

Dr. Herdwick's Trolley Problem

Part 2



‘What am I going to do? The virus is already here. Some people will die, that is certain. Soon we will not be able to meet like this - the Government will introduce a lockdown. This time next week pubs, restaurants and all other public spaces will be closed.’

‘Close the pubs?’ Alf shook his head in disbelief. ‘They can’t do that!’

‘Yes, they can. A total lockdown. I should not really be here tonight. We have already been told to keep a distance and I, of all people, should be keeping a distance. But I needed to talk. You see if I had resources I could save lives. Here in an isolated place like Screesdale I believe I could contain it. I could keep deaths to a minimum. Our hospital could cope with the crisis.’ He stared glumly into his beer and continued. ‘But I’m not going to get the money. I’m going to find myself in the intolerable position of having to ration treatment. Concentrate what resources I have on the cases I feel are most deserving of treatment. I will be in a situation where I have to choose between saving one healthy young woman or three elderly patients. Such decisions will have to be made; it can’t simply be left to chance.’

‘Foot!’

‘What?’

‘It sounds like that stupid Foot woman and her Trolley Problem.’

Alf Butterthwaite had left school at sixteen to take over the family farm. They called it a farm but really it was no more than an uneconomic smallholding clinging to the rocky slopes of Murthles Pike. It supported no more than a few dozen sheep, some pigs and a scattering of poultry and for generations too many to count the Butterthwaits had lived in near, or actual, poverty refusing to leave this patch of stony hillside that was their home. But soon there would be no more Butterthwaits on Murthles Pike; the farm house and buildings would be sold and turned into holiday cottages because Alf was the end of the line. The last living Butterthwaite. He had never married, had no children, and lived alone in the grim grey farmhouse on the hillside. Perhaps it was living with this constant reminder of his own mortality and the final end of all things that had given Alf his taste for philosophy. While many men in his position would have passed the long winter evenings staring at the television or turning to the bottle Alf turned to the book, and read. So despite his lack of education, Alf was one of the most knowledgeable men in Screesdale

and one of the very few people with whom Dr Herdwick felt able to hold an intellectual conversation. Alf was a pragmatist. A pragmatist by nature whose natural instincts had been confirmed by his reading. So many lives spent trying to scratch an existence out of an acre or two of stones with a thin covering of sparse etiolated grass had bred pragmatism into the Butterthwaite genes. Not for Alf the crystal ice palaces of the modern Continental Philosophers or the ivory tower rationalism of the British. Alf was a Pragmatist, a follower of Pierce, Dewey and James. He was fond of quoting Dewey 'Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes.' A suitable philosophy for someone who had few, if any, successes in life.

'And what exactly is her trolley problem?' asked Dr Herdwick.

'Imagine what the American call a trolley, What we call a tram. Not a shopping trolley. The trolley is out of control, the brakes don't work and it's speeding down the tracks. Somewhere ahead there are five people tied to the rails and unable to move. The trolley is headed straight for them. You are in a signal box and there is a lever. If you pull the lever, the trolley will switch to a different track. But on that track there is one person tied to the rails. You have two options:

do nothing and let the trolley kill five people or pull the lever, divert the trolley and just kill one person.’

‘I see, should one intervene and take one life to save five? A difficult problem.’

‘No it's not! It's bloody obvious. You pull the lever and save five lives. Let me ask you then, as a doctor: do you think life has a value?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then let's look at the problem as one of value and put it this way. Your house is on fire and in two rooms you have two bags full of money you have saved in £50 notes; in one room is a bag containing £1000 and in the other £10,000. You just have time to dash in and grab one bag. Which will it be?’

‘£10,000. But I feel it's a mistake and rather distasteful to equate human lives with money.’

‘But a moment ago you said human life had a value and I offered you a simple choice between values.’

‘That's true, but I think a human life has a different and special value.’

‘And do you think that ‘special value’ is equal for all human beings?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Then let us imagine a different situation. A doctor, we will call him Dr. Jones, in a modern expensive hospital with every resource, has a patient in a coma. Barely living but kept alive by machines and constant care. Dr Jones can see no possibility of improvement. But where there is life there is hope, even if it is just the slightest of hopes.’

Alf took a sip of beer and looked at Dr Herdwick who nodded in agreement.

‘Should Dr Jones switch off the machine that keeps his patient alive?’

‘No, not while he has the resources for care. As you said, where there’s life. Besides there’s the Hippocratic Oath to consider.’

‘Ah, the Hippocratic Oath. I swear by Apollo the Healer, by Asclepius, by Hygieia, by Panacea, and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my

witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath. I'll come back to that.'

Dr Herdwick was surprised to hear Alf quote the Hippocratic Oath so glibly. He could only remember a vague outline of it himself and he suspected Alf had been preparing for this conversation.

'Now, imagine Dr Jones is in a poor, underfunded, understaffed and ill equipped hospital but still has the same coma patient and keeping that patient alive is taking up 25% of the hospital budget. What then?'

'I see your point. In extreme circumstances normal rules do not apply. Difficult decisions have to be made.'

'But what about the Hippocratic Oath?'

'Oh, these days the term is used very loosely. I was referring to the code of ethics all doctors agree to follow, which can be briefly summed up in the phrase *primum non nocere*, first do no harm. Never harm the patient.'

‘But in extreme circumstances this rule does not apply? You just told me that in my example Dr Jones should knowingly harm a patient for the benefit of all the others.’

Dr Herdwick was feeling increasingly uncomfortably as he always did when an argument with Alf challenged his beliefs, which were largely instinctive and unconsidered.

Alf may not have had a formal education but he argued with all the sly cunning of a Yorkshire farmer at a livestock sale.

‘I think, Doctor, that essentially we are probably in agreement. We just need clarify things, to define our terms and then consider the practical consequences. I think we both agree that killing another person is wrong. But we cannot say it is a Categorical Imperative because in certain extreme circumstances it is necessary for the greater good.’

‘Categorical Imperative? That Kant isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Rules that should never be broken. Like telling a lie. The famous example is something like this: your wife is in the kitchen washing the dishes when there is

a knock on the door. It is a mad man with an axe come to split open your wife's skull because of some imagined slight. Is your wife in? asks the madman. You may think there are times when it is permissible to lie and this would be one. But Kant says no. A lie is a lie however harmful the consequences - I know some round here who would welcome that madman in if he was to come knocking. And in general I agree with Kant, if something is wrong it is always wrong. But we have to adapt to circumstance. So let us return to the trolley problem. If we accept that it is wrong to kill in any circumstances then you should not pull the lever. But if we take a more pragmatic, utilitarian and value based view then you are morally obliged to set aside your usual, everyday beliefs if you like, and take the action which results in the outcome with higher value, or greater good. So you see the supposed Trolley Problem is no problem at all. Would you pull the lever Doctor?'

'Yes, I suppose I would. As you implied, doctors are making hard choices all the time. We have to think of what benefits the most patients. Though we must do our best for individuals, the individual should never be treated at the expense of others who are equally needy. By the way, yesterday Mrs Furzcutt was admitted to hospital with the virus and is seriously ill.'

‘Mrs Furzecutt. I’m right sorry to hear that.’

Mrs Furzecutt had been the local Post Mistress and there was no one in Screesdale who had a bad word to say about her, and she had no bad words to say about anyone; always cheerful, always sympathetic and ready to reach out a helping hand whenever she could, and all with a simple unassuming modesty as if the most natural and easiest thing in the world was to be... nice.

‘Yes, if God forbid, she should die - and I have to say that is a risk with every case of this virus - she would be sorely missed. But much as we love Rosie Furzecutt, she will have no special treatment. We do the best we can for all our patients.’

‘Indeed you do. So you see Dr Herdwick we are in agreement. You are facing a very difficult time ahead but I’m sure you will make the correct decisions when you have to. Painful as they will be. Now can I get you another pint?’

After Alf got up and went off to the bar Dr Herdwick was left with the uncomfortable feeling that he had somehow compromised himself, been slyly tricked by Alf, as if he had been talked into buying and signing a

contract for something he neither wanted nor needed, like a flock of sheep with strawberry footrot

That night Dr Herdwick dreamed of the Trolley Problem. He was standing in the centre of a stone bridge over a railway line. In front of him set in a parapet of the bridge was a lever and next to the lever a sign in red letters that read: To Divert Train PULL ME or NOT. From where he stood about fifty yards down the line were five people tied to the rails. He could just recognise the features of the first of these, Rosie Furzecutt. To his left he could see a siding into which, by pulling the lever, he could divert the train to bypass and save the lives of the five helpless souls tied to the rails. But then he saw that someone had also been tied to the rails of the siding and he knew instantly that it was Lotte Munch. From somewhere concealed in the bushes beside the railway line he heard a cackle of satanic laughter and he knew he was being spied on by Alf Butterthwaite. Behind him he heard the ever increasing hiss and rumble of the approaching express train.

When he went into the hospital the following morning Dr Herdwick cancelled the Thursday meeting and scheduled it for the next day. He could not help feeling slightly guilty as he knew the situation was urgent and the others were impatient to know how his

phone call had gone, but he needed time to think. He had to present them with some plan that sounded superficially plausible even though inevitably it would actually be impractical and impossible. And he had to sound optimistic; he could not voice the feelings of despair and desperation that were stones in his pockets dragging him down into cold black water. Never happy as a leader, he was forced to take up the banner and lead his forlorn hope into battle. For now, he avoided working on the plan and instead concentrated on small practical details. A course of action Alf would have approved. The government lockdown he had anticipated was announced in the afternoon. He had instructed, no ordered, Janet not to leave the house, not even to go to the shops, and to have all essential supplies delivered. Daisy was withdrawn from school. Janet had never seen her husband ever make any decision, even over something as trivial as choosing the paint for the garden shed, without hours, sometimes days of hesitation, changes of mind, accompanied by seemingly endless and futile discussion until she decided for him and he rubber stamped and signed for her action. Now he had simply told her what she should do, and this, more than all the newspaper headlines and tv and radio reports, convinced her the situation was indeed serious.

Dr Herdwick reiterated his instructions that handling anything suspected of having contact with the virus was to be carried out with the utmost caution, always wearing gloves and mask. He quickly typed out some advice for staff on distancing and self-isolation at home and gave it to Sally Bairstow for printing and distribution. He asked for a PPI inventory to be carried out for presentation at the meeting the following day. He made his daily tour of the wards and reassured the patients that everything was under control and that most of them would be back home in a day or two. Finally all that was left was to visit the five patients considered critical who were now in an improvised isolation ward and Lotte Munch who had been put in a tiny private room while awaiting diagnosis. At present the five patients were in a stable condition and he was ready to go in and offer reassurance and answer any questions they might have about their treatment. Seeing Lotte Munch was something he dreaded.

‘There’s a possibility that she has the virus but going on past experience she is probably just imagining it. Do you remember when she thought she had Lyme Disease?’ He asked Nurse Mellinchamp as they carefully washed their hands and put on their protective coveralls.

She rolled her eyes theatrically and nodded.

There had been scare stories about Lyme Disease in the media and Lotte Munch had been bitten by a tick while picnicking on the fells. She was immediately convinced she had the disease and insisted on being admitted to hospital. Dr Herdwick assured her they were in a low risk area and not a single case of Lyme Disease had ever been reported in Screesdale, or its environs.

‘But Doctor Herdwick there always has to be a first time doesn’t there? she had insisted, and what about my symptoms? My awful headache, my dizziness, my swollen aching joints and this rash around the bite? Oh, and Doctor could you draw the curtains I think I am becoming sensitive to light.’

Dr Herdwick had reluctantly examined the rash at the top of Lotte’s left thigh and concluded it was no more than might be expected from any common insect bite, though exacerbated by constant scratching and examination. As expected, all tests were negative and Lotte was finally discharged after taking a hugely disproportionate amount of the hospital’s time and attention. But that summer the hospital was almost empty and they all had time to spare, in fact they all, with the exception of Dr McGregor, found her rather amusing, and given her fundraising capabilities they

were more than happy to fuss over her and pander to her hypochondria. But things were very different now.

‘We need that room. I am going to have to tell her to leave. She is becoming a nuisance and a distraction we can do without just now.’

‘Don’t be too hasty Doctor. It’s possible we may need her help raising money sometime in the future and you know how quick she can be to take offence.’

It was true, Lotte had managed to fall out with almost all the organisations she had initially supported with great enthusiasm; the Natural History Club, the Library, the Primary School and others. The Hospital was the single cause that received constant support, but only because all staff were under instructions never to upset Lotte Munch. In any circumstances. Dr Herdwick sighed.

‘Sadly you are right Nurse Mellinchamp. She may well be our last hope. I’ll bite my tongue.’

Together they went from bed to bed doing their best to encourage the patients and calm their anxiety with vague suggestions that things would soon improve and that the worst would soon be over, though they both knew that for some the worst would actually be

the worst and they were unlikely to leave the hospital alive. Only Rosie Furzecutt seemed unperturbed by the illness and despite her condition retained her usual good humour.

‘Well Doctor, I won’t be sorry to leave this place, even if it is in a box’ she wheezed through lungs clogged with tar and mucus. Rosie had been a smoker for over sixty years. ‘But I’ll miss you. And the nurses. You’ve been so good to me. So very kind. You are really heroes, all of you. They should give you all medals, Just like they did in the War.’

Medals can wait, thought Dr Herdwick as he left the ward, this war has only just begun.

‘Dr Herdwick! Nurse Mellinchamp! I’m so glad to see you. I have this terrible virus. But I know I’m in such good hands. I know you’ll do your best for me. Now Doctor, I know you won’t approve but I’ve done a little research and there’s this new drug...’

‘One step at a time. Even in these unhappy circumstances it’s delightful to see you again Miss Moonk. But one step at a time.’

‘It’s Munch’ said Lotte, ‘Like crunch and lunch. But just call me Lotte.’

‘Well Lotte, first tell me your symptoms.’

Lotte coughed and cleared her throat. In a weaker and more plaintive voice than the one with which she had greeted the doctor and nurse when they first entered the room, and which Dr Herdwick thought sounded rather forced, she listed her symptoms.

‘Fever, I have a high temperature, cough,’ she gave a little bark of a cough to confirm this. ‘Shortness of breath. Sometimes I gasp for air Doctor. I ache all over. I had a runny nose, though that seems to have stopped now. And I have a very sore throat.’

This comprehensive list of symptoms seemed coincidentally identical to those recently published in *The Guardian* thought Dr Herdwick. The NHS website only mentioned high temperature and cough.

‘Well, starting with your temperature I can see it is only slightly above normal and nothing to worry about.’

‘Perhaps the thermometer is broken. Take your gloves off. Put your hand on my head Doctor, you will feel how hot I am.’

‘I can’t risk your health by taking off my gloves Lotte. Perhaps your temperature is fluctuating. I’ll have a nurse take it again. With a different thermometer. Now open your mouth and let me look at your throat.’

A note of irritation was creeping into his voice and he caught a warning glance from Nurse Mellinchamp. As he suspected Lotte’s throat showed no signs of rawness or inflammation.

‘I can’t see any signs of inflammation. You’ll be pleased to hear that in my opinion you do not have this awful virus and can go home this afternoon. Ach!’

Nurse Mellinchamp had kicked him sharply on the shin. He should have known that Lotte was never happy to hear that she was *not* unwell. Something that implied her illness might just be imaginary.

‘What about my aching body, my tiredness, my shortness of breath? Aren’t those symptoms of the virus too? Are you saying I’m imagining them?’

Hearing the suggestion of offence and an unspecified threat in Lotte’s voice he avoided Nurse Mellinchamp’s gaze and did a screeching U turn, then put his foot to the floor.

‘No! No, Miss Moonk, Munch. Lotte. I am most certainly not. I have been under so much pressure. So much stress lately. So much worry about the hospital. And my family too. I spoke thoughtlessly and I apologise. I did not mean to suggest that you should leave the hospital. No. Only if you wish to, of course. We need to do more tests. You see some cases of this virus can be...’

He was about to say ‘mild’ but realised that this would not be a good idea. So instead he said,

‘... atypical. You may be one of the rarer, unusual cases. And these are of great scientific interest. We can learn so much about the virus from these cases. Please stay here and let us care for you. You may be able to help us enormously Lotte.’

The thought of being of great scientific interest mollified Lotte. A special case is also a special person by implication.

‘I’m sorry Doctor, I misunderstood. I should never have thought I would get anything but the very best of treatment here. Naturally I will help in any way I can. Perhaps even from my hospital bed I can do a little fundraising.’

To her credit Nurse Mellinchamp had the strength of character not to punch the air and shout Yay!

‘Now I’m feeling quite exhausted again. But before you leave I wonder if I could just have a word in private?’

‘I have to be getting on with things, so I’ll drop in and see you again this evening Miss Munch. Just to see if everything is alright.’ said Nurse Mellinchamp closing the door behind her and leaving the two of them alone.

Lotte raised herself up in the narrow hospital bed and whispered.

‘I don’t know if you heard, but I know things get around in a small village like this . Should anything happen to me I had planned to leave my money to the Local History Group.’

‘Well, I did hear something of the sort being said in the *Slater’s Arms*. But nothing will ‘happen’ to you, not for many, many years.’

‘You see I have no children and no family. So I thought I would like to leave something to Screesdale. Give something back to the community. So I was going to leave my money and the proceeds from the sale of my house - a considerable amount I have to

say - to the Local History Group to build a fully equipped Museum and Community Hub to be called The Lotte Munch Centre. And it was to be designed by Adrian Slyte. The famous architect. You've heard of him?'

Dr Herdwick nodded. Adrian Slyte was an ultramodernist architect who had an international reputation for his prestigious and highly controversial building projects.

'Well, Adrian is a personal friend of mine, and when I asked him, as a special favour he drew up some sketches for me to show the committee. Well, you wouldn't believe what that awful man Bert Aysgarth said when he saw them. I can't bring myself to repeat it. And he the Chair of the committee. You would expect him to behave responsibly, have some dignity. Not use the language of the gutter! I was so upset Doctor. I can tell you, you will understand how hurt I was, I left the room in tears and cried all the way home. But after I stopped crying I was very, very angry. And what do you think I did?'

'I really don't know. But I do know it was wrong to upset you like that.'

‘So, I took out my will and I tore it to shreds. Tore it to shreds! Then I wrote out a new one. And who do you think was the beneficiary?’

‘It’s not for me to guess.’

‘It was this hospital Doctor. Isn’t a new ward, The Lotte Munch Ward, far better than some old museum?’

‘Well, I don’t know what to say. It’s extraordinarily generous of you. And when I told you earlier I was worried, one of the main worries was concerned with hospital finance. As you know from the wonderful work you have done for us in the past we run on a shoestring and are constantly short of funds. But have you really thought this through? You are still a young woman, and if I may say so, a very attractive one, and you may well meet someone and well, what I am saying is circumstances can change. So do think very carefully about this. Speaking personally, and not as a Doctor, I would say you should use your money for whatever brings you the greatest happiness... Lotte.’

‘You’re very kind Doctor, but the thought that I would be able to help the hospital and take some of the worry off your shoulders does make me very happy. And as for meeting someone... I have put relationships behind me now so that is very unlikely.

Though not impossible because, as you so flatteringly put it, it is true that some men still find me attractive. But should anything happen to me....’

‘Nothing will happen to you while you are in this hospital. I shall see to that.’

‘I’m sure of that Doctor Herdwick. But still, we are both mortal and there is no avoiding fate, I always say. So I will leave my will as it is. For now. All I have said is in confidence of course.’

‘Of course, I would not dream of repeating a word you have said. Not a word. I cannot tell you how much I have been touched by your kindness and generosity. If only there were more like you Lotte. Now take these tablets and rest.’

‘What are they Doctor?’

‘Only Paracetamol. But they have been proven to help and will reduce the pain of those aching joints.’

After leaving the room he took off his gloves and wiped his forehead as if he could wipe away the self loathing he felt, like sweat after hard work. In the corridor he met Nurse Mellinchamp who asked, ‘How did it go Doctor?’

‘She’s going ahead with that idea of fundraising from her bed. Make sure she has a charger for her phone.’

‘Good for you Dr Herdwick! You did it!’

‘And she is leaving everything to the hospital in her will.’

‘The famous will, eh. I bet she’s changed it more times than I’ve changed my pants. I wouldn’t count on that if I were you.’

Dr Herdwick returned to his office and had barely taken more than a few sips of his coffee or stared at the blank sheet of paper in front of him for more than a minute or two when there was a knock on the door and Sally Bairstow entered.

‘Sorry to interrupt you Doctor but there’s a reporter from *The Guardian* on the phone asking if she can do an interview with Lotte Munch.’



The Tiny Cottage Hospitals are the Little Boats of Dunkirk.

Dr Herdwick had to admit Lotte Munch was very good at all things involving Lotte Munch. She had used the phrase in the phone interview with *The Guardian* with just enough emphasis to say, THIS is your headline! And it was. Accompanied by a picture of Lotte lying in her head looking pale with dark shadows around her sunken eyes (make up by Nurse Barrow) and hair lank and damp from fever sweats (water on head by Nurse Mellinchamp) but her bravery shone through in her famous scatty smile and the hope and optimism in her weak, yet clear and emphatic, voice. Though the pandemic was spreading fast there had still been no celebrity casualties, so when one not only had the virus but was in a critical state, it was a human interest story for the front page, even though the star of her celebrity had dimmed and all but died over a decade ago. The whole country remembered they had forgotten A Late Brunch with Lotte Munch and what an amazing show it had been. Lotte spoke at length about the heroic work of the nurses under the leadership of the brilliant Dr. Herdwick and the struggle, mainly financial, the hospital had to survive. And finally about how

fundamentally and uniquely English small hospitals like these were, so giving the reporter her headline. Naturally other papers and TV channels demanded interviews. Donations began to flow from the public and a new charity to support Cottage Hospitals was set up.

At the Staff Meeting Dr Herdwick was greatly relieved to be able to follow the bad news that it was very unlikely that his plea to The Deputy Chief Medical Officer would get anywhere, with the good news that as a result of Lotte's interview enough money had come in for them to have been able to place a new order for masks, gloves and other PPE.

'Helpful as that is' continued Dr Herdwick, 'it is still very small change compared with our overall needs. We need ventilators, we need more beds and the space to put them, we need the money to pay for extra staff and extra hours too. So far we have received just over £8,000 but in reality we will need close to a million. But we should not despair. In fact, we have reason to be quite optimistic. Money is still coming in as I speak. More interviews are being arranged, including one for the BBC which should make a huge difference. And just before I came in to this meeting I received an email from *The Observer* saying they would like to give over the colour magazine to Lotte's

story. So for the time being I think we can relax just a little and get on with our job of caring for our patients. As far as our finances go, things are looking far better than they were when I last spoke to you.’

But in less than forty-eight hours all Dr Herdwick’s optimism was dashed. Thrown down and smashed to tiny pieces. It was not Lotte Munch’s fault; it was Bo Badass Brist-O. Brist-O was a rapper, one of the few British hiphop artists who could fill stadiums around the world. He contracted the virus and was hospitalised and like Lotte this did not prevent him giving interviews. But unlike Lotte he did not praise the hospital and the healthcare system. Instead he slammed into it with all the punch and smash power he put into his performances. He claimed the whole health care system was biased. Only the rich and the well-off white middle classes got the best treatment. The poor were given a shoddy second class service, or worse, simply left to die. This was outrageous. This was news! Brist-O was NOW: Lotte Munch was Then. So Lotte’s interviews were cancelled and the spotlight was turned on Brist-O. The stream of funding was diverted too. People decided it was now embarrassing to be seen donating to the white middle class Cottage Hospitals when the money could go to Brist-O’s new charity HANTO (Health and the Oppressed). Someone rang up and asked Dr Herdwick

how many black or Asian patients were in his hospital. He put the phone down unanswered. On top of all this came other bad news: Rosie Furzecutt's condition had deteriorated and Alf Butterthwaite had been admitted to hospital showing every sign of having contracted the virus.

Brist-O had a point, Dr Herdwick thought, the well off always find a way to get preferential treatment and the situation in the crowded inner cities must be dreadful. But this was Screesdale and these were his people. He had to do his best for them: he must not let them down. He could not help feeling depressed and disappointed when the funds flowed to another cause, no matter how deserving.

Usually when Dr Herdwick returned home he was careful to remove his outer clothing and disinfect his hands in the hallway, which he had turned into a kind of airlock to prevent himself carrying infection into the house. Only then would he enter the living room and greet his family. Today Janet rushed out before he had time to open the front door.

'Hello dear, what's wrong?'

'It's Daisy. She's upstairs. She is not well. She has a temperature and a sore throat.'

‘Poor Daisy! But I don’t think we should be too worried her having the virus just yet. It may just be an ordinary sore throat. I have been very careful and neither of you have left the house or had contact with possible carriers. I’ll go up and see her now.

‘She has been meeting boys from the village in the shrubbery.’ said Janet.

That night Dr Herdwick in his dreams stood again on the old stone bridge. In his earlier dream he had stood indecisive before being jolted into consciousness by the piercing screech of the express train’s whistle as it neared the bridge. He had shot up in bed and glimpsed the white ghost of a barn owl drift past his window.

Tonight no owls flew.

He stood on the same grey stone bridge with the same lever and the same sign with red lettering that said To Divert Train PULL ME or NOT. He saw Lotte Munch still tied to the rails in the siding and could hear the same distant thunder of the approaching express train. What was different now was that he could clearly see the faces of the five people tied to the rails of the main line. The first of these was Rosie Furzecutt and next to her Nurse Mellinchap, then Sally Bairstow, then to his horror he saw the small pale face of his daughter Daisy, and finally Alf Butterthwaite. While the others

lay still as if ready to passively accept their fate, Alf appeared to be trying to free himself. His body heaved from side to side and up and down within the constraint of his bonds. Then Dr Herdwick heard the same demonic sound he had heard in his previous dream and knew Alf was not trying to escape. He was convulsed with laughter. Behind the laughter, the sound of the approaching train grew louder and louder until its thunder, like that of some mighty waterfall, was unbearable. The whistle screamed and this time Dr Herdwick did not wake up. He pulled the lever.

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