

Dr Herdwick's Trolley Problem Part 3



Over the next week funding from fans of Lotte Munch and the Cottage Hospitals charity had all but dried up. Only a few pounds a day trickled in, barely enough to buy a box of the disposable gloves they seemed to be using up at an alarming rate. They had managed to get some extra beds and were converting what used to be the staff canteen and hospital shop into an extra ward. One of the store rooms had been cleared and a bed fitted in to house Alf Butterthwaite. Though Alf slept much of the time, was feverish and breathed with difficulty, often when Dr Herdwick was passing he would sit up and call out in a voice that sounded as strong and healthy as it did when they used to argue on a Sunday night in the Slater's Arms.

Usually the call would be some quotation from one of his favourite philosophers that Alf felt was appropriate to the time and situation. Once when Dr Herdwick was trying to estimate the growing demand for certain essential medicines and walked down the corridor past Alf's room, pen and notebook in hand, Alf called out, 'Noting and contriving!'

Dr Herdwick stopped and asked, 'What is it Alf?'

'Are you noting and contriving? This is a time of great trouble and conflict and Dewey says: Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving. So when I saw you there with your note book I thought Dr Herdwick is a wise man. Conflict has stung him in to thought and after thought comes action and here he is with his pen and book, noting and contriving.'

Another time, when Dr Herdwick had come into his room and after checking his temperature and pulse was about to leave, Alf suddenly sat up and grabbed the sleeve of Dr Herdwick's white coat and said in a voice that concealed any trace of ill health, 'Before you go, Doctor, let me read you this.' and taking a book out from under his pillow he read, In the mass of people, vegetative and animal functions dominate. Their energy of intelligence is so feeble and inconstant that it is constantly overpowered by bodily appetite and passion.'

'Is this Dewey again?' guessed the Doctor.

'Yes, but listen, it goes on.' and he continued, 'Such persons are not truly ends in themselves, for only reason constitutes a final end. Like plants, animals and physical tools, they are means, appliances, for the attaining of ends beyond themselves.

Energy of intelligence feeble and inconstant, overpowered by passion and a means for attaining ends beyond themselves. Why he could be talking about your Lotte Munch, couldn't he Doctor?'

'I am not sure what you are implying but I think you are being very unfair Alf.' Said Dr Herdwick primly, 'Miss Moonk has been very generous to this hospital. And she is not my Miss Moonk,' he added.

After he left the room and was walking back towards his office, he thought that behind him he could hear the sound of Alf chuckling, and into his mind there flashed for an instant a clear vision of the old stone bridge. From then on he tried whenever possible to avoid passing Alf's room, even if it meant taking the longer and more complicated way to his office through the old canteen. He was convinced that Alf was taunting him in some way that he could not fully understand and he did not have the time or energy to worry over it. Nevertheless, it continued to bother him and he could not put the thought completely out of his mind.

When he returned home he found that Daisy's temperature had risen, she was feverish and was breathing in harsh deep gasps. He rang the hospital and arranged to take her in the next day.

That night Rosie Furzecutt died. And the following day Daisy was in her bed.

When Dr Herdwick arrived at work after handing a sick and feverish Daisy over to the nurses, he made his way to his office carefully avoiding Alf's room, as Alf always seemed to know when he was passing whatever time of the day or night. Sally Bairstow was waiting for him in the corridor outside the office.

'Bad news I'm afraid Doctor. The testing kits we were promised have been diverted to another hospital. And our PPE suppliers are nagging me for payment.'

'Oh no! I was assured that we would have those kits by the end of the week at the latest. They are essential. I have no idea who actually has the virus. Who is infectious and who isn't. Who should isolate and who should not. We are treating every bronchial infection as if it may be the virus but that can't go on. Pay our suppliers what you can out of our budget and tell them we will clear the rest as soon as our funding arrives.'

'And when will that be Doctor?'

'I have no idea. Next week? Next month? Next year? Never? Oh, and Sally I am going to be moving in to this office. I have brought a sleeping bag and camp bed. From now on I think it's best if I am on call twenty four seven as they say. I also want to be near Daisy in case she needs me.'

'I can quite understand Doctor. Shall I arrange another staff meeting?'

'Yes, as soon as possible if you can find a time when everyone can attend.'

Sally managed to arrange a meeting later that day while the patients were having their evening meal. She had also managed to stave off the suppliers and got extended credit on condition payment would be made as soon as funding arrived.

‘Well done Sally. At least we will not run out of essentials for another week or two. But what happens then I can’t say. As you all know the testing kits we were promised have been sent to Manchester. I am doing all I can but there are simply not enough kits to go round and Screesdale is not high on the list of priority hospitals. Those are all in the urban hotspots.’

‘What happened to Save Our Cottage Hospitals, the little boats of Dunkirk?’ growled Dr McGregor.

‘We still get a little from it. But not a significant amount any more. Things are changing so rapidly: a different situation. The focus now is on the inner cities.’

‘And what are you going to do about that Munch woman? Taking up a much needed bed. Not to mention our valuable time.’

Dr McGregor’s use of the word valuable reminded Dr Herdwick of Alf’s argument about placing value on human life and he became both confused and irritated by Dr McGregor’s brusque and rather discourteous tone so replied sharply,

‘Miss Moonk is a sick woman, a patient like any other. And though her symptoms are atypical I believe she really has the virus and deserves the best treatment we can give her.’

‘Atypical!’ snorted Dr McGregor with unconcealed contempt.

‘The woman’s a hypochondriac! You know that as well as I do. The only reason we let her in here in the first place is because we thought she could

raise some money for us. Now it seems she can't do that any longer. Get her out of this hospital we need that bed.'

'Dr McGregor! I do not need to remind you that I am in charge of the running of this hospital, not you- and I will make the decisions. It is true that we do need the bed badly but I am not going to discharge Lotte Moonk until I am certain that it is safe to do so. I make my decisions on the medical evidence not on any personal feeling or prejudice towards the patient. I am seeing Miss Moonk to assess her condition after this meeting and will tell you all the result tomorrow. That is all I have to say on the matter. Now has anybody got any other questions?'

Dr McGregor turned the colour of an overripe Victoria plum and for a moment it looked as if he was going to rise from his chair and storm out of the room but he remained seated and said nothing in reply.

When Dr Herdwick visited Lotte Munch he found her sitting up in bed. She appeared to have had her hair done and was wearing lipstick.

'Oh, Dr Herdwick it is so kind of you to come and see me.'

Dr Herdwick tried to visit every patient for a minute or two each day if he could find the time but she made it sound as if had come on a special journey just to visit her.

'It was so sad about poor Rosie Furzecutt. Such a lovely woman. I think someone said the good die first.'

'Wordsworth.' said Dr Herdwick, 'The good die first, and they whose hearts are dry as summer dust, burn to the socket. The Excursion: Book 1 The Ruined Cottage.'

'I didn't know you were a poetry lover, Dr Herdwick.'

‘I’m not really. I no longer have the time I’m afraid. I studied Wordsworth for my A Level and those were among the lines I memorised for the exam.’

‘You should make time Doctor even if it is just a minute or two each morning. Poetry is so uplifting and romantic. It will help you get through these difficult days.’

‘I’ll try Miss Moonk. But I’m not here to talk about poetry. How are you feeling this evening?’

‘Munch. But it’s Lotte. It must always be Lotte now we have become such good friends.’

‘How are you feeling Lotte?’

‘Well, Doctor I think my fever has gone down. For now. It comes and goes as you know. But my throat is sore and I have the most dreadful headache. I know you will think I’m very silly but I am so frightened since Rosie Furzecutt died. Will I be next?’ and she reached out and held his hand.

‘Now Lotte’ said Dr Herdwick gently disengaging his hand, ‘You are much younger than Rosie was and far, far stronger. You must not worry. Here take these tablets, they’re a little stronger than your usual paracetamol. They should relieve your headache and help you sleep. You must also make sure you have plenty to drink. I see you have some of those high energy drinks by your bed. That’s not a good idea. They contain caffeine. Not at all good for your headache. I’m afraid I shall have to take them away, but I shall bring you some glucose based drinks that are much better for energy and hydration. Now take your tablets, try to rest and don’t worry. I’ll come and see you again.’

‘Thank you so much Alan. You don’t mind me calling you Alan do you? I promise I won’t do it in front of the nurses. I don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t here!’

After leaving Lotte, Dr Herdwick went to see Daisy. She flung herself away from him burying her pale face in the sterile white pillows of her bed, and refused to speak.

That night, while he stretched out on his camp bed in his cramped office, Dr Herdwick's dreams were confused. He seemed to be on a station platform just after a massive steam train had pulled in and released a cloud of steam with an explosive hiss like a venting geyser. The steam enveloped the platform and Dr Herdwick could barely see his hand in front of his face, he could only make out the vague outlines of moving figures in the mist of steam as they clambered on and off the train. But all around him he heard familiar voices. Lotte Munch 'I promise I won't do it in front of the nurses' Little Daisy sobbing pitifully. Robert Rogers, 'I always remember the bus ride. Such fun! Such fun!' And from a darker figure that stood motionless on the platform, and unlike the others seemed to be neither mounting or dismounting the train, came the maniacal laughter of Alf Butterthwaite.

The next morning at around 5am Dr Herdwick was awakened by someone banging on the office door. It was Nurse Barrow.

'It's Miss Munch, Doctor. She seems to have taken a turn for the worse. I told Nurse Mellinchamp and she said to fetch you right away.'

Dr Herdwick had been waiting for this call all night and had not bothered to undress when he lay down on the camp bed. So he rose, picked up the briefcase that lay on the floor beside the bed, opened the door and followed Nurse Barrow down the corridor. When they arrived beside Lotte Munch's bed, Nurse Mellinchamp was waiting for them.

'Doctor Herdwick. Sorry to wake you so early. Has Nurse Barrow told you how when she was doing her early rounds this morning she found Miss Munch was having difficulty breathing, but was unable to wake her? She called me and I thought it was best if you came and had a look. Though you are starting to wake up now aren't you, Miss Munch.'

Lotte opened slowly opened her eyes as though her eyelids were so heavy she had to strain to lift them, and whispered.

‘Yes awake. So... So tired. Where’s Alan?’

‘Alan? Oh Dr Herdwick. He’s here. Standing by your bed.

‘Yes, I see him now. I’m not going to die am I Doctor?’

‘No. No, you are simply exhausted. It can happen like this.’

He opened his brief case and took out a sheaf of papers covered with graphs and numbers and blocks of dense text.

‘I have been doing some research on the atypical symptoms of yours. Sudden exhaustion like this is not uncommon. You are not to worry.’

‘I’m so frightened Doctor. Can you stay with me for a little while?’

‘I’d be happy to Miss Moonk. I’m not officially on duty for another hour or two, so now I’m up I can spare a few minutes and I’ll explain what I have learned about your condition. Nurse Mellinchamp, Barrow, there is no reason you can’t go back to your duties now.’

‘She actually has the virus. Who’d have thought it? I was sure she was faking it.’ said Nurse Barrow as they walked back towards the new ward in what used to be the canteen.

‘I’m sure she was at first. But she certainly seems to have got it now. I did read that there are sometimes unusual symptoms, so Dr Herdwick was right and Dr McGregor was wrong. Poor Miss Munch, even if it does seem like poetic justice to me.’

Back in her room, Dr Herdwick took Lotte Munch’s hand and squeezed it gently ‘Don’t worry Lotte. You will get better. But you must keep your spirits up. You must fight this virus. I tell you what, how about when this is

all over we take a trip to Manchester. Go to the theatre. Have a really good meal in a first class restaurant. Would you like that?’

Lotte’s eyes opened wider and she whispered, ‘But your wife wouldn’t..... I’d love to Alan. I’d love to.’

‘But as well as your spirits you must keep up your strength. Here I have brought you some of that energy drink I promised.’

He took the bottle from his briefcase and with his usual steady hand raised it to Lotte’s lips.

‘Here, drink up, it’ll give you back your strength.’

And thankfully Lotte gulped down the whole bottle of sweet syrupy ethylene glycol.

‘Go to sleep now Lotte dear. I have to return to my duties. I’ll come back again as soon as I can.’

On his way back to his office he was stopped by Dr McGregor.

‘It seems I owe you an apology, Herdwick. The Munch woman really is ill. Much as I detest her I wouldn’t wish this virus on any one, even Lotte Munch. I’m sorry I spoke out of turn the other day. It was the stress. The strain of all this, you know. I apologise.’

‘No need to. I quite understand. We are all under such unrelenting pressure just now. It’s only natural that we snap at each other occasionally. But McGregor I wanted to see you to ask if you wouldn’t mind taking charge for an hour or two. I need to pick up my laptop and some books from home, and to see how Janet is coping.’

‘Take charge? Take charge, of course. I can manage for a while so no need to hurry back. Janet must be very worried now there’s no visiting allowed.

You go back and reassure her. I've just checked on your Daisy and she's improved greatly. Chatty little thing. Bright girl.'

Dr Herdwick wondered if another child had been admitted in the night while he slept and then if Dr McGregor was making fun of him. But fun was not in Dr McGregor's nature so all he could do was mutter, 'Yes she's a bright girl,' and hurry off to the car park. In his hurry he made the mistake of taking the shortest route which led him past Alf Butterthwaite's room. As he sped by he heard Alf call out 'We only think when confronted with a problem. Isn't that right Doctor? John Dewey said that.'

Before entering his house he turned off his mobile phone then went inside and told Janet what Dr McGregor had said about Daisy. Janet looked confused. 'Chatty? Bright girl? Are you sure he was talking about Daisy? Is there another young girl in the hospital?'

'Not as far as I know. I think Daisy is probably still a little feverish.'

He found his laptop and pulled some books at random from his shelves, took them out to the car and opened the boot. Before putting in the books and laptop he took out a stack of papers and an empty bottle of anti freeze and threw them into the recycling bins. He closed the boot and said goodbye to Janet.

He had hardly crossed the carpark to the hospital's main entrance when Nurse Mellinchamp came running up to him.

'Dr Herdwick we have been trying to call you but your phone's dead!'

'Flat battery. What's happened?'

'It's Lotte Munch!'

'What about Lotte Munch?'

‘She’s dead Dr Herdwick. Dead! Dr McGregor tried to resuscitate her, but he could do nothing. And Alf Butterthwaite has taken a turn for the worse. Dr McGregor is with him now.’

Hurriedly throwing the books and laptop into his office, Dr Herdwick raced to the converted stockroom where Dr McGregor stood beside Alf’s bed.

‘Herdwick! Tried to call you.’

‘Flat battery,’ said Dr Herdwick.

‘I did what I could to save her Herdwick. But without a ventilator there was little anyone could do. This damn virus!’

‘I’m sure you did your best McGregor. I know you did. A woman of that age it’s a tragedy, and I have a feeling that there are many more tragedies to come. Now we must think of the living. How is Alf?’

‘He was having real trouble breathing, but as you can see I’ve given him oxygen and that seems to have helped for now.’

‘Aye, Dr Herdwick’ Alf wheezed through his mucus filled lungs, ‘Ah’m be alreet agin in a bit. Don’t ee frett.’

To Dr Herdwick’s surprise Alf was suddenly speaking in a broad Yorkshire dialect. In all their talks in the Slater’s Arms Alf had only voiced the slight hint of a local accent.

‘Then I shall put you in the capable care of Dr McGregor. I’m sure he would be happy to take over your case. Wouldn’t you Dr McGregor?’

‘Aye, indeed I would Dr Herdwick.’ It seemed that like viruses regional accents were infectious.

‘But ah wus rieyt looking forard to more uv ur little chats Doctor.’

‘You should be resting not talking. I’m leaving you with Dr McGregor.’

He hurriedly backed out of the room. What was that fake Yorkshire accent all about, he wondered? Once more he felt Alf was mocking him but in a way he could not pin down, and he was sure that if he was to try to explain his feeling to anyone else it was unlikely they would understand.

That night at about three am, that darkest hour most favoured by secret policemen and burglars, Lotte Munch came to his office where he lay sleeping fitfully. The creak of the door as it swung open pulled him up and out of the shallow waters of his sleep. There, framed in the doorway and illuminated by the light of the streetlight outside in the carpark, stood Lotte Munch.

‘Lotte I thought you were dead!’

‘You saved me Alan. You saved me, and I have come to thank you.’

Lotte closed the door behind her and stepping forward lay down on top of him. The frail camp bed creaked under the added weight. Dr Herdwick struggled to escape but was trapped by the confining grip of his sleeping bag and the weight of the woman above him who exuded an overwhelming sickly sweet odour of decay.

‘Alan. My hero. My saviour. My love!’

She kissed him gently on his lips and then slipped her tongue between his teeth. An impossibly long tongue; it wriggled to the back of his mouth and then slid down his throat. Dr Herdwick screamed and awoke. He spat out a fat grey moth, then trembling, he reached for the bottle of whisky he had started to keep in his desk drawer.

‘Are you alright, Doctor?’ called one of the Nurses passing outside in the corridor.

‘Fine thank you Nurse. Just a nightmare,’ he called back and then with shaking hand he drew the stopper and took a deep drink from the bottle.

Tired but not wishing to fall asleep again he rose, dressed and set off to see how Daisy was.

Dr Herdwick looked down at his daughter who lay on the narrow hospital bed pale, frail and enormously vulnerable. She twisted, twitched and muttered in her sleep as though talking to someone he couldn’t see. She seemed to me talking about snakes and someone called Max. He heard her say something about pythons and the name Max was repeated several times.

‘Max must be one of those boys she was seeing. The ones who gave her the virus. If it was him he could still be infectious. I should try and find his parents. One of the nurses are bound to know.’ Then, as he stood looking down at Daisy, he was engulfed by a sad warm feeling of pity and affection that rose from the pit of his stomach until it oozed out of his eyes as tears.

On the way back to his office he once again found himself passing the old stock room where Alf’s bed had been housed. As he went by Alf called out to him.

‘Dr Herdwick! Dr Herdwick!’

He stopped. ‘What is it Alf?’

‘Please come in Doctor. Sit down.’

He was cornered. It would have been very difficult to refuse without some good excuse and no excuses came to mind. He sat down.

‘I don’t have a lot of a lot of time. What can I do for you?’

‘I just wanted you to know. There is another part to the problem. Instead of the lever and siding what if there was a very fat man on the bridge. So fat he could stop an express train. Would you push him off to save the others tied to the track? More difficult pushing a man off a bridge than pulling a lever, don’t you think? Perhaps you disagree. But I say, Push him off! Push him off! Kill one, save five. Same as the first problem. No difference. That’s because the Trolley Problem is not a problem at all is it Doctor? Just a simple question of values.’

‘Really Alf, I know this is all very interesting, but I have no time to discuss philosophy just now. And you should be resting.’ He stood up and hurried out of the room and as he did so, Alf burst out into a peal of laughter.

The same awful laughter Dr Herdwick heard in his dreams. He was sure it would wake the other patients but he said nothing and simply hurried back to his office where he took another deep drink from the whisky bottle.

After that he was almost surprised that when he fell asleep he did not find himself back sharing the stone bridge with an enormously fat man as the express train hurled itself down the track towards the five victims tied to the rails. Instead he was tormented by visits from Lotte Munch. He threw himself into his work and cat napped, catching an hour or two’s sleep whenever he could and waking before the arrival of Lotte Munch.

Whenever he was forced to pass Alf’s room he tried to do it when Dr McGregor was there and Alf was distracted. Dr McGregor seemed to have taken a liking to Alf and they would have long conversations whenever Dr McGregor had time to spare. Dr Herdwick had no idea what they talked about but he was sure it was not philosophy. As he went by he could hear

Alf speaking in a broad Yorkshire accent and could make out words like ‘mardy’, ‘appen, ‘owt, ginnel and liggin. Once he was sure he heard his name. He was convinced this sudden fake Yorkshire accent Alf had adopted was put on to tease Dr McGregor who was too insensitive to notice that he was being made fun of. Dr Herdwick had come to believe that Alf was one of those people who delighted in tormenting, taunting and mocking those around him, but in an indirect and devious way that left his victims with no come back. No weapons with which to defend themselves. In fact some like Dr McGregor did not even notice. Something that gave Alf a subtle and peculiar pleasure. He even came to believe that Alf could implant ideas into people’s heads, where they grew and blossomed and send down roots so deep they could never be pulled out.

When in the next staff meeting Sally Bairstow said, ‘The suppliers are offering large pre-packaged bundle boxes of PPE at reduced prices. But we need more oxygen. I can’t decide. Should I order the big box or five cylinders of oxygen? What should I do Doctor?’ But Dr Herdwick had drifted away and all he could see was a hugely fat man leaning over the low parapet of the grey stone bridge and five small children tied to the tracks below. He jerked himself back to reality and said weakly, ‘I don’t know- you decide.’

Sally stared at him hesitantly before saying, ‘Are you alright Dr Herdwick? I hope you don’t mind me saying but you look terrible. You must rest. I know you want to be near your daughter and be on hand here at all times but you can’t get a good night’s sleep on that camp bed. Why not go home again, take a day off and catch up with some sleep? We can manage and we can always call you if there is an emergency. And I’ve heard rumours that Lotte Munch may have left us some money. So that will help pay off some of our outstanding debts. If you were to become ill what would we do? We’d only have Dr McGregor for the whole hospital. We could probably find a replacement if one of the nurses was sick but it would be impossible to find another doctor just now.’

‘Thank you Sally, but you must not put much faith in rumours. I’ll try and see if I can get any help from the County. They know the region and they may be more sympathetic to our situation. On the other hand they have been trying to close us for years. To them we are just an insignificant and uneconomic waste of money. So I don’t hold out much hope. I must be here. Here in the hospital. There may be new admissions at any time. And our current patients need me. If there is an emergency, I don’t want to waste time driving from home. So I’ll continue sleeping in the office for now. There is much to do and I’m needed here. But thank you for your concern.’

Sally saw that he could not be persuaded and simply said, ‘I’ll order the PPE then and see if they will extend us more credit for the oxygen. And Doctor do think about what I said. Please try and rest. If not for yourself, then for the rest us. You don’t know how much we rely on you.’

But Dr Herdwick was a haunted man, and there is no rest for a haunted man too afraid to fall asleep.

Then suddenly in the course of three short days things began to improve for the tiny Screesdale hospital; there were no new admissions, Daisy Herdwick made a rapid recovery, Lotte Munch’s solicitor confirmed that Screesdale Hospital was indeed the sole beneficiary and asked Dr Herdwick to attend the reading of the will as the hospital’s representative. When Dr Herdwick asked tentatively if he could be given some idea of what the total figure might be the solicitor replied, ‘Well I shouldn’t really tell you over the phone at this stage. But as it is you, Dr Herdwick, and the Hospital is the sole beneficiary I can see no harm in telling you it is a considerable sum.’

‘Of around how much?’

‘Well, the house alone, a beautiful place with a lot of land, Arts and Crafts you know, with fifteen acres of pasture and ten of woodland. Plus extensive gardens. Worth, I would guess, between four and five million.’

Dr Herdwick drew a sharp breath, and the solicitor continued.

‘And that is not all by any means. I know Miss Munch cultivated a scatterbrained image but in truth her brain was very sharp indeed when it came to money matters. She was an excellent business woman and did not fritter away her money when she was at the height of her career like so many other celebrities. No, she invested well. So apart from the house I think you can count on another six million or so.’

Dr Herdwick gulped. This was beyond his wildest expectations. He knew Lotte lived in a beautiful house with extensive gardens but had never suspected she was so wealthy.

‘Oh, and Doctor there is another thing. You know the new Government initiative?’

‘I’m afraid that over the last weeks I have been so busy I have not managed to keep up with these things.’

‘Well, because of the current crisis the Government is now offering match funding for any charitable donations to hospitals. I see no reason why I could not bump the total up to over fifteen million, if you were to ask me to act for you. But first things first. I can imagine how difficult it might be for you to find time but let’s see if we can fix a date for the reading of the will.’

On the strength of this news Dr Herdwick was able to approach the bank and negotiate a bridging loan for the hospital. Fifteen million should easily see them through the crisis and well beyond.

Sally Barstow immediately paid off the suppliers and placed new orders for PPE. She also managed to arrange the import of two ventilators from South Korea. At the next staff meeting, it was proposed that they built a new wing to the hospital that would take up half of the currently underused carpark. It was to be called the Lotte Munch Wing.

All this, however, did not appease the ghostly Lotte Munch who still visited Dr Herdwick in his dreams; he seemed to get paler and thinner day by day and some of the staff became worried that he might have contracted the virus. Others thought he was on the edge of a breakdown. He had developed a nervous tic in the corner of his mouth that he struggled to control during the daily meetings.

Even Dr McGregor noticed and remarked to Nurse Mellinchamp. ‘Is there anything wrong with Herdwick? He looks worse than a dead sheep the crows have been at.’ It was an expression he had learned from Alf Butterthwaite.

A farmer’s daughter herself, Nurse Mellinchamp winced at the image it conjured up.

‘Just overwork I think. Overwork and not enough sleep.’

Dr Herdwick ignored all efforts by the staff to get him to take a rest. He continued to work through both day and night, taking only the briefest of naps between shifts and sustaining himself by frequent visits to the whisky bottle in his desk drawer. Though inevitably there were times when he was too exhausted to do anything but stretch out on the camp bed and sleep. Then Lotte Munch would come to him again.

His attempts to trace the boy Max were futile. None of the nurses knew anyone in Screesdale or beyond who had a child, boy or girl, called Max.

One morning Dr McGregor approached him to voice concern about Alf Butterthwaite; Alf's health had started to decline and he was worried that if the decline continued Alf would need the help of a ventilator within a week, or perhaps even less

But the ventilators had not arrived. Korea is a long way away and it takes several weeks for a large piece of equipment like a ventilator to go through all the paperwork, customs checks and then be transported to its final destination.

As things improved thanks to the promised security that came with the money from Lotte Munch's will, stress and tension eased in the little hospital. They no longer worried about shortages of equipment and a retired auxiliary nurse was hired to come in to help on the wards. People smiled more and the chaff and banter that used to go on during the tea and coffee breaks returned as the staff relaxed. They were surprised that unlike everyone else Dr Herdwick continued to work just as hard as he had done before, as if Lotte's legacy meant nothing. He refused to take time off and refused to stop sleeping in his office.

'I am needed here. Just because we have some money now does not mean the virus has gone away. It is still out there. How many people are lying sick in their homes? How many of them will need hospital care? I don't know. But I do know we have not seen the worst of this yet. Any day we could overwhelmed with new patients. Next week, this week, tomorrow? Who knows? I have to be here. I have to be ready.'

He was no longer the always polite and soft spoken Dr Herdwick, there was a new anger and sharpness in his voice that disturbed the nurses and they became afraid to voice their concern in front of him.

The truth was that he was afraid. He fully realised the horror of what he had done although he could not understand why. Not that the motive was not clear. He had saved the hospital. Had saved the lives of those sick people in Screesdale who would soon be arriving in desperate need. But he

had broken the law and the most fundamental rule of his profession: he had taken a life. This was something Dr Herdwick - the real Dr Herdwick - he saw himself as a changed man now - would never do. Ever. In any circumstances. But he had done it. Coldly and dispassionately. Why? Late in the night and in the early hours of the morning he argued with himself while drinking strong black coffee and whisky to avoid slipping and falling into the dark waters of sleep where Lotte was waiting in a shadowy world just outside his door. The nurses could hear him muttering to himself as they passed by the office and went on their way the more convinced that he was having a breakdown. Lotte Munch he whispered to himself: It was her fault. If she had never mentioned her will none of this would have happened. They would have scraped by somehow. They would have survived. Alf Butterthwaite: It was Alf who put the idea in his head. It was Alf who took control of his mind and forced him to do this dreadful thing. Alf knew what he had done and now tormented him. It was Alf who sent Lotte to torture him in his dreams. If only he could rid himself of Alf. But he knew there was no way that he could. In the time of crisis he had found the strength to break the chains of morality and commit an abhorrent and normally unthinkable act, but now he was a frightened, weak and broken man, incapable of action. He would never be able to escape from Alf's controlling grip. He was made powerless by the consequences of his action.

As it happened he had no reason to fear Alf. While Dr Herdwick thought he was in the grip of Alf Butterthwaite, Alf Butterthwaite was in the grip of the virus. And the virus was slowly tightening that grip. His mocking laughter lost the power to follow Dr Herdwick down the hospital corridors and now faded into silence just beyond the door. Alf's conversations with Dr McGregor were no longer carried on in the loud ringing Yorkshire accent but were whispered harshly between gasps for air.

Curiously, as Alf's health declined so did the intensity of Dr Herdwick's dreams. The first thing to go was the overwhelming stench of decay. Next Lotte's wriggling tongue. Then the butterfly kiss on the lips. Then the

weight of her body on his. Instead she hovered above him murmuring, 'Alan my love. My love. My saviour.' Finally she simply stood by the office door silently gazing at him with pleading eyes full of infinite longing. By this time it was clear that Alf would last no more than a day or two longer. Daisy made a complete recovery and was sent home.

One night Dr McGregor summoned Dr Herdwick over his mobile phone and he hurried to Alf's room. 'He's going, I'm sorry to say, and he called for you.'

Alf drowning in accumulated mucus breathed with shuddering, rasping, bubbling gasps but still he was able to say between breaths, 'Dr Herdwick?'

'I'm here Alf.' said Dr Herdwick.

'The Trolley Problem. I was right wasn't I? And you did pull the lever!' Then he burst into an obscene and hideous gurgling laugh that turned into a convulsive cough and a final grating bark and rattle before he fell back on his bed and was still. Dr McGregor took his pulse and slowly shook his head. "What was about a trolley and a lever?"

'I have no idea.' said Dr Herdwick, 'He must have been delirious.'

'A good man. An admirable man.' said Dr McGregor closing Alf's eyes. "We could do with more like Alf Butterthwaite, don't you think?"

Dr Herdwick did not reply.

The day after Alf's death, Dr Herdwick felt he was at the limits of his endurance, when he was confronted outside his office door by a deputation consisting of Sally Bairstow and nurses Mellinchamp and Barrow.

'Dr Herdwick we need to speak to you!' Sally Bairstow took the lead.

‘Very well. Come in.’ he replied with unconcealed irritation.

The four of them pressed into the confined space of Dr Herdwick’s office. Sally cast her gaze around the room, taking in crumpled sleeping bag on the camp bed, the scattering of books and papers, an empty whisky bottle on the floor.

‘This cannot go on Doctor. You are ill and need rest. If you continue this way you will have a breakdown. We all agree. Dr McGregor too. He would be here but he is needed on the wards. You are not even bothering to conceal the fact that you are drinking.’ She nodded towards the whisky bottle. ‘You must know that it is unacceptable, unfair to the patients and unfair to us too. We need you here with a clear mind and in good health. I am sorry to say this, Doctor, but your appearance is beginning to upset the patients. You look as if you have not shaved, you look unwell and your breath smells of whisky. You must take time off. We can now manage without you for a while. You must go home and rest. Today. Otherwise... Please don’t force us to take this any further Doctor. You have no idea how difficult this is for me. For all of us. It is not just about work. We are worried about you. We want you back to your old self. Please listen to us.’

Defeated, Dr Herdwick sat down heavily on the camp bed and cupped his head in his hands.

No one spoke, the doctor sat silently for a moment or two, then his shoulders shuddered slightly and Sally thought he was going to burst into tears. Instead, he dropped his hands, gripped the metal of the bed frame, looked up at Sally and the nurses with dark sunken eyes and, ‘You are right. You are right. I can’t go on.’ He slowly shook his head from side to side. ‘I’m sorry. So very sorry.’

Sally felt her eyes moisten as she said, ‘You have done so much Doctor. You have worked so hard. Harder than any of us. We just want you to have

some rest. Please don't say you're sorry, there's nothing to be sorry about.'

The nurses nodded in agreement.

But Doctor Herdwick was not speaking to them.

At home Janet and Daisy were waiting for him. Janet was shocked to see his sunken eyes and body thin to the point of skeletal.

'Alan! What has happened to you?' she cried.

'Stress, over work, worry.' he said. 'I hope it will be better now.'

'Worry about the virus?' asked Janet.

'Yes, that and Daisy'

'What about me? I'm better now.' said Daisy.

'It was not just you being ill. It was the other stuff too.'

'What other stuff?'

'We'll talk about it another time. It's about you... you know... seeing boys.'

'What!'

'Meeting boys down in the shrubbery. In hospital while you were sleeping you talked about someone called Max.'

'I was reading!' shrieked Daisy throwing down the satchel she was holding and spilling books across the floor before running up to her room in tears.

Dr Herdwick bent to pick up the books and read the titles, Automate the Boring Stuff with Python and Max: Visual Programming a Beginner's Guide.

That night for the first time for a month he slept a deep and dreamless sleep. Though he no longer dreamed of Lotte Munch she was till very much in his mind, and whenever he tried to relax his mind drifted back to the hospital and the moment he decided that killing Lotte Munch was the only way to save it and the virus infected inhabitants of Screesdale. The word 'Murderer' echoed around the hollow recesses of his skull. At one point he decided to give himself up. He would go into the local Police station and say, 'I am here to confess to a murder. I killed Lotte Munch!' Then he thought, 'What good would that do? What use would I be in prison? Especially in this time when every doctor in the country is desperately needed to fight the virus pandemic. Would Lotte want me to confess? Now she has more than a ward called after her, she has her name above the new wing of the hospital. When she died her name went back on to the front pages. Her death released such an outpouring of grief and love. Isn't that the way she would want to be remembered?'

Nevertheless none of this could erase the simple fact he was a murderer. But why? What had forced him to commit such a terrible crime? Was it really just for the greater good? A desperate act in a desperate situation? Or were there other motives? Hidden subconscious motives he could not comprehend. He had always believed his natural instinct was to save lives, not end them.

Finally he decided there was no point in giving himself up. It would be far better to repent of his crime through his work. By saving lives. By healing the sick. But in truth he knew he would never escape the feelings of guilt for the rest of his life. Lotte Munch might no longer be in his dreams but her presence was there beside him. Forever. He could never undo his actions any more than he could bridge the gap that now existed between him and Daisy.

Murder cannot be undone and trust, like eggs, can never be repaired once broken. He remembered Alf and The Trolley Problem. He remembered

Alf's triumphant laughter just before he died. But the doctor was a free man now. Beyond Alf's control.

Alf had been wrong. He had been blinded by his pragmatism and not seen what was now glaringly obvious to Dr Herdwick. The Trolley Problem was much more than just a simple question of value. Judged that way he had done the right thing-and he knew he had not.

No, hidden at the centre of the Trolley Problem was another problem. A far greater problem. A far trickier problem. The Problem of Conscience.

Soon after Dr. Herdwick's leave started, a leaflet arrived through the letterbox saying that the local library was closed but was still doing online orders. Janet picked it up and asked if there were any books he wanted. At first he said, 'No. I already have too much reading to catch up with.' Then after a moment's thought he changed his mind and said, 'Wait a minute, there is a book I've been meaning to read. Can you ask them to order something for me. The title is *Natural Goodness* and the author is Philippa Foot.'

The End

