

THE SPARROW - 1665

A Historical Beast-Fable by Eleanor Grandin

Notes

Nicholas Culpeper 1615 – 1654, author of 'The English Physician' and 'The Complete Herbal'.

*The **Yersinia pestis** bacillus, the cause of bubonic plague, was discovered in 1894 by Shibasaburo Kitasato and Alexandre Yersin.*

Though I write this story, it is not my story. I am James Cobberduke, the spice importer and merchant, and write only that a brave man might not be forgotten.

It began for me in early 1666 when I returned with my family to London. We had spent the plague year in Holmbury St. Mary, a village in Surrey. We left London at the first reports of plague and, by God's mercy, we had all survived. Our house was in good order when we arrived as several of our servants had stayed behind to care for it. They had nowhere else to go. After seeing my family reasonably settled, I set out at once to check on my two business premises.

I went first to my warehouse in the docks at Rotherhithe. The door was smashed in and the contents almost completely gone. All that remained was broken crates and jars and a few pounds of ruined spices. There was no trace of the expensive oils for the perfumiers of course. It still smelled like my warehouse though and I spent some time there inhaling the lingering aromas. I had felt some hope of the goods being intact as I had hired two burly and reliable men to guard the warehouse in my absence. But enquiries in the neighbourhood revealed that they had both succumbed to the plague early in its attack on the city.

After this distressing experience I was dreading what I might find at my shop, where I sell the most expensive spices, essences and herbs, all of which must be considered more desirable to thieves. But on arrival I found that I couldn't get in. From what I could see through the window, which was very little as it was boarded up, the stock looked dusty but untouched. The mystery was that I had not boarded the window up before leaving, though perhaps I should have. Also the locks were new which was why I could not get in.

The candlemaker, my next door neighbour, was open for business so I went in and asked him if he knew the answer to my puzzle. He told me that an apothecary called Nathaniel Gent, who lived above the saddler's shop further up the street, had been guarding my shop and had asked the candlemaker to send me to him for the keys. I called upon Master Gent forthwith, but on finding him from home decided I had better return to my family to see what assistance I could render in re-establishing our home.

The next day I was luckier and found the apothecary busy amongst his alembics and unguents. He was a small, dark man of early middle-age, perhaps a year or two younger than me, and not unpleasant-looking. When I introduced myself he seemed somewhat abashed, though he must have been expecting my visit for some time. He told me that during the height of the plague he had been nearly overcome by the number of patients he was called to. His



supplies of medicines ran low because he hadn't time to collect herbs, make them up and attend his many patients. He couldn't apologise enough but he had been forced, by his patients' necessity, to break into my shop and steal what he needed. He said he would pay me when he could, perhaps in instalments if I would agree to that, as he was very low in funds and could only just afford his landlord's rent and to buy food.

I could well imagine that many of his patients died owing him money, and those who did pay could probably only afford a little themselves. I did my best to allay his obvious agitation by

telling him that I was pleased my stock had been put to good use, and I was sure we could come to some arrangement. Thinking to myself that helping the desperate was a much better use than my goods were usually put to, I suggested that perhaps his debt to me could perhaps be paid in treatment to my family when they were next sick. He seemed pleased with the idea and we went together to open up my shop. I thanked him for the excellent job he had done in re-securing the premises but think I only embarrassed him.

In truth there was very little missing, and I was thinking of telling him to forget the debt, but was too busy puzzling over the unexpected things that he had taken to say anything. I had expected the cheap herbs which grow round about here to be gone, and some were, but also missing were some of my exotic essences and oils. I felt regret as there was none of those particular ones in my warehouse either, but decided that was an unworthy thought. If my new acquaintance could stay in London through the Great Plague, as they are now calling it, tending his patients at very great risk to himself, surely I could contribute a few exotic essences.

Also I found the idea of his being willing to take such risks for the good of others compelling and wanted to know more of him. I thought the idea of his being bound to visit me at my house some time in the future was a good opportunity for satisfying my curiosity.

And so it proved. For many years now we have been good friends. Indeed my younger son became apprenticed to him. I had hoped that both my sons would follow me into the importing business, and my elder one did. But the younger one's mind was always on plants or insects and I thought my friend and my son would benefit each other by that arrangement.

Over the course of those years Nathaniel has told me what happened to him during 1665. But he never mentioned his family and it was from a different source that I found out that they were all dead of the plague. They must have been among the first to die. Nathaniel sent his wife and four children to his wife's relations in a village near Uttoxeter about the time my family and I fled to Holmbury St. Mary. But it was too late for them and all five succumbed.

They probably carried plague to the village, my informant knew no more but there were doubtless more deaths.

I shall end my part of this narrative here and tell as best I can Nathaniel's story in his own words as told to me. However I should add that I think during that year my friend's mind had been affected by despair at losing his wife and children.

The Testimony of Nathaniel Gent during the Great Visitation of 1665.

One of the best things that ever happened to me was to be apprenticed to that wonderful man and great apothecary Nicholas Culpeper. I will not say it was good fortune as my father chose my master and teacher with wisdom and loving care. My father lavished more care on me than perhaps he should have. I was his only surviving son, that was the reason no doubt, but I thought he should not have made me such a favourite over my sisters. Both my sisters married well and I believe are reasonably happy, but we are not close. My love of and interest in birds must have been obvious early to my father. Through that I later developed an interest in trees, well all plants really but I have always found trees particularly gripping.

During his last years my father spoke a lot about his decision to apprentice me to Master Culpeper. He really wanted to find a profession for me in which I could work with birds. He considered taxidermist and gamekeeper, but realised at once that they deal with dead birds and my interest lay in the life of birds. Reluctantly abandoning birds, he considered trees next. He could only think of forester in that category and (rightly or wrongly) thought it would offer me too little intellectual stimulation. On the other hand he thought working as an academic botanist would offer too much. He rightly realised that I needed to be doing something practical. Like a lot of young people I wanted to make my mark in the world by benefitting my fellow mortals. He had to reject carpentry, ship-building and all work with wood on the same grounds as taxidermy. Dead wood was no better than dead birds.

He finally decided that it would have to be a profession involving plants in general and being of help to mankind. There was only medicine left in his opinion. Unfortunately he considered physicians no better than hucksters. I am only giving his opinion and do not endorse it myself. The death of several of my brothers and sisters and the continual ill-health of my mother (she died many years before he did) under the ministrations of physicians had perhaps biased his views.

My master, Nicholas Culpeper is so famous (and rightly so) that I hardly know what I can add. I had the best education as an apothecary that it was possible to have. Experimenting and gathering information go all the time forwards, so I will just say in what ways I practise differently. Though hesitating to differ from my master in such a fundamental way I have to admit that I am unable to follow his practice with regard to the stars. Though I too love the stars, it does not seem reasonable to me that they affect the course of a disease. In fact I have serious doubts about their affecting human lives at all, they are too remote. Master Culpeper's first act on taking on a case was to take advice from an astrologer. I never do, being conceited enough to think that it is my skill and the grace of God which will restore the patient, or not of course.

Also, in the matter of birds' entrails. You will say I am biased and do not wish to see the birds killed. That is true, but I have two points to raise against the practice of prophecy by this method. One is that it seems too arcane a method for the Lord to convey information to us. It seems irreverent to me to suppose that He would. The second point is that I believe most skill with this method was lost with the Romans. We are amateurs in an art which they had

perfected. Though I follow my master closely in the matter of dreams. He considered them highly significant and so do I. Many times have I received useful ideas in dreams, and I use my patients' dreams as a diagnostic tool, when they are able to remember them which is annoyingly seldom.

In the matter of herbs I follow Master Culpeper most precisely. This is ancient knowledge which he was skilled at adding to, and I feel privileged to be a temporary holder of it. I will pass it on with care.

We come now to the plague itself and how I worked against it. Lack of knowledge hindered me at every turn. The disease, and it must be one disease as any outbreak starts as one and stops as one, shows itself in such different symptoms in different patients. The course of the disease may go three ways.

The most lethal is also the least common. The patient gets a rash (quite a slight one in some cases) such as is seen in several other diseases. They, or their relatives may hesitate to send for me. Not that it signifies as the patient will be dead within the day whether I treat them or not. I have never heard of one case where the patient recovered when the disease took this course.

The second course it may take is to attack the patient's lungs. This is seen in perhaps one case in five or six. There is high fever and pitiable coughing to which the patient almost always succumbs. I have not seen it myself but have heard tell that patients have recovered in a small number of cases.

The third course the disease may take is by far the most common, the one attended by so-called 'black' buboes from which the plague took its name of the Black Death. The buboes can cause extreme pain and headaches and vomiting are usually present. In this one of the disease's courses the symptoms cause the most anguish but there is more hope that the patient will recover. As with other diseases the earlier treatment begins the more likely it is to be successful. I can say this confidently because I keep detailed notes on each patient's symptoms and treatment. But all physicians and apothecaries report the same, that some patients recover if treated in the early stages.

It should be noted that some may recover if not treated at all, they would not appear in my notes or anybody else's. But all agree that if the disease progresses to the stage where the neck, armpit or groin buboes change colour to purple (a dark variant of which is called black) then the patient is lost.

Several herbs are thought to be active against the disease. Master Culpeper considered some





more so than others. I always use as many as I can without causing the patient harm to give him as much chance as I possibly can, though it can depend on my supplies which are not reliable at all times. The first to mention is Sweet Cicely as it is a preventative and everyone's best hope is not to catch the disease in the first place. I always put plenty of Sweet Cicely in the mask of my protective cloak when going out to treat patients.

To treat the disease once caught, at different stages in variable amounts, I use Meadow Sweet, Pellitory, Elecampane and Tormentil. I know some would use Brank Ursine but I have never found that it did

anything one way or another.

Well, you're thinking, he's going on a bit, does he not want to tell us what happened? You're right, in some ways I don't. But the facts are there in my notes so I must face it. When the cases are analysed the numbers show clearly that after my extraordinary experience I cured more patients than before (I allowed for variations in the Mortality Bills of course).

I have two rooms above a saddler's in Leadenhall Street. The larger of the two I use as my workshop as it contains the hearth which is much needed in my work. It is a good large one and I also cook on it. The main window opens from my workshop onto the street. It is my source of light and important to me for its sill on which I put stale bread, unwanted seeds and anything else which birds might eat. More sparrows than any other bird visit my sill and they are good company while I work. I see the more countrified birds on my trips out to collect the plants I require for my work. The ones needed for combatting the plague are unfortunately not very common. Over the years I've built up mental maps of where all useful herbs grow and they have been essential during this appalling time. It is worrying though, the plants do not grow in winter.

The saddler and I share the back yard (and the privy) and my half grows my most necessary plants. At the first reports of plague I transplanted those four named above to my small herb garden and they are growing, not as well as I could wish, they probably need more light. Collecting trips are still necessary and they take up valuable time which could be spent with my patients. Despite begrudging the time I enjoy the visits to the countryside, not least because I can take off my restricting protective clothing. Particularly the mask which limits hearing but more importantly vision. Though I dare say that restricting smells to just my medicinal herbs and oils, which are in the beak of the mask, is a very good thing. It is all very tiring though, I have to work at preparing unguents and decoctions late into the night which means less and less sleep as the plague worsens. Even the cost of candles is becoming more

significant on my weekly expenses. The costs cannot be passed on as my patients can barely afford the medicines as it is.

One afternoon I got back from a collecting trip rather earlier than usual. Though I had had to go further than previous trips, luck had been with me and I found everything I needed quickly. A particular piece of good fortune was to find a large quantity of elecampane, of which I had been running short. The gathered elecampane was on my workbench, and I was working at it quickly as it was urgent, when I heard a voice in my head. It said

“Thank you for the bread.”

There was nobody to whom I had given any bread, and anyway I was alone in the room. Lack of sleep is causing auditory hallucinations, I thought, and sat down for a moment. It didn't help. The rather high, and strangely staccato voice continued

“It's the elecampane doing it. With a little practice you will find that you can reply. But please accept my thanks. I have to spend so much time searching for food, the bread is a great help.”

Replying seemed a good plan but I could think of nothing to say. The voice continued

“Confusion, yes. Perhaps you have never spoken in the mind before. But I have seen you with elecampane before. Surely you breathe its aromatic oils and share thoughts with other humans?”

This was so strangely expressed that, without any trying, I replied

“Are you not human then?”

“Oh! That was not very bright of me was it? I wondered why you weren't looking at me. I am the sparrow looking at you through your window.”

The window was open and there was a sparrow on the ledge looking at me. Well, I quibbled at once.

“You say you are a sparrow, but I can plainly see that you are a tree sparrow.”

Telling about it now I can see that this point was not the first thing that should have struck me about the situation, but it seemed important at the time.

“Well, we consider that we are sparrows and the others are house sparrows.”

“Then you are the first sparrow to visit my window ledge, all previous have been house sparrows.”

“I know that house sparrows are happy around humans' houses, we generally stay in woods and fields, that sort of place.”

“You seem distracted.”

“It is constant. I watch for predators all the time, it is even more time consuming than finding food.”

“Do you fly in from the fields only to look for food on my ledge?”

“Yes, but sometimes it has all been eaten by house sparrows.”

“That’s what I was thinking, I shouldn’t put it out all at once. If I put a little out several times a day you would be more likely to find some.”

“You are a kind human.”

“It’s not just me, a lot of people put food out for birds.”

“I’ve found others but they are not such reliable sources as your window ledge. You said ‘people’ meaning ‘humans’. Why do you have two different words?”



“I’ve never thought about it. Well, it’s because of the context. One would say ‘human’ for the animal body as one would say ‘bird’ of the object sitting on the ledge. But ‘people’, means the mind. It is used for what people as minds would think or do.”

“You separate minds from bodies. That is strange to me. It seems like just one, I am a sparrow who thinks and flies and eats.”

“We think that way too, and even at the same time as doing the separation. A bit of a jumble really.”

“Perhaps I know what it is like to separate like that. My predator-checker does not always seem to be me. Though it very quickly becomes me if a predator should appear! But if all this elecampane is not for sharing thoughts what are you doing with it?”

“You will have seen that many humans are sick now. A plague has struck us, one of the worst ever I think”.

“Yes, I thought it must be that. There are so many corpses.”

“I try to cure people who are sick. Elecampane is one of the best medicines, though I have others. Sometimes I manage to cure a patient, but not often. There are so many deaths.”

“Do you not catch it from your patients then?”

“Not so far anyway. I take many precautions.”

“That is not a risk I would take. You are kinder than I thought, to humans as well as birds.”

“It is not kindness. It was how I made a living before the plague came, treating other diseases. So I cannot stop now, when people need me most.”

“What precautions do you take?”

“My main protection is a leather cloak with a hood and mask. In the front of the mask I put herbs and oils and breathe through them.”

“That is what it is! The first time I ever saw you I thought you were an enormous bird. It was the most terrifying thing I have ever seen. I had to track down the bird’s lair so I stayed well hidden but followed you home. What I saw through your window was astonishing. The bird did some convulsions with its wings, and there lay its skin on the floor. Inside its skin was a perfectly ordinary human. I felt as though the world was a different place where a bird could become a human.”

“That is how I felt when I found myself addressed by a sparrow!”

“We have astounded each other and all unintentionally. That is how I found that your window ledge provided good food. It has saved me many a hungry night.”

“Good. At least you had some return for your fright.”

“I must leave now to fly to my roost. The sun will go down soon and my roost is not near here.”

“You must go of course. But you will come back? I cannot believe we have spoken. I must keep some elecampane aside for this. Do you need it too?”

“Yes, I breathed it through your window. I will come back.”

He flew off and I sat down and started shaking. The obvious explanation was that my mind was overcome and none of it happened, but I did not believe that for a moment. I knew it was the case that I had been conversing with a sparrow. Now that it was too late everything I should have asked him occurred to me. Even that basic fact – is ‘he’ a he? I thought so, but certainly had no reason to. (You will perhaps say that a male sparrow has a very different appearance from a female. This is not true of tree sparrows where the appearance of the sexes is identical.) But, more than things which were personal to him, I should have asked about all the details of the lives of birds in general that I had always wondered about. I could ask him when he returned. He intended to come back, but their lives are so short and so uncertain – even more than ours.

And how had he known about elecampane? I did not doubt that he was right that it had mediated our thought transference. The room was thick with it and it is a very powerful drug. It was a blow to my self-esteem to be taught such a fact about one of my own plants when I thought I knew all about it. And by such an insignificant creature as a tree sparrow. Then I felt worse still at having had such a thought, he was no more insignificant than I.



There was no need to worry, he returned at the same time the next day. We both breathed the crushed elecampane I had prepared.

“Does it trigger your predator-checker if I come as close to you as this?”

“No. There is an over-ride for known non-predators.”

“I am pleased to hear that you think I am one.”

“I have watched you carefully. I know you are partly carnivorous, but you do not yourself kill what you eat. Perhaps you can tell me if I am right, it seems to me that you are a male.”

“Yes, I am. I also thought that you are male and intended to ask.”

“Yes, so we were both right. Very satisfying.”

I then asked him all the bird questions I had thought of but I won't trouble you with that. But I had to know about their navigation methods, and the problem of not laying eggs as you fly at height. Though he couldn't tell me the answer to that latter one.

“Now it's your turn to answer my questions” he said. “How did you find out which plants would cure, or reduce the symptoms of, which diseases?”

I explained as well as I could my apprenticeship to Nicholas Culpeper and how each added to the body of knowledge and passed it on. He thought it was a lot to hold in memory, so I explained about writing and drawing.

“That is a most wonderful invention. So humans are able to accumulate knowledge beyond what can be held in memory? And not just what your parents knew, but many generations each adding to the knowledge and passing it along for the next to add to. What an idea! I begin to see why humans are so widespread.”

“You have caught the essence of it very well. Birds are not well-adapted for writing, though. But your wings are useful for gathering knowledge too. You can travel such distances and see so much. We are limited in that respect.”

“Both are good no doubt. What we need is a flying animal that can find things out and also to write them. My friend the Owl probably comes nearest. She doesn't write, she has never mentioned doing anyway, but her memory is really good, she knows things from years and years ago. I was sure you wouldn't mind, so I told her all about you.”

“Then you had better tell me all about her. How can you be friends with an owl? Are you not afraid she will eat you?”

“No, no. She doesn't live anywhere near here. We speak in our minds when I use elecampane, though apparently she doesn't need it. She can listen and speak without it, I don't know how. She says that she is very old, so it may be that. And even if she was here I'm sure she would be careful not to eat her friends.”

“Is she a tawny owl or a barn owl? Perhaps even a short-eared or little?”

“I didn't know there were different kinds. All I've ever seen of them is huge curved talons. She's got those.”

“Yes, a fearsome friend for you.”

“Oh, no. She is kind and considerate and knows things beyond mention. The wonderful things she has told me about places far away where relations of mine live she says. They are almost beyond belief, except that there is no doubting her.”

He seemed to think that that was all that needed saying about his owl friend and flew off soon afterwards. I was left wondering if he had other friends he contacted with elecampane. He must have, I thought, so the owl must be his closest friend. One always feels flattered to be talked about. I couldn't help wondering what he had said to his owl about me and in what terms. What did a sparrow think of a human he had not known for long? Idle thoughts, there was much work to do in preparation for the next day before I could get to bed. There was even more to do than I thought, mainly because of the mishaps I caused through tiredness, and when I finished it was late and I fell asleep at once. It felt that I had not been asleep for long when I had a peculiarly vivid dream which I will now describe to you.

It started with a woman's soft voice in my head saying

“Wake up, Nathaniel, wake up.” I dreamed that I awoke in a steep sided valley and a strange owl was looking at me. She said (for it was definitely 'she')

“Can you see me?”

“I see an owl in a beautiful valley. The mountains are high, I think you must be in Wales, no you would say Cymru. But you look strange to me. You are a tawny owl are you not? But your eyes are those of a snowy owl.”

“That is so. For the most part I am a tawny owl as that suits this time. But I have been here for so long. When I first came here, as the ice retreated, I was a snowy owl. As the climate warmed, I became a warmer owl with it. But I could not bear to change my eyes. I am the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, one of the Ancients of the World.”

“I am honoured to meet you.”

“No need to be I assure you. I have been trying and trying to contact you. Though successful at hearing your thoughts I could not make you hear mine, even when you were breathing almost nothing but elecampane. No surprise there really, it is very difficult to make humans hear me, there is a barrier. In the past when I needed to speak to humans I have always waited until they were asleep. It has worked with you too. Wrong again, I thought I would be able to contact you waking as your barrier is lower than most. You are particularly open to the world. There is a downside for you in that, you are more open to suffering as well and will feel more pain for others.”

“I don't know that I feel more pain for others than the next man.”

“You can take my word for it.”

“What is this barrier you speak of? Do other animals have it or is it just humans?”

“Ravens have it too. It is a manner of thinking. You share with ravens the telling of stories which seem to be about one thing but are really about another. All the crow family do it, but my neighbours are the ravens on Ynys Mon so I know most about them. I believe it is that way of thinking which blocks my speaking to humans, though I could be wrong, it is very hard to

construe the thoughts of others. Humans think the crow family are more intelligent than other birds, but it seems to me that they are just noticing that they think like them.”

“It sounds just like human conceit to think that.”

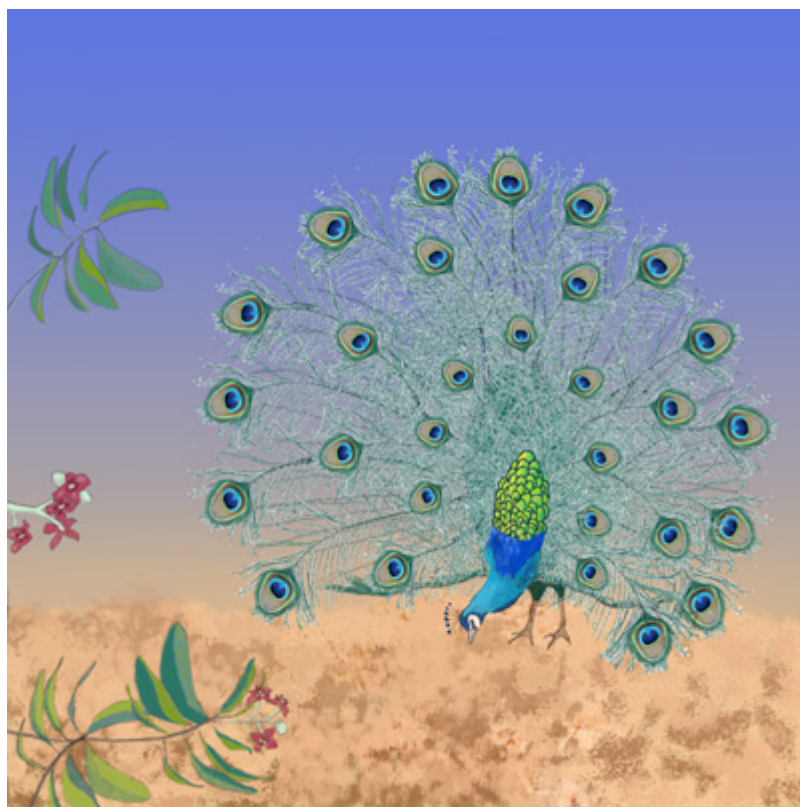
“Oh, all animals are conceited. You should hear what I think of myself! But I have serious things to tell you. I contacted you because I think I can help you. There are Ancients all over the world and we seek help from each other. This plague you are suffering from has been encountered in many places. South and towards the rising sun is a place that humans call India.”

“Yes, we import many wonderful things from India.”

“I’m glad you know of it. An Ancient there, a peacock, has told me that there is a plant growing there which is remarkably strong in its action against this plague. It is called ‘sandalwood’ here.”

“With a tail like that who could doubt him!”

“I know what you mean. If he can get around with such a tail he must be a bird of power.”



“Sandalwood is for sale at the spicer’s just down the street. His shop is all closed up though.”

“Oh, you know it’s there do you? I have been guiding your sparrow to find out if it was. We knew it was a place with the right plant extracts in general but didn’t know if he had any sandalwood. The poor sparrow has been sniffing and looking, with me trying to tell him what to smell for. His sense of smell is not very good, but he thought it was there. He can’t read anyway even if he could have seen the labels properly.”

“You know about reading!”

“Yes I have experience of many things from long years of

contacting many animals. Most of my knowledge of this island’s plants comes from a friend I had many years ago. She was a hare and very dear to me. She taught me a great deal about pharmacology. I’ve missed her so, through more than three hundred years now.”

“The short lives of others must be very painful for you.”

“Indeed, I’ve lost so many. You too. But there are others of my kind besides the peacock. Near me in the West are several, particularly an eagle and a salmon, and there is a stag and a

toad.”

“The peacock – does he know how sandalwood may best be used?”

“He only knows that it should not be eaten. It is too fierce for the digestive organs. The humans he has watched either inhale it directly or mix the plant extract with oil and rub it on their necks and chests.”

“Is it possible to overdose?”

“That I don’t know. I wouldn’t know how to judge – the extract from the tree could be of variable concentration.”

“True. I will have to test it on myself. Though, as I am healthy and my patients are not, that is not a good enough test.”

“ It sounds like the best you can do. There is the encouraging thought that with such a devastating disease it is worth a risk. How much harm can you do?”

The next day when the sparrow came I told him of my dream. He didn’t seem surprised and he didn’t think it a dream.

“I knew the Owl would contact you. I offered to relay a message but she thought I would get it wrong. She wouldn’t say so, of course, but I don’t think she was impressed by my efforts to find this substance at the spice merchant’s shop.”

“I need to ask a favour of you. I must have the sandalwood from the spicer’s. Even if it doesn’t work, I couldn’t bear not to have tried.”

“I’ll help if I can.”

“The difficulty is that it must be done at night when you would normally be in your roost. The street is too busy during the day, but at night I’m hoping to break in without being seen. At all costs I mustn’t be arrested and taken from my patients. Would you feel safe to spend a night in here, in my workroom?”

“Yes, completely safe. You would not ask me to if there was danger in there. What do you want me to do?”

“When everyone is asleep we will go to the spicer’s and I will force a way in as quietly as I can. You can sit on the roof and warn me if anyone is coming so that I can get out and hide round the back somewhere. I’ll leave this window open, so, if we get separated, you can fly into this room and we’ll meet again here.”

That is what we did. It went even more easily than I had thought. Breaking in was easy and quiet, I found a large jar of sandalwood and nobody disturbed us. Much sooner than I had thought we were back home with the stolen extract. I used it on myself at once in the way that the Owl had said. The smell of it was quite the most beautiful I had ever encountered and I immediately felt really euphoric. Though at the time I put that down to the success of our thieving venture, it was in fact caused by the sandalwood. The same effect happened whenever it was in the beak of my mask, which it always was from then on. The elation it gave me was quite out of keeping with the grim work I was engaged in.

You know the outcome, it worked. Though only if I could get to the patient in the early stages, once the disease had taken hold there was nothing to be done. But from that day on my successes increased considerably. It is presumptuous to say 'my' successes, they were due to the Peacock and the Owl. But I should admit that I didn't tell my patients that. Some of them already thought me a bit odd, I think, and I didn't want to stretch their credence with tales of powerful birds.

The lives of sparrows are short, we were friends to the end. I provided him with all his food to avoid unnecessary risks to him in searching for it. He became quite relaxed in my workshop, of course we never ran out of elecampane. And he was a great help to me in telling me where any particular herb I needed was to be found growing. One autumn I thought he had not recovered well from his moult. His new feathers looked rather sparse. He started coming to see me less frequently, then that winter he stopped coming at all. I like to think that he fell asleep one night and the cold took him before he could wake. An easeful death.

THE END