

EVERETT-GREEN EVELYN

**THE SIGN OF THE RED
CROSS: A TALE OF
OLD LONDON**

Evelyn Everett-Green

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CHAPTER I. A WARNING WHISPER

"I don't believe a word of it!" cried the Master Builder, with some heat of manner. "It is just an old scare, the like of which I have heard a hundred times ere now. Some poor wretch dies of the sweating sickness, or, at worst, of the spotted fever, and in a moment all men's mouths are full of the plague! I don't believe a word of it!"

"Heaven send you may be right, good friend," quoth Rachel Harmer, as she sat beside her spinning wheel, and spoke to the accompaniment of its pleasant hum. "And yet, methinks, the vice and profligacy of this great city, and the lewdness and wanton wickedness of the Court, are enough to draw down upon us the judgments of Almighty God. The sin and the shame of it must be rising up before Him day and night."

The Master Builder moved a little uneasily in his seat. For his own part he thought no great harm of the roistering, gaming, and gallantries of the Court dandies. He knew that the times were very good for him. Fine ladies were for ever sending for him to alter some house or some room. Gay young husbands, or those who thought of becoming husbands, were seldom content nowadays without pulling their house about their ears, and rebuilding it after some new-fangled fashion copied from France. Or if the structure were let alone, the plenishings must be totally changed; and Master Charles Mason, albeit a builder by trade, and going generally amongst his acquaintances and friends by the name of Master Builder, had of late years taken to a number of kindred avocations in the matter of house plenishings, and so forth. This had brought him no small profit, as well as intimate relations with many a fine household and with many grand folks. Money had flowed apace into his pocket of late. His wife had begun to go about so fine that it was well for her the old sumptuary laws had fallen into practical disuse. His son was an idle young dog, chiefly known to the neighbourhood as being the main leader of a notorious band of Scourers, of which more anon, and many amongst his former friends and associates shook their heads, and declared that Charles Mason was growing so puffed up by wealth that he would scarce vouchsafe a nod to an old acquaintance in the street, unless he were smart and prosperous looking.

The Master Builder had a house upon Old London Bridge. Once he had carried on his business there, but latterly he had grown too fine for that. To the disgust of his more simple-minded neighbours, he had taken some large premises in Cheapside, where he displayed many fine stuffs for upholstery and drapery, where the new-fashioned Indian carpets were displayed to view, and fine gilded furniture from France, which a little later on became the rage all through the country. His own house was now nothing more than a dwelling place for himself and his family; even his apprentices and workmen were lodged elsewhere. The neighbours, used to simpler ways, shook their heads, and prophesied that the end of so much pride would be disaster and ruin. But year after year went by, and the Master Builder grew richer and richer, and could afford to laugh at the prognostications of those about him, of which he was very well aware.

He was perhaps somewhat puffed up by his success. He was certainly proud of the position he had made. He liked to see his wife sweep along the streets in her fine robes of Indian silk, which seemed to set a great gulf between her and her neighbours. He allowed his son to copy the fopperies of the Court gallants, and even to pick up the silly French phrases which made the language at Court a mongrel mixture of bad English and vile French. All these things pleased him well, although he

himself went about clad in much the same fashion as his neighbours, save that the materials of his clothing were finer, and his frills more white and crisp; and it was in his favour that his friendship with his old friend James Harmer had never waned, although he knew that this honest tradesman by no means approved his methods.

Perhaps in his heart of hearts he preferred the comfortable living room of his neighbour to the grandeur insisted upon by his wife at home. At any rate, he found his way three or four evenings in the week to Harmer's fireside, and exchanged with him the news of the day, or retailed the current gossip of the city.

Harmer was by trade a gold and silver lace maker. He carried on his business in the roomy bridge house which he occupied, which was many stories high, and contained a great number of rooms. He housed in it a large family, several apprentices, two shopmen, and his wife's sister, Dinah Morse, at such times as the latter was not out nursing the sick, which was her avocation in life.

Mason and Harmer had been boys together, had inherited these two houses on the bridge from their respective fathers, and had both prospered in the world. But Harmer was only a moderately affluent man, having many sons and daughters to provide for; whereas Mason had but one of each, and had more than one string to his bow in the matter of money getting.

In the living room of Harmer's house were assembled that February evening six persons. It was just growing dusk, but the dancing firelight gave a pleasant illumination. Harmer and Mason were seated on opposite sides of the hearth in straight-backed wooden armchairs, and both were smoking. Rachel sat at her wheel, with her sister Dinah near to her; and in the background hovered two fine-looking young men, the two eldest sons of the household—Reuben, his father's right-hand man in business matters now; and Dan, who had the air and appearance of a sailor ashore, as, indeed, was the case with him.

It was something which Dinah Morse had said that had evoked the rather fierce disclaimer from the Master Builder, with the rejoinder by Rachel as to the laxity of the times; and now it was Dinah's voice which again took up the word.

"Whether it be God's judgment upon the city, or whether it be due to the carelessness of man, I know not," answered Dinah quietly; "I only say that the Bill of Mortality just published is higher than it has been this long while, and that two in the Parish of St. Giles have died of the plague."

"Well, St. Giles' is far enough away from us," said the Master Builder. "If the Magistrates do their duty, there is no fear that it will spread our way. There were deaths over yonder of the plague last November, and it seems as though they had not yet stamped out the germs of it. But a little firmness and sense will do that. We have nothing to fear. So long as the cases are duly reported, we shall soon be rid of the pest."

Dinah pressed her lips rather closely together. She had that fine resolute cast of countenance which often characterizes those who are constantly to be found at the bedside of the sick. Her dress was very plain, and she wore a neckerchief of soft, white Indian muslin about her throat, instead of the starched yellow one which was almost universal amongst the women citizens of the day. Her hands were large and white and capable looking. Her only ornament was a chatelaine of many chains, to which were suspended the multifarious articles which a nurse has in constant requisition. In figure she was tall and stately, and in the street strangers often paused to give her a backward glance. She was greatly in request amongst the sick of the better class, though she was often to be found beside the sick poor, who could give her nothing but thanks for her skilled tendance of them.

"Ay, truly, so long as the cases are duly reported," she repeated slowly. "But do you think, sir, that that is ever done where means may be found to avoid it?"

The Master Builder looked a little startled at the question.

"Surely all good folks would wish to do what was right by their neighbours. They would not harbour a case of plague, and not make it known in the right quarter."

"You think not, perhaps. Had you seen as much of the sick as I have, you would know that men so fear and dread the distemper, as they most often call it, that they will blind their eyes to it to the very last, and do everything in their power to make it out as something other than what they fear. I have seen enough of the ways of folks with sickness to be very sure that all who have friends to protect the fearful secret, will do so if it be possible. It is when a poor stranger dies of a sudden that it becomes known that the plague has found another victim. Why are there double the number of deaths in this week's bill, if more than are set down as such be not the distemper?"

All the faces in the room looked very grave at that, for in truth it was a most disquieting thought. The sailor came a few steps nearer the fire, and remarked:

"It has all come from those hounds of Dutchmen! Right glad am I that we are to go to war with them at last, whether the cause be righteous or not. They have gotten the plague all over their land. I saw men drop down in the streets and die of it when I was last in port there. They send it to us in their merchandise."

"My wife will die of terror if she hears but a whisper of the distemper being anigh us," remarked the Master Builder, with a sigh and a look of uneasiness. "But men are always scaring us with tales of its coming and, after all, there is but a death here and one there, such as any great city may look to have."

At that moment the door was thrown open, and a pretty young damsel, wearing a crimson cloak and hood, stepped lightly in.

"O father, mother, do but come and look!" she cried, with the air of coaxing assurance which bespoke a favoured child. "Such a strange star in the sky! Men in the streets are all looking and pointing; and some say that it is no star, but a comet, and that it predicts some dreadful thing which is coming upon this land. Do come and look at it! There is a clear sky tonight, and one can see it well. And I heard that it has been seen by some before this, when at night the rain clouds have been swept away by the wind. Do come to the window above the river and look! One can see it fine from there."

This sudden announcement, falling just upon the talk of pestilence and peril, caused a certain flutter and sensation through the room. All the persons there rose to their feet and followed the rosy-cheeked maiden out upon the staircase, and to a window from which the great river could be seen flowing beneath. A large expanse of sky could also be commanded from here, and as the inside of the house was almost dark, it was easy to obtain an excellent view of the strange appearance which was attracting so much attention in the streets.

It certainly was no star that was glowing thus with a red and sullen-looking flame. Neither shape nor position in the heavens accorded with that of any star of magnitude.

"It was certainly," so said Reuben Harmer, who had some knowledge of the heavenly bodies, "no star, but one of those travelling meteors or comets which are seen from time to time, and which from remote ages have been declared to foretell calamity to the lands over which they appear to travel."

The Harmer family were godly people of somewhat Puritanic leaning, yet they were by no means entirely free from the superstition of their times, nor would Rachel have called it superstition to regard this manifestation as a warning from God. Why should He not send some such messenger before He proceeded to take vengeance upon an ungodly city? Was not even guilty Sodom warned of its approaching doom?

All faces then were grave, but that of the Master Builder wore a look of fear as well.

"I must to my wife," he said. "If she sees this comet, she will be vastly put about. I must to her side to reassure her. Pray Heaven that no calamity be near to us!"

"Amen!" replied Harmer, gravely; and then the Master Builder retreated down the staircase, whilst from a room below a cheerful voice was heard announcing that supper was ready.

The party therefore all moved downstairs towards the kitchen, where all the meals were taken in company with the apprentices, shopmen, and serving wenches.

Dorcas, the maiden who had brought news of the comet, slipped her hand within Reuben's arm, and asked him in a whisper:

"Thinkest thou, Reuben, that it betides evil to the city?"

"Nay, I know not what to think," he answered. "It is a strange thing, and men often say it betides ill; but I have no knowledge of mine own. I never saw the like before."

"They spoke of it at my Lady Scrope's today," said Dorcas. "I was behind her chair, with her fan and essence bottles, and the lap dogs, when in comes one and another of the old beaux who beguile their leisure with my lady's sharp speeches; and they spoke of this thing, and she laughed them to scorn, and called them fools for listening to old wives' fables. It is her way thus to revile all who come anigh her. She said she had lived through a score of such scares, and would snap her fingers at all the comets of the heavens at once. Sometimes it makes me tremble to hear her talk; but methinks she loveth to raise a shudder in the hearts of those who hear her. She is a strange being. Sometimes I almost fear to go to and fro there, albeit she treats me well, and seldom speaks harshly to me. But men say she is above a hundred years old, and she leads so strange a life in her lonely house. Fancy being there alone of a night, with only that deaf old man and his aged wife within doors! It would scare me to death. But she will not let one other of her servants abide there with her!"

"Ay, it is her whimsie. Women folks are given to such," answered Reuben, tolerantly. "She is a strange creature, albeit I doubt not that men make her out stranger than she is. Well, well, the comet at least will do us no hurt of itself; and if it be God's way of warning us of peril to come, we need not fear it, but only set ourselves to be ready for what He may send us."

Below stairs there was a comfortable meal spread upon the table, simple and homely, but sufficient for the appetites of all. The three rosy-faced apprentices, of whom a son of the house made one, formed a link at table between the family and the shopmen and serving wenches. All sat down together, and Rebecca, the daughter who lived at home, served up the hot broth and puddings. The eldest daughter was a serving maid in the household of my Lady Howe, and was seldom able to get home for more than a few hours occasionally, even when that fashionable dame was in London. Dorcas spent each night under the shelter of her father's roof, and went daily to the quaint old house close beside Allhallowes the Less, where lived the eccentric Lady Scrope, her mistress, of whom mention has been made. The youngest son was also from home, being apprenticed to a carpenter in the service of the Master Builder next door, and he lived, as was usual, in the house of his employer. Thus four out of Harmer's seven children lived always at home, and Dan the sailor was with them whenever his ship put into the river after a voyage.

No talk of either comet or plague was permitted at table; indeed the meal was generally eaten in something approaching to silence. Sometimes the master of the house would address a question to one of the family, or suppress by a glance the giggling of the lads at the lower end of the table. Joseph's presence there rather encouraged hilarity, for he was a merry urchin, and stood not in the same awe of his father as did his comrades. Kindness was the law of the house, but it was the kindness of thorough discipline. Neither the master nor the mistress believed in the liberty that brings licence in its train.

Life went very quietly, smoothly, and monotonously within the walls of that busy house. Trade was brisk just now. The fashion lately introduced amongst fine ladies of having whole dresses of gold or silver lace, brought more orders for the lace maker than he well knew how to accomplish in the time. He and his son and his apprentices were hard at work from morning to night; and glad enough was the master of the daily-increasing daylight, which enabled him and those who were glad to earn larger wages to work extra hours each day.

Being thus busy at home, he went less than was his wont abroad, and heard but little either of the sullen comet which hung night after night in the sky, or of the whispers sometimes circulating in the city of fresh cases of the distemper.

These last, however, were growing fewer. The scare of a few weeks back seemed to be dying down. People said the pest had been stamped out, and the brighter, hotter weather cheered the hearts of men, albeit in case of sickness it might be their worst enemy, as some amongst them well knew.

"I never believed a word of it!" said the wife of the Master Builder, as she sat in her fine drawing room and fanned herself with a great fan made of peacock's feathers. She was very handsomely dressed, far more like a fine Court dame than the wife of a simple citizen. Her companion was a very pretty girl of about nineteen, whose abundant chestnut hair was dressed after a fashionable mode, although she refused to have it frizzed over her head as her mother's was, and would have preferred to dress it quite simply. She wished she might have plain clothes suitable to her station, instead of being tricked out as though she were a fine lady. But her mother ruled her with a rod of iron, and girls in those days had not thought of rising in rebellion.

The Master Builder's wife considered that she had gentle blood in her veins, as her grandfather had been a country squire who was ruined in the civil war, so that his family sank into poverty. Of late she had done all in her power to get her neighbours to accord her the title of Madam Mason, which she extorted from her servants, and which was given to her pretty generally now, although as much in mockery, it must be confessed, as in respect of her finery. She did not look a very happy woman, in spite of all the grandeur about her. She had frightened away her simpler neighbours by her airs of condescension and by the splendour of her house, and yet she could not yet see any way of inducing other and finer folks to come and see her. Sometimes her husband brought in a rich patron and his wife to look at the fine room, and examine the furniture in it, and these persons would generally be mighty civil to her whilst they stayed; but then they did not come to see her, but only in the way of business. It was agreeable to be able to repeat what my lord this or my lady that said about the cabinets and chairs; but after all she was half afraid that her boasting deceived nobody, and Gertrude would never come to her aid with any little innocent fibs about their grand visitors.

"I never did believe a word of it," repeated Madam, after a pause. "Gertrude, why do you not answer when I speak to you? You are as dull as a Dutch doll, sitting there and saying nothing. I would that Frederick were at home! He can speak when he is spoken to; but you are like a deaf mute!"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. I was reading-I did not hear."

"That is always the way-reading, reading, reading! Why, what good do you think reading will do you? Why don't you get your silk embroidery or practise upon the spinnet? Such advantages as you have! And all thrown away on a girl who does not know when she is well off. I have no manner of patience with you, Gertrude. If I had had such opportunities in my girlhood, I should never have been a mere citizen's wife now."

A slightly mutinous look passed across Gertrude's face. Submissive in word and manner, as was the rule of the day, she was by no means submissive in mind, and had her mother's ears been sharper she might have detected the undertone of irony in the reply she received.

"I think nobody would take you for a citizen's wife, ma'am. As for me, I am not made to shine in a higher sphere than mine own. I have not even the patience to learn the spinnet. I would sooner be baking pies with Rebecca next door, as we used to do when we were children, before father grew so rich."

Madam's face clouded ominously. She heartily wished she had never admitted her children to intimacy with the Harmers next door. It had done no harm in the case of Frederick. He was his mother's son, every inch of him, and was as ready to turn up a supercilious nose at his old comrades as ever Madam could wish.

But Gertrude was different-she was excessively provoking at times. She did not seem able to understand that if one intended to rise in the world, one must cut through a number of old ties, and start upon a fresh track. It was not easy in those times to rise; but still the wealthier citizens did occasionally make a position for themselves, and get amongst the hangers-on of the Court party, especially if they were open handed with their money.

Madam often declared that if they only moved into another part of the town, everything she wanted could be attained; but on that point her husband was inexorable. He loved the old bridge house. There he had been born, and there he meant to die, and he had not the smallest intention of removing elsewhere to please even the wife to whom he granted so many indulgences.

"You are a fool!" cried Madam, angrily; "you say those things only to provoke me. I wish you had some right feeling and some conversation. You are as dull as ditch water. You care for nothing. I don't believe it would rouse you to hear that the plague was in the next street!"

"Well, we shall see," answered Gertrude, with a calmness that was at least a little provoking, "for people say it is spreading very fast, and may soon be here."

"What!" cried Madam, in a sudden panic; "who says that? What do you mean, girl?"

"It was Reuben who told me," answered Gertrude, with a little blush which she tried to conceal by turning her face towards the window.

But her ruse was in vain. Madam's hawk eye had caught the rising colour, and her brow contracted sharply.

"Reuben! what Reuben? Have I not told you a hundred times that I would have none of that sort of talk any more? Reuben, indeed! as though you were boy and girl together! Pray tell me this, you forward minx, does he dare to address you as Gertrude when he has the insolence to speak to you in the streets, where alone I presume he can do so?"

Gertrude's face was burning with indignation. She had to clasp her hands tightly together to restrain the hot words which rose to her lips.

"We have been children together-and friends," she said, "the Harmers and I. How should we forget that so quickly-even though you have forgotten! My father does not mind."

Madam's face was as red as her daughter's. She was about to make some violent retort, when the sound of a footstep on the stairs checked the words upon her lips.

"There is Frederick!" she said.

CHAPTER II. LONDON'S YOUNG CITIZENS

The door of the room where mother and daughter sat was flung wide open with scant ceremony, and to the accompaniment of a boisterous laugh. Into the room swaggered a tall, fine-looking young man of some three-and-twenty summers, dressed in all the extravagance of a lavish and extravagant age. Upon his head he wore an immense peruke of ringlets, such as had been introduced at Court the previous year, and which was almost universal now with the nobles and gentry, but by no means so amongst the citizens. The periwig was surmounted by a high-crowned hat adorned with feathers and ribbons, and ribbons floated from his person in such abundance that to unaccustomed eyes the effect was little short of grotesque. Even the absurd high-heeled shoes were tied with immense bows of ribbon, whilst knees, wrists, throat, and even elbows displayed their bows and streamers. The young dandy wore the full "petticoat breeches" of the period, with a short doublet, a jaunty cloak hung from the shoulders, and an abundance of costly lace ruffles adorned the neck and wrists of the doublet, he wore at his side a short rapier, and had a trick of laying his hand upon the hilt, as though it would take very little provocation to make him draw it forth upon an adversary.

His step was not altogether so steady as it might have been, as he swaggered into his mother's presence. His handsome face was deeply flushed. He was laughing boisterously; but there was that in his aspect which made his sister turn away with a look of repulsion, though his mother's glance rested on him with a look of admiring pride that savoured of adoration. In her fond and foolish eyes he was perfection, and the more he copied the vices and the follies of the gallants about the person of the King, the prouder did his vain and weak mother become of him.

"Ho! ho! ho! such a bit of fun!"

It is impossible to give Frederick Mason's words verbatim, as he seldom opened his lips without an oath, and inter-larded his talk with coarse jests in English and fragments of ribaldry in vile French, till it would scarce be intelligible to the reader of today.

"Such a prime bit of fun! Who would have thought that little Dorcas next door would grow up such a marvelous pretty damsel! By my troth, what a slap she did give me in return for my kiss!"

Gertrude suddenly turned upon her brother with flashing eyes.

"Think shame of yourself, Frederick! You disgrace your boasted manhood. How dare you annoy with your coarse gallantry the daughter of our father's oldest friend, and that too in the open streets!"

"How dare you speak so to your brother, girl?" cried Madam, bristling up like an angry mother hen. "What call have you to chide him? Is he answerable to you for his acts?"

Gertrude subsided into silence, for she could not answer back as she would have liked. It was not for her to argue with her mother; and Madam, having vanquished her daughter, turned upon her son.

"You must have a care how you vex our neighbours, for your father would take it ill an he heard of it. Nay, I would not myself that you mixed yourself up too much with them. They are honest good folks enow, but scarce such as are fitting company for us. What of this girl Dorcas? Is not she the one who is waiting maid to that mad old witch woman in Allhallowes, Lady Scrope?"

"That may well be. I saw her come forth from a grim portal hard by Allhallowes the Less. I knew not who it was, but I gave chase, and ere she put her foot upon the bridge, I had plucked the hood from off her pretty curls, and had kissed her soundly on both cheeks. And at that she gave me such a cuff as I feel yet, and ran like a fawn, and I after her, till she vanished within the door of our neighbour's house; and then it came to me that it was Dorcas, grown wondrous pretty since I last took note of her. If she comes always home at this hour, I'll waylay my lady again and take toll of her."

"You had better be careful not to let Reuben get wind of it" said Gertrude, with suppressed anger in her voice. "If he were to catch you insulting his sister, it is more than a slap or a cuff you would get."

Frederick burst into a boisterous laugh.

"What! do you think a dirty shopman would dare lay hands upon me? I'd run him through the body as soon as look at him. He'd better keep out of reach of my sword arm. You can tell him so, fair sister, if you have a tendresse for the young counter jumper."

Gertrude's sensitive colour flew up, and her brother laughed loud and long, pointing his finger at her, and adding one coarse jest to another; but the mother interposed rather hastily, being uneasy at the turn the talk was taking.

"Hist, children, no more of this!

"I would not that this tale came to your father's ears, Frederick; it were better to have a care where our neighbours are concerned. Let the wench alone. There are many prettier damsels than she, who will not rebuff you in such fashion."

"Ay, verily, but that is the spice of it all. When the wench gives you kiss for kiss, it is sweet, but flavourless. A box on the ear, and a merry chase through the streets afterwards, is a game more to my liking. I'll see the little witch again and be even with her, or my name's not Frederick Mason the Scourer!"

"Your father will like it ill if it comes to his ears," remarked Madam, with a touch of uneasiness; "and for my part, the less we have to do with our neighbours the better. They are no fit associates for us."

"Say that we are no fit associates for them," murmured Gertrude, beneath her breath.

Her heart was swelling with sorrow and anger. In her eyes there was no young man in all London town to be compared with Reuben Harmer. From the day when in childhood they had playfully plighted their troth, she had never ceased to regard him as the one man in the world most worthy of love and reverence, and she knew that he had never ceased to look upon her with the same feelings.

Latterly they had had but scant opportunities of meeting. Madam threw every possible obstacle in the way of her daughter's entering the doors of that house, and kept her own closed against those of her former friends whom she now chose to regard as her inferiors. Madam had never been liked. She had always held her head high, and shown that she thought herself too good for the place she occupied. Her house had never been popular. No neighbours had ever been in the habit of running in and out to exchange bits of news with her, or ask for the loan of some recipe or household convenience. It had not been difficult to seclude herself in her gradually increasing dignities, and only her daughter had keenly felt the difference when she had intimated that she wished the intimacy between her family and that of the Harmers to cease.

Frederick had long since taken to himself other associates of a more congenial kind. The Master Builder went to and fro as before, permitting his wife full indulgence of her fads and fancies, but resolved to exercise his own individual liberty, and quite unconscious of the blow that was being inflicted upon his daughter, who was naturally tied by her mother's commands, and forced to abide by her regulations.

Madam had been quick to see that if she did not take care Reuben Harmer would shortly aspire to the hand of her daughter, and she was not sure but that her husband would be weak enough to let the foolish girl please herself in the matter, and throw away what chance she had of marrying out of the city, and rising a step in life.

Madam pinned her main hopes of a social rise for herself in the marriages of her children. She fondly believed that Frederick, with his good looks and his wealth, could take his pick even amongst high-born ladies, and not all the good-natured ridicule of her husband served to weaken this conviction. She was not a great admirer of her daughter's charms, but she knew that the girl was admired, and had been noticed more than once by the fine ladies who had come to look at her furniture and hangings. She had a plan of her own for getting Gertrude into the train of some fine Court dame, and once secured in such a position, her fair face and ample dowry might do the rest. If her son and daughter were well married, she would have two houses where she could make a home

for herself more to her liking. No end of ambitious dreams were constantly floating in her shallow brain, and as all these were more or less bound up with the future of her son and daughter, it was natural that she should desire to put down with a strong hand the smallest indication of a love affair between Gertrude and Reuben. She had even persuaded her husband that Gertrude ought to make a good marriage; and as he was able to give her an ample dowry, and was proud of her good looks, he himself was of opinion that she might do something rather brilliant, even if she did not realize her mother's fond dreams.

All this was very well known to poor Gertrude by this time, and it was seldom now that she did more than catch a passing glimpse of Reuben, or exchange a few hasty words with him in the street. The young man was proud, and knew that he was looked down upon by the Master Builder and his wife. This made him very reticent of showing his feelings, and reduced Gertrude often to the lowest ebb of depression.

So the coarse jests of her brother were a keen pain to her, and she presently rose and left the room in great resentment, followed by a mocking laugh from the ill-conditioned young man.

Having lost one victim, that amiable youth next turned his attention to his mother, and began to torment her with the same zest as he had displayed in the baiting of his sister.

"All the town is talking of the plague," he remarked, in would-be solemn tones. "They say that in St. Giles' and St. Andrew's parishes they are burying them by the dozen every day;" and as his mother uttered a little scream, and shrank away even from him, he went on in the same tone, "All the fine folks from that end of the town are thinking of moving into the country. The witches and wizards are declaring openly in the streets that the whole city is to be destroyed. Some folks say that soon the Lord Mayor and the Magistrates will have all the infected houses shut up straitly, so that none may go in or come forth when it is known that the distemper has appeared there. The door will be marked with a red cross, and the words 'Lord, have mercy upon us!' writ large above it. So, good mother, when I come home one day with the marks of the distemper upon me, the whole house will be closed, and none will be able to go forth to escape it. So we shall all perish together, as a loving family should do."

The blasphemies and ribald jokes with which this good-for-nothing young man adorned his speech made it sound tenfold more hideous than I can do. Even his mother shrank away from him, in terror and amaze at his levity, and cried aloud in her fear so that instantly the door opened, and her husband entered to know what was amiss.

Frederick looked a little uneasy then, for he still held his father in a wholesome awe; but the mother made no complaint of her son, but only said she had been affrighted by hearing that there were more deaths from the plague than she had thought would ever be the case after all the care the Magistrates had taken, and was it true that the Lord Mayor had spoken of shutting up the houses, and so causing the sound ones to become diseased and to perish with the stricken ones?

The Master Builder answered gravely enough; for he had himself but just come in from hearing that the weekly Bills of Mortality were terribly high, and that the deaths in certain of the western parishes had been beyond all reckoning since the last years when the plague had visited the city. True, there were not many put down as having died of the plague; but it was known how much was done to get other diseases set down in the bills, so that there was not much comfort to be got out of that.

The Master Builder thought that the houses would not be shut up unless things became much worse. The matter had been spoken of, as he himself had heard; but the people were much against it, and it would be a measure most difficult to enforce, and would tend to make men conceal from the authorities any case of distemper which appeared amongst them. But he said it was true enough that persons of high degree were beginning to move into the country, at least from the western part of the town; but that all felt very sure the distemper would speedily be checked, and would not come within the city walls at all, nor extend eastward beyond its boundaries.

Madam breathed a little more freely on hearing this, but made an eager suggestion to her husband that they should go away if the distemper began to spread.

But the Master Builder shook his head impatiently.

"A fine thing to run away from a chance ill, and court a certain ruin! How do you think business will thrive if all the men run away from their shops like affrighted sheep? No, no; it is often safest to stay at home with closed doors than to run helter skelter to strange places where one knows not who may have been last. Keep indoors with your perfumes and spices, and keep the wench close with you. That is the best way of outwitting the enemy. Besides, it has come nowhere near us yet."

Madam had certainly no mind to be ruined, nor was she one who loved change or the discomforts of travel. So she thought on the whole her husband's advice was good. It would be much more comfortable to stay here with closed doors, surrounded by the luxuries of home.

Now as Frederick sat with outstretched legs in one of the easiest chairs in the room, and heard his father speak of these things, a thought came into his head which tickled his fancy so vastly that throughout the evening he kept bursting into smothered laughter, so much so that his sister threw him many suspicious glances, and divined that he had some evil purpose in his head.

The May light lasted long in the sky; but as it failed Frederick went out, as was his wont, and for many hours he spent his time with a number of kindred spirits in a neighbouring tavern, quaffing large potatoes, and dicing and gaming after the fashion of the Court gallants.

The bulk of the young roisterers thus assembled belonged to one of those bands of Scourers of which Frederick claimed to be the head. They were the worthy successors to the "Roaring Boys" or Bonaventors of past centuries, and their favourite pastime was, after spending the night in revelry and play, to start forth towards dawn and scour the streets, upsetting the baskets or carts of the early market folks bringing their wares into the town, scattering the merchandise in the gutter, kissing the women, cuffing the men, wrenching off knockers from house doors, and getting up fights with the watch or with some rival band of Scourers which resulted in broken heads and sometimes in actual bloodshed.

The Magistrates treated these misdemeanours with wonderful tolerance when the culprits were from time to time brought before them, and the nuisance went on practically unchecked—the people being used to wild and dissolute ways and much brawling—and looking on it as one of the necessary ills of life.

But upon this bright May morning, before the streets began to awaken, even before the market folks were astir, Frederick led forth his band intent upon a new sort of mischief. Some of the number carried pots of red paint in their hands, and others pots of white paint.

Up and down the empty streets paraded these worthies, pausing here and there at the door of some citizen that presented a tempting surface. One of their number would paint upon it the ominous red cross, whilst another who had skill enough (for writing was not the accomplishment of every citizen even then) would add in staring white letters the legend, "Lord, have mercy upon us!"

It was a brutal jest at such a time, when the dread visitor had actually appeared as it were in their midst, and all sober men were in fear of what might betide, and of the methods already spoken of for the suppression of the distemper. But it was its very wickedness which gave it its charm in the opinion of the perpetrators, and as they went from street to street, Frederick suddenly exclaimed:

"Ha! we are close to Allhallowes. Let us adorn the door of the old madwoman, Lady Scrope. They say she lives quite alone, and that her servants come in the morning and leave at night. Sure they will none of them have courage to pass the threshold when that sign adorns it, and the old hag will have to come forth herself to seek them. An excellent joke! I will watch the house, and give her a kiss as she comes forth."

Whereupon the whole crew burst into shouts of drunken laughter, and made a rush to the door, which stood flush in a grim-looking wall just beneath the shadow of the church of Allhallowes the Less.

Frederick had the paint pot in his hand, and he traced a fine red cross upon the door, all the while making his ribald jests upon the old woman within, he and his companions alike, far too drunk with wine and unholy mirth to have eyes or ears for what was happening close beside them. They did not hear the sound of an opening window just above them. They did not see a nightcapped head poked forth, the great frilled cap surrounding a small, wizened, but keenly-courageous face, in which the eyes were glittering like points of fire.

None of them saw this. None of them heeded, and the head was for a moment silently withdrawn. Then it was again cautiously protruded, and the next minute there descended on the head of Frederick a black hot mass of tar and bitumen. It scalded his face, it blinded his eyes. It choked and almost poisoned him by its vaporous pungency. It matted itself in his voluminous periwig, and plastered it down to his shoulders; it clotted his lace frills, and ran in filthy rivulets down his smart clothes. In a word, it rendered him in a moment a disgusting and helpless object, unable to see or hear, almost unable to breathe, and quite unable to rid himself of the sticky, loathsome mass in which he had suddenly become encased.

Then from the window above came a shrill, jeering cry:

"To your task, bold Scourers-to your task! Scour your own fine friend and comrade. Scour him well, for he will need it. Scour him from head to foot. A pest upon you, young villains! I would every citizen in London would serve you the same!"

Then the window above was banged to. The mob of roisterers fled helter skelter, laughing and jeering. Not one amongst them offered to assist their wretched leader. They left him alone in his sorry plight to get out of it as best he might. They had not the smallest consideration for one even of their own number overtaken by misfortune. Roaring with laughter at the frightful picture he presented, they dispersed to their own homes, and the wretched Frederick was left alone in the street to do the best he could with his black, unsavoury plaster.

He strove in vain to clear his vision, and to remove the peruke, which clung to him like a second skin. He was in a horrible fright lest he should be seen and recognized in this ignominious plight; and although he felt sure his comrades would spread the story of his discomfiture all over the town, he did not wish to be seen by the watch, or by any law-abiding citizens who knew him.

But how to get home was a puzzle, blind and half suffocated as he was; and he scarce knew whether anger or relief came uppermost to his mind when he felt his arm taken, and a voice that he knew said in his ear:

"For shame, Frederick! It is a disgrace to London the way you and your comrades go on. And now of all times to jest when the foe is at our doors. Shame upon you! The old dame has given you no more than your due. But come with me, and I will get you home ere the town be awake; and have a care how you offend again like this, for the Magistrates will not suffer jests of such a kind at such a time. Know you not that it is almost enough to frighten a timid serving wench into the distemper to see such signs upon the doors? And if it break out in the midst of us, who can say where it will end?"

It was Reuben Harmer who spoke, as Frederick very well knew. The young men had been boys together, and as Reuben was two years the elder, he assumed a tone in speaking which Frederick now keenly resented. But it was no time to repel an overture of help, and he sullenly forced himself to accept Reuben's good offices. The great clotted periwig was with some difficulty got off, and then it was possible to remove the worst of the tar from face and eyes. Frederick at last could see clearly and breathe freely, but presented so lamentable an object that he only longed to get safe home to the shelter of his father's house.

The costly periwig of curls had perforce to be left in the gutter, hopelessly ruined, and Frederick, who had given more money for it than he could well afford, shook his fist at the house which contained the redoubtable old woman who had thus fooled and bested him.

"You Scourers will find that you can play your meddlesome games too often," remarked Reuben sternly, his eyes upon the red cross and the half-completed words above. "I would that all the city

were of the same spirit as Lady Scrope. She always keeps a quantity of hot pitch or tar beside her bed, with a lamp burning beneath it, in case of attacks from robbers. You may thank your stars that it descended not boiling hot upon your head. Had she been so minded to punish you, she would have done so fearlessly. You may be thankful it was no worse."

Frederick sullenly picked up his hat, which he had laid aside while painting the door, and which had thus escaped injury, pulled it as far over his face as it would go, and turned abruptly away from Reuben.

"I'll be revenged on the old hag yet!" he muttered between his teeth. "I've got a double debt to pay to this house now. I'll not forget it either."

He turned abruptly away and scuttled home by the narrowest alleys he could find, whilst Reuben went about looking for the red crosses, and giving timely notice to the master of the house, that they might be erased, as quietly and quickly as possible.

Accident had led Reuben early abroad that day, but he made use of his time to undo as far as he was able the mischievous jesting of Frederick's band of Scourers.

CHAPTER III. DRAWING NEARER

"Brother Reuben, I cannot think what can be the reason, but my Lady Scrope has bidden me beg of thee to give her speech upon the morrow. All this day she has been in a mighty pleasant humour: she gave me this silken neckerchief when I left today, and bid me bring my brother with me on the morrow-and she means thee, Reuben."

"What can be the meaning of that?" asked Rachel Harmer, with a look of curiosity. "Doth she often speak to thee of thy kindred, child?"

"If the whim be on her, and she has naught else to amuse her, she will bid me tell of the life at home, and of our neighbours and friends," answered Dorcas. "But never has she spoke as she did today. Nor can I guess why she would have speech with Reuben."

"I can guess shrewdly at that," said the young man. "It so befell this morning that I found a party of roisterers at her door, who were marking it with a red cross, as though it were a plague-stricken house-as the Magistrates talk of marking them now if the distemper spreads much further and wider. The bold lady had herself put these fellows to the rout by pouring pitch upon them from a window above; but I stopped to rebuke the foremost of them myself, and to erase their handiwork from the door. I did not know that I was either seen or known; but methinks my Lady Scrope has eyes in the back of her head, as the saying goes."

"You may well say that!" cried Dorcas, with a laugh and a shrug. "Never was there such a woman for knowing everything and everybody. But she spoke not to me of any roisterers. Would I had been there to see her pouring her filthy compound over them! She always has it ready. How she must have rejoiced to find a use for it at last!"

"It is an evil and a scurvy jest at such a time to mock at the peril which is at our very doors, and which naught but the mercy of God can avert from us," said the master of the house, very gravely.

Then, looking round upon his assembled household, he added in the same very serious way, "I have been this day into the heart of the city. I have spoken with many of the authorities there. The Lord Mayor and the Magistrates are in great anxiety, and I fear me there can be no longer any doubt that the distemper is spreading fearfully. It has not yet appeared within the city nor upon the other side of the river; but in the western parishes it is spreading every way, and they say that all who are able are fleeing away from their houses. Perchance for those who can do so this may be the safest thing to do. But soon they will not be permitted to leave, unless they have a bill of health from the Lord Mayor, as in the country beyond the honest folks are taking alarm, and are crying out that we are like to spread the plague all over the kingdom."

"I, too, have heard sad tales of the mortality," said Dinah, raising her calm voice and speaking very seriously. "I met a good physician, under whom I often laboured amongst the sick, and he tells me that there be poor stricken wretches from whom all the world flee in terror the moment it appears they have the distemper upon them. Many have died already untended and uncared for, whilst others have in the madness of the fever and pain burst out of the rooms in which they have been shut up, and have run up and down the streets, spreading terror in their path, till they have dropped down dead or dying, to be carried to graveyard or pest house as the case may be. But who can tell how many other victims such a miserable creature may not have infected first?"

"Ay, that is the terror of it," said Harmer. "All are saying that nurses must be found to care for the sick, and many are very resolved that the houses where the distemper is found should be straitly shut up and guarded by watchmen, that none go forth. It is a hard thing for the whole to be thus shut in with the infected; but as men truly say, how shall the whole city escape if something be not done to restrain the people from passing to and fro, and spreading the distemper everywhere?"

"I have thought," said Dinah, very quietly, "that it may be given to me to offer myself as a nurse for these poor persons. I have passed unscathed through many perils before now. Once I verily

believe I was with one who died even of this distemper, albeit the physician called it the spotted fever, which frights men less than the name of plague. There be many herbs and simples and decoctions which men say are of great value in keeping the infection at bay. And even were it not so, we must not be thinking only at such times of saving our own lives. There be some that must be ready to risk even life, if they may serve their brethren. The good physicians are prepared to do this, to say nothing of the Magistrates and those who have the management of this great city at such a time. And it seems to me that women must always be ready to tend the sick even in times of peril. I seem to hear a call that bids me offer myself for this work; but none else shall suffer through me. If I go, I return hither no more. I shall live amongst the sick until this judgment be overpast, or until I myself be called hence, as may well be."

All faces were grave and full of awe. Yet perhaps none who knew Dinah were overmuch surprised at her words. Her life had been lived amongst the sick for many years. She had never shrunk from danger, or had spared herself when the need was pressing. Her sister Rachel, although the tears stood in her eyes, said nothing to dissuade her.

Nor indeed was there much time for discussion then, for the Master Builder looked in at that moment with a face full of concern. He brought the news that fresh revelations were being hourly made as to the terrible rapidity with which the plague was spreading in the parishes without the walls; and he added that even the gay and giddy Court had been at last alarmed, and that the King had been heard to say he should quit Whitehall and retire with his Court and his minions to Oxford in the course of a week or a fortnight, unless matters became speedily much better.

"Ay, that is ever the way," said Harmer, sternly. "The reckless monarch and his licentious Court draw down upon the city the wrath of God in judgment of their wickedness, and those who have provoked the judgment flee from the peril, leaving the poor of the city to perish like sheep."

"Well, well, well; fine folks like change, and it is easy for them to go elsewhere. I would do the same, perchance, were I so placed," said the Master Builder; "but we men of business must stick to our work as long as it sticks to us."

"What about your mistress, Lady Scrope, Dorcas? Has she said aught of leaving London? She is one who could easily fly. Not but what I trust the distemper will be kept well out of the city by the care taken."

"She has spoken no word of any such thing," answered Dorcas. "She reads and hears all that is spoken about the plague, and makes my blood run cold by the stories she tells of it in other lands, and during other outbreaks which she can remember. Methinks sometimes the very hair on my head is standing up in the affright her words bring me. But she only laughs and mocks, and calls me a little poltroon. I trow that she would never fly; it would not be like her."

"Men and women do many things unlike themselves in stress of particular and deadly peril," said the Master Builder. "Lady Scrope would do well to consider leaving whilst the city has so good a bill of health; it may be less easy by-and-by, should the distemper spread."

"Thou canst speak to her of this thing, Reuben, when thou dost see her on the morrow," observed his father. "Perchance she has not considered the peril of being detained if she puts off flight too long."

Reuben said he would name the matter to the lady; and when Dorcas set forth upon the morrow for her daily walk, her brother accompanied her, and told her in confidence what he had not told to his family-how Frederick Mason had been served by the irate old lady, and what a sorry spectacle he had presented afterwards.

Dorcas laughed heartily at the story. She had no love for Frederick, and she told her brother that she suspected he had been the half-tipsy gallant who had striven to kiss her in the streets, and had partially succeeded. This put Reuben into a great wrath, and he promised whenever he could do so to come and escort his sister home from the house in Allhallowes. True, the distance was but very

short, yet the lane to the bridge head was lonely and narrow, and Frederick was known for a most ill-conditioned young man.

Lady Scrope received Reuben in a demi-toilet of a peculiar kind, and a very strange and wizened object did she appear. She thanked him for the rebuke she had heard him administer to the roisterer, enjoyed a hearty laugh over his wretched appearance, and then proceeded to indulge her insatiable taste for gossip by demanding of him all the city news, and what all the world there was talking about.

"Since this plague bogey has got into men's minds I see nobody and hear nothing," she said. "All the fools be flying the place like so many silly sheep; or, if they come to sit awhile, their talk is all of pills and decoctions, refuses and ointments. Bah! they will buy the drugs of every foolish quack who goes about the streets selling plague cures, and then fly off the next day, thinking that they will be the next victim. Bah! the folly of the men! How glad I am that I am a woman."

"Still, madam," said Reuben, taking his cue, "there be many noble ladies who think it well to remove themselves for a time from this infected city. Not that for the time being the city itself is infected, and we hope to keep it free-

"Then men are worse fools than I take them for," was the sharp retort. "Keep the plague out of the city! Bah! what nonsense will they talk next! Is it not written in the very heavens that the city is to be destroyed? Heed not their idle prognostications. I tell you, young man, that the plague is already amongst us, even though men know it not. In a few more weeks half the houses in the very city itself will be shut up, and grass will be growing in the streets. We may be thankful if there are enough living to bury the dead. Keep it out of the city, forsooth! Let them do it if they can; I know better!"

Dorcas paled and shrank, fully convinced that her redoubtable mistress possessed a familiar spirit who revealed to her the things that were coming; but Reuben fancied that the old lady was but guessing, and he saw no reason to be afraid at her words. Saying such things would not bring them to pass.

"Then, madam," he answered, "if such be the case, would it not be well to consider whether you do not remove yourself ere these things comne to pass? Pardon me if I seem to take it upon mnyself to advise you, but I was charged by my father, who is like to be appointed for a time one of the examiners of health whom the Mayor and Magistrates think it well to institute at this time, that soon it may not be so easy to get away from the city as it is now; wherefore it behoves the sound whilst they are yet sound to bethink them whether or not they will take themselves away elsewhere. Also my mother wished me to ask the question of your ladyship, forasmuch as she would like to know whether my sister in such case would be required to accompany you."

Lady Scrope nodded her head several times, an odd light of mockery gleaming in her keen black eyes.

"Tell your worthy father, good youth, that I thank him for his good counsel; but also tell him that nothing will drive me from this place-not even though I be the only one left alive in the city. Here I was born, and here I mean to die; and whether death comes by the plague or by some other messenger what care I? I tell thee, lad, I am far safer here than gadding about the country. Here I can shut myself up at pleasure from all the world. Abroad, I am at the muercy of any plague-stricken vagabond who comes to ask an alms. Let all sensible folks stay at home and shut themselves up, and let the fools go gadding here, there, and all over. As for Dorcas, let her come and go as long as she safely may; but if your good mother would keep her at home, then let her abide there, and return to me when the peril is overpast. I like the wench, and if she likes to abide altogether with me she may do so. Let her mother choose."

Dorcas, however, had no wish to live in that lonely house altogether, and for the present there was no reason why she should not go backwards and forwards to her father's abode. Her parents were grateful to Lady Scrope for her offer, but for the present there was no reason for making any change.

The weather during these bright days of May had been cool and fresh, and in spite of all evil auguries, sanguine persons had tried hard to believe and to make others believe that the peril of a

visitation of the plague had been somewhat overrated. Yet the choked thoroughfares leading out of London gave the lie to these suppositions, and for many weeks the bridge was a sight in itself, crowded with carriages and waggons all filled with the richer folks and their goods, hastening to the pleasant regions of Surrey to forget their fears and escape the pestilential atmosphere of the city.

Then towards the end of the month a great heat set in, and at once, as it were, the infection broke out in a hundred different and unsuspected places, not only without but within the city walls. How the distemper had so spread none then dared to guess. It seemed everywhere at once, none knew why or how. Doubtless it was in innumerable instances the tainted condition of the wells from which the bulk of the people still drew their water; but men did not think of these things long ago. They looked each other in the face in fear and terror, none knowing but that his neighbour in the street might be carrying about with him the seeds of the dread distemper.

It now behoved all careful citizens to bethink them well what they would do, with the fearful foe knocking as it were at their very doors, and the matter was brought home right early to the Harmer household, by a thing that befell them at the very outset of the access of hot weather which told so fatally upon the city almost immediately afterwards.

Rachel Harmer was awakened from sleep one night by the sound of something rattling upon the bed-chamber floor, as though it had fallen from the open casement, and as she came to her waking senses, she heard a voice without calling in urgent accents:

"Mother! mother! mother!"

Rising in some alarm, she went to the window which projected over the lower stories of the house, as was usual at that time, and on putting out her head she beheld a female figure standing in the roadway below. When the moonlight fell upon the upturned face, she saw it was that of her daughter Janet, who was in the service of Lady Howe, and was her waiting maid, living in her house not far from Whitehall, and earning good wages in that gay household.

In no little alarm at seeing her daughter out alone in the street at night, she spoke her name and bid her wait at the door till she could let her in, which she would do immediately; but Janet instantly replied:

"Nay, mother, come not to the door; come to the little window at the corner, where I can speak quietly till I have told you all. Open not the door till you have heard my lamentable tale. I know not even now that I am right to come hither at all."

In great fear and anxiety the mother cast a loose wrapper about her, and descended quickly to the little storeroom close against the shop, where there was a tiny window which opened direct upon the street. At this window, but a few paces away, she found her daughter awaiting her, and by the light of the rush candle that she carried she saw that the girl's face was deadly white.

"Child, child, what ails thee? Come in and tell me all. Thou must not stand out there. I will open the door and fetch thee in."

"No, mother, no-not till thou hast heard my tale," pleaded Janet; "for the sake of the rest thou must be cautious. Mother, I have been with one who died of the plague at noon today!"

"Mercy on us, child! How came that about?"

"It was my fellow servant and bed fellow," answered Janet. "We were like sisters together, and if ever I ailed aught she tended me as fondly as thou couldst thyself, mother. Today, when we rose, she complained of headache and a feeling of illness; but we went down and took our breakfast below with the rest. At least I took mine as usual, though she did but toy with her food. Then all of a sudden she put her hand to her side and turned ghastly white, and fell off her chair. A scullery wench set up a cry, 'The plague! the plague!' and forthwith they all fled this way and that-all save me, who could not leave her thus. I made her swallow some hot cordial which I think they call alexiteric water, and which is said to be very beneficial in cases of the distemper; and she was able to crawl upstairs after a while to her bed once more, where I put her. I knew not for some hours what was passing in the house, though I heard a great commotion there, and presently there stole in a mincing physician who attends

my lady, holding a handkerchief steeped in vinegar to his nose, and smelling like an apothecary's shop. He looked at poor Patience, who lay in a stupor, heeding none, and he directed me to uncover her neck for him to see if she had the tokens upon her. There had been none when I put her to bed again, so that I had hoped it was but a colic or some such affection; but, alas, when I looked at his direction, there were the black swellings plainly to be seen. Forthwith he fled with indecent haste, and only stopped to say he would send a nurse and such remedies as should be needful."

"O my child! and thou wast with her all the time! – thou didst even touch and handle her?"

"Mother, I could not leave her alone to die. And hardly had the doctor gone than the fever came upon her, and it was all I could do to keep her from rushing out of the room in her pain. But it lasted only a brief while-for the poison must have gotten a sore hold on her-and just after noon she fell back in mine arms and died.

"O mother, I see her face now-so livid and terrible to look upon! O mother, mother, shall I too look like that when my turn comes to die?"

"Hush, hush, my child! God is very merciful. It may be His good pleasure to spare thee. Thy aunt doth go to and fro amongst the smitten ones, and she is yet in her wonted health. But ere I call thy father and ask counsel what we are to do, tell me the rest of thy tale. Who came to thy relief? and how camest thou hither so late?"

"I could not come before. I dared not go forth by day, lest I bore about the seeds of the distemper. The nurse came at three o'clock, and finding her patient already dead, wrapped her in a sheet, and said that a coffin would be sent at dark, and that the bearers would fetch her for burying when the cart came round, and that when I heard the bell ring I must call to them from the window and let them in. I asked why the porter should not do that, but she told me that already every person in the house had fled. My lady had fallen into an awful fright on hearing that one of her servants was smitten, and before any knowledge could have been received of it by the authorities, she had applied for and obtained a clean bill for herself and her household, and every one of them had fled. The house was empty, save for me and the poor dead girl; and I was bidden to stay till her corpse was removed, for the nurse said she was wanted in a dozen places at once, and that she had too much to do with the sick to attend upon the dead."

"And thou wert willing to wait?"

"I could not leave her alone. Besides, I feared to walk the streets till night. The nurse bid me not linger after the body was taken, for no man knows when the houses will be shut up, so that none can go forth who have been with an infected person. But it is not so done yet, and I was free. But I dared not come home amongst you all to bring, perhaps, death with me. I waited in the house till the men and the cart came, and they brought a coffin and took poor Patience away. They told me then that soon there would be no more coffins, and that they would have to bury without them."

Janet paused and shuddered strongly.

"O mother, mother, mother!" she wailed, "what shall I do? What will become of me? Shall I have to die in the streets, or to go to the pest house? Oh, why do such terrible things befall us?"

The mother was weeping now, but the next moment she felt the touch of her husband's hand upon her shoulder, and his voice said in its quiet and authoritative way:

"What means all this coil and to do? Why does the child speak thus? Tell me all; I must hear the tale.

"Janet, my girl, never ask the why and the wherefore of any of the Lord's just judgments. It is for us to bow our heads in repentance and submission, trusting that He will never try us above what we are able to bear."

Comforted by the sound of her father's voice, Janet repeated her tale to him in much the same words as before, the father listening in thoughtful silence, without comment or question; till at the conclusion of the tale he said to his wife:

"Go upstairs and bring down with thee my heavy riding cloak which hangs in the press;" and when she had obeyed him, he added, "Now go up to thy room, and shut thyself in till I call thee thence."

Implicit obedience to her husband was one of Rachel's characteristics. Although she longed to know what was to be done, she asked no questions, but retired upstairs and fell on her knees in prayer. The master of the house went to a great cask of vinegar which stood in the corner, and after pretty well saturating the heavy cloak in that pungent liquid, he unbarred the door, and beckoning to his daughter to approach, threw about her the heavy mantle and bid her follow him.

He led her through the house and up to a large spare guest chamber, rather away from the other sleeping chambers of the house, and he quickly brought to her there a bath and hot water, and certain herbs specially prepared-wormwood, woodsorrel, angelica, and so forth. He bid her wash herself all over in the herb bath, wrapping all her clothing first in the cloak, which she was to put outside the door. Then she was to go to bed, whilst all her clothing was burnt by his own hands; and after that she must submit to remain shut up in that room, seeing nobody but himself, until such time should have gone by as should prove whether or not she had become infected by the distemper.

Janet wept for joy at being thus received beneath her father's roof, having heard so many fearsome tales of persons being turned out of doors even by their nearest and dearest, were it but suspected that they might carry about with them the seeds of the dreaded distemper. But the worthy lace maker was a godly man, and brave with the courage that comes of a lively faith. He had learned all that could be told of the nature of the distemper; and after he had burnt all his daughter's clothing with his own hands, and had assured himself that she felt sound and well, and had also fumigated his own house thoroughly, he felt that he had done all in his power against the infection, and that the rest must be left in the hands of Providence.

The mother hovered anxiously about, but came not near her husband till permitted by him. She did not enter the room where her daughter now lay comfortably in a soft bed, but she prepared some good food for her, which was carried in by the father later on, and promised her that by the morning she should have clothing to put on, and that she should have every care and comfort during the days of her captivity.

Janet thanked God from the very bottom of her heart that night for having given to her such good and kindly parents, and earnestly besought that she might be spared, not only for her own unworthy sake, but for their sakes who had risked so much rather than that she should be an outcast from home at such a time of peril and horror.

CHAPTER IV. JAMES HARMER'S RESOLVE

It was with a grave face, yet with a brave and cheerful mien, that the worthy Harmer met his household upon the following morning. He had passed the remainder of that strangely interrupted night in meditation and prayer, and had arrived now at a resolution which he intended to put into immediate effect.

His household consisted, it will be remembered, of his own family, together with apprentices, shopmen, and serving wenches. To all of these he now addressed himself, told the story which his daughter had related of the treatment received in the house of the high-born lady by the poor girl stricken by the pestilence, and how it had made even his own child almost fear to enter her father's house.

"My friends," said the master, looking round upon the ring of grave and eager faces, "these things ought not to be. In times of common trouble and peril the hearts of men should draw closer together, and we should remember that God's command to us is to love our neighbour as ourself. If we were to lie stricken of mortal illness, should we think it a Christ-like act for all men to flee away from us? But inasmuch as we ought all of us to take every care not to run into needless peril, so must we take every right and reasonable precaution to keep from ourselves and our homes this just but terrible visitation, which God has doubtless sent for our admonition and chastisement."

After this preface, Harmer proceeded to tell his household what he had himself resolved upon. His two apprentices—other than his own son Joseph—were sons of a farmer living in Greenwich; and he purposed that very day to get his sailor son Dan to take them down the river in a boat, that he might deliver the lads safe and sound to their parents before further peril threatened, advising them to keep them at home till the distemper should have abated, and arranging with them for a regular supply of fresh and untainted provisions, to be conveyed to his house from week to week by water, so long as there should be any fear of marketing in the city. He foresaw that very soon trade would come almost to a standstill. The scare and the pestilence together were emptying London of all its wealthier inhabitants. There would be soon no work for either shopmen or apprentices, and he counselled the former, if they had homes out of London to go to, to remain no longer in town, but to take their wages and seek safety and employment elsewhere, until the calamity should be overpast. He also gave the same liberty to the serving wenches, one of whom came from Islington and the other from Rotherhithe. And all of these persons having home and friends, decided to leave forthwith, to be out of the danger of infection, and of that still more dreaded danger of being shut up in an infected house with a plague-stricken person.

The master gave liberally to each of his servants according to their past service, and promised that if he should escape the pestilence, and continue his business in more prosperous times, he would take them back into his house again.

For the present, however, it seemed good to him that only his own family should remain with him. His wife and three daughters could well manage the house, and he did not desire that any other person should be imperilled through the course of action he himself intended to take.

When he took boat with his apprentices, he offered to Joseph to accompany his companions and remain under the charge of the farmer and his wife at Greenwich; but the boy begged so earnestly to remain at home with the rest, that he was permitted to do so. Truth to tell, Joseph was more fascinated than alarmed by the thought of the advance of the dreaded plague, and was by no means anxious to be taken away from the city when all the world was saying that such strange things would be seen ere long. The lad felt so safe beneath the care of wise and loving parents, that he would never of his own will consent to leave them.

The moment the party had started by boat, the shop being that day shut for the first time, albeit for some days nothing had been stirring in the way of custom—Joseph darted away down a network

of alleys hard by in search of his younger brother Benjamin, who was apprenticed to a carpenter in Lad Lane, off Wood Street, and therefore much nearer to the infected parishes than the house on the bridge. Benjamin was sure to know the latest news as to the spread of the pestilence. Joseph was of opinion that it was all rather fine fun, especially since it seemed like to get him a spell of unwonted holiday.

Already as he passed through the streets he noted a great many empty and shut-up houses. Men were going about with grave and anxious faces. Often they would look askance at some passerby who might be walking a little feebly or unsteadily, and once Joseph saw a man some fifty paces in advance of him stagger and fall to the ground with a lamentable cry.

Instead of flying to his assistance, all who saw him fled in terror, crying one to the other, "It is the pestilence! Send for the watch to get him away!"

And presently there came two men who lifted him up and carried him away, but whether he was then alive or dead the boy did not know, and a great awe fell upon him; for he had never seen such a thing before, and could not understand how death could come so suddenly.

"Is it always so with them?" he asked of a woman who was craning her head out of a window to see where the bearers were taking him.

"I cannot tell," she answered. "They say that there be many walking about amongst us daily in the streets who carry death to all in their breath and in their touch, and yet they know it not themselves, and none know it till they fall as yon poor man did, and die oftentimes in a few minutes or hours. If such be so, who knows when he is safe? May the Lord have mercy upon us all! There be seven lying dead in this street today, and though folks say they died of other fevers and distempers, who can tell? They bribe the nurses and the leeches to return them dead of smaller ailments, but I verily believe the pestilence is stalking through our very midst even now."

She shut down the window with a groan, and Joseph pursued his way with somewhat modified feelings, half elated at being in the thick of so much that was terrible and awesome, and yet beginning to understand somewhat of the horror that was possessing the minds of all. He found himself walking in the middle of the street, and avoiding too close contact with the passersby; indeed all seemed disposed to give strangers a wide berth just now, so that it was not difficult to avoid contact.

Yet crowds were to be seen, too, at many open spaces. Sometimes a fervid preacher would be declaiming to a pale-faced group on the subject of God's righteous judgments upon a wicked and licentious city. Sometimes a wizened old woman or a juggling charlatan would be seen selling all sorts of charms and potions as specifics against the plague. Joseph pressing near in curiosity to one of these vendors, found him doing a brisk trade in dried toads, which he vowed would preserve the wearer from all infection. Another had packets of dried herbs to which he gave terribly long names, and which he declared acted as an antidote to the poison. Another had small leaflets on which directions were given for applying a certain ointment to the plague spots, which at once cured them as by magic. The leaflets were given away, but the ointment had to be bought. Those, however, who once read what the paper said, seldom went away without a box of the precious specific.

Joseph would have liked one himself, but had no money, and was further restrained by a sense of conviction that his father would say it was all nonsense and quackery.

Church bells were ringing, and many were tolling-tolling for the dead, and ringing the living into the churches, where special prayers were being offered and many excellent discourses preached, to which crowds of people listened with bated breath. Joseph crept into one church on his way for a few minutes, but was too restless to listen long, and soon came forth again.

He was now near to Lad Lane, and hastening his steps lest he might be further delayed, came quickly upon the back premises of the carpenter's shop, where the sound of hammer and chisel and saw made quite a clamour in the quiet air.

"They are busy here at all events," muttered Joseph, as he pushed open the gate of the yard, and in truth they were busy within; but yet the sight that presented itself to his eyes was anything but

a cheerful one, for every man in the large number assembled there was at work upon a coffin. Coffins in every stage of construction stood everywhere, and the carpenters were toiling away at them as if for dear life. Nothing but coffins was to be seen; and scarcely was one finished, in never so rude a fashion, but it was borne hurriedly away by some waiting messenger, and the master kept coming into the yard to see if his men could not work yet faster.

"They say they must bury the corpses uncoffined soon," Joseph heard him whisper to his foreman as he passed by. "No bodies may wait above ground after the first night when the cart goes its round. Six orders have come in within the last hour. No one knows how many we shall have by nightfall, or how many men we shall have working soon. I sent Job away but an hour since. I hope it was not the distemper that turned his face so green! They say it has broken out in three streets hard by, and that it is spreading like wildfire."

Joseph shuddered as he listened and crept away to the corner where his brother was generally to be found. And there sure enough was Benjamin, a pretty fair-haired boy, who looked scarce strong enough for the task in hand, but who was yet working might and main with chisel and hammer. His face brightened at sight of his brother, yet he did not relax his efforts, only saying eagerly:

"How goes it at home with them all, Joseph? I trow it is the coffin makers, not the lace makers, who have all the trade nowadays! We are working night and day, and yet cannot keep up with the orders."

Benjamin was half proud of all this press of business, but he did not look as though it agreed with him. His face was pale, and when at last he threw down his hammer it was with a gasp of exhaustion. The day was very hot, and he had been at work before the dawn. It was no wonder, perhaps, that he looked wan and weary, yet the master passing by paused and cast an uneasy glance at him. For it was from the very next stool that he had recently dismissed the man Job of whom he had spoken, and of whose condition he felt grave doubts.

Seeing Joseph close by he gave him a nod, and said:

"Hast come to fetch home thy brother? Two of my apprentices have been taken away since yesterday. He is a good lad, and does his best; but he may take a holiday at home if he likes. You are healthier at your end of the town, and they say the distemper comes not near water.

"Wilt thou go home to thy mother, boy? We want men rather than lads at our work in these days."

Joseph had had no thought of fetching home his brother when he started, but it seemed to him that Benjamin would be much better at home than in this crowded yard, where already the infection might have spread. The boy confessed to a headache and pains in his limbs; and so fearful were all men now of any symptom of illness, however trifling, that the master sent him forth without delay, bidding Joseph take him straight home to his mother, and keep him there at his father's pleasure. A young boy was better at home in these days, as indeed might well be the case.

Benjamin was well pleased with this arrangement, having had something too much of over hours and hard work.

"He thinks perchance I have the distemper upon me," he remarked slyly to Joseph, "but it is not that. It is but the long hours and the heat and noise of the yard. I shall be well enough when I get home to mother."

And this indeed proved to be the case. The child was overdone, and wanted but a little rest and care and mothering; and right glad were both his parents to have him safe under their own wing.

Upon that hot evening, almost the first in June, James Harmer had the satisfaction of feeling that he had every member of his family under his own roof, and that his household contained now none who were not indeed his very own flesh and blood. Janet had slept peacefully almost the whole day, and had conversed happily and affectionately through the closed door with her sisters, who were rejoiced to have her there. She spoke of feeling perfectly well but desired to remain in seclusion until

certain that she could injure none beside. She was not therefore able to be present when her father unfolded his plans to the rest of the family, though she was quickly apprised of the result later on.

"My dear wife and dutiful children," said the master of the house, as he sat at table and looked about him at the ring of dear faces round him, "I have been thinking much as to what it is right for us to do in face of this peril and scourge which God has sent upon the city; and albeit I am well aware that it is the duty of every man to take reasonable care of himself and his household, yet I also feel very strongly that in the protection of the Lord is our greatest strength and safeguard, and that our best and strongest defence is in throwing ourselves upon His mercy, and asking day by day for His merciful protection for a household which looks to Him as the Lord of life and death."

Then the good man proceeded to quote from Holy Writ certain passages in which the pestilence is represented as being the scourge of the Lord, and is spoken of as being an angel of the Lord with a drawn sword slaying right and left, yet ever ready to spare where the Lord shall bid.

"I shall then," continued Harmer, "daily and nightly confide those of this household into the keeping of Almighty God, and pray to Him for His protection and special blessing. It may be (since His ears are always open to the supplication of His children) that He will send His angel of life to watch over us and keep us from harm; and having this confidence, and using such means as seem wise and reasonable for the protection of all, I shall strive- and you must all strive with me- to dismiss selfish terrors and the horror that begets cruelty and callousness, that we may all of us do our duty towards those about us, and show that even the scourge of a righteous and offended God may become a blessing if taken in meekness and humility."

Then the good man proceeded to say what precautions he was about to take for the preservation of his family. He did not propose to fly the city. He had many valuable goods on the premises, which he might probably lose were he to shut up his house and leave. He had no place to go to in the country, and believed that the scourge might well follow them there, were every householder to seek to quit his abode. Moreover, never was there greater need in the city for honest men of courage and probity to help to meet the coming crisis and to see carried out all the wise regulations proposed by the Mayor and Aldermen. He had resolved to join them- since business was like to be at a standstill for a while- and do whatsoever a man could do to forward that good work. His son Reuben was of the same mind with him; whilst his wife would far rather face the peril in her own house than go out, she knew not whither, to be perhaps overtaken by the plague on the road. Her heart had yearned over the sick ever since she had heard her daughter's harrowing tale, and knew that her sister was at work amongst the stricken. She knew not what she might be able to do, but she trusted to her husband for guidance, and would be entirely under his direction.

Some citizens spoke of victualling their houses as for a siege, and entirely secluding themselves and their families till the plague was overpast- and indeed this was many times done with success, although the plan broke down in other cases- but this was not Harmer's idea. He did indeed advise his wife and daughters to be careful how they adventured themselves abroad, and where they went. He had arranged at the farm near Greenwich for a regular supply of provisions to be brought by water to the stairs hard by the bridge; and since their house was supplied by water from the New River, they were sure of a constant fresh supply. But he had no intention of incarcerating himself or any of his household, and preventing them from being of use to afflicted neighbours, whilst he himself anticipated having to go into many stricken homes and into infected houses. All the restriction he imposed was that any person sallying forth into places where infection might be met should change his raiment before going out, in a small building in the rear of the shop which he was about to fit up for that purpose, and to keep constantly fumigated by the frequent burning of certain perfumes, of oil of sulphur, and of a coarse medicated vinegar which was said to be an excellent disinfectant. On returning home again, the person who had been exposed would doff all outer garments in this little room, would resume his former clothing, and hang up the discarded garments where they would be subjected to this disinfecting fumigation for a number of hours, and would be then safe to wear

upon another occasion. He intended burning regularly in his house a fire of pungent wood such as pine or cedar, which was to be constantly fed with such spices and perfumes and disinfectants as the physicians should pronounce most efficacious. Perfect cleanliness he did not need to insist upon, for his wife could not endure a speck of dust upon anything in the house.

A careful diet, regular hours, and freedom from needless fears would, he was assured, do much towards maintaining them all in health, and he concluded his address by kneeling down in the midst of his sons and daughters, and commending them all most fervently to the protection of Heaven, praying for grace to do their duty towards all about them, and for leading and guidance that they ran not into needless peril, but were directed in all things by the Spirit of God.

They had hardly risen from their knees before a knock at the door announced the arrival of a visitor, and Joseph running to answer the summons—since there was now no servant in the house—came back almost immediately ushering in the Master Builder, whose face wore a very troubled look.

"Heaven guard us all! I think my wife will go distraught with the terror of this visitation, if it goes on much longer. What is a man to do for the best? She raves at me sometimes like a maniac for not having taken her away ere the scourge spread as it is doing now. But when I tell her that if she is bent upon it she must e'en go now, she cries out that nothing would induce her to set her foot outside the house. She sits with the curtains and shutters fast closed, and a fire of spices on the hearth, till one is fairly stifled, and will touch nothing that is not well-nigh soaked in vinegar. And each time that Frederick comes in with some fresh tale, she is like to swoon with fear, and every time she vows that it is the pestilence attacking her, and is like to die from sheer fright. What is a man to do with such a wife and such a son?"

"Surely Frederick will cease to repeat tales of horror when he sees they so alarm his mother," said Rachel; but the Master Builder shook his head with an air of more than doubt.

"It seems his delight to torment her with terror; and she appears almost equally eager to hear all, though it almost scares her out of her senses. As for Gertrude, the child is pining like a caged bird shut up in the house and not suffered to stir into the fresh air. I am fair beset to know what to do for them. Nothing will convince Madam but that there be dead carts at every street corner, and that the child will bring home death with her every time she stirs out. Yet Frederick comes to and fro, and she admits him to her presence (though she holds a handkerchief steeped in vinegar to her nose the while), and she gets no harm from him."

"Poor child!" said Rachel, thinking of Gertrude, whom once she had known so well, running to and fro in the house almost like one of her own. "Would that we could do somewhat for her. But I fear me her mother would not suffer her to visit us, especially since poor Janet came home last night from a plague-stricken house."

Reuben's eyes had brightened suddenly at his mother's words, but the gleam died out again, and he remained quite silent whilst the story of Janet's appearance at home was told. The Master Builder listened with interest and sighed at the same time. Perhaps he was contrasting the nature of his neighbour's wife with that of his own. How would Madam have acted had her child come to her in such a plight?

Harmer then told his neighbour the rules he was about to lay down for his own household, all of which the Master Builder, who was a keen practical man, cordially approved. He was himself likely soon to be in a great strait, for most probably he would be appointed in due course to serve as an examiner of health, and would of necessity come into contact with those who had been amongst the sick, even if not with the infected themselves, and how his wife would bear such a thing as that he scarce dared to think. Business, too, was at a standstill, all except the carpentering branch, and that was only busy with coffins. If London became depopulated, there would be nothing doing in the building and furnishing line for long enough. Some prophets declared that the city was doomed to a destruction such as had never been seen by mortal man before. Even as it was the plague seemed like

to sweep away a fourth of the inhabitants; and if that were so, what would become of such trades as his for many a year to come? Already the Master Builder spoke of himself as a half-ruined man.

His neighbour did all he could to cheer him, but it was only too true that misfortune appeared imminent. Harmer had always been a careful and cautious man, laying by against a rainy day, and not striving after a rapid increase of wealth. But the Master Builder had worked on different lines. He had enlarged his borders wherever he could see his way to doing so, and although he had a large capital by this time, it was all floating in this and that venture; so that in spite of his appearance of wealth and prosperity, he had often very little ready money. So long as trade was brisk this mattered little, and he turned his capital over in a fashion that was very pleasing to himself. But this sudden and totally unexpected collapse of business came upon him at a time when he could ill afford to meet it. Already he had had to discharge the greater part of his workmen, having nothing for them to do. The expenses which he could not put down drained his resources in a way that bid fair to bring him to bankruptcy, and it was almost impossible to get in outstanding accounts when the rich persons in his debt had fled hither and thither with such speed and haste that often no trace of them could be found, and their houses in town were shut up and absolutely empty.

"As for Frederick, he spends money like water-and his mother encourages him," groaned the unhappy father in confidence to his friend. "Ah me! when I look at your fine sons, and see their conduct at home and abroad, it makes my heart burn with shame. What is it that makes the difference? for I am sure I have denied Frederick no advantage that money could purchase."

"Perhaps it is those advantages which money cannot purchase that he lacks," said James Harmer, gravely-"the prayers of a godly mother, the chastisement of a father who would not spoil the child by sparing the rod. There are things in the upbringing of children, my good friend, of far more value than those which gold will purchase."

The Master Builder gave vent to a sound almost like a groan.

"You are right, Harmer, you are right. I have not done well in this thing. My son is no better than an idle profligate. I say it to my shame, but so it is. Nothing that I say will keep him from his riotous comrades and licentious ways. I have spoken till I am weary of speaking, and all is in vain. And now that this terrible scourge of God has fallen upon the city, instead of turning from their evil courses with fear and loathing, he and such as he are but the more reckless and impious, and turn into a jest even this fearful visitation. They scour the streets as before, and drink themselves drunk night by night. Ah, should the pestilence reach some amongst them, what would be their terrible doom! I cannot bear even to think of it! Yet that is too like to be the end of my wretched boy, my poor, unhappy Frederick!"

CHAPTER V. THE PLOT AND ITS PUNISHMENT

Strange as it may appear, the awful nature of the calamity which had overtaken the great city had by no means the subduing influence upon the spirits of the lawless young roisterers of the streets that might well have been expected. No doubt there were some amongst these who were sobered by the misfortunes of their fellows, and by the danger in which every person in the town now stood; but it seemed as if the very imminence of the peril and the fearful spread of the contagion exercised upon others a hardening influence, and they became even more lawless and dissolute than before. "Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die," appeared to be their motto, and they lived up to it only too well.

So whilst the churches were thronged with multitudes of pious or terrified persons, assembled to pray to God for mercy, and to listen to words of godly counsel or admonition; whilst the city authorities were doing everything in their power to check the course of the frightful contagion, and send needful relief to the sufferers, and many devoted men and women were adventuring their lives daily for the sake of others, the taverns were still filled day by day and night by night with idle and dissolute young men, tainted with all the vices of a vicious Court and an unbelieving age-drinking, and making hideous mockery of the woes of their townsmen, careless even when the gaps amid their own ranks showed that the fell disease was busy amongst all classes and ranks. Indeed, it was no unheard of thing for a man to fall stricken to the ground in the midst of one of these revels; and although the master of the house would hastily throw him out of the door as if he had staggered forth drunk, yet it would oftentimes be the distemper which had him in its fatal clutches, and the dead cart would remove him upon its next gloomy round.

For now indeed the pestilence was spreading with a fearful rapidity. The King, taking sudden alarm, after being careless and callous for long, had removed with his Court to Oxford. The fiat for the shutting up of all infected houses had gone forth, and was being put in practice, greatly increasing the terror of the citizens, albeit many of them recognized in it both wisdom and foresight. Something plainly had to be done to check the spread of the infection. And as there was no means of removing the sick from their houses—there being but two or three pest houses in all London—even should their friends be prompt to give notice, and permit them to be borne away, the only alternative seemed to be to shut them up within the doors of the house where they lay stricken; and since they might already have infected all within it, condemn these also to share the imprisonment. It was this that was the hardship, and which caused so many to strive to evade the law by every means in their power. It drove men mad with fear to think of being shut up in an infected house with a person smitten with the fell disease. Yet if the houses were not so closed, and guarded by watchmen hired for the purpose, the sick in their delirium would have constantly been getting out and running madly about the streets, as indeed did sometimes happen, infecting every person they met. Restraint of some sort was needful, and the closing of the houses seemed the only way in which this could be accomplished.

It may be guessed what hard work all this entailed upon such of the better sort of citizens as were willing to give themselves to the business. James Harmer and his two elder sons, Reuben and Dan, offered themselves to the Lord Mayor to act as examiners or searchers, or in whatever capacity he might wish to employ them. Dan should by this time have been at sea, but his ship being still in the docks when the plague broke out remained yet unladed. None from the infected city would purchase merchandise. The sailing master had himself been smitten down, and Dan, together with quite a number of sailors, was thrown out of employment.

Many of these poor fellows were glad to take service as watchmen of infected houses, or even as bearers and buriers of the dead. At a time when trade was at a standstill, and men feared alike to buy or to sell, this perilous and lugubrious occupation was all that could be obtained, and so there were always men to be found for the task of watching the houses, though at other times it might have been impossible to get enough.

Orders had been sent round the town that all cases of the distemper were to be reported within a few hours of discovery to the examiner of health, who then had the house shut up, supplied it with a day and a night watchman (whose duty it was to wait on the inmates and bring them all they needed), and had the door marked with the ominous red cross and the motto of which mention has been made before. Plague nurses were numerous, but too often these were women of the worst character, bent rather upon plunder than desirous of relieving the sufferers. Grim stories were told of their neglect and rapacity. Yet amongst them were many devoted and excellent women, and the physicians who bravely faced the terrors of the time and remained at their post when others fled from the peril, deserve all honour and praise; the more so that many amongst these died of the infection, as indeed did numbers of the examiners and searchers who likewise remained at their post to the end.

It will therefore be well understood that good Master Harmer and his sons had no light time of it, and ran no small personal risk in their endeavours to serve their fellow citizens in this crisis. Although the pestilence had not as yet broken out in this part of the town with the virulence that it had shown elsewhere, still there were fresh cases rumoured day by day; and it often appeared that when one case in a street was reported, there had been many others there before of which no notice had been given, and that perhaps half a dozen houses were infected, and must be forthwith shut up. At first neglectful persons were brought before the Magistrates; but soon these persons became too numerous, and the Magistrates too busy to hear their excuses. An example was made of one or another, to show that the laws must be kept; but Newgate itself becoming infected by the disease, it was not thought fit to send any malefactor there except for some heinous offence.

Dan joined the force of the constables, and day by day had exciting tales to tell about determined persons who had escaped from infected houses either by tricking or overpowering the watchman. All sorts of clever shifts were made to enable families where perhaps only one lay sick to escape from the house, leaving the sick person sometimes quite alone, or sometimes in charge of a nurse. Dan said it was heartrending to hear the cries and lamentations of miserable creatures pleading to be let out, convinced that it was certain death to them to remain shut up with the sick. Yet, since they might likely be themselves already infected, it was the greater peril and cruelty to let them forth; and he had ghastly tales to tell of the visitation of certain houses, where the watchmen reported that nothing had been asked for for long, and where, when the house was entered by searchers or constables, every person within was found either dead or dying.

The precautions duly observed by the Harmer family had hitherto proved efficacious, and though the father and his sons going about their daily duties came into contact with infected persons frequently, yet, by the use of the disinfectants recommended by the College of Physicians, and by a close and careful attention to their directions, they went unscathed in the midst of much peril, and brought no ill to those at home when they returned thither for needful rest and refreshment. Janet had had a slight attack of illness, but there were no absolute symptoms of the distemper with it. Her father was of opinion that it might possibly be a very mild form of the disease, but the doctor called in thought not, and so their house escaped being shut up, and after a prudent interval Janet came down and took her place in the family as before. Mother and daughters worked together for the relief of the sick poor, making and sending out innumerable dainties in the way of broth, possets, and light puddings, which were gratefully received by poor folks in shut-up houses, who, although fed and cared for at the public expense when not able to provide for themselves, were grateful indeed for these small boons, and felt themselves not quite so forlorn and wretched when receiving tokens of goodwill from even an unknown source.

The harmony, tranquillity, and goodwill that reigned in this household, even in the midst of so much that was terrible, was a great contrast to the anguish, terror, and ceaseless recriminations which made the Masons' abode a veritable purgatory for its luckless inhabitants. As the news of the spreading contagion reached her, so did Madam's terror and horror increase. As her husband had said long since, she sat in rooms with closed windows and drawn curtains, burned fires large enough

to roast an ox, and half poisoned herself with the drugs she daily swallowed, and which she would have forced upon her whole household had they not rebelled against being thus sickened. As a natural consequence of her folly and ungovernable fears, Madam was never well, and was for ever discovering some new symptom which threw her into an ecstasy of terror. She would wake in the night screaming out in uncontrollable fear that she had gotten the plague—that she felt a burning tumour here or there upon her person—that she was sinking away into a deadly swoon, or that something fatal was befalling her. By day she would fall into like passions of fear, call out to her daughter to send for every physician whose name she had heard, and upbraid and revile her in the most unmeasured terms if the poor girl ventured to hint that the doctors were beginning to be tired of coming to listen to what always proved imaginary terrors.

The only times when husband or daughter enjoyed any peace was when Frederick chose to make his appearance at home. On these occasions his mother would summon him to her presence, although in mortal fear lest he should bring infection with him, and make him tell her all the most frightful stories which he had picked up about the awful spread of the disease, about the iniquities and abominations practised by nurses and buriers, of which last there was plenty of gossip (although probably much was set down in malice and much exaggerated) and all the prognostications of superstitious or profane persons as to the course the pestilence was going to take. Eagerly did she listen to all of these stories, which Frederick took care should be very well spiced, as it was at once his amusement to frighten his mother and spite his sister; for Gertrude in private implored him not to continue to alarm their mother with his frightful tales, and also begged him for his own sake to relinquish his evil habits of intemperance, which at such a time as this might lead to fatal results.

The good-for-nothing youth only mocked at her, and derided his father when he gave him the same warning. He had become perfectly unmanageable and reckless, and nothing that he heard or saw about him produced any impression. Although taverns and ale houses were closely watched, and ordered to close at nine o'clock, and the gatherings of idle and profligate youths of whatever condition of life sternly reprobated and forbidden by the authorities, yet these worthies found means of evading or defying the regulations, and their revels continued as before, so that Frederick was seldom thoroughly sober, and more reckless and careless even than of old. In vain his father strove to bring him to a better mind; in vain he warned him of the peril of his ways and the danger to his health of such constant excesses. Frederick only laughed insolently; whereupon the Master Builder, who had but just come from his neighbour's house, and was struck afresh with the contrast presented by the two homes, asked him if he knew how Reuben Harmer was passing his time, and made a few bitter comparisons between his son and those of his neighbour.

This was perhaps unfortunate, for Frederick, like most men of his type, was both vain and spiteful. The mention of the Harmers put him instantly in mind of his grudge against Reuben and his suddenly-aroused admiration for rosy-cheeked Dorcas, both of which matters had been put out of his head by recent events. He had discovered also that Reuben generally accompanied his sister home from Lady Scrope's house in the evening, so that it had not been safe to pursue his attempted gallantries towards the maid. But as he heard his father's strictures upon his conduct, coupled with laudations of his old rival Reuben, a gleam of malice shone in his eyes, and he at once made up his mind to contrive and carry out a project which had been vaguely floating in his brain for some time, and which might be the more easily arranged now that the town was in a state of confusion and distress, and the streets were often so empty and deserted.

In that age of vicious licence, it seemed nothing but an excellent joke to Frederick and his boon companions to waylay a pretty city maiden returning to her home from her daily duties. Frederick meant no harm to the girl; but he had been piqued by the way in which his compliments and kisses had been received, and above all he was desirous to do a despite to Reuben, whose rebukes still rankled in his heart, though he had quickly forgotten his good offices on the occasion of his escapade before Lady Scrope's door. Moreover, he owed that notable old woman a grudge likewise, and thought he

could pay off scores all round by making away with pretty Dorcas, at any rate for a while. So he and his comrades laid their plans with what they thought great skill, resolved that they should be carried out upon the first favourable opportunity.

For a while Dorcas had been rather nervous of leaving the house in Allhallows unless Reuben was waiting for her. But as she had seen no more of the gallant who had accosted her, and as it was said on all hands that these had left London in hundreds, she had taken courage of late, and had bidden her brother not incommode himself on her account, if it were difficult for him to be her escort home.

Of late he had oftentimes been kept away by pressure of other duties. Sometimes Dan had come in his stead. Sometimes she had walked back alone and unmolested. Persons avoided each other in the streets now, and hurried by with averted glances. Although upon her homeward route, which was but short, she had as yet no infected houses to pass, she always hastened along half afraid to look about her. But her father's good counsel and his daily prayers for his household so helped her to keep up heart, that she had not yet been frightened from her occupation, although her mistress always declared on parting in the evening that she never expected to see her back in the morning.

"If the plague does not get you, some coward terror will. Never mind; I can do without you, child. I never looked for you to have kept so long at your post. All the rest have fled long since."

Which was true indeed, only Dorcas and the old couple who lived in the house still continuing their duties. Fear of the pestilence had driven away the other servants, and they had sought safety on the other side of the water, where it was still believed infection would not spread.

"I will come back in the morning. My father bids us all do our duty, and sets us the example, madam," said Dorcas, as she prepared to take her departure.

It was a dark evening for the time of year; heavy thunderclouds were hanging low in the sky and obscuring the light. The air was oppressive, and seemed charged with noxious vapours. Part of this was due to the cloud of smoke wafted along from one of the great fires kept burning with the object of dispelling infection. But Dorcas shivered as she stepped out into the empty street, and looked this way and that, hoping to see one of her brothers. But nobody was in sight and she had just descended the steps and was turning towards her home when out from a neighbouring porch there swaggered a very fine young gallant, who made an instant rush towards her, with words of welcome and endearment on his lips.

In a moment Dorcas recognized him not only as the gallant who had addressed her once before, but also as Frederick Mason, her brothers' old playfellow, of whom such evil things were spoken now by all their neighbours on the bridge.

Uttering a little cry of terror, the girl darted back, turned, and commenced running like a hunted hare in the opposite direction, careless where she went or what she did provided she only escaped from the address and advances of her pursuer. But fleet as were her own steps, those in pursuit seemed fleetest. She heard her tormentor coming after her, calling her by name and entreating for a hearing. She knew that he was gaining upon her and must soon catch her up. She was in a lonely street where not a single passerby seemed to be stirring. She looked wildly round for some way of escape, and just at that moment saw a man come round a corner and fit a key into the door of one of the houses.

Without pausing to think, Dorcas made a rush towards him, and so soon as the door was opened she dashed within the house, and fled up the staircase—fled she knew not whither—uttering breathless, frightened cries, whilst all the time she knew that her pursuer was close behind, and heard his voice mingled with angry cries of remonstrance from the man they had left below.

Suddenly a door close to Dorcas opened, and a new terror was revealed to her horror-stricken gaze. A gaunt, tall figure, wrapped in a long white garment that looked like grave clothes, sprang out into the stairway with a shriek that was like nothing human. Dorcas sank, almost fainting with terror, to the ground; but the spectre—for such it seemed to her—paid no heed to her, but sprang upon her pursuer, who had at that moment come up, and the next moment had his arms wound about him in a bearlike embrace, whilst all the time he was laughing an awful laugh. Then lifting the unfortunate

young man off his feet with a strength that was almost superhuman, he bore him rapidly down the stairs and rushed out with him into the street.

All this happened in so brief a moment of time that Dorcas had not even time to regain her feet, or to utter the scream of terror which came to her lips. But as she found breath to utter her cry, another door opened and a scared face looked out, whilst a woman's voice asked in lamentable accents:

"What do you here, maiden? What has happened to bring any person into this shut-up house? Child, child, how didst thou obtain entrance here? The plague is in this house, and we are straitly shut up!"

Before Dorcas could answer for fright and the confusion of her faculties, a pale-faced watchman came hurrying up the stairs.

"Where is the maid?" he asked, and then seeing Dorcas he grasped her by the wrist and cried, "Unless you wish to be shut up for a month, come away instantly. This is a stricken house. What possessed you to seek shelter here? Better anything than that."

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