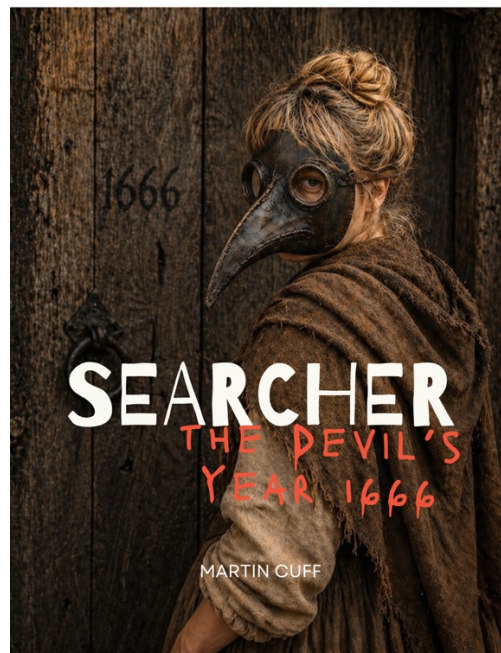


SEARCHER

THE DEVIL'S YEAR, 1666



Sample Pages 1-34

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London, July 1665

PROLOGUE

‘Come on yer Highness, let’s get it loaded,’ says the old draper, jovially. ‘I’d like to be out of here before bedtime, if you please.’

The boy, Billy, fourteen years old but already shaped by hard work and malnutrition, is weighed down by a bolt of damp wool that nearly reaches down to the muddy cobble. He grins at his employer and humphs a “Yessir.”

‘And keep the ends out of the swill, my lad.’ London’s streets are foul at the best of times, and here, just beyond the city walls, where the alleys are narrow and the gables of timbered houses scrunch more tightly together overhead, the movement of the air stalls and the smell is almost unbearable; piss and fish guts, stale ale and oily wool, cabbage stalks and human waste. ‘No man wants his waistcoats smelling of shit, I’d warrant.’

‘Nosir,’ replies the boy, straining as he tosses the bolt of wool into the bed of the cart like a Scotsman with a caber. It settles awkwardly on top of the cloth already stacked, and he clambers up nimbly to shoulder it more properly into place. A flea lands on his bare ankle and he slaps it absently before jumping down again.

‘Well done, lad. And how many’s left now?’ asks the older man.

‘Just a couple more, sir.’

‘Well don’t be tarrying. Let’s get ’em loaded up so I can be on my way. Have you seen the missus?’

‘Goody Brookmyre’s indoors. Finishing the last of the paperwork, she says.’

‘Well, we wouldn’t want to interrupt her with that, would we lad?’ Her bills of sale will accompany the trade cloth as far north as Derby, where they’ll be subdivided for distribution across the Peaks and Dales, by pack horse train. The draper pulls a face: ‘Else she’d have me guts for garters.’

The boy laughs and dips back into the shop like a cat burglar, so the old draper – Master Brookmyre, in fact – turns his attention to the harness of the large black gelding with the feathered feet that’s waiting patiently between the shafts of the cart. The old nag is churning the oats in its nosebag like it’s making butter. Brookmyre runs his hands firmly across the nag’s withers and croup, down his legs, lifting his massive feet to check for stones in his frogs one last time. He fingers each leather strap for give, and each buckle for strength, and he squeezes the thick oval collar to test its comfort.

But suddenly a wail of anguish rings out from a house further down the street, and Brookmyre’s head whips round at the surprise of it. It’s a woman’s cry, a keening full of fear and foreboding, like one of the banshees his Irish grandmother long warned him about. The old gelding’s ears flick back, unsettled by the tone, and he stamps his hoof in protest. And then the wailing comes again, and this time the voice of a desperate woman can be heard with it, pleading: ‘No, no, no. Please don’t, Master Munny. You don’t have to do that.’

Brookmyre looks up from his inventory of checks. The commotion is coming from the Holder house five doors down. Three generations under the eaves, and a fourth on the way. He moves to have a closer look.

The Ward’s Constable – a petty man with a face like a black rat who Brookmyre’s known since he was a boy, and was never much fond of, even then – is standing in the roadway holding a clay pot. In the yellowy midday smog, a plague doctor in an oilskin

cloak and long-beaked mask stuffed with camphor and dried herbs emerges from the house, nods at Munny brusquely, and striding off in the direction of the busy High Street, where a steady run of carriages and carts and sedan chairs is already moving inexorably out of the city gates.

‘You don’t have to do this, sir!’ says the voice. It’s Betty Holder, Brookmyre realises, and she’s wrung out with misery.

‘Sorry Goody Holder, them’s the rules now,’ the Ward Constable is saying in return. ‘There’s plague in there and the rules say you have to be quarantined.’

‘Please don’t,’ says Betty Holder from inside. ‘We’re fine. Honest, we are.’

Brookmyre moves closer as Munny takes a brush dripping with red paint from the pot and swiftly daubs the door of the house with a large red cross.

A clear warning.

‘Forty days,’ he says.

‘It’s plague is it then, Master Munny?’ Brookmyre has moved to the Ward Constable’s shoulder.

‘Aye, Master Brookmyre’ the Ward Constable replies.

‘The plague’s in these parts?’

‘It’s in all parts, I hear,’ says Munroe. ‘Three homes on Church Street. More in over in Trotting Lane.’

‘A proper outbreak then?’

‘Enough for the King and his court to leave for Oxford.’

‘Oxford, is it?’

‘Anyone who can is going,’ says Munny. He nods to the heavy traffic on the high street, jostling and swearing its way away from the city.

‘That’s lucky for ‘em.’

The Ward Constable steps back and begins to paint on the plasterwork. The words ‘*Lord Have Mercy Upon Us*’ emerge from the end of the brush. When he’s done, he steps back to admire his handiwork.

‘And what about the rest of us?’ asks the draper.

‘If you’ve got anywhere to go, I’d be on my way as soon as possible,’ Munny says.

‘It seems bad this year. Very bad. Worse than ever.’

‘I’m heading away this very afternoon,’ says Brookmyre. ‘But maybe I should carry the wife along too, though she’ll complain the whole way no doubt.’

‘That’d be wise.’

‘The carrying or the complaining?’

‘May be both.’

As the Ward Constable finalises his words of warning, the door to the house opens again and pregnant Abby Holder stands in the frame, a child on her hip and another clutching her skirts. She’s burning up with a fever and the hair falling from her cap sticks to her forehead in clammy clumps. There’s a swelling in her neck too, a buboe, big as a daffodil bulb. This alone is the tell-all of the drama unfolding indoors.

Abigail sees her neighbour and opens the door wider. ‘Master Brookmyre. Please take the children?’ she whispers. ‘Please?’

The Ward Constable answers for him, putting an arm out even to stop him from approaching. ‘He can’t do that, Mistress Abigail. It’s the law now. You have to stay in there. Forty days. All of you. Go on now.’

And bleakly she closes the door again as she returns inside to die.

Eyam

Derbyshire

July 1665

ALYS

The Reverend Thomas Stanley, now in his sixties, lives in much reduced circumstances in a hovel at the far edge of the town. His shack sits in a shallow dell, leaking and broke-spined and mostly falling down, half-swallowed by the tangled edge of the woods. Much like the Reverend himself.

This sunny July day finds the Reverend – the former reverend to be more precise – sitting in front of the weather-warped door, legs spread, stockings down over blue-white shins, face up to the sun, a raggedy chicken snoozing in his lap. He could be sleeping. He could also be dead.

A whistle comes sharply from the footpath and the old man stirs.

His eyesight is still alright though: ‘Mistress Alys,’ he says stirring cheerfully, trying and failing to get to his feet. ‘Come in, come in. To what do I owe this pleasure?’

The invitation to enter is moot; the gate is leaning against the grassy bank, gathering moss and earwigs.

‘Someone had to come and keep an eye on you,’ says the young woman.

‘Well, good of you to have come, nonetheless,’ he replies warmly.

Alys Pritchard looks around the muddy yard, the broken shack, the roof sagged under the weight of its own patchwork. Straw and reeds hang in clumps, matted with lichen, bracken jammed into holes where the wind had torn away the rest. The walls are daubed here and there with streaks of hardened mud and rain has carved little runnels through the daub, and the place stinks faintly of damp soil and stale smoke. The dereliction of it.

And of him.

'I'm glad I did,' she says.

'You didn't walk all this way on your own did you?'

'I've got bad bones, father, I'm not a complete invalid.' Alys moves across the threshold on the crutches she's used since they noted her uncooperative and dragging leg as a small child - her arm drawn stubbornly inward, her hand unsteady as she reached for baubles above her crib.

'Still, it's a long way to travel,' he concedes.

'Well, whose choice was it to move as far out of town as humanly possible?'

'The Five Mile Act said I must stay away from my old congregation.'

'And yet you chose to near double that? You're a spit from the boundary stone. You may as well be in Sheffield for all the community you get out here.'

'It's how I like it.'

'I'm sure it is,' she says, smiling knowingly. 'Are you sure you're not being just a bit stubborn? I thought pride was a sin?'

'I'm sure you can forgive an old man his failings.'

'I'm not certain forgiveness is my job, Reverend. That's more your sphere of expertise. But I have brought you something to eat. You *have* been eating, I hope?'

'As and when,' he shrugs.

'As *and when* what?' she says. 'Must I come here and bathe you too?'

'I'm not a cripple,' he protests, before an aghast look washes briefly across his face when he remembers he's who he's talking to.

Alys though, doesn't take offense, or pretends not to. 'No, but you're acting worse than one,' she prattles cheerfully. 'Even us cripples keep ourselves fed. Look, I

brought you a cabbage and some leeks. Some nettles and sorrel and dandelion leaves too. I can make a pottage?’

‘You’ll have to start the fire, I let the hearth go cold.

‘Reverend, you have to start looking after yourself. Or I’m going to call an intervention up at the village.’

‘Don’t you dare; I’m quite capable of looking after myself.’

‘It does seem so, yes,’ she says, meaning quite the opposite. ‘When exactly was the last time you had anything to eat?’

‘What day is it today?’

‘Thursday.’

‘Not Thursday, anyway.’

She rolls her eyes at him. ‘Let’s get this going then. Where’s your crockpot.’

‘Where you left it.’

She shakes her head: ‘You and I are going to have words.’

‘I thought that’s what we were doing.’

‘You are a frustrating old man,’ she says, tenderly. ‘Maybe you’ll listen to Reverend Mompesson. I should send him over here to reason with you?’

‘That sparkling popinjay?’

Mompesson was the vicar who’d been sent to replace Stanley when the old man had refused to sign the Act of Uniformity and was summarily dismissed from the parish in 1662.

‘Don’t talk to me about him.’ A pause. ‘How are things at my church, anyway?’ asks Stanley. There’s pain behind the question, and not just because of his dramatic fall from grace.

‘It’s better than it was with Shoreland Adams, is what I can say.’

Shoreland Adams was the first vicar appointed after Stanley’s ignominious departure.

‘Well, that’s a low bar,’ says Stanley. Shoreland Adams had barely turned up to the parish.

‘That it was. Well, Mompesson is just different, I guess’ says Alys. ‘He’s not a Puritan, that’s for sure, not one for the old ways. He’s a more *colourful* sort.’

Stanley spits, a mocking sort of sound.

‘He’s got the whole town planning for Wakes Week,’ Alys continues. ‘They’re cleaning out the church, getting fresh rushes cut. The ladies are brewing, strong beer and small ale. Master Hadfield the tailor’s got a new assistant from Chesterfield to help him make all the extra waistcoats for the men; he even ordered cloth up from London and everything. Sir Richard will roast a sheep. There’ll be dancing. Half the town is abuzz with it all.’

‘Half the town is idiots.’

‘You should have just signed the Act,’ says Alys, shaking her head.

‘And what? Lied?’

‘Survived? Lived another day?’

‘You know conscience doesn’t work like that? Nor faith neither.’

‘I know it doesn’t. Especially not *your* faith, Reverend.’ She’s getting the fire going as she speaks. ‘They’re calling it The Great Ejection, when they fired you all. The Great Ejection.’

‘I heard. A nice way to describe the end of a man’s living. Handing his parish to some stranger who don’t know the Dales from his asshole.’,

‘Are you supposed to swear? As a vicar, I mean?’

‘The times drive you to it.’

‘I see,’ she smiles. ‘Anyway, he seems decent enough, this new man. Little bit enthusiastic for my liking, all jolly and *please* and *thank you* and *oh my goodness*.’ She mimics the poshness of the new Vicar’s tones. Then she says: ‘I think he means well enough.’

‘Don’t you go taking his side,’ Stanley blusters. ‘I couldn’t bear to see you go over to popery.’

‘I’m not taking anyone’s side, Reverend. In my circumstances, taking sides is rarely a sensible idea. How long has this water been sitting here?’ she says pointing at a three-legged cauldron by the hearth. The pot is half full of water but there’s a cloudy skin of pollen and insects mulling about on top.

‘Maybe a day? Maybe three. Hard to keep track of time.’

‘What with you being so busy and all?’

He looks at her and grins sheepishly.

‘Why don’t you just come down to the village and show your face? Everyone misses you, everyone would like to see you.’

‘I’m not allowed.’

‘But who would stop you?’

‘No, I wouldn’t go there.’

She shrugs.

Stanley continues: ‘It’s all so humiliating, isn’t it? Being kicked out like that and no one stands up for you.’

‘It wasn't like anyone *could* stand up for you, Reverend. Once it came to Saint Bart's Day and you hadn't signed, you were removed regardless. Not one of us had a say in the matter. So now we all have to deal with this new vicar sent by London.’

‘Mompesson. What kind of name is that even? Where are his people from?’

‘Devon, I think he said. Or Somerset maybe.’

‘He should go back there. Him and that snooty wife of his.’

‘You don't even want to know what they're saying about her in the village.’

‘They tell you, do they?’ he asks, but not unkindly.

‘Reverend, no one tells me anything. You know that. But it doesn't mean I haven't got ears. It's one of the benefits - one of the few benefits, it has to be said - of being the village cripple. No one really pays me any attention and they're all loose with their words around me.’

Stanley nods, sagely. ‘I expect Margery Grievance has had something to say about her?’ he says.

‘Margery Grieves? Scurrilous things mostly, and unrepeatable here, in such polite company,’ Alys grins. ‘Did you know they were in Paris with the King, before the Restoration?’

‘And now they're in Eyam, population six hundred and something? Haven't they fallen on hard times?’ There's an uncharitable glee to his tone.

‘When they were in France, they say Reverend Mompesson had a love child with another woman,’ Alys says. ‘Catherine only sticks with him out of a promise she made to his dying mother.’

‘Who told you that?’ asks Stanley. ‘Margery Grieves said? Well, if it were Widow Grieves that said it, I'd take that with a pinch of salt bigger'n Lot's own Wife. That

woman could slander the baby Jesus. Sometimes I wish we had a Scold's Bridle and a ducking stool still in use in the Parish.'

'Not very charitable of you, Reverend.'

'Not very nice of her, Alys. Are those parsnips? You trying to kill me off?'

Alys is scraping chopped vegetables into the crockpot that's beginning to bubble.

'They're not wild ones. I grew these myself. Besides, there's enough belladonna in these hedgerows to kill off the entire village. If I really wanted you dead, I wouldn't bother getting my hands dirty digging roots.'

'Don't even joke about that, Alys. Someone might hear you and call you a witch.'

'They only accuse you of witchcraft if they want to take something from you. I don't have anything, so they think me harmless.' She pauses. 'Truly, I doubt they think of me at all.'

'Well, you be careful of them, anyway. I'd trust none of them as far as I could throw them.'

'I didn't get this far on these rickety legs by making myself easy prey.'

'Now that I can believe.'

In the distance, a train of pack horses with loaded panniers makes its way slowly across the narrow dale track in the direction of the village. Mowers scythe and gather in a wheatfield, bent backed and rhythmic. A lark sings on high in the blue summer sky.

They watch the scene together in companionable silence for a while until Alys says: 'Now, do you want me to cut your hair while that's cooking? You look like you're sleeping in that hedge.'

CATHERINE

In an upstairs bedroom of the grey stone rectory that overlooks the medieval churchyard, Catherine Mompesson, the vicar's wife, is folding away her finest court dresses into a large oak trunk; it's a solemn ritual, a funeral, because she has no need of such beauty here. Silken pinks and pale blues and greens and marigold yellows, each folded within gossamer crunches of tissue paper, the gowns sigh as she presses them in deeper into the box. There's one more to go, spread out on the bed like a fainting beauty - a creamy number with a bodice shaped by Brabant lace, and puff sleeves for entertainment, once worn with dainty silk slippers and a pale blue sash the colour of cornflowers. She looks from the gown – all summer sky made manifest - to the dull beige wool of her current outfit, the broad starched country collar, the apron (*dear God, an apron!*) and the sensible shoes of a country vicar's wife.

Zut Alors. How life has changed.

On the pillows of the bed, another memento of her past - a red and black toy spaniel called Pippin - looks at her without raising its head. A King Charles spaniel is not a subtle animal to bring to a Puritan village in the first years after the Act of Conformity. The king's own breed, everyone knows that. Pip looks back at her and wags his tail with enthusiasm - enough to signal his pleasure, but not quite enough to get him to stir from the feathers.

She smiles at him. 'What?' she says.

He blinks back, bug-eyed, and settles back down to snooze.

Out of the window, there's a pack train making its plodding way towards the village. Haymakers in the lower field take a break from the threshing, and a blue kestrel shimmers on an updraft above a hedgerow packed with wood mice and wildflowers. The kestrel dives out of view.

Catherine's attention is drawn closer; the sound of voices rising up from the churchyard below. Her husband William, the Vicar of Eyam (*Eeeeeem*, sorry - she'd had this pronunciation drilled into her before they'd arrived), is talking with the Church Warden and the grave digger and three other men whose names and roles she hasn't remembered yet. She can hear the man she married, clear and bell-like, jabbering with too much enthusiasm and soft refinement about the plans to cut and lay fresh rushes in time for Wake's Week and the ceremony of re-dedication of the church, his church, of St. Lawrence.

'And when the old rushes have been cleared, where do you take them?' William is asking. 'You burn them of course? But where? Not too close to the church, I hope?' He laughs nervously, a hiccuppy bray like a donkey rising at the end.

'No, sir,' says Marshall Howe, the gravedigger, leaning on his shovel like it's a third leg, 'we share them round the cottages hereabouts,'

'You do? The dirty rushes?'

'Oh aye, Reverend. All the poor folks round here like their holy rushes come summer.'

'Oh,' says William, nonplussed. 'Whatever for?'

'For Holy Soup,' says Marshall.

'For what?' asks William, taken aback. The *wh* comes out like a whistle that automatically places him as *not from these parts*.

‘Old custom in these here hills. Like to mix ‘em in the stock pot and make a soup of it. Swear it brings the Lord’s protection. And good for the gut.’ Howe rubs his belly as if in explanation.

‘Good Lord,’ exclaims William, who, *God love him*, still takes every man’s word as he finds it. ‘I can’t imagine it does anything but give you the runs.’

From the leaden window with the diamonds of glass that make everything a little blurred and wonky, Catherine can see Howe pulling funny faces when William isn’t looking. The other men stifle their laughs behind their hands, averting their shoulders like naughty schoolboys. Only the trusty Church Warden, Peter Dale, has the decency to frown. Though now she thinks of it, quite frankly a frown is the Warden’s usual expression.

‘Up here in the Dales, there’s all sorts of custom like you wouldn’t believe,’ the gravedigger continues, ‘and none of it were shook up by the Commonwealth, nor by the Restoration neither.’

When he was offered this living, they’d read up together on the traditional beliefs of the people in these parts – of the witches and hobgoblins and fairy rakes, and the corpse candles lighting up the moors marshes on a windless night. The Dales bred such a dour and unimaginative sort generally, she found the inventiveness of their hand-me-down myths fascinating; like maybe there were wells of creativity, of joy, of humanity, within the veins of these people, like the rakes of leaden ore in the fissures of a rolling hillside.

Well-hidden, obviously.

She sees William nod his head, thoughtfully as if he can fully believe it.

Which he probably can.

Fine, ok, so William is handsome and gentle but he is also foolish, and naïve. After all, this livelihood had been presented to him as something of a last chance, given the humiliation of his misconduct in Paris. She has no idea how the women in the village know about this humiliation, but know about it they do, and they gossip over it incessantly. And not even behind her back. In fact, to walk through the heart of the village, where the cottages lay side-by-side like the foundations of a Roman wall, the old women all sitting on their thresholds twining yarn on their spindles - well, it's like running a gauntlet, like you're some kind of Lady Godiva exposing yourself to the mockery and ridicule and snide remarks thrown like cabbage stalks.

God knows, she doesn't deserve it; it wasn't her, after all, who'd let her enthusiasm for feckless French custom run away with itself. Nor is it her fault that the former vicar of Eyam - a filthy and decaying mess of an old man currently shackled up in an actual pigsty at the village edge - had refused to sign the Act of Uniformity and had rejected the Book of Common Prayer. Literally, not her fault - though if you were to believe Margery Grieves' telling, Catherine had all but bound Reverend Stanley's hands behind his back and locked him in the belfry to prevent him from putting ink to paper.

Turning the other cheek is hard. So, so hard.

She hadn't expected it to be so difficult, honestly, though she thinks she was just unexperienced when she first came here. She'd grown up in a city, and in cities the people and their names wash past you like water, strangers generating more strangers, nobody's grandmother remembered by anyone beyond their own front door. She had honestly not known a place like Eyam existed. A place where the Thorpes and the Talbots and the Hancocks and the Syddalls and the Rowlands and the Reeds and the Wilsons and the Mortons and the Friths had lived alongside each other since the

Norman conquest, dealing surnames out like playing cards at each marriage. She hasn't traced the thread far enough back to find where they join, but they do join; somewhere they all join. Perhaps that's why they don't seem very welcoming to strangers? Agnes Spicer, she thinks, or perhaps one of the Rowlands, had told her that the way to understand Eyam was to understand that it was not many families but one family that has forgotten it is a family. Of course, the village does not look like a family, it looks like a village; the houses, the lane, the church, the spire against the sparkling summer sky, the smell of pollen and warm updrafts and someone's fresh bread laid out to cool. But it lives like a family, all six hundred and something of them, with all of the love and resentment, competition and compassion a family can muster.

She has been told there is nobody here she will not, in time, come to love.

She doubts that very much.

Catherine checks herself. Besides, there's a commotion of giggling coming towards her from the corridor, accompanied by frenetic and stompy little footsteps moving at speed. Elizabeth Mompesson, aged four, appears in the door frame clutching a straw doll. Her skin is pale and flushed, and her blonde hair has fallen loose like the wispy tendrils of a delicate vine. You could pluck strawberries from such sweetness. She's exhilarated at her escape from nurse.

'Mama,' she squeals.

'Lili-bee,' says Catherine, with delight. She loves this child fiercely; the child reminds her of herself - or rather how she once saw herself, before duty and responsibility clipped her wings and caged her. The girl slams herself into Catherine's thighs with strength and vigour, clutching her mother fiercely around the legs.

‘Sorry, Mrs. Mompesson,’ says Annie Buxton, the red-faced nursemaid, who huffles in behind the girl. Kitty, aged one, perches on Annie’s hip like she’s a figurehead on a sailing ship, looking out wide-eyed but incurious and unperturbed. Catherine’s beautiful boy, six-year-old Georgie, trails behind, his little hand clasped in the maid’s sweaty paw. ‘She got away from me again, the little monkey,’ says Annie, without rancour. She loves the little girl’s spirit; it is joyful and rumbunctious and entirely surprising given the haughtiness she expects from the parents.

‘It’s no worry,’ says Catherine. ‘I was just finishing up here.’

‘You shouldn’t have done that, ma’am,’ says Annie, looking at the trunk full of dresses. ‘I’d’ve got one of the girls to do all that for you.’ There are three parlour maids for the vicarage, as well as the nursemaid. ‘We can always find ‘em summat to do.’

‘Oh, it’s no bother, Anne, I like doing it myself. It’s like packing away memories.’

‘If you say so ma’am,’ says Annie, trying to detach little Elizabeth from her mother’s hips.

‘What you can do for me though,’ says Catherine, ‘is ask Lydia to bring me some of those dried herbs to go in the trunk. Some lavender and rosemary and mint? Wormwood if we have it?’

‘Lad’s Love’s good for moths too, ma’am.’

‘Lad’s Love? What’s that?’

‘Southernwood it’s called, proper.’

‘Ah, *Artemisia abrotanum*,’ says Catherine thoughtfully, and Annie looks at her askance. Catherine smiles. ‘Lad’s Love it is, then,’ she says. ‘If she could sew it into some muslin pouches, we can stuff it between the folds of my dresses later.’

‘Very good, ma’am. Let me get these young’uns back to the nursery.’

‘Shall I take Miss Kitty for a little while?’

Kitty is Catherine’s consolation prize after her husband’s foolish dalliance in France, the clumsy attempt to rebuild the bonds he’d broken, an error that she is grudgingly prepared to forgive. The little girl looks like William too, those big brown trusting eyes, a worried, wary face, as if every single thing in the vicarage and the landscape beyond it is waiting to bamboozle her.

One day I’m sure I’ll love her, thinks Catherine. I’m sure of it.

‘I was about to bring them their lunch,’ says Annie.

‘Oh. Well. Best you do that then,’ says Catherine. ‘I can see the children afterward.’

‘Right you are, Ma’am. Come on Miss Elizabeth.’

‘Thank you Annie,’ says Catherine, though she holds her daughter’s hand for somewhat longer than necessary as she follows the maid from the room.

From outside, there’s a peel of male laughter as the men finally break rank. She hears Marshall Howe say finally: ‘I’m only joshing with you Rev.’

William laughs too, a stumble of relief, and then he blushes, as if his gullibility was writ large on his forehead and every one of them could see.

EMMATT & ROWLAND

‘What are you doing here?’ Emmatt Syddall squeals with delight when she realises that it’s Rowland Torre who’s taken her by the waist and spun her behind the hayrick. The smell here is rich and fecund and honeyed; haydust languid in the air, tumps of freshly mown grass drying out in the midday sun.

Emmatt is twenty years old, pretty and strong bodied, with a porcelain skin that’s reddening in the heat. Though she gasps when he kisses her hard on the mouth, she accepts it willingly, nonetheless.

After, as she breaks free, she laughs again. ‘What are you doing here?’ Then: ‘Someone will see us.’

‘You think I care if they do?’ he teases, all bravado. He’s a year older than her, but holds a decade extra in misplaced self-confidence.

‘No, not you, you fool. You’ve a care for nothing. But ‘appen I do?’

‘And why would you care?’ says Rowland, grinning like a fool. ‘The whole world knows I’m sweet on you.’

‘Oh, they do, do they now? And who would’ve told ‘em that, then?’

‘Me, clearly. I’m like to tell anyone who asks,’ he proclaims boldly. He throws his head back and his arms wide, and he shouts: ‘I’m in love with Emmatt Syddall.’

‘What you are is touched in yer head,’ says Emmatt, laughing.

‘Is it loud enough for them to hear tho’? I’m in love,’ yells Rowland again, twirling around.

‘Shhhh, you coot,’ she grabs at his hand to pull him back. Instead, he pulls her beyond the edge of the hayrick into full view of the other haymakers, men and women, all sitting for their lunch.

‘I’m in love with Emmatt Syddall,’ he shouts.

‘You kept that well-hidden, Rowland, love,’ calls back Bridget Naylor. ‘Whoever could’ve guessed?’

The haymakers laugh.

‘Ye got more sense than to be sweet on a Stoney Middleton boy, Emma,’ shouts Abel Archdale, playfully. ‘They’ve all lost their wits to the metal vapours.’

‘I’m in love with Emmatt Syddall,’ yells Rowland one more time.

‘I rest my case,’ shouts Abel, and the hay harvesters all laugh again.

Finally, Emmatt, blushing, manages to pull him back behind the hayrick and he takes the opportunity to snatch another kiss.

‘That’s enough,’ she says, pushing him off and straightening her bonnet. ‘You’ll put me to shame.’

‘There’s no shame in being in love, Emmatt Syddall.’

She lifts her left hand tartly to demonstrate the noticeable lack of a wedding ring on her finger.

‘Oh, is that all you have?’ he laughs. ‘Well, then.’

And he plucks a windrow of grass from the hayrick behind her, takes her hand and ties the stiffening grass stem into a knot around her finger. He draws it into a bow. ‘Ta-da,’ he says.

Emmatt is torn between joy and embarrassment. ‘What will you have of me?’ she says with affection.

‘I’ll have you as my wife.’

She snorts. ‘Not without me faither’s blessing.’

‘Your faither would see me hang than grant me his daughter’s hand.’

‘And I wonder why that is? Is it because you’re an eejit?’

‘It’s because I’m too handsome and his daughter is quite mad for me too.’

He pulls a face and leans in again to kiss her.

‘Get on with you,’ she laughs, and she pushes him away finally. And then: ‘Will I see you Sunday? At church?’

‘You can count on it,’ says Roland.

When Emmatt returns to the haymakers – alone this time – they jeer and tease. Someone offers her a flagon of small beer, and she drinks from the neck.

‘Thirsty work, Miss Emma?’ says Sarah Morten and all the haymakers laugh.

Finally, so does Emmatt. ‘Haven’t you all got threshing to get on with?’ she says, smiling.

She picks up her the wooden handle of her long fork and heads back to turn the hay, waving to the chapman at the head of the string of pack horses clopping down the narrow lane towards the town.

SWEET MISTRESS SPICER & MARGERY GRIEVANCE

They called him Jemmy Button, though his real name was Séamus Ó Dubhda - Seamie O'Dowd when you anglicised it, which he had done since he'd crossed the Irish Sea after Cromwell's campaign. He was a small man, and red haired, wiry like the strands of burnished copper he used to sew and bind the holed and dented pots people brought him to fix. In his sixties by now, one cheek shaking a little with the palsy, Jemmy's hands were the only thing about him that remained firm, but they were also raw and scarred across the knuckles where molten metal of the work had caught him. Jemmy had landed in Liverpool in '52, with little more than a tan terrier, some sheets of tin and a brace of tools he was handy with. And though the terrier was long gone now, he'd been pushing his handcart along unevenly furrowed tracks from town to village from Manchester to Lincoln and south as far as Nottingham, every summer since.

Eyam is a regular stop.

Jemmy had arrived in the second week of July, a good fortnight before Wakes Week, and with time to spare to fix the various kettles and cauldrons and buckets and pans that would be put to use on the brewing and broiling and baking and batch boiling that will be needed to prepare food and drink for the church fair. Whenever he reached a town, he followed the same routine, the same performance if you will; he'd arrive on a Saturday, passing though the village like a preening song thrush, trilling three or four repetitive tunes from the beak of a penny whistle, drawing attention to his presence. Later, he'd set up camp at the edge of the town and unpack his wares, spreading pots and pans, ribbons and haberdashery, tin snips, iron stakes, rolls of solder wrapped in

rags, around the awning of his tent like some still-life Tinker's Nativity. He then gathered firewood from hedgerows, or sometimes coal if he could scrounge it. Finally, he ate a cold supper and unrolled his bedding under the cart itself, before settling for the night and the sabbath that followed. By Monday morning, the townsfolk were already seeking him out, and his fire was already burning.

Sweet Mistress Spicer (everyone calls her that, because although she is past seventy, she is indeed sweet and kindly and this lightness of her spirit is much loved by her neighbours) heads to Jemmy's camp after dawn later in the week, after the first rush for his services has passed. It's early, and cool, and the hedgerows are aflutter as the night creatures settle and the day ones stretch and warm their voices. Agnes, Miss Spicer, finds this time of day between sleeping and waking a particular comfort; she hasn't really slept since her second husband died painfully in the war between King and Parliament; her thoughts no longer still themselves by night. Her mornings come as a relief now, especially in these summer months, with birds singing and the dew burning off swiftly, and all the vale fresh and green and plump with warmth and opportunity.

She finds Jemmy squatting, head bent, making a tinker's dam on a blackened kettle. He's pressing a muddy clay plug into a hole and pouring solder into the wound that runs bright and silver for a moment. The plug holds the metal in place, and it dulls as it cools. He taps once or twice, to settle it, and sets it aside to harden.

When he sees her coming, knife in one hand, pan in the other, Jemmy says 'Whoa. They closed recruitment for the New Model Army, you know?'

Her face breaks into a smile. 'Good morning, Master Button,' she says by way of reply.

‘Are those for me?’ he asks, looking at her weapons.

‘Yes,’ she says, and she hands him the knife and the skillet in turn.

Jemmy Button assesses the pan, turning it over with both hands; it’s burnished copper lined inside with bright tin, and there’s a fist-sized dent in the side of it.

‘Whatever did you do to this, Sweet Mistress Spicer?’ asks Jemmy, his Irish brogue still lyric and dancey.

‘It slipped from my hand onto the stone floor,’ she says.

‘Onto the skull of a worthless suitor more like,’ says Seamus.

‘Jemmy Button,’ she replies, grinning and hoping she’s not blushing.

‘We’ll have no callow boys making a nuisance of themselves around here, now will we?’ he teases.

‘Jemmy Button,’ she says again, smiling delightedly. Her white hair framed by her white cloth cap lights her face. ‘You’ve been kissing the Blarney Stone, again.’

‘Only because you woulda’na kiss me first, Sweet Mistress Spicer.’

‘Go away with yourself, Jemmy Button. So can you fix them while you’re in town?’

‘I can indeed.’ And he offers a price so low she would be ashamed to haggle over it.

‘Deal,’ she says. ‘Thank you Jemmy. I’ll see you when it’s ready.’

‘Not if I see you first,’ he says.

She walks the short path back into town, still smiling.

‘Oh, look what the cat dragged in.’

Margery Grieves' has a voice like a bucket of iced water thrown over your back on a chill winter morning. The sound of it, a cold foot touching a bare back under the bedclothes, wipes the smile off Sweet Mistress Spicer's face, though she strives to correct that and it still hangs on in there, just, albeit watery and wavering.

'Good morning Goody Grieves,' she replies pleasantly enough under the circumstances.

'Parading about with your tail up like a bitch in season.'

'That's a strange description of a person, Goodwife. You spend a lot of time contemplating the mating styles of dogs?'

'She's been to Jemmy Button,' says Anne Parsley, another crone setting out her spindle. Add Deborah Elliot to the mix and you've got a whole Weird Sisters' thing going on. Agnes saw Master Shakespeare's Scottish play once, when the Kings' Men brought it to Derby more than thirty years back, and she thinks of it whenever she meets her neighbours.

'Good morning Goodwife Parsley. And Goodwife.'

'Jemmy Button?' spits Margery. 'That papist? You went to the midden-heap he calls a camp?'

'I did. Like half the rest of the village, I have pots I need fixing.'

'I'd not trust him as far as I could spit,' says Margery.

Which is far, thinks Agnes, recalling the scatter-shot flecks of projective drool that emerge whenever Margery is in a vituperative mood.

You almost need an oilskin coat.

'He's nowt but a stray dog with tools,' Margery continues. 'He smells of ditchwater.'

‘I’d not gotten close enough to him to notice,’ says Agnes.

‘A man like that brings his own weather.’

Agnes placidly looks up at the clear blue sky. ‘Well,’ she says. ‘The threshers will have no complaints then.’

Though no doubt you will, Margery Grievance.

The Church Warden, Peter Dale, has the misfortune to be passing on his way to unlock the church for Matins. He’s whistling, happy.

Margery Grievance can fix that. ‘Master Dale,’ Margery calls out to him.

‘Goody Grieves,’ says Peter.

He hesitates a moment. This is a fatal mistake for a prey species to make.

Margery pounces before he can move: ‘What are you doing about that papist Traveller? Lurking on the edge of the village like a Will o’ the Wisp.’

‘Um...’

‘She means Jemmy Button,’ says Agnes Spicer.

‘Jemmy Button? I wasn’t planning on doing anything about him, Goody Grieves. He’ll move along on his own before the week is out. It’s what he does. It’s what he always does.’

‘How much pilfering and thievery must the good people of this town support while he is in our midst, then?’

‘I wasn’t aware there was an issue?’

‘He is the issue,’ Margery protests. ‘Eyam don’t need idolatrous Catholics, with all their blessed saints and superstitions robbing us blind, and maybe slitting our throats when we least expect it.’

Peter Dale has the decency to look confused.

‘She means: after what the Gaels did to our brethren in Ireland,’ says Agnes. She holds her hands out like she’s dowsing for stupidity.

‘They stripped our women naked and threw our babies in the river, they did,’ Margery insists.

Anne Parsley and Deborah Elliot both nod in earnest agreement, though since neither of them has ever left the Dales, it’s hard to tell how they might know.

‘They’re given over to drink and violence, too,’ adds Margery. ‘And other heinous vices. You must move him along, Warden. Send him on his ill-gotten way.’

‘But not before he’s finished fixing my pots, if you don’t mind, Warden?’ says Agnes, cheerfully. ‘He’ll need a day or two more.’

Gratitude flashes across Peter Dale’s face and he makes a polite bow. ‘I will have a word with him and find out his plans.’

‘And send him on his way?’ asks Margery again.

‘And ask him what his plans are,’ he says more firmly. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me, Reverend Mompesson will be waiting at the church. Good morning, ladies.’

‘Peter Dale,’ says Margery when the warden has scurried away, ‘The Lord’s own afterthought. Hard on a man born that far down the line.’

‘We don’t need to make it harder, tho’ says Agnes. ‘There’s no shame in being surplus.’

'There is, if you forget your place,' Margery says. 'And his place is a good deal lower than he pretends it is.'

Agnes sighs, hoping Margery's vicious tongue will burn itself out. It doesn't.

'Son of a bigamist and a fallen woman. He's little more than a bastard with the heirs and graces of landed gentry.'

'Mary Reed was just fifteen when she ran off with Simon Dale,' Agnes says, in the tone of a woman correcting a record she has corrected before, and will certainly correct again if she has to, 'who was twice her age and should've treated her better.'

'He was married...' Margery starts to say, but Agnes isn't making space for it.

'And whatever Simon Dale was, whatever Simon Dale did, Peter carries none of it. He came back to this village with nothing, not even his pride, and he has made himself useful every day since. And that's a good deal more than can be said for many around here who were born with considerably more luck and opportunity.'

'Useful?' Margery says. 'Useful? Juggling the keys to the Poor Box and the church door?'

'Thank goodness, then,' Agnes says pleasantly, 'that he always has you to always remind him of his limitations.'

GEORGE VICCARS

Giles Purdew the carter, walking at the head of his train of pack horses, arrives in the village in the afternoon. He passes the Churchyard (Peter Dale waves), and the neat row of workers' cottages (Margery Grieves at her spindles does not), before drawing to a halt in front of John Hadfield the tailor's premises.

He knocks at the painted door, and a young man with jug ears and a merry smile opens.

'Master Hadfield in?' asks the carter. 'I've brung his cloth.'

'No, sir, I'm George Viccars. Master Hadfield's assistant. At your service.'

'You're new.' An observation, not a question. Purdue's delivered along these peaks and dales for more than a decade.

'I am sir. I'm up from Chesterfield to help with the cutting of all Wakes' Week cloth.'

'That much business, eh?'

'People are warming to the idea, I think.'

Before the old King's son returned, Eyam held fast to godly discipline. No Christmas feasts, no saints' day celebrations, definitely no maypole on the village green when dancing was a door the Devil might use. The Sabbath was kept tight as a knot in a purse string. Now there was Wakes' Week, to reconsecrate the local church with feasting and celebration.

So, things had begun to change, but slowly and in some parts, grudgingly.

'Master Hadfield told me to expect you. How was the road, Master Purdue?'

‘Not bad at all, thank ee,’ says the carter. ‘The tracks were dry and the nags are surefooted, so we made good time.’

‘And the weather’s held up for you at least?’

‘We had some rain setting out, in truth. You may find the cloth needs to be hung out for airing before you start to work on it.’

‘Good to know. I’ll get onto that before Master Hadfield returns. So, what do you have for me?’ George asks.

‘This way.’

The carter goes to the second of his pack horses and starts to untie the bindings. The cloth is evenly balanced and lashed over the pack-saddle’s wooden frame. He slides the bundle off the horse’s back and the mare breathes out a sigh, like she’s glad to be rid of it. George Viccars helps him carry through the low door and into the tailor’s workroom. They lay the cloth over a trestle. Two more journeys are needed for the task’s completion.

‘Time for an ale, before you head on? Or are you on a schedule?’

‘I wouldn’t say no,’ says Purdue. ‘Goody Hadfield’s beer is legend.’

Later, when the cartman has gone on his way, ruddy cheeked and merry, George takes his small knife and cuts through the twine and wrapping of the first bale of fabric. It’s broadcloth, dense and obedient, smelling faintly of lanolin long washed out. The colour is deep and saturated, like the dye has seeped through it across the course of a long, wet winter. He opens the fold and lowers it across his forearm, the cloth forming a slow, heavy curve. It is wide, wider than most wool cloth, generous in breadth, the

selvedge firm and clean. Its surface has been shorn close after fulling, the nap is short and fine, almost velvety. George strokes it one way and the shade deepens, strokes it back again and it lightens slightly, the pile shifting like the coat of a well-groomed Cleveland Bay. He holds it out at arm's length, a little damp and clammy on his skin, and he begins to stretch it across the trestles to dry.

When he's done unwrapping and hanging the bundles, he goes through to the kitchen, where Sarah Syddall, the Hadfield's maid, is waiting for water to boil on the stove.

'May I take some kindling for the workshop fireplace, Goody Syddall?'

'Help yourself, George,' she replies pleasantly.

He bends to take pick up the Fire Shovel, and scoops glowing coals into them. Shielding it from any breeze with his spare hand, he walks briskly back into the workroom and pours the embers into the hearth. While they smoke and glow, he stacks kindling around them and waits before they catch alight before adding more wood. Shortly, the fire is burning.

George carries the fire shovel back to the kitchen and then returns to the workshop. He spends the next while turning the cloth around so each bolt has a chance to draw in the heat. And as the cloth dries, the fleas that had nested there move onto the workshop floor.

George slaps at his leg as the first of them bite at his ankle.