

CHAPTER FIVE

I

They went down, all of them, into the black winter of 1918. It was a winter which Catherine could never clearly remember, a blurred nightmare of fatigue and overwork.

Peace came at the beginning of a spell of bitter weather, when the country cowered, terrified, under the influenza epidemic.

'It's swine fever,' William's patients assured him. 'It comes from putting the pigs' vittles into the bread. It's swine fever. Don't they turn black when they die, same as the pigs?'

Nothing he could say would shake them out of that belief.

The village was very quiet the day the Armistice was declared. Catherine wrapped her children up and took them out. A few people stood at their doorways, talking in low voices, and with no joy in their faces. On the church tower half a dozen flags had been stuck, but the wind had knocked them crooked and wound the bunting round the poles, so that they looked like drunken umbrellas. Outside the Golden Lion a man with a copper shovel was tossing hot pennies to the children. His face glowed, he shouted with laughter as the

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'It's a queer business,' he said. 'It takes the strong, middle-aged people. The old people and the children are hardly touched. I've never seen anything like it before.'

In the end he took it himself.

'I know where I got it,' he said wrathfully, furious with himself for being unable to hold out. 'Damned fools. There they were . . . the whole family . . . sitting round the kitchen fire in a fug you could cut with a knife. Wouldn't go to bed, preferred to sit there like stewed owls. Idiots.'

Catherine took his temperature. It was 104.

'You never ought to have gone out today!'

'Could I help it? Who's to do the work now, I don't know. Patterson's got his hands as full as I have.'

Catherine put him to bed and telephoned for help. The promised locum announced his arrival six weeks later when they had forgotten all about him, the nurse didn't come for a week.

'You'll catch it!' William fretted. 'Don't stay in the room.'

Catherine saw that there was nothing else to be done, then she went out and sat on the stairs, within call. She felt helpless. She knew very little about nursing, and was fairly certain that William would do nothing that she asked him to do. She was glad when the doctor from the neighbouring practice arrived, vetted William, left a bottle of influenza mixture, and took his visiting list. He departed to cope with patients by the household, scattered throughout twenty-seven villages.

Catherine came back to William. 'You'll catch it!' he said.

* 'I shan't. I've too much sense,' Catherine snapped.

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Eb, their jobbing gardener, came up and found her looking at it.

'They've stamped it to death!' Catherine said. 'They were all jumping on it.'

'Maybe there was somewhat the matter with it,' Eb said, picking the rabbit up. 'They'll do that if one of 'em's sickening. I'll open him up and see.'

Catherine sat down on the top of the stairs and cried uncontrollably. She hardly knew whether she was crying with relief because William was better, or merely because rabbits were so horrible.

She went down to find a friend from four miles off waiting to help her with William.

'But you've had a far worse time than I have,' she said. 'You've been nursing it for weeks. Aren't you worn out?'

'I had to come and look after William,' the friend said firmly. 'Where all the rest of us would have been without him I don't know. It's time you had a rest.'

She sent Catherine out for supplies. Catherine managed to get a tin of beef essence and, with great difficulty, a small supply of cream. She also contrived to get a bottle of champagne, the bill for which infuriated William so much that he refused to pay it for over three years. He liked to take it out and look at it, work himself up into a rage over it, and put it away again.

'He must be fed now,' the friend said. 'Look here . . .'

She wrote recipes and planned diet sheets.

'All right,' Catherine agreed wearily. 'But for heaven's sake show them to him yourself or he'll wear me out about the expense. He'll take it lying down, from you.'

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1914 the nights had been broken by the sound of feet passing, passing down the road under her window from the barracks to the docks. Feet, and voices singing (Tipperary) and the rumble of baggage waggons. Feet of men who would never come back. That sound had been in her memory, at the back of her mind, all these years. Now it had stopped, and the guns had stopped. It was all over.

She no longer believed that a new heaven and a new earth would come with the peace. It was too late. They were all too tired, too spoiled and broken.

*Les lauriers sont coupés,
Nous n'irons plus aux bois.*

There were no laurels for Catherine and her generation. Cut. All cut.

Something dark, bitter and fatiguing had been worked and kneaded and ground into the very stuff of their natures.

So Catherine only knew in a numb way that she was relieved. She lived on black coffee and bread and dripping and onion soup and sat over the fire in the evenings, discovering an unknown author, one Shakespeare, the Elizabethan dramatist, who had nothing to do with the Shakespeare of the schools. She found his world a lustier and a more cheerful one than her own.

At the end of the week William came back, very hollow under the eyes, and greyish yellow in colour. They found a man to drive the car and Catherine abandoned her children and went out with William, a brandy bottle in her pocket. William could just manage to walk from the car to the cottage

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children shrieked, dropped the pennies and sucked their fingers, and then scrambled for them again.

Farther on, down the main street, voices in the Horse and Groom were raised thinly in an old song about 'Tommy lad'.

The wind blew shrewdly, sending whirls of dust down the street. Adam sat up, solemn and wide-eyed. Audrey ran from tree to tree, touching each in turn, lifting her feet high and bringing them down with a smack. The sound echoed in the empty street.

Presently the children from the market square trailed past them with a couple of flags, small boys beating tin cans and tea trays, a girl or two dragging shamefacedly at the rear.

'Why! There's my Vi'let!' said a woman in a doorway. 'I won't half give her somewhat when she comes home. Making a fool of herself like that.'

At twelve o'clock, when the men came in from work, the bells in the church tower clashed all together – a jarring, jangled sound. Churches at a distance sent back an echo. Stridently above the listless villages, tower called to tower. Everything else was dead still. A few flakes of snow came down grudgingly, in the bitter cold.

II

The influenza epidemic went on. William worked twice as hard, visiting patients, scolding scared relations and neighbours into nursing them, keeping on the road from nine in the morning till nine at night and making up medicine and giving advice for two and three hours afterwards.

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She made up the fire, opened the window as he told her, and fetched him hot milk. Then she put her bed in the spare room and set the alarm-clock to wake her an hour after she got into bed.

For three days and nights she went on, mechanically filling William with alternate doses of hot milk and influenza mixture.

'I'm saturated with the damn stuff,' William complained, and refused to have anything more to do with it. He turned his shoulder on Catherine and went doggedly off to sleep. The doctor from the next practice, running over his chest the next morning, found a resolving pneumonia and congratulated William.

Catherine, heavy in the head, and gummy about the eyes, went off, shakily, to feed William's rabbits.

At the top of the stairs to the stable loft a noise of running and stamping made her stand still. The young bucks in the long hutch by the wall were running round and round in a great hurry and commotion. Catherine went closer and looked in.

One of the bucks was lying on its side in the corner, the others were running over it, striking back with their hind legs at its ribs as they passed. The buck lay huddled, not attempting to resist or run away.

Catherine fetched a shovel. She hadn't the courage to put her hand in amongst the stamping rabbits. There was something beastly and terrifying about the whole business. She shovelled the buck out and laid it on a pile of sawdust. Its head rolled over, it stretched out and its eyes glazed.

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Her friend sent her away, sat up all night with William and returned by day to deal with her own parish, to come back, still fresh, in the evening.

The doctor from the next practice took aspirin and carried on, visiting innumerable patients in twenty-seven villages.

Patients banded at William's own front door all day. He was indispensable, it appeared, to some of them.

'Ah! Dear now! Not up yet? Just run up and tell him I'm here, he'll see me for certain.'

Or:

'Still in bed? Ah now! We've never had anybody else but him or his father. Just run up and take him my name.'

'One gathers,' Catherine said irritably to William, 'that doctors are never really ill. One thing is perfectly plain. As soon as you can stand on your feet you go away – even if it's only for a week.'

'I can't possibly go,' William objected. 'Don't you see that I must get back to the round? The other chap can't hold up for ever.'

The nurse came at last and Catherine retired to bed with a streaming cold, a temperature, and a large towel – she and William between them having used up every handkerchief in the house. In twenty-four hours she was perfectly well, and a day or two later nurse – who agreed with Catherine – took William, protesting to the last, away to his people.

Catherine, by contrast, was happier than she had been for years. Adam and Audrey were well and there was time to remember that, at least, the War was over. Slowly, the relief of that knowledge seeped into her. She remembered how in

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doors and back again. Somehow he struggled round the countryside, stuck at it, and mended.

The winter dragged on. Prices soared up and up. Butter went to four shillings a pound, and sewing cotton to tenpence ha'penny the reel. Shoes were two or three pounds a pair. Nothing that anyone ate or wore or used was made of quite what it ought to have been.

The War was over, but the nightmare went on.

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