snow in a faint: she'd followed and seen all.

Miraculously, I thought, she revived in my arms while I was carrying her back to safety, and she resumed her place in the driver's box beside mine as I rushed us away as hastily as we'd arrived—too hastily. Thicker now, and deeper on the ground, snow engulfed us and erased our bearings. A wooded hillside loomed up ahead: I'd lost the road.

Cheerful, affectionate, unshakably calm—herself, in full—Idris murmured reassurance and pressed a little closer to my side. I could always take heart from her. Putting the wind at our back and keeping the hilly woods on one flank, we covered another unfamiliar mile that ended in another wall of trees, only on level ground; no choice but to turn and ride parallel to it, hoping we might happen on a road cut through the woods. Now the weather pelted us from the side, driving snow into our eyes, coating our scarves and cloaks with ice. I also feared our way might return us to the corgis' territory. Better, perhaps, to stop

and take our chances inside the wagon: bundle up together and wait for the sun's sure help. But too much suggested this would be a dangerous experiment. The wind was bleak and piercing; the intense cold I felt myself must be worse for my frailer companion, who'd also been dropped full-length in deep snow by the shock of our tragic adventure; in fact I could add hypothermia to the list of things that might be killing her.

Idris by degrees had sunk into silence. Her head lay heavily on my shoulder, I only knew that she lived by her irregular breathing and frequent sighs. Then methought she slept—hypothermia, surely. At this moment the horse tossed and pulled at the reins. I looked around and saw the heavy outline of a cottage through the trees beside us. I cried out in relief.

“Dearest love, hold on one more moment—here's shelter!”

As I spoke, my heart was transported, and my senses swam with excessive delight and thankfulness. An opening in the trees took us to the back of the property. A narrow drive out front would lead to the main road—later. For now, my single focus was warmth. I brought the wagon to the cottage door, carried Idris into the back and piled her with furs; she remained unconscious. Worthy's death made me our party's groom, and our exhausted horses' needs came next. I unharnessed one and got the pair fed and stabled comfortably. Then I returned to the door of this blessed dwelling, which stood open; the snow, drifting in, had blocked up the threshold. My lantern showed me a neat comfortable room with a pile of wood in one corner and no sign of dogs anywhere. I shoved my way in and got a

quick fire started in the fireplace before I went back to get Idris. The darkness was thicker since I'd been indoors, at first I felt blinded. When I recovered my sight—eternal God of this lawless world! O supreme Death! I will not disturb thy silent reign, or mar my tale with fruitless exclamations of horror—I saw Idris, who must have been trying to take her seat up front again; she'd fallen to the bottom of the carriage; her head, her long hair hiding her face and most of one arm, hung over the side. Struck by a spasm of horror, I lifted her up; her heart was pulseless, her faded lips unfanned by the slightest breath.

I carried her into the cottage, lay her in front of the fire, and began to chafe her stiffening limbs. For two long hours I sought to restore departed life; and, when hope was as dead as my beloved, with trembling hands I closed her glazed eyes.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind what I should do next. I must proceed to Windsor without delay, and place my beloved beside her child in the vault.

I readied the wagon again, harnessing both horses this time and lighting the lanterns. I wrapped Idris in furs and placed her across my lap in the driver's box. Then, taking the reins, I sent us forward. Massed on the ground, blinding in its furious descent, snow impeded every inch of our way. The hardship and pain occasioned by the angry elements, the iron arrow shafts of cold that pierced my aching flesh—these were a relief to me, blunting my mental suffering. The horses staggered on, the reins hung loosely in my hands. I kept picturing how easy it would be to bend and lay my head close to the sweet, cold face

of my lost angel, and never sit up again. But I couldn't leave her prey to the rooks and roaming animals; no, the tomb of her ancestors was where she belonged—and where a merciful God might permit me to rest also.

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