NICOLA THORNE

A WIND IN SUMMER

Nicola Thorne is the author of a number of well-known novels which include *Champagne Gold, Pride of Place, Where the Rivers Meet, Bird of Passage* and The Askham Chronicles (*Never Such Innocence, Yesterday's Promises, Bright Morning* and *A Place in the Sun*). Born in South Africa, she was educated at the LSE. She lived for many years in London, but has now made her home in Dorset.

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The Askham Chronicles:
Never Such Innocence
Yesterday's Promises
Bright Morning
A Place in the Sun

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This edition published by Diamond Books, 2000

Diamond Books is an imprint of
HarperCollins*Publishers*
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

First published by Grafton 1993
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 26 167397 1

Set in Meridien

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd, Glasgow

Contents

Part One	Father and Sons 1932–1944	7
Part Two	The Mills of God 1945–1953	137
Part Three	Critical Heritage 1953–1955	299
Part Four	The Pride of the Family 1958–1961	349
Part Five	One for Sorrow, Two for Joy 1962–1965	447
	Epilogue 1965–1966	539

What is more gentle than a wind in summer?
John Keats, *Sleep and Poetry*

PART ONE

Father and Sons

1932–1944

Chapter 1

Doctor Geoffrey Blair sat bowed over his desk writing busily, while, on the other side, his patient waited humbly.

'There,' Doctor Blair said, handing the woman opposite him a script. 'Three spoonfuls a day until the pain subsides. If it doesn't, come and see me again in a week.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' the woman said submissively, taking the piece of paper and rising. 'How much do I owe you, Doctor?' She fumbled awkwardly in the shabby handbag that hung from her wrist.

'See how you feel next week,' the doctor said with a kindly smile. 'We can talk about money then.'

The woman mumbled something, turned her back and walked rather slowly to the door as if she had more on her mind than the state of her health. Doctor Blair rose and, swiftly overtaking her, stood in front of the door before opening it.

'I shan't charge you, Minnie, you know that,' he said. 'There's no need to pay me until Jim gets work again.'

'It's worry that's making him ill.'

'And you too, Minnie.' Geoffrey Blair bent and looked into her faded, once undoubtedly pretty eyes. 'You won't get better if you worry too much about Jim, or the children. You must think of yourself as well.'

Minnie Parsons put out her hand and he pressed it. Her eyes filled with tears. 'You're a very good man, Doctor Blair,' she said rather tersely and brushed past him through the door.

Sitting at her own desk in the reception area outside the surgery, Catherine Wills looked up with an air of resignation as Mrs Parsons walked straight past her and went through the outside door.

She glanced at Geoffrey Blair who still stood with his hand on the knob of the door leading to his surgery. The reception area was now empty and, rising slowly from her desk, Catherine crossed the room and locked the outside door. Then she turned towards the doctor, the expression on her face changing to one of reproach.

'You can't go *on* like that, not charging your patients, Doctor Blair. You'll be in the dole queue yourself.'

It was 1932 and the Depression had affected Netherwick as much as any other area of England. In the north it was particularly severe. Maybe Netherwick was protected by the fact that it was a prosperous market town on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales, but it was a centre of the woollen industry too and some of its mills had laid off workers; others had closed down for good. Jim Parsons was one of the unlucky ones who had been affected by the closure of a long-established family business and had been on the dole for months.

Doctor Blair hadn't replied to his receptionist's reproaches but, instead, wandered back into his surgery, drawing the curtains against the cold and the encroaching dark outside. In the grate a fire burned brightly, and an oil burner in the corner protected those of his patients who had to remove items of clothing for medical examination.

It was a warm, friendly room lacking the usual austerity of a doctor's surgery. Doctor Blair returned to his desk and went through the cards of the patients he had seen that evening, making notes on their conditions, the treatment prescribed and, in the space provided for a fee, invariably leaving a blank.

When he had finished his notes he gathered up his cards and returned to the reception area where Catherine sat frowning at the paper in her typewriter before glancing at a card beside her on her desk.

'Do you actually *want* to refer Mrs Longridge to Mr Banks privately, or to the hospital, Doctor Blair?'

Even with a scowl on her brow she looked so appealing, Geoffrey Blair thought, standing by the side of her desk, scarcely paying any attention to what she was saying. She had pale golden hair and a peculiarly white translucent skin; her eyebrows swept upwards tapering to a point which focused the gaze of the onlooker on the deep recesses of her eyes. Conscious of his expression she averted her eyes, concentrating on the task before her.

'Er . . .' Geoffrey Blair leaned over the desk so that he could read the document in question and, at the same time, inhale the very faint perfume which was part of her freshness and naturalness.

'It's really a question of money,' Catherine said.

'Oh, she can afford private fees,' Doctor Blair said, aware that the moment of intimacy had passed. 'And,' he stared at her over his half-moon glasses, 'so can Mr Binns. Now, Mrs Hapgood . . .' He took another card from her desk and looked at it, scratching the side of his face. 'No, I'm afraid she'll have to go to the clinic at the hospital.' Suddenly he slumped in the chair beside her desk and let the card dangle between his hands. 'It is a terrible business you know, Catherine, when people can't afford medical treatment. Some perfectly respectable people are now forced to beg for charity.'

'Not here,' Catherine said, again pursing her lips. 'Do you know, I reckon that about half the people you see don't pay you . . .'

'Don't pay me *now*, Catherine,' Doctor Blair chided her

gently, 'but they will. When times improve they will.'

'Yes, but when *will* they improve?' Catherine sharply drew the paper from her typewriter and screwed it into a ball before committing it to the wastepaper basket. 'Everyone says the Depression shows no signs of lifting.' But her question seemed a rhetorical one and she proceeded with the typing while Geoffrey, conscious of her proximity, continued to sort through his patients' cards, reluctant to leave her side.

He well understood Catherine's worry. Her family were millworkers, ordinary townsfolk of Netherwick but, as yet, unaffected by the Depression. Her father and mother worked in the mill together with a brother and two sisters; but, so far, it had been one of the successful ones, relatively unaffected by the times.

It was a life that had never appealed to Catherine. She was pretty and she was ambitious, and after working for some time in a baker's shop, she decided to go to one of the new secretarial colleges that were springing up for the women newly emancipated by the challenge of war work, the promise of the vote and the whole host of opportunities that had opened up for women ever since.

But Catherine, who had been born the year before Geoffrey Blair qualified as a doctor, had little recollection of those times. She was a modern woman, a woman of the post-war world and twenty-three years younger than the employer she had worked for for two years.

She was much, much too young for him.

The doctor cleared his throat and suddenly stood up, his expression business-like. 'Now, have you any letters for me to sign before you go?'

It was true they were worrying times, but when hadn't they been since the end of the war? Geoffrey Blair had qualified in 1912, but poor sight had kept him out of the

army and, with a few doctors, mostly of retirement age, he had helped to look after the population of Netherwick then as he had done ever since.

Netherwick had been scarcely touched by the war except in the number of men who had lost their lives fighting in the trenches, particularly on the Somme, where the enthusiastic 'pals' brigades had been decimated. Netherwick had its share of memorials of the dead as much as any other town in England. It had been the doctors' task to care for the mourners as well as those who eventually returned home.

Geoffrey William Blair was now the senior partner in a practice he had joined in 1914, the year he was rejected for service in the army. In the same year he married Claire Ransom who had been a nurse at the General Hospital in Leeds. In 1915 they had a son, Edward, and in 1917 another son, Jeremy. Claire had died of tuberculosis in 1920 and since then Geoffrey had remained a widower devoted to his practice and his children, mainly in that order. His sons he had sent to boarding school as soon as they were old enough, and he lived alone in the large house of which the surgery formed a part and which had belonged to the former senior partner, Doctor Darrell, who retired in 1919.

After Catherine had left for the night Geoffrey Blair went through the door which led directly from his surgery into the house, the large cold house which seemed permanently inhabited by ghosts of the past. Geoffrey cared little for his creature comforts, and would eat without enthusiasm the meal left for him in the oven of the large stove in the kitchen by his housekeeper who came at eight in the morning and left promptly at four-thirty when evening surgery began. There were also two daily women and a gardener; but, from the close of surgery until eight the next morning, Geoffrey Blair,

unless he was called out in the night, remained alone. He never entertained and seldom these days received private invitations because he had hardly ever been known to accept any. At first people attributed this desire for solitude to grief at the death of his young wife; but then they came to realize that he liked solitude for solitude's sake. He was a solitary, and cared little for companionship. But he was a good, conscientious doctor, much respected; otherwise he left others alone and was left alone himself.

When the Blair boys came home for the school holidays they never stayed long. Claire had come from a large family and Geoffrey planned well in advance for his sons to spend time with their cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents on his wife's side. He himself had been an only child and his parents died when he was relatively young.

Maybe it was from that state of early bereavement that he became someone perfectly satisfied with his own company, uneasy in social gatherings.

Uneasy, that is, until his life was invaded by the life-enhancing presence of Catherine Wills. The shadows began to fall away from his existence and life slowly, very slowly assumed a new meaning.

But was it fair to her? Sitting over his solitary supper that night, a dull fire flickering in the grate, Doctor Blair glanced round a room which, like the rest of the house, bore traces of considerable neglect. It was not damp, it was not dirty or badly furnished but it had that unlived-in, unloved air of a house that has seen little laughter, little noise and bustle of children or animals, little love.

Geoffrey Blair had been aware of a quickening of the pulse almost from the day his new receptionist arrived; but he dismissed it as the folly of an ageing and disappointed man. Besides, she was only a few years older

than his eldest son, young enough to be his daughter. Somehow, in his mind, the feelings he had for her appeared obscene and he felt that anyone else would be shocked by them.

As the months had gone by he had taken care never to let her have any indication of his interest which, he soon knew, was not paternal. She was a young, beautiful, vibrant woman and he wanted to make love to her. In time he found the temptation to touch her almost overwhelming and at one time he considered dismissing her, selling his practice to his partner and moving away, out of temptation.

Yet there were times, and more of them recently, when he had a feeling that she was aware of what went on in his mind as he sat by her: the stirrings of the flesh, the overwhelming sense of desire. He sensed no revulsion on her part, no abrupt movement of her chair away from his.

Could she . . . ? But what would people say? Geoffrey Blair vigorously shook salt on his stew as though to punish himself for the carnal nature of the thoughts that increasingly tormented him.

After dinner he usually read medical magazines, case papers and letters from specialists about his patients. He listened to the news on the wireless and went to bed at about ten o'clock, a practice that he had started as a house doctor when he had been summoned to the wards at any hour of the night.

He never worked in his consulting room but in his study in the house which was a large room, gloomy like the rest but perhaps a little more lived-in with faded leather chairs, pipe racks, books, papers, the paraphernalia of a bachelor existence.

Last thing at night the doctor smoked a pipe and had a cup of Ovaltine – never whisky, in case he was called

out – and then he went to bed, checking the clocks in each room and carefully putting out the lights as he went upstairs to the solitary bed where he had slept alone for so many years.

Geoffrey Blair was on the point of going to the kitchen to boil the milk for his drink when the telephone rang. He checked his watch, shrugged his shoulders and answered it in the terse, crisp manner that, intentionally or not, invariably had the effect of putting people off.

'Yes? Doctor Blair speaking.'

'Oh, Doctor,' a voice said that made his heart lurch immediately. 'Do you think you could come? It's my dad.'

'What is it, Catherine?' The doctor kept his voice as steady as he could.

'I think he's had a stroke, Doctor Blair.'

Thus did the mills of God begin to work; mysteriously to bring about, through the misfortune of one, happiness, fulfilment and blessing to others.

When Geoffrey Blair arrived at the small terraced house in Castle Street, the opposite side of the town from his own, it was a little after ten o'clock. All the lights in the house were on, whereas those in the rest of the street were in darkness as the working day in the mill began early.

At the bottom of the cobbled street rose the mill on which the welfare of so many families depended. Its huge chimney stack dominated the town, and alongside it ran the canal which linked Liverpool in the west to the port of Hull in the east. This canal served as a lifeline, a kind of artery carrying the huge, ponderous, laden barges through the Pennines from one side of the country to the other, stopping at the small towns through which they passed to unload or take on goods; balls of