

# 18

## *'Recovery'*

Will felt himself being shaken violently into consciousness. He opened his eyes and peered around the darkened room. He could see no one, nor could he even see a window. He raised himself on his elbows and strained his eyes, searching for something recognizable and familiar. As he gazed at one of the walls, it lurched forward in his direction. He turned to look for the door so that he could leave but found himself facing another wall. This too was moving towards him. He glanced quickly behind. A third wall was closing in on him and as it leaned nearer, the ceiling shuddered and began to descend. He leapt out of bed and flung himself at one of the walls in a desperate attempt to find a door-knob. By the time he had slid his body along the fourth wall, he realized with horror that there was no door. He was trapped. He pressed himself against the walls to prevent them moving any closer but they only pushed him backwards. Terrified, he let out a scream only to find himself surrounded by four tall figures dressed in white.

'If you scream,' said one of them. 'We shall put you to sleep for ever.'

'No!' he shrieked. 'No! No!'

But the black airless tomb began to smother him and he screamed again.

'We warned you,' said the four figures. 'We warned you.' He watched them, paralysed, as they produced a long hypodermic needle.

'Turn over,' they said. 'Turn over, turn over, turn over.'

He backed up against one of the walls. Two arms burst through the hard surface and gripped him from behind. Helpless, he watched the cold steel tip of the needle glinting as it travelled towards him. He struggled to break free but was forced down by a multitude of hands.

'No! No!' he cried. 'Please. Let me be! Let me be!'

As the needle entered his right buttock he woke with a frightened start. He was in his bed in the attic bedroom. His pyjamas and sheets were sticking to his drenched skin and blankets lay scattered about the floor. The blacks were up and a nightlight stood burning on his little side table. He heard footsteps coming up the steps. It was Tom. He hoisted himself up through the trap-door and sat on his bed.

Will clung on to him fiercely. Tom put his arms round his soaking body and held him firmly.

'You keep breathin', boy,' he murmured. 'Don't you go holdin' it in.'

'They said they were going to put me to sleep if I screamed,' gasped out Will.

'Who did?'

'The tall people in my dreams. I were frightened. I couldn't help screamin'. I had to.'

'You scream as much as you likes. No one'll hear you except p'raps me and Sammy. You might reach the vicarage but you'll have to be pretty loud for that. No. You yell away. Give them 'ole bones in our front garden a good rattlin'!

Will smiled weakly.

‘Now, we’d best get you dried and warmed up.’

He carried him down the ladder to the front room. Hanging in front of the range were several sheets on a wooden clothes-horse. Tom stripped Will and, after he had sponged and dried him he put some clean pyjamas on him and wrapped him in a blanket. He left him with Sammy curled up in the large armchair.

By the time Tom had remade the bed Will had fallen asleep. His small stubbled head lay flopped over one of the arms of the armchair. Tom picked him up and carried him back up the ladder. It was the fifth time that he had changed the sheets and had soothed Will after a horrific nightmare.

Will was relieved when daylight filtered into his room. He dreaded the terrors of night.

Zach meanwhile visited the cottage regularly but Will was usually asleep when he called and Tom didn’t want to disturb him. Day after day a tremendous fatigue swept through and drained his entire body. Eating took a supreme effort and the smallest task, be it cleaning his teeth or holding a book, exhausted him into another deep sleep.

One night he was so feverish that Tom stayed by his bed keeping watch. Sammy had been left downstairs in the front room with the door closed firmly behind him.

Will moaned and cried out, pushing the blankets away from his legs. He arched his back and gritted his teeth like a baby having an hysterical tantrum and with flailing limbs he appeared to be fighting some powerful force. The sweat trickled down him in never-ending streams. Tom felt quite helpless. There was nothing he could do except stay with Will and go with what was happening. He hugged him when he woke and encouraged him to talk about his nightmares as much as possible.

By four o’clock in the morning Will had soaked every sheet in the cottage and was now reduced to wearing yet another of Tom’s shirts. He grew increasingly hotter until, at one point, Tom was sorely tempted to run over to the Littles to fetch the Doctor. He quickly dismissed the idea. He didn’t dare leave in case Will should wake from one of his nightmares during his absence.

It was during one particular dream that Will suddenly froze on the bed. He spread his legs and arms outwards as if backing up against a wall, tipped his head back, and let out the wildest and most terrifying scream Tom had ever heard. It shook him to his very bowels. He couldn’t remember how long the scream lasted. It sounded like a baby crying in despair, an old forgotten scream that must have been swallowed down years before.

He found himself being dragged back to the day when Rachel had given birth to their son. Tom had been a young man of twenty then and still very deeply in love. He remembered how he had paced the floor in the living room listening to her moans from the bedroom and then the sudden silence. He had turned to find the midwife standing at the door shaking her head sadly. He remembered how he had run across the hall and into their bedroom, how he had clasped Rachel’s hand. She had smiled so tenderly at him. He tried to ignore how thin and pallid she was and had glanced down at her side to where a tiny red-faced baby lay.

‘Ent he beautiful,’ she had whispered and he had nodded and watched helplessly as the old familiar colour of scarlatina spread across both their faces.

‘Yous’ll have to git blue,’ she had whispered to him for during her pregnancy he had brought her a new pot of paint for each month of her being with child. The ninth was to be blue if she had given birth to a boy, primrose yellow if it had been a girl.

After they had died he had bought the pot of blue paint and placed it in the black wooden box that he had made for her one Christmas, when he was eighteen. As he closed the lid so he had shut out not only the memory of her but also the company of anyone else that reminded him of her.

He glanced down at Will who had suddenly become quiet. He gave a start and opened his eyes. His lips had turned blue. Tom raised him to a sitting position and stroked his back as if he was a baby with wind.

'Keep breathin', boy,' he murmured. 'Keep breathin'.'

Will released his breath and as he gulped in a fresh lungful of air he began to vomit violently.

It was after this incident that he began to sleep more easily. He had reached the climax of his nightmares and they no longer haunted him.

One morning, several days later, he awoke feeling refreshed.

A smell of bacon and eggs drifted through the floor-boards and although the blacks were up and his nightlight was still on he could hear the sounds of birds and the old familiar whirring of a tractor in the distance.

'Mister Tom,' he yelled. 'Mister Tom.'

In seconds Tom's head appeared through the hatchway and Sammy scampered across the floor and jumped on to his bed.

'You'se lookin' good,' he remarked. 'You got colour in yer cheeks.'

He walked over to the window and removed the blacks. Sunlight danced into the room. Tom propped the window up and extinguished the nightlight.

Will pushed his legs over to the side of his bed and stood up with a wobble only to sit down suddenly again.

'They ent had much use,' commented Tom, noticing the anxious frown on Will's face. 'They'll git stronger. Remember...' but Will finished the sentence for him.

'Everythin' has its own time,' and he laughed.

It was good to see Will smile again. It made Tom feel lively, rejuvenated.

'Breakfast in bed, sir?' he said cheerily. 'I takes it yer hungry.'

Will nodded and grinned.

Tom propped the pillows up and left him sitting happily with a book. Sammy snuggled in next to him. It was like the old days.

Downstairs, Tom began to prepare a royal breakfast. As he broke an egg into the frying pan he started singing. He too felt released. While he was singing he heard a tap at the window. He looked up to find Zach peering in.

'Come on in,' he said.

'I say,' blurted out Zach excitedly as he ran breathlessly into the room. 'He's better, isn't he?'

Tom nodded.

'You can see him after he's eaten his breakfast.'

'Oh gosh, I can't wait till then. He'll take an age with that lot,' he said, indicating the toast and mushrooms, egg and bacon. 'You know what he's like. He chews his food.'

'That's usual, ent it?' remarked Tom in surprise.

'Oh no. I just give mine a few bites and swallow it but he chews and chews. Couldn't I sort of drape myself inconspicuously on a chair while he's devouring that lot?'

'You inconspicuous?' commented Tom wryly. 'You jest wait. You've waited long enough already. A few minutes won't make that much difference.'

'That's what they say in novels,' moaned Zach. 'A few minutes can be a jolly eternity,' but his words were lost on Tom for he was half-way up the ladder.

Zach plunged his hands deep into the pockets of his red corduroy shorts and stared out at the graveyard. It was a glorious spring day. He had abandoned his boots and socks and had retrieved his battered sandals from their winter hibernation. The only other garment he wore was a white collarless man's cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It billowed out in voluminous folds between his braces.

It was now the first week in May. The spring holidays had ended and already the summer term had begun. Now that Mrs Hartridge had had her baby and was no longer teaching, Mrs Black had been splitting her energies between the two classes.

'You want tea?' asked Tom on his return.

'Yes, please. How is he?' he added urgently.

'Hungry.'

He took a large gulp from his tea and gave a yell as it burnt his lip.

'I know, you don't have to tell me,' said Zach catching Tom's eye. 'Look before you leap,' and he blew on it and sipped it hurriedly.

'Does he know I'm here?'

'No. I didn't want to disturb his breakfast.'

'Oh, Mr Tom,' he cried despondently, thrusting his cup dramatically on to the table.

'No offence to you,' Tom added. 'It's jest I knows how over-excited he gets.'

After what seemed hours to Zach, Will called from upstairs. Zach followed Tom into the hall.

'Wait,' Tom whispered.

'I see. Then it'll be a surprise. I say, what a wizard...'

but Tom was already through the hatchway.

He reappeared soon after.

'All right,' he said. 'You can come on up.'

Zach waited impatiently for him to reach the bottom of the ladder and then half running, half stumbling, he flung himself upwards.

Tom stood in the hallway listening to their yells of delight. He cast his eyes upwards to an imaginary heaven.

'Couple of doughbags,' he remarked.

Zach bounced at the end of Will's bed and hit his head on the eave. A round pink lump appeared immediately at the side of his forehead. Sammy scabbled over the bedcovers and smelt and nuzzled him all over.

'You're ever so bony,' exclaimed Zach, 'but you look much much better.'

'Me legs are a bit wobbly.'

'How romantic to be stuck in bed with a fever. Rather like Keats, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning or the Brontë sisters.'

'Romantic?'

'Yes. I wonder if you'll be like Heidi's cousin, you know, the one in the wheelchair who has it pushed down the mountain and then she walks.'

'Wheelchair?' said Will in alarm. 'I ent that bad.'

'Pity!'

They looked at each other and smiled broadly. The stubble round Will's head had grown past it's prickly stage and had developed into a thin layer of sandy coloured fluff.

'I expect you're dying to know all the news,' said Zach, crossing his legs and making sure he was quite comfortable.

'You'se goin' to tell it to me anyway,' remarked Will.

'I say, you've lost your London accent. You've gone all yokel.'

'Have I?'

'Miss Thorne will have the screaming abdabs when she hears you. She gives elocution lessons now, to the dramatics group.'

Will pushed himself up excitedly.

'Is she still doin' plays, like?'

'You bet and she can't wait for you to be well. You're one of her prodigies. I'm as jealous as anything, of course,' and he smote his chest and gazed up at the ceiling.

'What was it like? *Toad of Toad Hall*?'

'Oh, great fun. I was marvellous, of course. Missed you though terribly, and Carrie. She's still swotting madly for this wretched exam. She's even learning Latin and a bit of Greek from Mr Peters. I'm sure she needn't. Folks round here already say she's a queer one. Oh, by the way,' he added after a pause, 'Mrs Hartridge has had a baby girl.'

'A baby,' repeated Will and he paled.

'I say, are you all right?'

'Yes,' said Will quietly.

'You don't look it. Do you want me to call Mister Tom?'

'No. I'm all right.'

'If you say so. The baby's called Peggy. Oh dear,' he sighed. 'I haven't cheered you up very much. You've been looking miserabler and miserabler ever since I came in.'

Will smiled.

'Oh, I forgot,' he said suddenly. 'Lucy missed you terribly too. Mrs Padfield told me she hasn't eaten properly in weeks. She's lost her pudding look, well, round her body. Her cheeks still seem just as enormous.'

Will scowled.

'You don't like her very much, do you?'

'It ent that,' said Will squirming. 'It's jes, it's jes... She's a girl.'

'So are the twins.'

'They're different. They ent, they ent...'

'Lovey dovey?'

'Yis. Lovey dovey,' and he couldn't help but laugh at his own embarrassment.

'And,' continued Zach, remembering something else. 'Aunt Nance and Uncle Oz dragged out one of their children's old bicycles and I've been cleaning and derusting it

and doing odd jobs so I can save up for two new inner tyres. The old ones are riddled with holes.'

He sat back and puckered his brows in an effort to remember any other news. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'There's talk of forming a Home Guard, same as Local Defence Volunteers only more official I think and, oh yes, there's two land army girls up at Hillbrook Farm and there's talk of the Grange being used as a maternity hospital.'

'Hospital?' said Will alarmed.

'Well, nursing home,' said Zach, sensing that he had put his foot in it.

'What's that?'

'A place where women who can't be at home have their babies.'

'Babies,' said Will, feeling sick.

'Yes,' said Zach, puzzled at his reaction.

'Don't they come from Jesus, like?'

'Of course not. Oh,' he said, 'you don't know.'

'Know what?'

'About sex.'

Will blushed scarlet.

'I know it's somethin' dirty and you goes to hell for it.'

'Rot!' exclaimed Zach. 'We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for sex. It's what happens between men and women when they love each other.'

'What, kissin' and touchin'?' said Will, feeling a little hot.

'Well, that's a good beginning.'

'But kissin's a sin, ent it?'

'No. That's what you do when you love someone. Look, the woman has a seed inside her and a man has a seed inside him and when they reach one another they join up and the man gives the woman his seed. If the seed sticks to one of the woman's seeds it grows into an egg and the egg grows into a baby inside the woman and when the baby's grown enough and is ready to be born it shoots out of the mother.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. My parents told me and they don't lie.'

'Your parents told you!'

'Yes. Look, ask me any questions you want. I'll tell you all I know.'

'Thanks.'

'It isn't dirty,' continued Zach. 'Unless you make it that way.'

'Can't a lady have a baby on her own?'

'No. There has to be a man to give her his seed.' He stood up abruptly. 'I'm going to get Mister Tom. You look dreadful.'

Tom popped his head through the hatchway.

'What was that about me, then?' he remarked.

He glanced at Will. 'I think you'd best go home, Zach. Overdone it a bit.'

'Yes, that's what I thought. Can I come again tomorrow?'

'Oh yes, please do,' urged Will.

Tom sat at the end of his bed and waited till Zach's footsteps had disappeared out of hearing.

'Now then, what's up?'

Will looked startled.

'Best tell me.'

'It's about Trudy.'

'I think you know already,' added Tom quietly.

'She's dead, ent she?'

He nodded.

'My fault,' he choked out. 'My fault. I killed her. I made her die.'

'How?'

'She cried and cried and I nursed her, like. I held her real good. I rocked her. I gives her the milk in the bottle and then there wasn't no more.'

'Ent your fault. The milk runnin' out.'

'But I should have got out like. I waited. I shouldn't have waited. I thought me Mum'd be back any minute, only...' but he couldn't get the words out.

'Only she never did, that what yer sayin'?''

He nodded.

'Baby needs milk. You couldn't give her that. You was tied up.'

'Zach said,' and he blushed. 'He said that a woman can't have a baby without a man. Is that true?'

'Yes.'

'So me Mum must have met with a man.'

'Yes.'

'She lied. Why did she lie? She said men and ladies goin' with each other were a sin.'

Tom took out his pipe and began to stuff tobacco into it.

'I has a feelin' that your mother is very ill.'

'She must have had Trudy growin' inside her, like. Mebbe that's what she meant when she said she were ill.'

'There's another kind of sickness that some people has. It's a sort of sickness of the mind, usually an unhappy mind. Reckon yer mother is a bit like that.'

'Mister Tom, I want to stay here. I don't want to go back to her, even if she says she's ill.'

'You won't go back to her. Authorities wouldn't allow it.'

'But why did you kidnap me then?'

'They were goin' to put you in a children's home. I wanted you back here.'

'Why?'

'Why? Well,' and in an embarrassed manner he puffed out a billow of smoke from his pipe. 'Because I'm fond of you, boy. That's why. I missed you,' and he stood up. 'And now I'll git out all the bits of paper I've bin savin' up for yer drawrin'. Then you can come downstairs and scrawl away.'

Tom watched him slowly descend the ladder.

'Mister Tom,' he said.

He lifted his head back up through the hatchway.

'Yes, boy.'

'I love you,' and instead of the cold feeling he imagined would happen if he uttered those words, he felt a wave of warmth flooding into his stomach and through to his chest, and he beamed. Mister Tom's face became flushed. He cleared his throat.

'I love you too, boy,' he grunted. 'And now I'll git on with downstairs,' and he disappeared quickly down the ladder.

As May flew into June Will steadily grew in strength. He remained indoors, happy just to draw and read. Zach, George and the twins and even Lucy came to visit him but he tended to fall asleep mid-conversation and would wake to find that they had gone leaving a little pile of fruit and comics beside him.

It was several weeks before he ventured as far as the tiny patch of front garden overlooking the graveyard. He and Tom would carry the large wooden table outside so that he could lay out his paints and brushes on it. The constant fresh air increased his appetite and as he ate, so his energy returned.

Meanwhile, in London, Neville Chamberlain had resigned as Prime Minister and a plump, bald man of sixty-five had taken his place. His name was Winston Churchill.

Soon afterwards the inhabitants of Little Weirwold were shaken by the news of Dunkirk.

The British Expeditionary Force had been driven back to the coast of France by the Germans, and thousands of troops, some very badly wounded, had to be evacuated by sea to Folkestone. Hundreds of ordinary people who had vessels risked their lives to help in the evacuation. Many were killed. 'Sir' from the Grange and his son Julian had taken a motor boat. The Grange was now no longer to be a maternity hospital but a convalescent home for wounded and shell-shocked soldiers.

One weekend, several truck loads of vacant-eyed, wounded young men in uniform rumbled their way through the village. The villagers cheered and threw garlands of flowers at them and handed them home-made cakes, bread and eggs as they passed. Some of the youths managed a numb smile, but most of them were too dazed to know what was happening.

On the last Saturday in June, Will made up his mind to do something that he had been putting off for some time. He had finished his cottage chores and was sitting outside reading. Tom had left a shopping list for him on the table. He was helping over at Hillbrook Farm as were George and Ginnie. Carrie was at the vicarage with the vicar, studying Latin.

He closed his book, picked up the list from the table and headed for the shop. On his way back he called in at the Littles'. If Zach wasn't doing anything, maybe they could go off somewhere. Then he could postpone his venture again.

He found Zach covered in oil and surrounded by soiled rags and small tools. Propped upside down on its handlebars was an old bicycle.

'I've nearly got it working, you know. This is the first mechanical thing I've ever done in my whole life. I'm determined to complete something once and for all.'

They chatted briefly and Will returned home. He left a short note saying where he had gone and headed in the direction of Annie Hartridge's cottage. An hour later he was still staring intently at her front door.



After much deliberation he crossed the rough narrow lane, knocked three times and stood back nervously. It was a blisteringly hot day and his shirt clung to his body. He shook it to fan some cool air inside. No one answered the door. Perhaps she wasn't in. He felt relieved. He could come back another day. He took hold of the smooth brass knocker and tapped it again. There was still no answer. He was about to leave when Mrs Hartridge's head suddenly appeared around the corner. He jumped.

'I thought I heard someone,' she said. 'I'm in the back garden. Come round. I heard you were back,' she added gently. 'This is a surprise.'

On the grass in the back garden was a large tartan rug. She told him to sit down and make himself comfortable while she made him a glass of home-made lemonade. He watched her go into the cottage and remained standing. He glanced furtively round the garden taking in the vegetable patch, the herb garden under the kitchen window, the tall trees that stood by the lane and then he gave a small gasp, for standing in the shadow of the trees was a pram.

He stared numbly at it not daring to breathe for fear he might disturb whatever lay there. Annie Hartridge stood at the sink looking out of the window. She was about to lean out and ask him whether he would like honey in his lemonade but when she saw the look on his face she kept silent. News always spread like wildfire round the village and she knew some of what he had been through.

Will, meanwhile, was making slow, steady progress towards the pram. It shuddered slightly and two small chubby legs rose into the air. He moved closer until he was standing beside it. There, lying under the protective shade of a hood, was the tiniest of babies. She had dark wispy hair and round brown marble eyes. She waved one of her hands absently and looked up startled as one of the fringes at the edge of the hood flickered.

Annie Hartridge let him stand quietly for some time before breaking the silence.

'Lemonade and ginger cake coming up,' she said brightly. Will turned round feeling self-conscious at being caught staring at the baby.

'She's rather beautiful, isn't she?' Annie remarked strolling towards the pram and lifting her out. She gazed into the baby's eyes and kissed her cheeks.

'I'll let you have a little romp on the grass, my love,' and she lay her face down onto the rug. 'There you are, my precious.'

Will sat beside her with his lemonade and watched her, fascinated at the enormous power the tiny, helpless being held over him.

He stayed in the garden till dusk talking with Mrs Hartridge about books and ideas for obtaining paper and where you could buy the cheapest paint. He didn't mention Mr Hartridge and she didn't talk about his mother or Trudy. Sometimes in the middle of a conversation they would stop suddenly and look at each other with understanding.

In Will's eyes she was more beautiful than ever. A little on the thin side now but her eyes were still as large and blue, her hair still as golden and her voice was just as melodious, if not more so. He watched her hold the baby in the air and bring her down to her face where she blew raspberries into her tummy. Sometimes she would just gaze at her and look happy and sad all in one moment.

They were in the middle of a conversation when Will heard a knock at the front door. Annie stood up with Peggy still in her arms. 'Here,' she said handing her over to Will. 'Hold her while I answer the door.'

She walked briskly away not daring to glance back at him. She had no idea whether she was doing the right thing or not. Instinctively she wanted Will to know what it was like to hold a warm, live child.

Will sat stunned, clutching the tiny infant in his arms. He felt tense and awkward. The baby blew a bubble which burst and dissolved into a long dribble. It dangled down the side of her chin and headed towards her flimsy cotton dress. She felt soft and had an extraordinarily pleasant smell, thought Will. He began to relax a little and the baby puckered up her mouth and made a small gurgling sound, then for no reason at all she screwed her eyes up and began to cry.

Will glanced frantically round for Mrs Hartridge. He rocked her and held her close to him but she continued to cry. He stood up with her still in his arms, searching for a bottle.

Mrs Hartridge opened the back door and crossed the garden. She took Peggy in her arms and smiled.

'I know what you want, my love,' she murmured and, sitting down in a canvas chair, she unbuttoned the front of her floral blouse and placed one of her breasts into the baby's mouth.

Will was too shocked to avert his gaze. He felt that he should shut his eyes or excuse himself but his feet remained rooted to the spot and soon he forgot his embarrassment and became mesmerized by the slow rhythmic sucking of the baby. He watched her small arms lying outstretched while her fingers curved inwards and outwards contentedly. A pinkish flush spread across her cheeks.

When the baby had taken her fill Mrs Hartridge buttoned up her blouse and looked at him.

'Mister Tom's waiting for you out front.'

He thanked her for the lemonade and ran to join Mr Tom. He was sitting on the grass with Sammy, staring at the long thin rows of pink-tipped clouds in the distance.

As they walked home Will felt suddenly lighter. Tom had been right. He couldn't have given Trudy what she had needed. It wasn't his fault that she had died. He was still saddened by her death but the awful responsibility that had weighed so heavily on him had now lifted. He thrust his hands into his pockets and walked with a brisker step.

When he and Tom arrived at the cottage they found Zach waiting for them in the front garden, with the old bicycle.

'I've fixed it. I've actually fixed it,' he announced proudly. 'I say, Mister Tom,' he added, giving a broad grin, 'how far is it to the sea?'