

MY NEW ZEALAND STORY

PANDEMIC

The Spanish Flu, 1918

SALLY STONE

SCHOLASTIC
AUCKLAND SYDNEY NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO
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Preface to 2020 edition

The word *pandemic* is a scary one and has been used a lot recently with the outbreak of a new coronavirus called COVID-19 that emerged from Wuhan, China, in December 2019. On 12 March 2020, the World Health Organisation announced that COVID-19 was officially a global pandemic.

So what is a pandemic?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a pandemic as the worldwide spread of a new disease.

The current coronavirus is highly contagious. Common signs of infection for COVID-19 include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. Severe cases can cause pneumonia, acute respiratory problems, kidney failure and may be fatal, but most people who contract the disease seem to be able to make a full recovery.

Nevertheless, cities and towns throughout the world have gone into lockdown in 2020 to try and prevent the spread of the disease, and international travel has come to a halt as countries close their borders. Currently, scientists are working with urgency to develop a vaccine.

COVID-19 is thought to have originally come from bats. Two other animal coronaviruses have crossed over into people during the past twenty years: SARS (Severe Acute

Respiratory Syndrome), which killed around 800 people, was transmitted from civet cats; and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), which is transferred from camels. But neither of those has been labelled a ‘pandemic’.

There can be mild pandemics, such as the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic (known as ‘swine flu’), which killed as many people as the regular flu. At the opposite end of the scale was the 1918 Spanish flu – about which this book is written – that affected around 500 million people worldwide, killing an estimated 50 million of those.

What can we do?

Hand hygiene is the most important thing to prevent the spread of a virus. You should wash your hands thoroughly with soap for 20 seconds after using the bathroom, before eating, and after visiting public places. Also avoid touching your mouth, eyes and nose and avoid close contact with anybody showing symptoms of respiratory illnesses, such as coughing and sneezing. Wearing a mask that covers your nose and mouth will help prevent the airborne spread of a virus, as will maintaining social distancing, i.e. keeping two metres away from other people.

This diary belongs to Freda Rose

Birthday: 5th January 1907

Age: 11 and seven-twelfths

Favourite colour: Lilac

Favourite sport: Rounders

Favourite food: Raspberry turnovers

Best friend: Pearl Lucy Locket



Only a Nosey Parker OR a German spy reads another person's diary, so what do you think you are doing?

KEEP OUT!

This is Private Property ...

X this line and you WILL BE SHOT!



My bedroom, Southill Downs, Canterbury,
South Island, New Zealand

Monday, 26th August, 1918

Dear Lucy Locket,

I officially declare you my new best friend, so I hope you won't blow hot and cold and make up GIGANTIC stories like my *ex*-best friend Pearl Bennett does. This morning she told the class that her chooks lay eggs the size of pumpkins, and then she said they can talk! That's when Ted Hamilton yelled out, "What do they say – ouch?"

Everyone roared with laughter, but all that ever does is *egg* her on (now that was clever!) to make up another story that's even taller.

Which made me feel sad, because it got me thinking about my older brother Bobby, even though he's miles from tall. In fact, he's terribly short! He has to wear children's boots because his feet are so tiny. He takes after Mother's side of the family, who Father says are all knee-high to a grasshopper.

Lucy, you would really like Bobby. He's gone to be a stretcher-bearer in the war. He tried at least three or four times to get in before they finally took him. I truly miss him. He's been gone for almost two years now. He blows the roundest smoke rings and tells the rudest jokes. "Never let the truth spoil a good story," he always says with that wicked grin of his. And, "It's time for a

Capstan,” which are his favourite smokes and say ‘navy strength’ on the front of the packet, whatever that means.

When he announced to us that he’d signed up, Mother looked like she was going to collapse. “No!” she shrieked. “How will we manage on the farm?”

But Father shouted back, “He’s going, Mother, and that’s that. They’ll need every able-bodied man if we’re going all the way against the Hun.” The Hun are the Germans, who sound positively beastly. Pearl, who knows everything *of course*, says that they are cutting the hands and feet off Belgian children, and throwing babies up in the air and catching them on the ends of their bayonets. Mother says that’s all a load of codswallop. But Pearl also says they give you germs, those Germans.

“That’s right,” said Bobby, winking at me, “the Mother Country needs me.”

I think Mother wanted to say, “But *this* mother in *this* country needs you. Forget Mother Land.” But she held her tongue and cried so much her eyes were all red and swollen for days. She tried to plead with Father to make Bobby stay, but Father just frowned and stared straight through his steel-rimmed glasses.

“He’s made up his mind and there’s nothing we can do about it,” Father said. “So let that be an end to it.”

It seemed every other able-bodied man had made up his mind as well. All of Bobby’s friends were signing up.



I don't know why they'd want to go and fight in a war; Mother said maybe it was because they had something to prove, to show how brave they were and what tough stuff us colonials were made of. But Father just said, "Don't be so cynical."

I rolled the word around my mouth: *sin-ical*. Whatever it means, it sounds like God might not like it much.

"We'll see the world," beamed Bobby, "and get a bit of fresh air at the same time. It'll be a right old adventure!"

"Bit of fresh air, my foot," Gran cried, shaking her grey, wispy head. "You're not going on a picnic, you know; it'll be no picnic."

It was as though all the men were swept up in the war fever. They were so fired up (ha!), dying(!) to go and fight the good fight and get right in the thick of it.

Tuesday, 27th August

Dear Lucy Locket,

To think this fighting all started because this man called Franz Ferdinand, who was heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated by a Serb in Bosnia. Which of course caused Austria-Hungary to become very angry and blame Serbia, who tried to say sorry. But

it was too late, and WAR was declared.

What followed afterwards was a chain reaction. Russia supported Serbia, Germany sided with Austria-Hungary, and France stuck up for Russia. Things *really* started to heat up when, on the 4th of August, 1914, Germany invaded Belgium (who had declared that it wanted to remain neutral and not fight anyone) on its way to France. You see, Germany wanted to knock France out of the war before turning its attention to Russia, so it could try and avoid war on two fronts. But Britain had guaranteed to defend Belgium's neutrality, so it declared war on Germany.

So now the Allies (that's our side), led by Britain and France, are fighting on three fronts – the Western, the Eastern and the Southern Front – against the Central Powers, led by Germany.

Phew! Lucy, did you understand all that? Or, as our battle-axe of a teacher, Miss Savage, would say, "Did you get that through your thick skulls?" She really is such a charmer, Lucy. Anyway, this war is all anyone's talked about for what seems like forever and a day, so I feel as if I know it like the back of my hand.

"It'll all be over by Christmas," Bobby kept saying.

Gran snorted and tut-tutted. "If it's over by Christmas I'll eat my hat."

I'd like to be around to see that.



Wednesday, 28th August

Dear Lucy Locket,

Mother was really very upset after Bobby enlisted, and couldn't speak for days. She wouldn't even talk to Gran, who has been living with us since Pa died a year ago and is always asking questions and yelling out all manner of things which seem to come out of nowhere and have absolutely nothing to do with anything. I think secretly that's why she's ended up sleeping in the annexe out the back – so Father gets his peace and quiet. He says she's losing her marbles. I feel like saying she can borrow some of mine, if that will help.

I overheard Bobby whispering to Father that Ivan Robinson from down the road had lied, saying he was 21 so he'd be allowed to enlist. When his father learned of it, he'd gone to the army recruiting office and tried to convince the sergeant that Ivan was underage and should be discharged, but was told it was too late and there was nothing that could be done!

And Allan Rolland, who they call Roly, joined up by saying he was 39 when he was really 60! He wanted to go and serve with his son. He said he was fit, and that he wouldn't let age be an excuse for being a slacker. I hope Mother doesn't get to hear about any of this or she'll never speak again.

I still remember the day Bobby left. I was allowed off school for the day to go to the railway station with him. He was up at the crack of dawn packing his kit. Mother made me wear my Sunday best, which should really be called my ‘Sunday only’ since it’s my one and only nice dress and therefore can’t possibly be my best, because it’s not better than anything else, if you see what I mean. (It’s what Miss Savage would call a superlative. *Best*, that is, compared to *better*, which is a comparative. I’ve obviously learnt something at school.)

Anyway, Lucy, it’s a red-and-white dress with pink flowers all over it. I wore my special white socks with the frill and my shiny black shoes that are far too big because they are hand-me-downs, so I have to stuff handfuls of newspaper down into the toes. Mother plaited my hair, which takes forever because it’s like a bird’s nest. Maybe that’s why I always squawk like a bird when she brushes hard over my ears. I almost think she does it on purpose.

Then we piled into the gig; all except Gran, who said she was feeling poorly and wanted a bit of shut-eye before the Germans attacked. I think she might secretly be going to hunt down her marbles. Or work out how to steal mine.

When we arrived at the station, there were hundreds of people everywhere. Bobby barely said goodbye before

he was swallowed up in the crowd. I gripped Mother's hand tightly and neither of us spoke. After what seemed like hours, a brass band banged along the decorated platform, followed by all the soldiers, who looked so proud and happy. I strained to catch a glimpse of Bobby but I couldn't see him anywhere. All the soldiers looked the same in their khaki uniforms and lemon-squeezer hats, all marching in time. *Left, right, left, right. Attention!*

Everyone was shouting and cheering, and all the women were hugging and kissing their boys. After they boarded the train we returned home but nobody said a word. Not even one.

I was so tired after our long day, especially as we were late home because Ned, our horse, somehow managed to get a stone wedged between one of his shoes and the frog of his foot. No, he didn't start croaking(!) but he went lame, so Mother and I sat shivering silently in the cold wind while Father set to work removing it.

Thursday, 29th August

Dear Lucy Locket,

Apologies, Lucy, but I've been a bit sidetracked, talking all about my precious Bobby. What I really wanted to do was tell you how I found you.

Well, Mother and Father were so busy poring over the newspaper and the long list of names of people who've been killed in this horrid war that they didn't notice me fossicking about in their wardrobe, looking for any coins that might have fallen out of Father's old trousers.

I didn't manage to find any, although I don't know why I expected to. This war sure hasn't made us rich. But I did find you in a pile of Father's old farm socks that Mother is set to darn. You were tied up with a piece of wool. Father had written down some columns of figures that I couldn't read and he probably couldn't either, what with his poor eyesight. So I ripped out the used pages from your beginning. I hope you feel all right about that. Like Mother says, some people deserve a fresh start. Especially with this war going on. She says it's killing the flower of our youth.

Lucy Locket lost her pocket,
Kitty Fisher found it.
Not a penny was there in it,
Only ribbon round it.

So, my new friend Lucy Locket, it all seems to fit ...
don't you think?

Friday, 30th August



Dear Lucy Locket,

It was such a struggle to wake up this morning. Last night we had a storm. I snuggled up in bed and watched it coming in for ages. The clouds kept gathering speed and whirling about in circles, getting darker and darker, and the wind howled louder and louder like it was in pain.

I don't know what time I finally nodded off, but the next thing I knew it was 6 a.m. and Mother was standing in the doorway with her candle flickering. After she left I must have fallen straight back to sleep, because suddenly she was back in my room, shouting and yelling loud enough to wake the dead, let alone me.

So I had to race down the garden path to the cold dunny quick smart and then back to the kitchen for a wash in the basin before racing out the door to school. I didn't have time to eat my breakfast, let alone do my chores, so I hope Father doesn't find out I didn't feed the hens, collect the eggs, bring the water up from the creek or milk Betsy. I suppose I'll have to do them after school, when I normally milk Betsy again, separate the cream and chop the firewood.

With any luck, Mother will sneakily do them for me!

My black stockings were so itchy walking to school

(oh, to have a pair of Lily of France), and I was feeling so tired and hungry that I couldn't help yelling at the driver of a trap who drove straight past without bothering to pick me up. Miserable git, especially in this cold. I shouted out, but he just galloped right by me. I could still see the white steam from the horse's nostrils and hear its hooves clattering on the cold, hard ground long after they'd passed.

Last week, a driver turned around and caught Charles Moses riding on the back of his gig and lashed out viciously with his whip. It went clean through Charles's trousers and you could still see the red marks across his legs for days afterwards. No wonder they call them 'traps'!

Wednesday, 4th September



Dear Lucy Locket,

I will tell you what school is like with our teacher, Miss Savage, who truly and utterly suits her name. She always dresses in black, like she's in mourning, with her hair pulled tightly back in a severe bun. And she doesn't go anywhere without her trusty parasol, which she constantly flicks back and forth. She looks like a magpie and starts the day by screeching just like one.

“ARMS FORWARD, MARCH!”

We big children march in lines like soldiers into the top room, while the littlies head into the bottom room. Then it’s, “Good moorning, Miss Saaavaage,” before we sit down in orderly rows.

This morning she ordered us to run five times around the playground to warm up before we were allowed into the classroom, which is so draughty it whistles like a boiling kettle. We take it in turns to sit by the narrow black stove with its chimney pipe going up through the ceiling, but we have to keep the fire stoked up with wood and coal we collect from the wood shed.

It’s no half measures: you either melt up the front by the fire or freeze to death down the back. Today, though, strike me down if Miss Savage didn’t let those of us down the back come forward and warm our hands near the fire. I’d have liked to have put my feet right inside like I do at home, it was so bitter.

Every morning she calls out our names, and we have to answer, “Present, Miss,” before she marks a cross in her book. But this morning, when she called out, “Percy Smith?” there was no reply.

“*Percy Smith?*”

Silence.

“Playing truant again, I see,” said Miss Savage. “Well, I’ll have something to say about that.”

Percy's father has already had to pay out so many pounds in truancy fines. And it's not as if it's harvest season, when Percy has a valid excuse to skip school. (We older children are allowed to help with the harvest because all hands are needed to bring in the crops.) I think the writing's on the wall for Percy. As Gran says, "He's going to be up the creek without a paddle!"

Then it was arithmetic. We have to memorise everything off by heart and chant our times tables like a pandemonium of parrots: "One and one are two-o-o, two and two are fo-o-our . . ." All the while, Miss Savage yells out instructions: "Again! Repeat! Slates out!"

The slates are kept in slots at the back of our desks. I detest the squeak and grating of the slate pencils on them. It fair makes my teeth tingle.

Mother told me that during the air raids over in England, my posh cousin Constance has to remove her slate from its slot and lie it flat on her desk. Then she crawls underneath her desk and places her hands on her head before singing, "There'll always be an England . . ."

And sadly there'll always be a Miss Savage. So maybe I should just hide under my desk, put my hands on my head and start singing.

Maybe Miss Savage should too, because she looks wildly unhappy much of the time. But she looks

especially glum at the end of the year when the inspector arrives for the annual examinations. I think it sends prickly shivers down even her cold spine to think that the entire year's work could end in a BIG FILTHY FAIL. The inspector, Mr Toon, insists we call him Sir Toon. He has a very shiny, black moustache and beady little black eyes, exactly like pieces of coal. He struts about, poking and banging his stick on our desks, half scaring us out of our wits, wherever they are.

Before he arrives, we have to make sure that everything is spick and span. All the inkwells have to be cleaned and topped up and the blackboards wiped down. And Miss Savage gives us tests in readiness for the big day. I always feel so nervous, like a bubble about to burst. Sir Toon the spoon doesn't stop asking us questions and is always peering over our shoulders to see what we are writing, which is very disturbing. I can never concentrate, and end up staring blankly at the Roman numerals on the clock or at the picture of King George V on the wall, who looks awfully serious and kind of bored, which is how kings are meant to look, I suppose.

But if I don't get a pass I'll have to stay with Miss Savage, like Percy, who didn't get 50% in all his subjects so, even though he's 13, he's still in Standard 2. Which is probably why he's happier playing hooky instead of coming to school.

When I got home, Mother was in the scullery making jam jars. She's got this iron ring with a handle that she heats to red hot and then slides it down the neck of a bottle, which has a little cold water in the bottom of it. Then, SNAP, off comes the neck and she has a jam jar. Next, she sticks newspaper around the jars using flour-and-water paste. In spring we'll pick gooseberries and boysenberries and blackcurrants and make some delicious fruit jam.

She was singing:

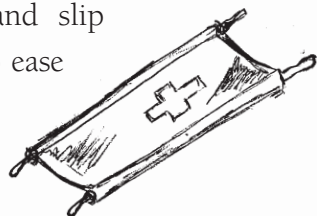
"Keep the home fires burning
While your hearts are yearning.
Tho' your lads are far away
They dream of home.

There's a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining.
Turn the dark cloud inside out
Till the boys come home."

Mother always sings or hums when she's thinking of Bobby. Maybe it gives her strength, because we haven't heard from him for a while. He's in Flanders now, which is in Belgium, on the other side of the world, rescuing all those wounded soldiers. He has to carry them on stretchers (which are two long poles with a piece of sacking tied between them) over bumpy, muddy roads

to the safety of the dressing stations, where doctors and orderlies bandage them up and slip morphia pills under their tongues to ease the pain a bit.

Meanwhile, he's got to dodge the shelling going on all around him and not collapse from exhaustion, because there are so many injured to be carried away. He's brave, is our Bobby. Being a stretcher-bearer is one of the most dangerous jobs you can have in the war. Gran says that she hopes the chap holding the other end of the stretcher isn't too much taller than Bobby, otherwise the wounded soldiers will think they're heading downhill all the time and might go flying off the end.



I pray to God to keep Bobby safe from those tanks they've started using, which are these machines that go around blowing people up. And as Gran says, I'd better pray for the wounded, that they don't land face-down in all that beastly mud!

When Bobby first enlisted two years ago he was sent to Trentham Military Camp near Wellington for army training. Although he was stationed in the North Island, Mother said that at least he was within shooting distance (which I thought was strange, because I'd have thought she wouldn't want him to be anywhere near any shooting!).

Even though Bobby volunteered to be a soldier, he'd be forced to sign up anyway now, because the Government has introduced compulsory military training, which means all men between the ages of 20 and 45 years have to go and fight in this war. If you decide you don't want to go and fight, then you're called a 'conscientious objector', and you could find yourself behind bars. I know, because at Trentham Bobby had to guard the 'conchies,' as they called them at the camp. He had to stand inside the door with his bayonet, keeping a sharp eye on them. Conchies won't join the army because they don't believe in fighting. They believe in peace, and refuse point-blank to enter into any sort of combat. A few of them have even escaped into the bush to avoid going to jail.

Thursday, 5th September

Dear Lucy Locket,

Well, our class certainly needed to escape into the bush or somewhere today. Miss Savage was on the warpath, and God help anyone who stood in her way – like Cyril Archibald, who was strapped for writing with his left hand. We're all supposed to write with our right hand, but he switched hands when Miss Savage's back

was turned. Unfortunately she caught him and gave him six of the best, and he cried like a baby. Her motto is, “Who spareth the rod spoileth the child.” But I felt sorry for Cyril. Why does it matter which hand you use? Then she ordered him to sit with us girls. That’s the worst punishment ever, if you’re a boy.

And if that wasn’t enough, us girls got a right royal hauling over the coals because we went leapfrogging across the boy’s part of the playground. They were too busy playing football and blowing up frogs with straws to even notice. But we were told in no uncertain terms that it just wasn’t the sort of behaviour expected from young ladies. You know, Lucy, I’m wondering if being a young lady might not be all it’s cracked up to be, having to be all lah-di-dah-ladylike-mind-your-p’s-and-q’s, and on top of that being lumbered with piles of washing and cooking.

And if you’re not keeping the home fires burning, you’re supposed to be helping with the war effort, like all those girls working in the British arsenals, testing fuses and filling bombs. It all sounds like it’s jolly hard work and very dangerous.

Maybe I should have been a Freddy instead of a Freda. Don’t worry, Lucy, you’d still be my best friend. Cross my heart and hope to die. Well, not really.