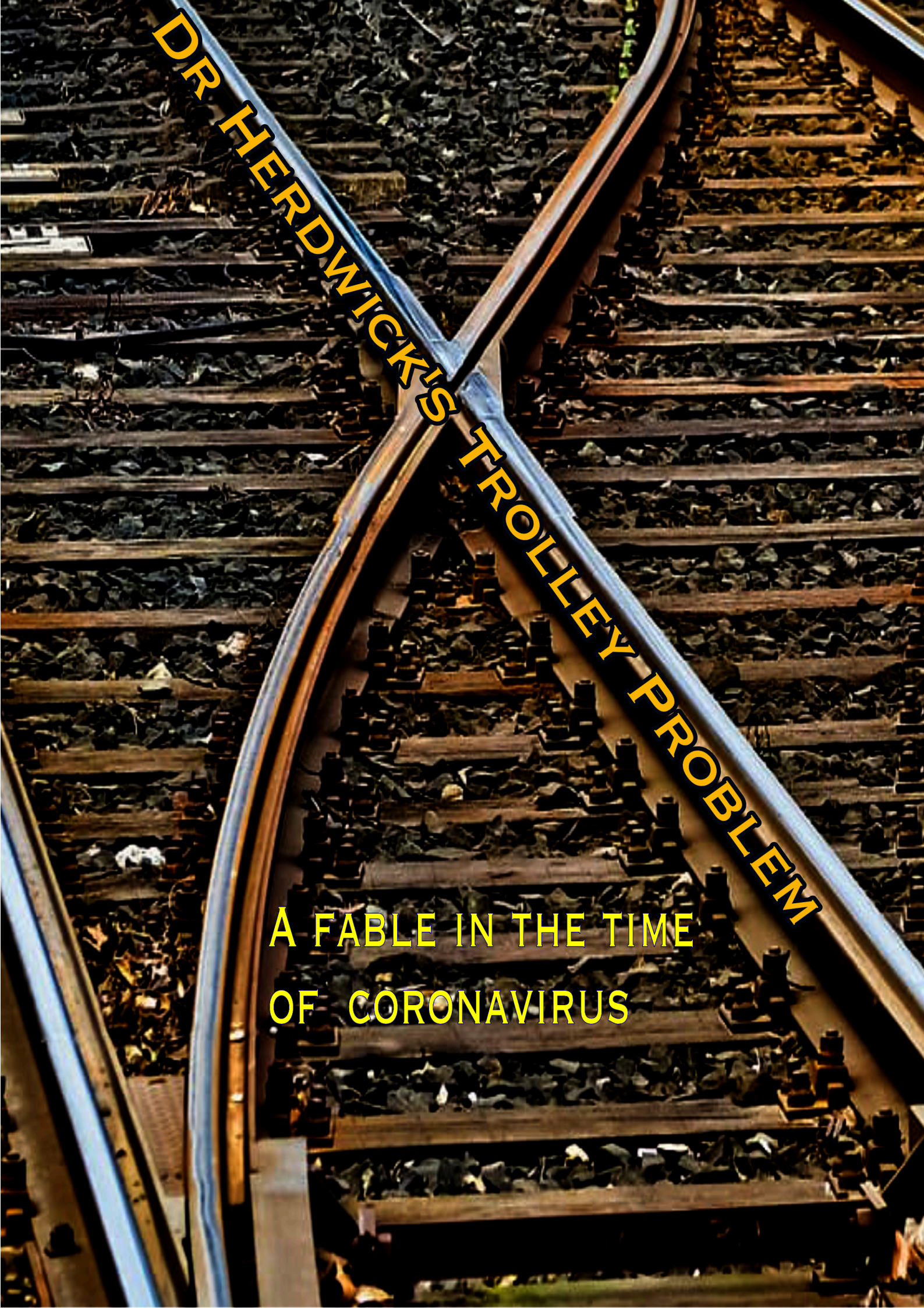
DR HERDWICK'S TROLLEY PROBLEM
A FABLE IN THE TIME
OF CORONAVIRUS

‘How many cases do we need to be eligible to the emergency funding?’

‘Ten confirmed critical cases.’

‘How many do we have at present?’ Dr Herdwick asked the question although he and everyone else in the room already knew the answer.

‘Five.’

‘So are we expected to wait another two weeks until we have our ten, or perhaps even twenty cases, before we can apply for the money we need now if we are to save lives?’

Nobody spoke. Some pretended to take notes while others stared down at the polished surface of the table.

Screesdale was a tiny hospital. Thirty beds in all, and for most of the time the majority were unused. To paraphrase Viktor Lukashenko, the dictatorial President of Belarus, there is no disease that cannot be cured by strong drink and a day’s hard work in the fields; in the case of Screesdale there certainly seemed to be an element of truth in this. The hospital was little used and completely uneco-

nomic employing four nurses, two full time doctors and an Administrator; it should have been closed, and would have been many years ago except for two things (three, if you include the strength of local feeling) Dr Herdwick and Lotte Munch. Dr Herdwick had been born in Screesdale but had pursued a highly successful career in medicine at The King's Hospital in London where he gained an international reputation for his work in epidemiology. Had he continued it seemed that there was little he could not have achieved in his field: knighthood, Nobel Prize, both of these seemed possible. But Dr Herdwick lacked ambition. He hated city life almost as much as he hated travel. Flying and having to talk to an audience of more that ten people brought him out in a cold sweat, no matter many times he was forced by his work to do so. Everyone, except those who knew him well, was astonished when he suddenly gave up his work in London and returned to the irenic tranquility of Screesdale, where he was to run the hospital and marry Janet his childhood sweetheart who now worked as a barmaid at the *Slater's Arms*. Though Dr

Herdwick had left medical research behind him, his reputation remained in London. His papers were still cited the world over and all his books still in print. So whenever the suggestion was made in some government department - Whitehall or elsewhere - that a considerable amount of money could be saved by closing Screesdale Hospital inevitably someone said in that hesitant tone of voice that conveys very clearly the message Not a Good Idea, 'Isn't that Herdwick's patch?' That is not to say that there were those with considerable influence to whom Dr Herdwick's reputation meant not a fig and saving money meant… saving money, and they would very likely have won the day if it had not been for Screesdale Hospital's second line of defence, Lotte Munch.

If you are of a certain age and enjoy watching daytime television you will certainly have heard of Lotte Munch. Her BBC TV show An Early Brunch with Lotte Munch had eight million viewers at its peak - a record for any breakfast show. She became one of the biggest fishes in

the Sea of Media. It is hard to say what made her so popular but when asked to describe her the word people came up with more than any other was ‘scatty’. She was unmanageable and unpredictable but she could ask the questions no-one else dared ask, boundaries were pushed ever further and taboos broken that other interviewers would not even have tried to crack. All with a cheeky smile, an insistent giggle and a deceptive aura of girlish innocence. Of course, over time the ratings began to drop; boundaries pushed off the pitch and into the long grass, no new taboos could be found to break. The blight of dullness slowly tarnished the lustre and gleam of An Early Brunch. Even the new glowing plastic and neon set looked somehow shabby on its first outing before the studio audience. And years passed. A cheeky smile, an insistent giggle and girlish innocence are all very charming in a young woman but in a middle aged person they are simply… irritating. Lotte came to the realisation that her career was in decline, that the road ahead went steeply downhill and she had the sense to stop before it became precipitous. She

announced her retirement from television and said she now wanted to develop her long suppressed artistic talents: she would write her novel, paint and make music. In truth she knew that when big fish start to shrink, and by this time Lotte's celebrity was roughly the size of a small trout, the best thing they can do is find a much smaller pond. When Lotte Munch chose her new pond it was the biggest thing that had happened to Screesdale since the Black Death. Like all incomers she immediately threw herself into village life; she organised the Local History Group, chaired the Screesdale Natural History Club, was on the Board of Governors of the Primary School, initiated a Screesdale Art Trail and, almost literally given her abundance of enthusiasm, flung herself into raising funds for the local hospital. Of all the causes she was involved with the Screesdale Cottage Hospital was the one dearest to her heart. Because Lotte Munch was a hypochondriac. So whenever any penny-pinching Civil Servant or bureaucrat undeterred by Dr Herdwick's fearsome reputation decided to go ahead with the hospital closure, they ran

straight into and awoke the dragon that was the Wrath of Lotte Munch. A *Save Our Hospital* campaign was organised in an instant. Emails, letters and phone calls sped out of Screesdale and across all seven continents. In the past Lotte had done lots of favours to both rising stars and falling stars by giving them time on her show to promote a new film, album or book, as well as favours of a more personal nature. Now her friends were pleased to repay. She got all the media coverage and celebrity endorsement she wanted for her campaign. The tiny rural hospital became a symbol: all that was best in traditional English values standing up to the tyranny of an uncaring faceless government. No one had ever got through the second barrier. The hospital remained open.

‘Unless we get the extra funding there will be deaths’, continued Dr Herdwick. ‘We need at least two ventilators, perhaps more if things worsen.’

‘Could we not send the patients to County?’ asked Dr McGregor.

‘County has refused to take them. They claim they have no spare beds. Besides, you know the people here, they would rather die than be transferred to a place more than twenty miles away.’

Everyone nodded in agreement. For the people of Screesdale ‘foreign’, and all the fecundity of horror that the word implied, lay on the far side of Murthles Pike.

‘Could we raise the money ourselves and buy the ventilators?’ asked Sally Bairstow, the Administrator, ‘Lotte Munch…’

She was interrupted by a groan from Dr McGregor, who for a moment looked as if he was going to bang his head on the wooden table but simply dropped his face into his cupped hands.

‘Oh God! Another nude calendar! Or worse!’

‘I’m not sure a fund raising campaign would work in the current climate. There have been two very recently. We all know Hampton Bargest and Frogstone. Hospitals in a very

similar position to us. Even with Miss Munch's excellent contacts I think she would have difficulty raising the money.'

Dr Herdwick always had difficulty with Lotte's name. He could never bring himself to pronounce Munch as if it rhymed with crunch even though everyone else in the country did, and if one did not it made a nonsense of the title An Early Brunch with… Instead he pronounced the name as Moonk like that of the artist Edvard Munch. This inevitably caused a good deal of confusion when talking to people for the first time about the champion fundraiser, but he simply could not bring himself to do otherwise. He paused and the silence was broken only by the continued groans of Dr McGregor.

'I shall ring the new Deputy Chief Medical Officer. Robert Rodgers. I know him personally… well, I was at school with him, and I believe school friends are the ones that stay with you throughout life. He will have the ear of the Chief Medical Officer and the Minister. You all know

how much I detest nepotism but nevertheless I will make the call and plead our special case. It is all I can think of and I believe it is true to say I still have a little influence in medical circles. Do you all agree with this course of action?'

Dr McGregor raised his head and with a weary sigh said, 'Aye, any damn thing is better than a nude calendar.'
The others merely nodded.
'Well, I think that's everything then. I suggest we meet again the day after tomorrow, Thursday, at the same time.'
'Oh, Dr Herdwick…'
Reluctant and hesitant and knowing that they had to be said, Nurse Mellinchamp finally managed to voice the words she had avoided saying throughout the entire meeting.
'What is it Nurse Mellinchamp?'
'Lotte Munch is here in the hospital.'
Partly because Dr McGregor's groan had drowned out the reply, partly because Nurse Mellinchamp's reply was

mumbled and rushed and partly because he fervently hoped he had misheard, Dr Herdwick asked again.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t catch that. What did you say?’

‘Lotte Munch is here. She thinks… no actually, she is *sure* she has the virus.’

We all know that the cuts we receive in childhood run deep, but what is surprising is how deep some of the pin pricks and scratches can run. The pain and humiliation from what, viewed from the outside, is the most superficial and trivial of hurts can throb and fester throughout our lives almost as much as any serious trauma can. What is passed over and forgotten by those around us lingers on deep in our own minds. So it was that when Dr Herdwick mentioned that the new Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Robert Rogers, was an old school friend he believed that he was stating a simple fact. But fact and truth are very different things, as old Alf Butterthwaite would have re-

minded him in one of their Sunday night arguments in *The Slater's Arms*. Yes, it is both a fact and true that Alan Herdwick and Robert Rogers had been at secondary school together at Borethorpe Grammar some twenty miles away from Screesdale. All that is uncertain lies in the use of that word 'friend'. There are words that we use every day that behave like fundamental particles in Quantum Physics. They are governed by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle; it is impossible to pin them down. 'Love' is obviously one of these, 'like' another. There are many, many examples, including 'friend'. Alan Herdwick made the long journey to Boreham Grammar on the school bus with three other Screesdale boys, Biddle, Drool, and Undercock. The bus started in Screesdale and meandered its way through the surrounding villages en route to Boreham picking up boys every here and there. Robert Rogers was a farmer's son and the first boy to be picked up after the bus left Screesdale. So when the bus stopped and picked up Robert from where he stood at the head of the lane that led down to the farm, the bus was empty except for the

four Screesdale boys who always sat on the bench seat at the back of the bus. Children as any parent or teacher can tell you, are highly territorial beasts, so the back seat of the bus was The Screesdale seat and Herdwick, Biddle, Drool and Undercock would have given their lives fighting for their right of ownership. Though the bench seat was fully occupied, you might imagine that Rogers could have sat anywhere else in the bus**.** In most circumstances it would have been difficult for a shy only child like Robert Rogers to approach and sit next to such a group that clearly claimed ownership of the bus. It is a rule among schoolchildren that still holds, those that own the back seat own the bus. It would have been hard for Robert but every child has strategies to cope with situations like these. In Robert's case this would be to approach the seat avoiding eye contact, throw down his bag of books and then himself, take out a book and pretend to be catching up with some imaginary homework. It would then be up to the boys behind him to invite him to join in their conversation with some throw away line like, 'Catching up

with the Maths homework?' or 'Did you see the match on tele?' It would have been hard at first but not the dreadful torture it was when Robert first set foot on the bus. The reason that Robert Rogers broke out into a cold sweat and stinging tears welled up in the corners of his eyes when he first saw the Screesdale boys at the back of the bus was because he had started school a week late having had a dose of chicken pox and had therefore not been with the other boys on that first journey to secondary school. On his first day, his parents had driven him to the school and dropped him off. When the register was being called the teacher, Mr Mortlake, noticed that there was an extra pupil in the classroom. Jim Mortlake had been in the army before leaving to take up teaching and was given the name The Major by the boys. He did his best to live up to it by acquiring a reputation for discipline, sarcasm and a complete lack of humour. So on seeing Robert he bellowed, 'I see we have a new boy in class! What is your name New Boy?'

To suggest that Robert Rogers had a speech impediment would be inaccurate. He had nothing of the kind and in later life he acquired a reputation for being able to speak at length and answer questions with an assurance and fluency that was envied by many of his colleagues. But like most of us in times of great stress he was prone to a verbal tic, a tremor or trip. Robert's was a barely noticeable lisp but to a shy under confident and self consciously chubby boy, it screamed out to be noticed. His awareness of the lisp made him make superhuman efforts to overcome it but the more he tried to suppress it the worse it became. His Rs became Ws and when he strived to correct this the Ws became Ps. His first day in secondary school being made to stand up in front of the terrifying figure of The Major and the curious scrutiny of his class mates, was undoubtedly one of the most stressful moments of his young life.

'What is your name New Boy?' repeated The Major.

‘Wobert’ said Robert turning a deep red as he realised what he had said and struggling not to make the same mistake a second time, ‘Podgers.’

Compassion is a quality learned much later in life. Children have no sympathy for such public discomfort. The whole class erupted in raucous laughter.

‘Wobert Podgers! Podgy Wodgy!’ giggled Alan Herdwick a chant was immediately taken up by Biddle, Drool and Undercock. ‘Podgy Wodgy! Podgy Wodgy!’

‘Silence!’ boomed The Major slapping the flat of his hand on the table. ‘Robert Rogers.’ He spoke the name aloud as he scanned the register for the new name.

But it was too late for Roger who was now stuck with the name Podgy until he finally left secondary school for university, despite the fact that by the time he was in the third form the puppy fat had disappeared and he was in fact a rather skinny adolescent. Like Alan Herdwick he was to study medicine, though at a different and less prestigious university.

So on boarding the school bus for the first time Robert was faced with the awful dilemma of either sitting next to his tormentors or keeping his distance and becoming a perpetual outsider. As an only child living on a remote farm it was natural that he was lonely and longed for the friendship of other children his own age.

A boy with brothers and sisters, someone more confident and self-contained might have had the strength to sit alone but Robert's need for acceptance was overwhelming. He went and sat on the seat in front of the Screesdale boys. Apart for saying, 'Look it's Podgy. That's your seat now Podgy.' they ignored him and continued to chatter amongst themselves. Greatly relieved, Robert continued with his strategy of pretending to go over some imaginary homework.

The days turned into weeks, the weeks into months and soon a year had passed.

Often, Robert believed he had become a friend of the four Screesdale boys. In truth they had grown to tolerate him. He had not been born or grown up in Screesdale so how

could he possible be a *real* friend? To achieve that status he would have to be granted an unstated honorary Screesdale citizenship and that could only be done through sporting prowess, an admirable courage to challenge authority or the ability to entertain his peers. Robert was miserable at sports, too timid to challenge any kind of authority and the ability to entertain. In short he was dull. Still he had his uses, he was the butt of their jokes; sometimes cruel but more often than not just condescending. He could be relied on to help with any tedious task the others wished to avoid.'Hey Podgy, my parents have asked me to cut the lawn on Sunday. Can you come and help?'and he was always willing to give a loan out of the small amount of money his parents allowed him for help around the farm. The loans were usually repaid, though sometimes forgotten. There were even times when he was invited to one of the Screesdale boys' birthday parties. Though this was always helped by the insistence of some kind hearted mother.'Make sure you invite that nice Rogers boy. He must get very lonely all by himself out at

that farm. He’s always so helpful and polite. I just wish that you were a little more like him!’ But of course she did not.

Dr Herdwick was disappointed. He was also annoyed, angry and confused. He had made his telephone call to Robert Rodgers. He had got through to The Deputy Chief Medical Officer with little difficulty and at first thought things were going well.

‘Hello Dr Rogers, I’m not sure if you remember me I’m Alan Herdwick.’

‘Alan! Of course I remember you. I followed your career with some interest. What a loss it was to medicine when you gave up research to return to Screesdale. Though I can quite understand why. I’d do the same. Like a shot, if it was not for my responsibilities. Work and family. Wife, three kids. All that. How are you? Didn’t you marry, whatshername? The barmaid. Any kids?’

‘Janet. Yes, I married Janet and we have one daughter, Daisy. Aged ten.’

Dr Herdwick wished that like other fathers he could feel proud when he spoke about his daughter, but Daisy was a sickly child and pale almost to ghostliness**.** Her lank white-blonde hair hung loose to frame a sharp bleached

elfin face in which were set two faded blue eyes that seemed to face inwards rather than out. She was not a stupid girl. She was simply not interested. In anything. At school she did as little as she could get away with. When not at school she spend all her time hidden in the overgrown tangles of the shrubbery at the bottom of the garden. What she did there Dr Herdwick could not imagine.

‘Daisy. Such a pretty name.’

‘And a lovely little girl too. I’m very proud of her.’ Dr Herdwick said without conviction.

‘Well, what strange paths life leads us down. But I have such fond memories of our school days. How we laughed. What good friends you were to me. You were always so kind and generous to a simple farm boy like me. How are Biddle, Drool and Undercock? They should have got together after they left school and formed a firm of solicitors, or auctioneers. Biddle, Drool and Undercock… haha.’

Dr Herdwick laughed in polite agreement.

‘I’m afraid I’ve lost touch with them.’

In fact he knew perfectly well that Biddle had worked in the local Recycling Centre, or tip as it was still known, but was now unemployed. Drool was in prison for handling stolen goods and Undercock was a hopeless alcoholic.

‘You’ve lost touch? They were your best friends and don’t they still live in Screesdale too?’

Damn!, thought Dr Herdwick *it had been such an obvious lie.*

‘After I left for university we drifted apart. I sometimes see them around the village but that’s all.’

‘Isn’t it sad when that happens? And we all got on so well together. I’ll always remember those bus rides. Such fun. How you used to rib me. How we laughed. Now what can I do for you?’

Of all the eels that live in the Sargasso Sea of Language irony is the slippiest, trickiest and most difficult to catch. It is not the words themselves, though obviously they are

important, it is the tone of voice, the inflection, the emphasis, the timbre.

And something in the way Robert Rogers said the words *kind*, *generous*, *laughed* and *friends* told Dr Herdwick he had never forgotten or forgiven the nickname Podgy and had carefully nurtured his bitterness through all the years. In a sudden flash of imagination of almost religious intensity Dr Herdwick was back in the school bus and seated in the centre of the back seat looking down at him in utter contempt and hatred, was Podgy.

'It's about our hospital. Screesdale Cottage Hospital and the virus pandemic. Cases across the the country are increasing exponentially and soon without extra funding we will not be able to cope. We already have five critical cases and not a single ventilator. Our PPE is limited. At present we are coping but only just. I know the rules about funding but we really are a special case and I was hoping that…'

'Let me cut in there. I am sorry to hear you are experiencing such difficulties. The pandemic is dreadful, and as you

say it's going to get worse. I have to admire the work you and your team are doing. It's splendid. Heroic. But special case? Alan you should know better than anyone that if the Department was to make one special case there would soon be dozens of other hospitals demanding the same. And we just can't afford to be giving out money like that. At times like these we have to target funds to where they are going to be most effective. I suggest you arrange for the most serious cases to be transferred to one of the larger NHS Trust hospitals in somewhere like Manchester.'

'I have tried that and nowhere has the capacity to take on extra patients at this time. Besides you know what Screesdale folk are like. They would die rather than be taken to the city. We really are a special case.'

'Alan, I know Screesdale people only too well…. and to be frank isn't it time they were dragged into the twentieth century, if not the twenty-first? I would like to help you. I really would, but my influence as Deputy Chief Medical Officer is really very limited. I can have a word with the Chief Medical Officer and urge him to bring the matter to

the ears of the Minister. For the sake of our friendship I'll plead your cause. I'll argue that Screesdale is a special case and needs extra funds urgently. But Alan, honestly, I don't hold out much hope of success.'

'Thank you Robert. I'm sure you will do your best. As far as I can see it's our only hope. I'm at my wits end. Without extra money people will die. It's as simple as that.'

'You can be reassured I will do my best. And Alan…'

'Yes?'

'Sometime after this is over we should get together. Introduce our families. Abigail is the same age as Daisy. I'm sure they would get along famously just like we did.

Oh and get in touch with John Biddle, Billy Drool and Undercock too. Make it a proper reunion.'

And with that the conversation ended. Dr Herdwick was shaking as he put the phone down.

He has harboured a grudge all these years about something as trivial as a nickname, he thought. What kind of a man is he? It was just a schoolboy joke for God's sake! We didn't treat him that badly. But Dr Herdwick knew he

was lying to himself. Then he shuddered. Why bring up Daisy's name like that? Introduce our families? A re-union? He knows. He knows! He already knew what had happened to Biddle and the others.

And in an awful delusory moment he even thought, he knows what Daisy does in the shrubbery! There is no chance of him asking the Chief Medical Office. He was simply taunting me.

What am I going to do? Oh God what am I going to do?

If you would like to read Part 2 of the story email part2@atticusbooks.co.uk

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