

The Great Plague





Contents

The Great Plague, 1664–1666 4

At the Sign of the Sugared Plum 6

by Mary Hooper

Plague Remedies 9

Ring-a-ring o' roses..... 10

The Great Plague, 1664–1666

What was the plague?

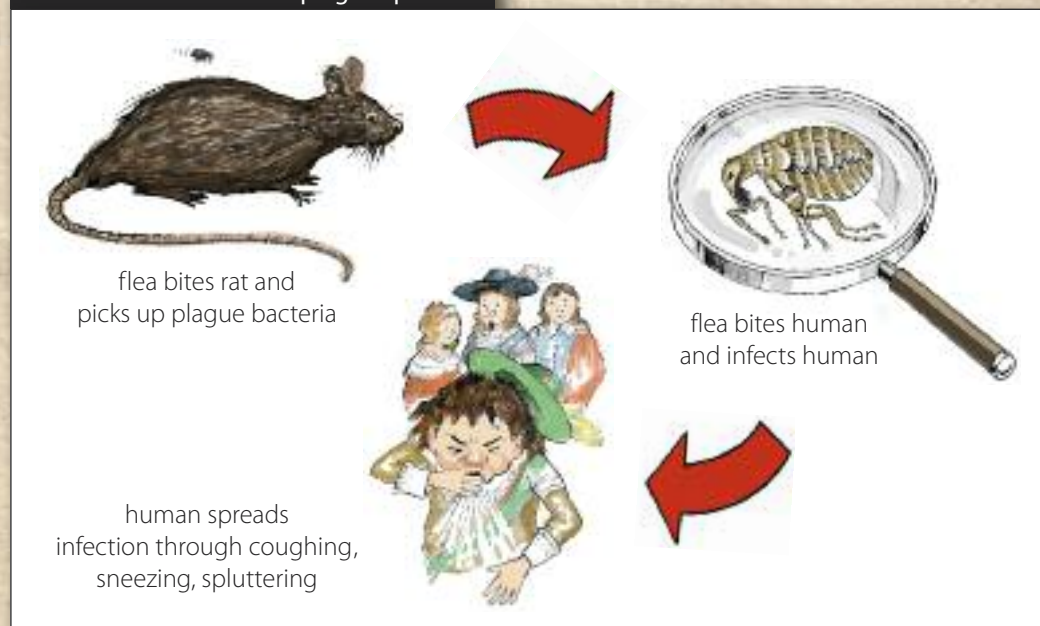
About 350 years ago, a terrible disease spread across parts of Europe. It was called the Great Plague. The worst year was 1665 when London was badly affected. By the end of that year, about 100,000 people had died.

The plague was terrifying because it killed people so quickly. Victims died within days of catching the illness, in agony, from fevers and infected swellings. It spread at a horrifying rate and could destroy the population of a town or even a city within weeks. There were no real cures so people used extreme methods to try to prevent the disease from spreading. 'Plague orders' were put on houses where people became ill. A large red cross was nailed to the door to warn others that the inhabitants were infected by the plague. The victims were shut inside, where they were often left to die.

What caused the plague?

Some doctors believed bad, poisonous air floated around, infecting all who breathed it. Others blamed farm animals for carrying the plague. In fact, the plague was caused by bacteria found on black rats. The bacteria were then passed on by fleas.

How we *now* know the plague spread.





Plague victims were treated in their own homes by people who wore protective clothing.

Rats thrived in the towns and cities, especially in London. The Mayor of London thought that domestic animals were to blame and ordered that all cats and dogs should be destroyed. However, this had the opposite effect. Rat numbers increased without their predators and the fleas spread the plague even further.

What was it like to live through the plague?

Much is known about what it was like to live in London through the time of the Great Plague from the diary of Samuel Pepys. He wrote in his diary almost every day. This is his entry for 7th June 1665, written in the language that was used at that time.

This day, I did in Drury-lane see two or three houses marked with a red cross upon the doors, and "Lord have mercy upon us" writ there – which was a sad sight to me, being the first of that kind that to my remembrance I ever saw. It put me into an ill conception of myself and my smell, so that I was forced to buy some roll tobacco to smell and chew – which took away the apprehension.

At the Sign of the Sugared Plum

by Mary Hooper

This is the opening part of a longer story that takes place in London at the outbreak of the plague. It is a story about a girl called Hannah who has arrived in London from the country.



Hannah

At the bottom of the street there was a series of alleys and I went down the first, past a dunghill and some piles of rotting rubbish, and through into a small, busy market selling all manner of roots and herbs. Laid out here were rough tables loaded with produce, and there were more traders selling from baskets or sacks on the ground.

I stopped, fascinated, amid the jostling people, but the shrill cries of the stallholders urging customers to, “Come buy before night!” reminded me that I had to get on. If I got lost in the backstreets in the dark I knew for certain that I’d get my throat cut and never be seen again.

Being hungry, I started to wonder what my sister Sarah would have prepared for supper.

A little further on was another small square with a number of ways leading off it and I stood there, perplexed, for a moment. Sarah had told me that the city was like a rabbit-warren and it surely was. After some thought I went along an alleyway, passed more shops and entered the churchyard of St Olave’s.



There I came across six small children standing among the tombstones playing a game. One was pretending to be the minister, for he had a long dark piece of cloth round his shoulders and was proclaiming in a solemn voice. One was a body, lying ‘dead’ on the ground muffled in a sheet and the others – the mourners – were wailing and crying. I deduced they were playing at funerals and after staring at them for some moments – fascinated, for I’d never seen children play such a game at home – I stepped past the ‘body’ and went out of the back gate of the churchyard.

Excited now, I looked up at the swinging shop and house signs, searching for Sarah’s. I saw the *Pigeon Pie Shop*, the *Half Moon*, the *Oak Tree*, the *Miller’s Daughter* – and then, in a line of four or five shops, found the one I’d been looking for: a painted picture of a sugared plum. I swung my bundle of clothes over my shoulder and broke into a run, slipping and sliding on the cobbles in my effort to get there quickly, and thinking all the while how happy Sarah would be to see me.

Sarah was in the back of the shop, rolling something on a marble slab and looking very cool in a cotton dress with a starched white apron over it.

I went in to greet her, sniffing in appreciation. The shop smelt of spices and sugar water and its wooden floor was thick with straw and herbs, which was pleasant after some of the odious smells outside.

“Sarah!” I said. “Here I am.”



She looked up at me and I was disconcerted to see that she seemed surprised – even shocked – at the sight of me. Surely she hadn’t forgotten that I was coming?

“Hannah!” she said. “How did you ...”

“Just as we planned,” I said. “I took Farmer Price’s cart to Southwark and then walked from there. But what a muddle and a mess it all is in London. What stinks! What crowds!”

“But what are you doing here?”

I put down my bundle and my basket. “I’ve come to help you, of course – just as you asked. The Reverend Davies brought your letter to me and I was that excited – Father said he’s never had a letter in his life. But where is your living space? Where shall I sleep? Can I look round?”

“But I wrote to you again,” she said. “I wrote two weeks back and said not to come.”

“Not to come?” I said in disbelief. “Surely you didn’t —”

“I wrote to you care of Reverend Davies again. Didn’t he come to see you?”



I shook my head, upset and bitterly disappointed. I couldn't bear it if I had to go back home! What about all my grand plans for living in London, for attending playhouses and bear pits, and going to fairs?

"But why don't you want me here?" I asked. "I'll be of such a help to you!" I couldn't understand why she didn't want me to stay. I began to wonder what I had done in the past for which she might not, after all, have been able to forgive me.

"It's not because I don't want you here," she said. "It's because ... well, haven't you heard?" She began to whisper.

"Heard what?" I asked.

"About ... about the plague," she said, looking round and shuddering slightly, as if the thing she was talking about was standing like a great and horrible brute behind her. "The plague has broken out in London."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh is that it?" I said. So it wasn't because of me or anything I'd done. "Is that all? Why, there's always a plague somewhere and as long as it's not here – I mean, not right here —!"

"Well, it's not in this parish," she admitted. "But there are some cases nearby – and a house has been shut up in Drury Lane."

"Shut up?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"One of the people inside it – a woman – has the plague, and they've locked her up with her husband and children so it can't be spread."

"So there – it's all contained!" I said. "And it's just one house, Sarah – we don't need to worry about that, do we? London must have all the best doctors. I bet we're safer here than anywhere."

"I don't know —" said Sarah.

"But I'm here now, Sarah. Don't send me back!" I pleaded. "I can't bear it if I've got to go home."

She sighed. "I'm not sure."

"I'll do everything you say," I went on anxiously. "I won't go anywhere I'm not supposed to. I'll be such a help to you, really I will —"

She gave a sudden smile. "Come and give me a hug and we'll close the shop early and go out and buy a venison pasty to celebrate your coming."

"I can stay?" I asked joyfully.

She nodded. "You can for the moment. But if the plague comes closer —"

"Oh, it won't!" I said. "Everything is going to be perfectly fine."

Or so it seemed.

Plague Remedies

As the plague continued to stalk Europe, people invented strange remedies to try to cure it. Some of these cures used all sorts of peculiar ingredients that the desperate people were willing to try. They ranged from drinking fine wines or eating toads to bathing in milk. Many people believed that holding a small bunch of flowers and herbs up to the nose kept the plague away and even tobacco was highly valued as a medicine.

One of the most alarming images of the Great Plague is the clothing worn by the people who treated the plague victims.

A mask in the shape of a beak

The beak of the mask was often filled with herbs and spices to overpower the 'bad air' which was thought to carry the plague. The mask also included red glass eyepieces, which were thought to keep the wearer safe from evil.

A wooden cane

The cane was used to push away people who came too close.

Leather trousers and long boots

These were worn beneath the coat to protect the lower half of the body from infection.



A wide-brimmed black hat

This would have identified the person as someone who treated plague victims.

A long, black overcoat

The coat was tucked in behind the beak mask at the neck to reduce skin exposure. It completely covered the body and was often coated all over in wax. It was thought that the wax would draw out the plague from the infected victim and either trap it or repel it. We now know that the heavy coat would have helped to stop the real cause, flea bites.

Ring-a-ring o' roses – the story behind the rhyme

**Ring-a-ring o' roses,
A pocket full of posies
Atish-oo! Atish-oo!
We all fall down!**

This rhyme is sometimes sung in the playground. It is a game where young children dance around in a ring, singing the rhyme and deliberately falling down on the ground at the last line. The rhyme is thought by some to be about the Great Plague.

Ring-a-ring o' roses describes the red spots that come out on the skin during the first days of catching the disease.

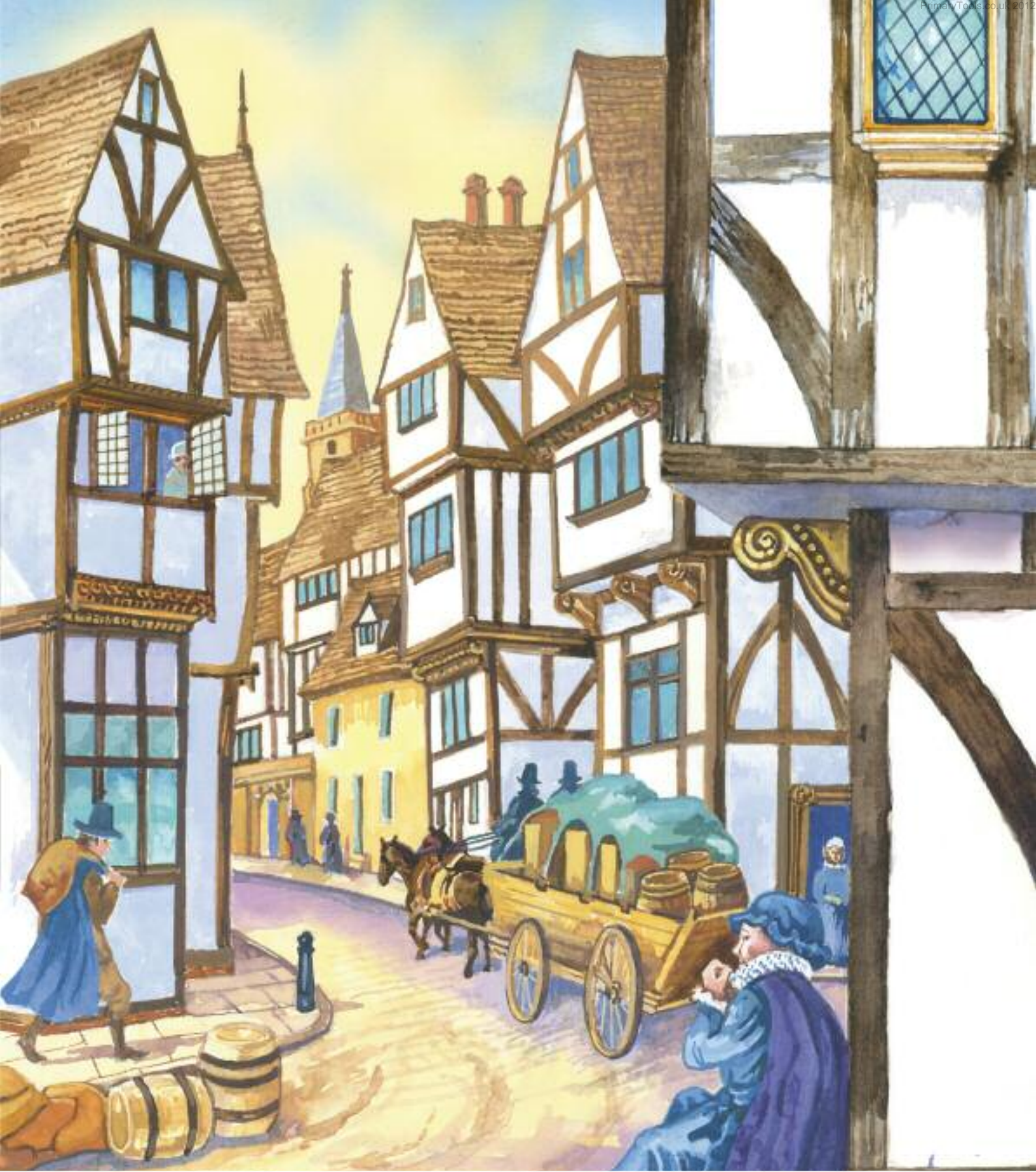
A pocket full of posies is believed to be the small bunches of flowers that people used to carry about with them during the plague. They thought that the flowers would keep the disease away. People were told that diseases were caused by 'evil airs' (bad smells) and that having something sweet-smelling around would protect them.

Atish-oo! Atish-oo! represents the sound of sneezing, which is a symptom of so many illnesses and diseases. In this case, it refers to the final stages of the illness.

We all fall down, as you may have guessed, is supposed to mark the death of the victim.

Although many people still think that the words of the rhyme seem to match the symptoms of the plague, some historians now believe this link is a myth.





'At the Sign of the Sugared Plum' adapted from *At the Sign of the Sugared Plum* by Mary Hooper, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2003.

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