

The Man

At the sound of the rain hammering against the roof, I nudged open a shutter and peered outside. Although it was surely midday, a heavy darkness hung over the town of Worcester. The rain pounded the ground and already I could see streams running down the street.

‘Close that window!’ Mother shouted.

I pulled the shutter closed. Even though the outside was wet and cold I had enjoyed the brief moment of fresh air caressing my face. The inside of our house was so stuffy and warm I thought I might suffocate.

Shadows danced across the walls and the furniture of our tiny room, lit only by the flickering flames of the rush lights. As they burned the rush lights gave off the most terrible stink, another reason to be grateful for the fresh air outside. I would have gone out and breathed deep of the clean night air, but we are not allowed to step out of our house.

The plague stalked the streets and houses of Worcester. Everyone in the city had been ordered to stay inside. We were not allowed to mix with people outside of our household. Because once the plague caressed you with its bony, scabrous fingers, you would die.

There were five of us squashed into our tiny little house. My mother and father, my baby sister Grace, and the man.

The man was a stranger to us, a traveller who had implored us to let him inside last night, in the darkest hours. Mother and Father refused him at first, but he wailed and cried and pounded on the door until I could take no more and I let him in.

He sat on the floor in a corner of our room and pulled his cloak around him and over his head so that all we could see of his face was the tip of his nose and his mouth, his lips set in a tight line as though he was very displeased about something.

Father had dragged me to the opposite corner and, placing his mouth up close to my ear, hissed his displeasure at me. Now that the man had entered our house, we couldn’t ask him to leave. He had to stay with us until the lockdown was lifted.

But who was he, this strange man? Why wouldn’t he talk to us? And why had he been so desperate to come into our house?

Story opening written by Ken Preston for Tudor House Museum

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