'*The Plague Letters* is a riotous delve into the dark medical world of Restoration London and, in her heroine Penelope and the hapless Symon, V.L. Valentine has given us an appealing and truly unique pairing'

S.G. Maclean, author of *The Seeker*

'With its endearing, comic characters and crisp, spirited prose, this witty portrayal of seventeenth-century Britain pulls you into the gruesome underworld of the London plague. *The Plague Letters* is a gripping whodunnit with a sinister twist'

Jennifer Ryan, author of *The Chilbury Ladies' Choir*

'V.L. Valentine drops us deep into a single deadly year, 1665, into a sickening, increasingly desperate London wonderfully evoked. With meticulous detail, excellently chosen, she compels us to experience a squalid and horrifying world that ultimately reaches hope through its two sympathetically drawn principal characters. A terrific read!'

Alix Nathan, author of *The Warlow Experiment*

'Dark, haunting and unexpectedly witty – a journey back to seventeenth-century London, where a serial killer is even more terrifying than the raging sickness. Suspenseful from start to finish'

Susan Elia MacNeal, author of *Mr Churchill's Secretary*

'A gorgeous, darkly witty novel that transports the reader to the London of Charles II and the bubonic plague. In this richly layered tale of a rector who teams up with a maid of rare gifts to find both a cure and a sadistic killer, Valentine takes the reader to squalid back alleys and serene country estates with equal aplomb, creating a marvellous cast of ghosts, inebriates, brave tots, licentious aristocrats and misguided lovers. Those looking for a wonderfully entertaining escape from our own dark times need look no further'

Mariah Fredericks, author of *A Death of No Importance*

'A funny, fascinating and gripping adventure tale. It's as if V.L. Valentine holds up a magic mirror to reflect a lesson in time for us now'

Janice Hallett, author of *The Appeal*

'A glorious whodunnit. I loved the characters, and fell in love with its world'

Leonora Nattrass, author of *Black Drop*

The Plague Letters

V.L. Valentine

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
VIPER, part of Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

Copyright © V.L. Valentine, 2021

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

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

ISBN 978 1 78816 4535
Export ISBN 978 1 78816 4542
eISBN 978 1 78283 6568

CAST OF CHARACTERS

All Loyal [Mostly] Subjects to King Charles II

IN LONDON

The Rector's Household, James Street, Covent Garden

Mr Symon Patrick, Rector of St Paul's Church, Covent Garden

Joan, Housekeeper

Nell, Maid

Jack, Errand Boy

Mite and Tripe, the Cats

The Society for the Prevention and Cure of Plague

Dr Alexander Burnett, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, of Fenchurch Street

Mr Lodowick Mincy, Surgeon, by the Maypole, the Strand

Mr William Boghurst, Apothecary, at the Sign of the White Hart, Holborn

Mr Valentine Greatrakes, Irish Mystic, Temporarily of Pall Mall

The Staff, St Paul's Church, Covent Garden

Francis Bernard, Sexton

Penelope, Misc.

And . . .

Sir Denis Gauden, Navy Victualler, Little Tower Hill

General George Monck, Duke of Albemarle, Overseer of the Western Outparishes

Lady Katherine Digby, Heneretta Street, Covent Garden

Mr Unthankes, Sexton, St Gabriel Fenchurch

Theodora Thurgood and Family, of Leg Alley, St Martin's in the Fields

IN BURNTWOOD, ESSEX

Lady Elizabeth Gauden, Temporarily of Hutton Hall, Burntwood

Mrs Abigail Pheasunt, Sister to Lady Gauden, Hutton Hall, Burntwood

Mr John Evelyn, Fellow of the Royal Society, Naval Commissioner, of Sayes Court

LONDON

1665

PRELUDE

The Parish of St Paul Covent Garden

He checked his pockets, started out. *Such a clean, crisp time of day*, he thought. Just before daybreak, the world no longer black and not yet that garish yellow, but the colour of a deep sea. A subtle glow suffused the sky, but it was still dark enough to hide whatever needed to be hidden.

He took a deep breath, the morning mist soothing his lungs. Plucked a leaf off a young elm, crumbled it, coating his fingers with its tangy scent. London belonged only to him at this moment, and he was in love with it. Well, there were a few others out. He tried to catch the eye of the early-morning clerks and servants passing by. *They are like me*, he thought, *immune to sloth and joyfully springing out of bed at this godly hour. And for our dutiful efforts, we will be rewarded with the companionship of this blessed and luxurious dawn. We are special.* He smiled. *Yes, we are.*

He turned on to Long Acre. A newer lane, separating the parishes of St Martin's in the Fields and St Paul Covent Garden. Not quite London, not quite Westminster. Not yet

crooked and festering. The land ripped from the Westminster monks to make a royal road that connected the king's palace at Whitehall in the west with the ancient walled city in the east. Not that merry King Charlie ever made the journey. Why would he? So dismal that end of town.

He surveyed the shops and homes lining the street, inspected them for the day's first signs of life. A candle flickering behind an upstairs curtain, a dog let out a door. The homes and businesses were tall and proper, made of brick; the dwellings of sturdy, prosperous folk – carriage makers, furniture makers, drapers. Still, the lane was a little too exposed for his taste. He headed south towards the heart of Covent Garden. He had seen so many possibilities on earlier walks, a veritable banquet! But he would skip the sweets. Go for strength. Look for those with an inviolate air. One in particular had stood out.

He walked by a saddler's shop, a sempstress, a tavern. A gust of wind, a creaking of hinges. He looked up to see a green dragon swinging over his head. Perhaps afterwards he would come back for breakfast. Some oysters, some ale, then a rest. He peered through the window. A bent bone of a girl, chest caved in, behind the bar, spit-shining the pewter. Consumptive. No doubt they shoved her into the kitchens come opening time.

He turned on to James Street, a lane even newer than Long Acre. A wide, well-cobbled street that led right into Covent Garden's famed piazza. He closed his eyes, said a prayer then quietly made his way to the corner of James and Hart Street and, ah, there she was, as expected. The clergyman's maid. Up early (good girl!), sweeping the front step. He fumbled around in his satchel, pretended to search through his papers, all the while taking her measure out of the corner of his eye.

She wasn't long from the country, this one. Thick wrists, thick ankles. No cap to cover her head, luscious knots of buttercup hair on display for all. He wanted to part little sections of it and hide things in it. Shoulders so broad and straight he could use them as a bookshelf. He knew the clergyman. A plain man, her master. Plain, like his church. The clergyman did have good hair and a handsome calf, he would give him that. But the man was also in a bit over his head. He was not yet five and thirty but already a rector in one of London's wealthiest, most prestigious parishes. God knows why. He supposed it was because the man was affable. Pliable. An unwitting pawn for his patrons. Why he himself was about to take this risk with the man's maid. How could he not? She was so perfect! He had searched and searched, was running out of time, and he really did need the best.

He hurried up to her, took a quick breath. Began.

'My dear! Oh miss!'

She broke from her sweeping, looked him over, then turned back to her task. A positive sign. Strong-willed. That flash in her eyes, fascinating. A jutting chin, must be some Prussian in her. Or a lot. He needed to know these things. Know anything and everything about her.

He tapped his cane on the cobbles. 'Would you like a better sort of work? Something less dreary? Would you like to come work for me?'

She gave him a ferocious look.

He knew exactly what she was thinking. 'No such thing, bless us, no! The girl who watered my plants, she's left me. Gone to care for sick family. I hope it's not *the* sickness, but if it were, it is for the best that she's gone, I suppose. It's just . . . I have a great deal of plants.'

Her arms went slack, the broom dangled from her hand.

'Sir, you feeling all right?'

'Quite serious, my child. I have so many plants. Big house. Lots of stairs. Inside and out. It is a lot of walking. But no other duties required. Well, if you could write, that would be helpful. Can you write?'

She looked ready to spit. She had good instincts then, a keen mind! Could such traits be protective?

'Course I can't write.' She snapped the broom upright and started sweeping again.

He stepped closer, angling his cane between her legs and the broom. 'I could teach you! Would you like that? And in the meantime, you only need to make an X on the chalkboard for each plant you water.'

She stopped. He could see her working out the calculations in her head. The promise of lessons would be hard to resist. He fetched the coins from his pocket, held them out to her. 'An advance payment, perhaps, to seal the deal? A little more if you come with me now?'

She was beginning to waver. Why? She'd learn to read. Get a small purse. What more could she want? Ah . . . yes, of course.

He smiled, a twinkle in his eye. 'Might I ask, do you like almond cake? Curd cake? We always have plenty.'

Quick as a whip, she knocked his cane out of his hand with her broom. 'Scut off, you old mackerel,' she said, taking another swipe at him before fleeing down a passage between the houses.

He sighed, bent over to pick up his cane. He'd misjudged her. Not Prussian blood at all. Irish. He took out a kerchief and polished the brass handle, then followed her into the passage.

JUNE

In the evening home to supper; and there, to my great trouble, hear that the plague is come into the City; but where should it begin but in my good friend and neighbour's, Dr Burnett, in Fanchurch Street: which in both points troubles me mightily.

Samuel Pepys, Naval Clerk, Seething Lane

I

A Departure From Half Moone Street, Covent Garden

Penelope dragged herself towards the church. Her strength nearly gone, the world before her in shadow. She leaned against a hitching post to catch her breath; she wouldn't let herself sit, no. If she could get to the church, the rector, she would have a chance. Mr Patrick was his name. Symon Patrick. A good name. Pleasingly plosive. P-P-P Patrick. But Penelope was a better name.

The night her luck turned ill had been as hot as Satan's belly, the winds stolen away. She cursed her master, the baker on Half Moone Street, as she thought back upon it. That doughy old hairball. Cursed his wife, cursed the ghosts, too, for there had not been a whisper from them of what was to come. One was by her side now, a young woman with a sorrowful face and dressed in a gown of ashes. The wraith tried to take her by the elbow and guide her along. Penelope had long since stopped wondering whether any of these phantoms often about her were real, or a distorted attempt by her mind to ease her loneliness. For no matter what she tried, she

could not be rid of them. 'Do you mean to help me,' Penelope hissed, 'or take me to Hell?!'

That night – how many days ago was it now? – she had woken up with a terrible itching. Tore through the knots in her hair to get at her scalp. Scratched her toes against her shins. Shot out her arms like a possessed marionette to get at her shoulders, her back, behind her knees. She was used to sharing the baker's garret with all sorts of creatures. They scuffled and clicked around her in the dark. In the mornings, she'd sweep up their dried, feathery little corpses. But that night, something had agitated the fleas and she woke up with welts the size of pinpricks all over. Perhaps it had been the full moon, low in the sky and swelled up to thrice its size, pulling on them, provoking them all.

She had liked the baker's garret in a way, surrounded by sacks of yeast and sugar, barrels of wheat flour, rye, barley and lots of white flour – most of the baker's customers were rich and preferred their loaves fluffy and white. (She herself was partial to oatmeal; she had stitched up a half-empty sack of it for a pillow.) When a new sack or barrel was needed downstairs, they would hook it to a pulley outside one of the garret windows and lower it to the ground. It was one of the better places she'd stayed. Dry and clean; the nutty smell of baking bread warmed the air most hours of the day.

She remembered getting up to search for a balm to stop the itching, and she'd heard the baker and his wife stirring below. A jolt of panic. Had she overslept? She looked out the window for the moon, judged it to be two in the morning. Nearly time for her to wake up, get the ovens going, but why was the family awake? They were never up until the ovens were hot. She had pulled a tub of lemon balm out of her bag and rubbed it on her legs and arms. Threw on her dress, wrestled her hair under a

cap. Tugged out a few greasy clumps for show, tied on a dirty apron and bumped her way down the stairs.

Light had flickered from under the door of the master's chamber. She knocked, called out, 'All's well?'

The door flung open, Mr Gilbert stood before her, night-shirt over his breeches. 'Penelope!' He eyed her snake's-nest hair in disgust. *He was one for faces*, she thought, forcing herself not to comment on his own thick mat of hair creeping out from under his shirt and up his throat. 'I . . . you . . .' He looked over his shoulder at his wife, who was fluttering around behind him. He turned back to Penelope. She lifted up her chin, dared him to comment on the lard she'd deliberately smeared on her apron. 'Go downstairs, clean the ashes out of the ovens. We're closing shop, leaving town.'

She had worried about this. Their custom had dropped to a trickle as the parish emptied out. And she had heard the day before there was sickness at the other end of Half Moone Street.

The Gilberts' maid elbowed past Penelope and dumped a pile of linens into an open chest. She was a pretty thing, Deb was, a buttery little biscuit. As she swept out of the room, she refused to meet Penelope's eye.

'The cloth!' her mistress yelled after her. 'The curtains!'

'And the plate!' Mr Gilbert said. 'When Mark gets back with the cart, get him to packing the plate!'

'What are we to do about my mother's chair?' Mrs Gilbert asked, more to herself than anyone.

'And the dogs, are they tied up? There's no time to chase after them! Penelope, see to it.' Mr Gilbert started to close the door on her; she thrust her foot out, blocking it.

'Where are we to go?'

He paused. Looked back at his wife. 'Canterbury. Cousins

there. Be fast about it, girl. Anything of metal we'll need to lock up.' She heard horses clopping up the street, heard them stop in front of the bakery.

'What time are we to leave?'

The baker gave her an exasperated look. 'You're to stay; we haven't enough space.'

'Shall I watch the stores?' Her eyes lit up, she imagined herself standing guard by the door, a big club in her hand. Or swinging down from the pulley, bashing intruders on the head.

'Mark is to do it.' He stared down at his hands, stabbed his fingernails into his thumb.

'I'll watch him, then.'

'A girl like you, here? Unsupervised, with Mark? Heavens, no. You'll have to find another place . . . though who will take you in, looking like that . . .'

'Looking like what?' *Go on, say it,* she thought.

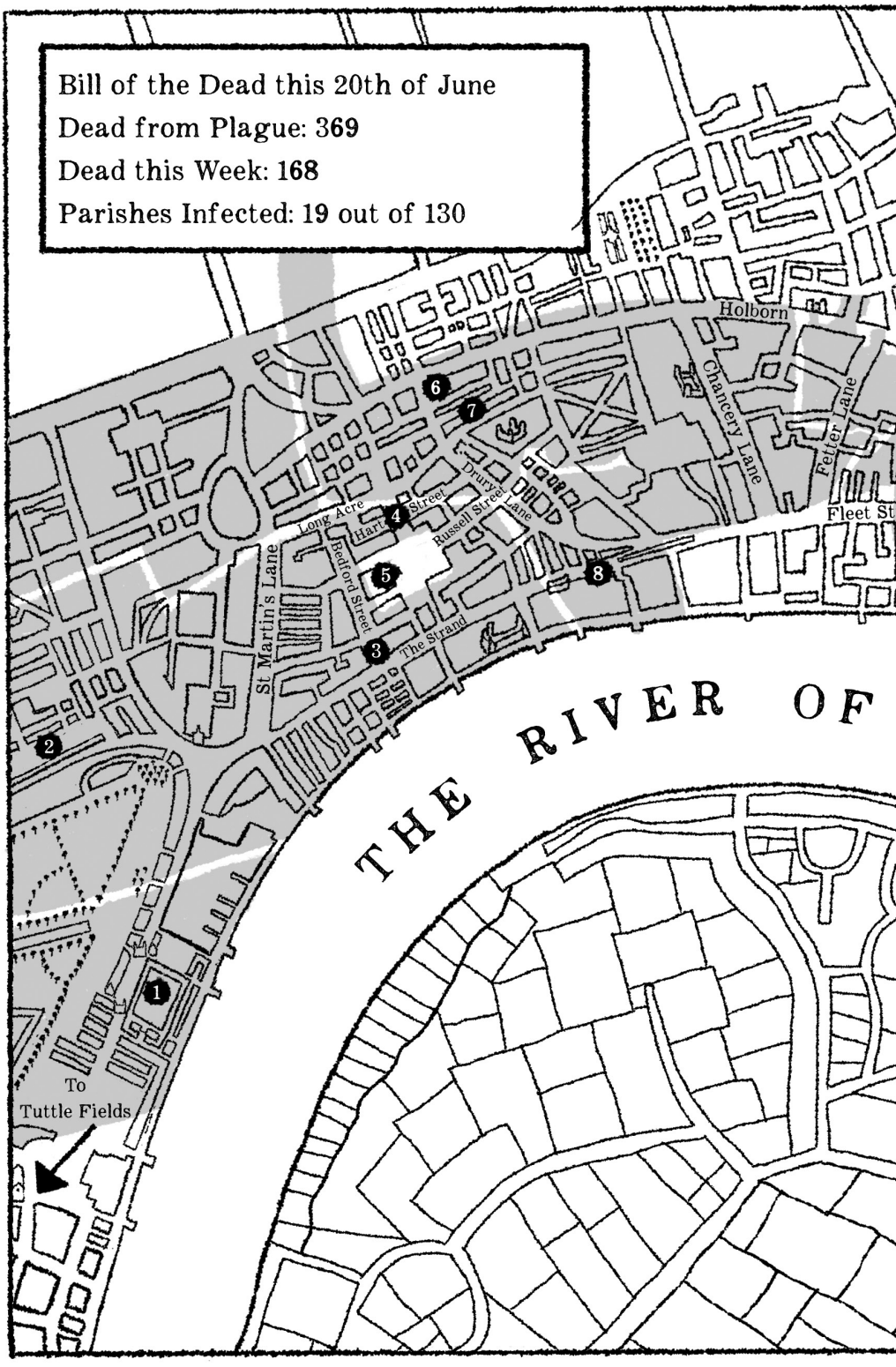
The baker moved to shut the door. She put both hands out to stop it, pushed it back open with her shoulders. 'Is Deb going with you?'

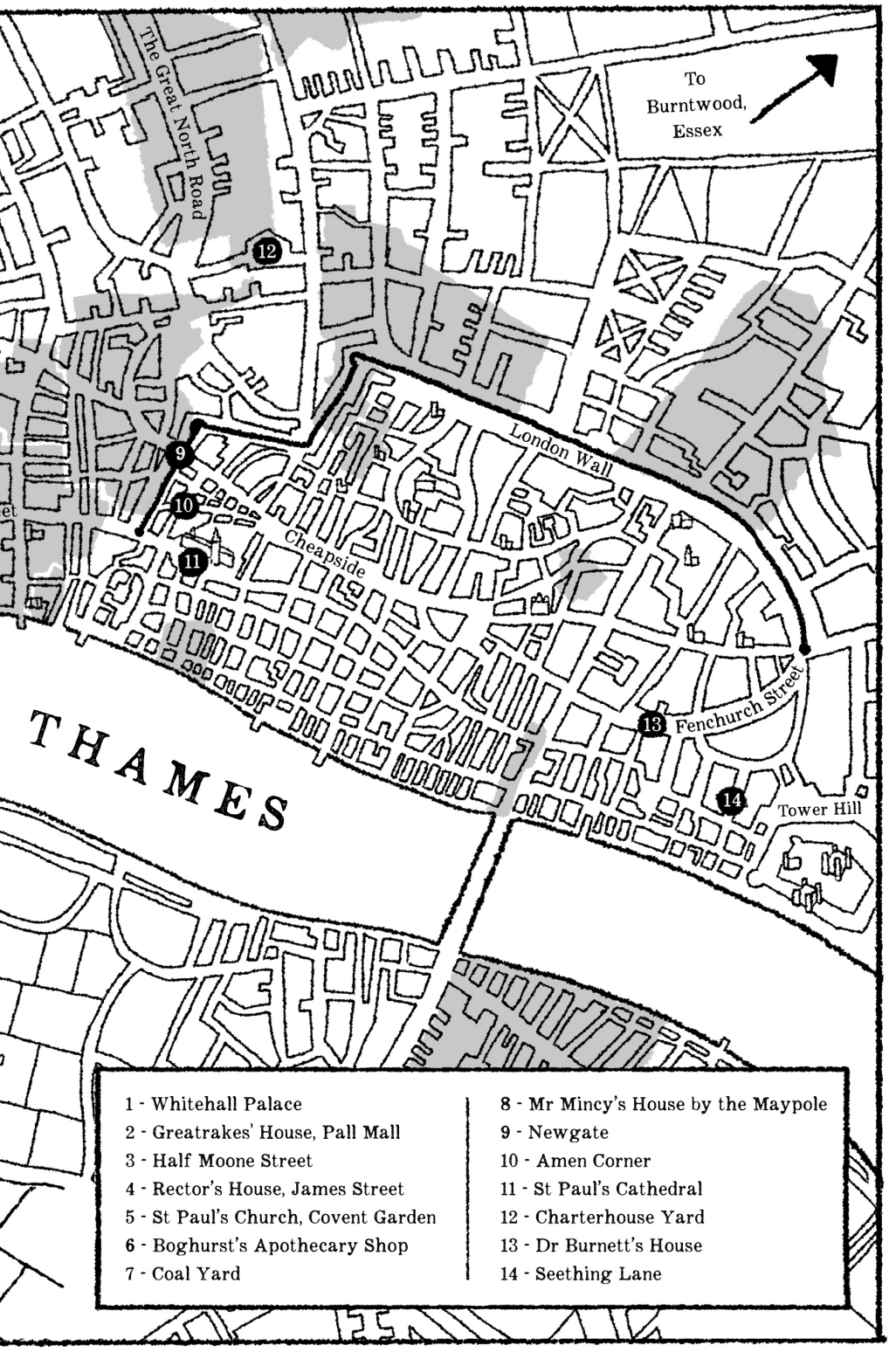
'The ovens, Penelope!' he yelled, trying to shove her back. She craned her head around his fat arms; she'd get one last word in, she would. She cried out to his wife, 'Oh mistress, did you know? When you go to visit your mother, Deb keeps the bed warm for the master.' She heard the crash of a ewer followed by a murderous scream. She let the door slam shut and ran up the stairs to collect her things. Not much there; she kept her treasures elsewhere.

She had been sorry to lose her garret, the chimney that kept it so warm in the winter. She'd settled right into a decent routine after she'd dealt with the baker's cockle hands. Poor Deb, she wasn't as skilled. Didn't know how to fend for herself.

Penelope, however, always had a plan. She was going to cross the river, spend the summer helping in the fields, wait out the sickness, wait for the baker to return, then burn him down. But now, she needed help.

She dropped down to her hands and knees. She could do this, get to the church. *It's not so far*, she tried to convince herself. The rector would help her. He had done so before. She had been on her way to deliver a sack of bread over at Hart Street. A boy had darted from the alley, grabbed at her skirts, then another took her by the shoulders and spun her around. Next thing she knew she was surrounded by them, filthy boys, pawing at her, pinching her and then a blow to her back that knocked her down. The beggars ripped the bag of bread off her shoulder and as fast as they had come they were gone. She had stayed on the ground for a moment and closed her eyes; she wanted to remember their faces so she could find them again. Of a sudden, two hands slipped under her arms and she was ready to kick, but then she heard the whisper, 'I've got you.' It was the priest, Mr Patrick. 'I saw them,' he said. 'My man Bernard, he'll find them. They'll be worse for it.' She stared at him, waited for the trick; there was always a trick with men. 'I expect your baker will blame you for this,' he continued. 'Here is what we shall do.' He asked her to take him to her shop then bade her to wait at the corner. He went inside and came out with a dozen loaves, a replacement for those stolen from her. He bowed and left, asked nothing more of her. Except that she come to his church when she could. And now, that was exactly what she was trying to do. When she reached the piazza, reached his church, she would ask him for a dry, clean corner. Some water. A home. A safe one. A place where she wouldn't have to die alone.


Bill of the Dead this 20th of June
Dead from Plague: 369
Dead this Week: 168
Parishes Infected: 19 out of 130
Holborn
Chancery Lane
Fetter Lane
Fleet St
Drury Lane
Russell Street
Long Acre
Hart Street
Bedford Street
St Martin's Lane
The Strand
THE RIVER OF
To
Tuttle Fields
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8


To
Burntwood,
Essex
The Great North Road
12
9
10
11
London Wall
Cheapside
THAMES
13
Fenchurch Street
14
Tower Hill
1 - Whitehall Palace
2 - Greatrakes' House, Pall Mall
3 - Half Moone Street
4 - Rector's House, James Street
5 - St Paul's Church, Covent Garden
6 - Boghurst's Apothecary Shop
7 - Coal Yard
8 - Mr Mincy's House by the Maypole
9 - Newgate
10 - Amen Corner
11 - St Paul's Cathedral
12 - Charterhouse Yard
13 - Dr Burnett's House
14 - Seething Lane

2

Saturday, June 24th
James Street, Covent Garden

MIDSUMMER. THE HOTTEST DAY Symon Patrick ever did feel in his life. His girl Nell slammed down a cup of whey next to him and stalked away.

He was sitting in his new little closet off the bedchamber. *Roasting was more like it*. He frowned. He bolted up and tried to open the window more. It refused. He let out a deep breath and collapsed back into his chair, stared at the wet letter before him. This was the third time she'd spilled something on him this morning. After some months away, he had returned the night before to a home in uproar.

Another of his maids – a girl he'd brought on for the spring – had run off and his household blamed him for it.

'Told you she were no good,' said his housekeeper Joan.

'She et like a pig,' said Nell.

They were angry that he took her on. Angry that she left without a word, and now they were angry that Symon hadn't moved heaven and earth to find her.

'A girl like that, out there on her own,' said Joan. 'And what

with the sickness spreading so! It ain't right! Trouble clings to her like soot on linen.'

'I don't know what you mean, Joan,' was all he said. Though he knew exactly what she meant. He had taken the girl on as a favour to his brother, who lived across the Thames in Battersea. His brother claimed a need for economy, but there was such an urgency behind the request, and the girl so beautiful – a perfect peach of a thing – that Symon suspected his brother had done with her what he would and been found out by his wife. Symon couldn't afford to take her on permanently, but he agreed she could stay until another place was found for her; she could help Joan and Nell give the house a thorough cleaning while he was away. He rubbed his eyes; he would have no peace until he found the girl. 'And then have her beaten for her cheek'! Joan demanded. 'And tossed back out!' Nell added.

The girl had been gone for several weeks now; Symon had written to his brother when he first heard, hoping she had run back to him. But all Symon got in return was a vituperative letter blaming him for his carelessness. He had his sexton ask around the parish, and then returned to the business of restoring his health at the spa in Northamptonshire. He thought the matter well behind him – maids running off, it wasn't unheard of! – until he walked through the door last night.

'If we was to go missing, is that all you'd do for us?' Nell's voice had quivered. 'Write some letters? Then disappear back to your spa?' The girl was all knees and feet and gangly hands. She needed a new dress, Symon thought as he looked at her. She was a severe-looking thing, all in all. Her hair winched back tightly in its braided bun, the way she'd hitch up her cheek and squint her eye when you were talking to her, like

she was taking aim. The other eye was no longer safe either, for it threatened tears.

'Of course not,' said Symon. He gave her an awkward pat on top of her head. 'I'd—'

'Take his dagger and stick whoever took us!' yelled Jack. He had an eye like his sister's. But his peeked out from behind shaggy blond hair and was more quizzical, like he was trying to square something, not shoot it.

Symon had given them both a kiss atop their heads, then gladly closed the bedchamber door on them. But his household found one excuse after another to intrude. Breakfast in bed, which ended up being breakfast on the floor. The gift of whey that turned into a milk bath for his letters. 'Fie,' he snapped. He would write again to his brother, take a sterner tone this time. His brother started this trouble; he should be the one on the hook.

He picked up the soggy letter by the corner and dropped it on to the cold hearth. He gave a quick mop of the desk with his sleeve – damp linen was a blessing in this heat – and pulled out a fresh sheet of paper. Wrote a quick note to his brother, then turned back to his original endeavour. He had been writing to Elizabeth. Or not writing to Elizabeth. He couldn't get past the opening. He tried again:

My Friend,
It happens to be such a busy time that I cannot say all that I would.

He took a sip of the whey, chewed on his quill. He could say nothing that he wanted. The truth would work no magic.

He could not tell her of this foul situation his brother had landed him in. Nor would he frighten her with a tale of his journey home to London the day before. The Great North

Road clogged beyond belief, stuffed with carriages stuffed with people; carts and wagons piled high with chairs and tables, bedding and trunks; crates of chickens and rabbits jammed into the cracks. Nothing moving beyond a crawl. The heat near to unbearable. Through unforgiving clouds of dust, he saw mothers with their eyes closed and fanning themselves uselessly under trees while their overdressed children nipped at each other for the waterskins. Drivers yelled their right of way, oxen refused to budge – the miserable bulldogs and pocket beagles sheltering under them in agreement. Symon's little coach – he was the only one in it – was constantly forced to pull over to make way for those leaving London. Each time he was stalled, he wondered what madness had seized him that he should agree to return when the whole town was fleeing.

A cramp flamed through his belly. The only remedy, his letter. Quill to ink, quill to paper and let the soothing scratches begin.

With what little time I have to mee, I shall tell you that I am troubl'd with the thoughts of what this friendship will do to mee. Am I to believe the dreams that I have lately had of you?

'Mweep.'

Down at his feet, his little cat Mite stared up with her spring-green eyes. 'Mweep,' she said again, cocking her head. She had missed him so. Was she getting fatter? How embarrassing.

'You want some pets? Come here, kitlin.' He gave some quick strokes to her cheek, then resumed his letter.

This evening I shirk no longer. This evening I begin burying the plague dead so that you will not know mee to bee . . . or think mee to bee . . . the most weak, most pathetic, most . . .