

Tales From Tudor House



Plague and Pestilence



TUDOR HOUSE MUSEUM
— WORCESTER —

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Introduction

In September 2020, Tudor House Museum launched our 'Plague and Pestilence' writing competition with support from local author Ken Preston. Ken wrote the beginning of a short story set in Worcester, during the plague outbreak here in the 1630s. Between June 1637 and the spring of 1638, the plague killed over 1,000 people, almost 10 percent of the city's population. Quarantines were set and food ran short as markets ground to a halt, while plague "doctors" stalked the streets.

We asked young people in Worcestershire to complete Ken's story and are pleased to present here the winning and highly commended entries, and a selection of others we received. We were thrilled by the standard of stories entered, and we hope you enjoy reading them here!

We would also like to gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). The funding Tudor House Museum received from the NLHF for our 'Revealing the Past' project supported this competition.

Now, turn the page and be transport to Worcester, 1637, and a city infested with a deadly disease...

'The Man'

By Ken Preston

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?

First Prize was won by Grace Rusby, age 13

The sun gave up and the world passed into the night and the man still had the displeased look on his face. He did not move, just sat there silently. So silently in fact he seemed to be judging us. Who was he to judge us? – we were just following orders from the authorities? Grace wailed and wailed for most of the night, the only sound in the darkness as we slept apart from the rhythmic drumming of the rain outside.

Thud...

Thud...

Thud...

That night my dreams were filled with several horrors. A hand reaching up out of lake. Me reaching down to pick it up. It is turning skeletal as the body I drag out of the water turns into a plague corpse. I recognize the face on the bloated body. But I was not sure where I had seen it. His watery eyes staring into my soul. Then a sudden pain in my back as a spade digs in. The scene transforms as I fall face first into the wet earth of a grave beneath me. I wake up each time sweat dripping from my brow.

My mother first started to catch a fever, the predicament she found herself in meant that she could no longer work and was bed ridden. We invited a plague doctor into our house, and he tried to cure her with rosemary and wood-sorrel. They did not help. I went out to help with bringing in the supplies people had brought into the city from Droitwich and Tewkesbury. I also helped my father in bringing the rations in for the day. Small portions of bread, cheese, flour and a handful of vegetables. When we returned, we noticed my mother had weakened in health. We asked the man if he had done anything he said yes, he had only helped her as she now had a headache and was too weak to take what the plague doctor had prescribed to her. We believed this.

That dreadful night, I was invaded by the same dream and the same fate. As morning grew upon us, we awoke to a horrible site of my mother on the verge of death and my father too lay next to her shivering and shaking as the fever took hold. He too now had the plague. I cradled my baby sister in my arms, I had to protect her because if she got it, she would die in a matter of days. I peered into the cupboards. We had nothing except stale bread and a carrot left for our rations. It was vital that my parents keep their health up and doing so meant I had to go out and find provisions.

I trudged through the grimy streets of the city the mud and straw squelching under my feet. It had rained on and off for three days now. There were not many people in the street. Many either had the plague, where staying indoors or had gone out to find food and collect water. I went over to the water pump and filled up my metal bucket with water. I cautiously went back to my house trying not to spill a precious drop. I went out once I had done this to source some rations. Many of the city's folk tattled on about how some of the people in the plague houses had broken out and stolen items because of the treacherous conditions inside of them. I managed to source some bread, apples and flour.

As I stepped inside of the door the smell of rosemary hit me, the man must have tried to give my parents some medicine. I hope they had not of gotten worse as with no income, we had no money to pay a plague doctor to come and cure them. Unfortunately, they had deteriorated and huge boils had begun to appear on their arms and necks. I watched the man lean over them. He had taken his gloves off and was touching my mother's forehead. I watched as he stroked his long fingers over her forehead. The skin bubbled underneath, the boils started to grow across the skin getting bigger and bigger. They were now the size of walnuts now. I noticed how his fingers where skeletal. Skin so thinly stretched over them it seemed transparent. My mother coughed as the green boils spread down the sides of her face. She coughed even more. She fell back against the pillow. She had breathed her last.

I stepped forward to confront the man. He had already started to do the same to my father. I pushed him back, but my father had already taken his last breath. The man turned around and I asked him who he was "I am as old as time itself and I must infect everyone. I am death" he said. I backed into the corner as he hastily turned towards me.

I fell into the corner and as he grasped my wrist an icy blast shot through my veins. The fever took hold. Boils started to appear on my forearm. I had never experienced such pain in my life before. The light began to fade from my view. Grace started wailing as I screamed out in terror. I looked into Deaths face and he stared into my eyes. He let go of my wrist as I lay in a heap on the floor.

Then all I saw was darkness.

Ken says: Ooh, what a great story with a deliciously bleak ending, and I enjoyed the dream sequence too. Lots of interesting info about the period slipped into the story without making it obvious. A great sense of time and place and atmosphere, and nicely gruesome too. Well done.

Highly Commended was Daniel Haines, age 13

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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?

As I later discovered, only weeks earlier (before the outbreak), this mysterious man, who in fact was an alchemist, had been inside his lab, tinkering with a precise setup of vials, pipes, knobs and dangerous liquids. Just as he was finetuning the final knob, a knock on the door made him jump, knocking over the experiment. Scowling, he walked over to the door, opened it and saw a masked figure with clothes as dark as the night.

"What do you want?" the man grumpily asked.

"I have a deal for you," the figure replied.

"Come in; let's discuss it in the warm."

Sitting down, the figure explained his deal: a plot to assassinate the Mayor, who had swindled him in a trade about 5 weeks earlier. He would pay the man an incredibly large sum of money, if he managed to kill the Mayor, but he had to make it look like an accident. The man accepted the masked visitor's devilish offer and set to work planning his assassination straight away.

That night, as a dark storm raged outside, he decided to create a disease that he would release into the Guildhall, which would kill the mayor and his subjects, but would be easy to contain. He started by mixing two solutions that he figured out would be incredibly deadly to anyone who drank it. Next, he added a dark red liquid that he had only recently discovered, which would aid the spread of the 'disease'. Finally, he decided he would add a fine, white powder, which, when dissolved in the mixture, should counteract the effects of the solution, but would take a few days to dissolve, so the mixture would quickly become harmless. Before he was able to add that powder, a shout from outside distracted him, and he poked his head out of the window, but he soon realised that it was just a child playing with his friends. Coming back to his work, he realised he was done, so he decided he would release the vapour of the mixture that night.

After he had eaten his dinner, he nonchalantly walked to the Guildhall, and, pretending to be a messenger, was allowed to walk straight in. He then opened the container, letting out the vapour, which was as toxic as a poisonous scorpion, and rushed through the doors and into the street. Satisfied that his work was done, he went to sleep dreaming of the money he would have in a few days.

The next day, he heard the Town Crier announcing that one of the Mayor's staff was dead. The man knew that it would just be a matter of hours before the Mayor died, but he was very surprised when he learnt the Mayor had ordered everyone to stay inside. After asking a

friend who had also been in the criminal business for many years, he learnt that other people outside the Guildhall had been infected too. Returning to his lab, he glanced at his table where he had made the 'disease' and spotted a small vial of white powder. To his horror, he realised that he had forgotten to add the substance that counteracted the effects. So, the infection would keep spreading, and infect the whole country. He also discovered that the Mayor had been ill with a less dangerous disease, and so was not at work the day the alchemist released the vapour, meaning he was not infected. It was also unlikely the Mayor would get it now since he had imposed a lockdown. Panicking, the man decided to try and make up a cover story to get to the Mayor and murder him. After thinking for a long time, the alchemist had an idea; that is where I came to the story.

Sitting there, listening to the rain pouring down, I decided to ask the man whom I had admitted to our house what his story was. He told us he had an antidote for the plague that had appeared and has tasked by the King to give it to city leaders in the area around Worcester. Apparently, he had travelled for many days from London to our hometown and had to put some antidote in the King's meal. My father, being one of the Mayor's chefs, was allowed to go to the Guildhall, even during the lockdown, and, believing the man's story, decided to take the antidote to the mayoral building the next morning.

As my Father walked into the guildhall, he was asked by a guard, whose clothes were more for ceremonial purposes than actually protecting the Guildhall, why he was outside. My father explained that he needed to make the Mayor's breakfast. He then swiftly proceeded to the kitchen, where he cooked breakfast for the Mayor and added in some of the so-called antidote. Soon after the Mayor took a bite of his food, he started choking and coughing up blood. His servants started panicking and called for the Mayor's doctor, but he did not have time to even leave his room before the Mayor had died. The doctor quickly decided that the food had been poisoned, and my father, being the chef who had done the most to prepare the Mayor's meal, was arrested.

My father explained in his defence that a mysterious stranger had told him to put some of the poison in the food, claiming it was an antidote for the plague. When he was asked who the man was, he said he didn't know his name, but that he had been living in our house, and so the guards stormed it, only to find that the man had ran off. Consequently, my Father was charged with murder, even though my mother and I backed up his story. As my

mother and I waited outside the court room I could only pray that the mysterious stranger would give himself up, to save my father from the gallows.

Ken says: I love this story of a murder plot gone wrong, that ends up killing many more people, and then an innocent man is arrested and found guilty of it. Nice cliff hanger ending too. Well done.

Finn Kelly, age 13

I watch the man, his nose snuffles every now and again, I think as to what his story is. An adventurer, sent to uncover the mysteries of the world or a writer, like my father, learning the world. My father slams a pot down, about to prepare our meal for the night, agressed about the guest that I had set free into our home. He has been extremely protective of us since the outbreak began and letting a stranger walk our floors had anguished him very much. Supper is a tense battleground of silent emotions, my wishes to ask the traveller questions are clouded by my father's suspicions of the stranger and what his intentions may be. His plan would've been to escort him out by sunrise but my mother knew it was too late after the first hour of him being beyond the walls.

"Warm bread, eat up." My mother says, while passing around her stale bread, black as a crisp from the stove. The night continues with the same closed up energy, the traveller is still silent and his body hidden away from us. Swiftly at the eleventh chime of the grandfather clock, my father is already ushering me into my bed so he could drink away his anger with liquor. Now I am left motionless on my bed, thinking of the world I was living. Since supper, the rain had come to an end, with only a few taps on my window every now and again. I can hear coughing and stamping up the street, occasionally some horses escorting doctors or Church workers travelling to to give prayers to the families that had fallen ill. All of a sudden, I feel like all the noise in the world has gone, my sister's faint breathing comforts me that I haven't gone deaf. Suddenly I catch the sound of a noise, my father, two walls apart from me, a cut off shriek of agony and pain. What if he is hurt? Has he taken his medicine today? I wrap Grace up in one my my mother's hand sewn clothes and I hide her beneath the cot, then slowly, not making a racket, I reach for my candle. Creeping through my house, I peer through the creak of the door, a body is lying restless on the floor, it has brown greasy hair covered in blood. My father. A knife from my mothers cookery utensils is resting in the back of his skull. The mysterious man I had allowed to walk into our home is sat next to him, his now visible face burnt and scarred. "FATHER!" Stupidly I squeal out, alerting the man to my viewing. Quickly I lock the door of the room my father's corpse now rests in and I'm rushing into the attic where my mother is sleeping and I shake her till she wakes.

Now I'm shaking, mother tries to comfort me while I tell her what I had seen but I realise something, over my weep Grace was now crying. I'm running to my sister, ignoring all my mother's wishes to remain safe. My father's door is still locked, the murderous man is now

savagely pushing through it. It could be mere seconds until he makes it through. I clutch Grace close against my chest, grab my medicine pot and turn around where I can see the traveller lurking in my doorway, staring right at me. The blood stained knife which was used to slaughter my father is in his hands, its main target... me. The man's face is terrifying to see, burns from his left cheek to his right ear, his bowler hat covering a hairless burn mark, which is making Grace cry even more to see.

"Your father.. left me to die in that factory. That fateful day. He let me burn." Finally he is speaking in a croaky, soulless voice. "The fire took many lives, almost mine. He took the money that should be mine thinking I was dead. Leaving me on the streets with my face like this, people dropping to their deaths around me. Your father was a monster."

What fire was he talking about? My father worked in the factories and then became a writer. He didn't steal a fortune, he made one. That didn't matter now because my mother was running to me but it didn't matter because I couldn't leave the house and I couldn't run to her. The man overcome with anger about the lies my father has possibly told me hurdles towards me, my mother close behind him but not fast enough to stop him slashing at me and my sister who I drop at the first slash to protect her. SLASH. Now I drop on the floor and I can feel a stinging pain on my left arm, Grace is crawling under her cot seeing her blanket, untouched luckily.

"Hands off me!" Mother is screaming, the man holds his hairy hands around her neck against the wall. The knife. I can see it on the floor. I crawl over to the knife but the stranger swoops in front of me and clutches the knife in his hand and is aiming it at my mother. SCHLAT! Mother drops to the ground, she is reaching to me, her hand is covered in blood. My blood is leaving a trail through the house, I only hope Grace is hidden, I beg Grace is hidden. Rapid footsteps are coming from the stairs and the man stares at me in the kitchen, he is holding Grace. My beautiful baby sister in the hands of a murderer.

"DROP HER" I squeal "PLEASE!"

He throws her onto the carpet, she still cries. Now he's charging at me head on with the knife and I have no choice, my mysterious father is dead, my mother is lay in a pool of her blood. I feel the metal pierce my skin, pain rushes through my body. The man has had his vengeance.

Ken says: What a violent and gory story!! I love it. Now I am left wondering what happened to Grace. I think she survived and grew up to get her revenge. Well done.

Bea Rusby, age 13

The man just sat there. We just sat there. There is nothing much to do in lockdown.

I was so bored. All there is to do is to watch the rain running down the wall as there is a hole in the roof. The man didn't seem to be bored though. Every day he would leave when the light broke through the shutters.

Who is he? Where is he going? What is he doing?

Then as the stars in the sky come out to play, the man would come home and sit in his corner. This would happen day in and day out.

Slowly the days turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months and the months turned into nearly a whole year of lockdown. We just let the time pass and let the man go in and out as he pleased and sat and watched ice form on the windows as the harsh winter drew closer.

There was nothing really much to observe in this time, I couldn't really understand what the man was actually doing. He didn't really leave his mark on the house. The only thing he did leave with us was this strange mask. It was made of stiff clay coloured in a midnight black with a massive beak on the front which made him resemble a bird.

I just stared at it, as it hung from a nail on the wall, on his side of the room.

I was unsure what the purpose of the mask was, but all I knew for sure was when he put it on, it scared my baby sister Grace and it brought her to floods of tears. Sometimes she would even wake up wailing in the middle of the night and I just knew it was the mask running thorough her mind in her nightmares.

One day as we were just coming out of the depths of winter, I heard a sharp brisk knock at the door while the man was out. A man who was wearing similiar attire to our mystery man, was stood on the threshold of our door. He had the same clay mask and the same billowing long black cape. It scared me.

I had heard tales from the mouths of my mother and father, whispers under breath. He was the figure everyone dreads knocking on your door. His job is to lock you behind the door. Forever.

My father made me let him in despite the fact I knew what letting him meant. One of us had the plague.

The prickly hot feeling covered my body and I felt ulcers forming in my mouth. I hope it's not me or my family. Maybe it's the lodger? He could be going anywhere within the Worcester City Walls. He is probably spreading it, not curing it.

Then all was revealed it wasn't the lodger.

It wasn't my mother.

It wasn't my father.

It wasn't Grace.

It was me.

Florence Smith

1820-1834

Ken says: I love the image of the black mask with the beak, which finished with Death come calling at the door. A very dark ending, and I like the name and the dates of birth and death to finish off the story making it seem like a true account. Very good.

AS, age 14

The man gave off a strange and ghastly aura to the already swelteringly hot room lit up by two oil lanterns against the ominous dark sky outside. But worst of all was the deafening silence which filled the room like a snake, I could feel my dad's anger and disappointment in me just by sitting next to him, it was just me and my dad, in addition to the man. The man. That's what I knew him by and that's all I knew about him. I was yet to hear him say anything other than a boisterous shout to let him into our house.

Sometimes, I would make eye contact with the man but quickly look away. I noticed he had a scar on his left cheek, which stood out awkwardly and he had these peculiar looking goggles on his face and from time to time, he would look under his cloak, look up again, then look back down. He might have been writing something, but then again, I doubt he was hiding enough ink to be writing so much. I dared to even think about saying a word to the man. He wrote for so long that I had managed to fall asleep and wake up to find him in the exact same spot, doing the exact same thing.

"Let's get you to sleep" My dad moaned.

However, no matter how sleepy I became, there were two things holding me back from dozing off: The tropical temperatures and the man. What is he hiding? Who is he? Where is he from? Sooner or later, my fatigue got the better of me. Until...

"You must let me out!" A deep voice barked

"No! I can't, the lockdown is in place" My dad firmly replied

I woke up in a cold sweat. Heart racing. It was somehow even darker than it possibly could be when I fell asleep. All of a sudden. Bang. Thump. The door opened in a hurry and a distant screech bellowed "HELP ME!". It sent goosebumps shivering over my body. I peered outside to see the man sprinting away into the direction of the canal until he went out of site into the deep dark. I rushed downstairs to investigate the origin of the bangs which, I presume, were from the man violently handling our door, but nothing could prepare anyone to what I was about to see.

There he was. My dad. Dead. He was lying in a pool of his own blood, his neck resting against a box. His eyes still wide open, filled with terror. I felt my whole body, my whole word collapses right in front of my eyes. The door wide open from when the man made his murderous escape. At the same time, a refreshing but humid wind filled our house. I did not

want to believe it. I still can't believe it and will never believe it. My dad is dead, killed by a man I let into our house. How could such a friendly gesture turn into this? My mum was already next to my dad's dead body, her whole body paralysed with tears in her eyes. She slowly turned her head towards me. I could not hold it. We burst into tears and ran into each other's arms. The rest of the night was a blur to me, a mixture of sadness and anger. Yes, anger. Partly, anger at myself but mostly at the man. My dad did nothing wrong, but was killed in his house and we didn't say any goodbyes either. He would always kiss me to bed, but that night he didn't. For the first time in my life. I could tell he was angry when he left my bedside. Anger was the last feeling he felt for me before he died, I shouted in anger as loud as I could "This is all my fault".

We had no choice other than put my dad's dead body in the attic to rot. Over 2 months of extra lockdown made us dare to go in there. He was eventually collected and buried but we couldn't afford a funeral. This meant, he was thrown into a big pit of other dead bodies. We hated it but had no other choice. I ended up forgetting about the man, and so it may be. I hate him with every bone in my body.

Life carried on as usual, until it didn't. News went round of a lunatic serial killer who had been on the loose had been pronounced dead. In reading the news board, I stumbled across a description of the mysterious killer: Brown, sleepy eyes. Black, scruffy hair. Reasonably short, a distinctive scar on his left cheek and transparent goggles. My heart sunk. I came to the realisation that I had let in a serial killer into our house. Plain and simple. But what was I meant to do with that information? Tell my mom; she would hate me for ever. I was forced to live with this piece of information for the rest of my life.

It was a cold and dreary night; I could hear the rain smashing on our roof. I heard footsteps outside but this was common as there were many peop-

"Don't you bloody move!" Screamed my mother.

Oh no. Not again.

I raced downstairs to see my mother holding a stool in her hand, ready to hit a man with all her strength. It became a Mexican standoff for a few still seconds. Taking short glances at each other. Then, "What's that?" The man pointed at something across the room. He grabbed me and held me in a headlock, so tight I could not breath. He punched my five times till just as my mom was going to hit him. He vanished. Gone. Where? I fell to the ground, my cheek numb. That was the man.

EXPLANATION:

The man is a time traveller from the modern day. At the start he was holding a smartphone under his cloak, writing down notes of his surroundings to take back with him. However, this new world becomes too much for him and he goes mad, goes on a killing spree. He was never dead. At the end, the reason he disappears is because he quickly time travels back to the modern day.

Ken says: What a great story. I love the idea of him being a time-traveller. I wonder what happened to him next? Well done.