



*My
Story*

A
London Girl's Diary
1665–1666

THE
GREAT
PLAGUE

Pamela Oldfield

*My
Story*

THE
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 SCHOLASTIC



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July 25th

July 27th

Later

July 28th

July 29th

July 30th

July 31st

August 3rd

Two days later – I think

August 6th

Two or three days later

Master Winn thinks today is August 10th

August 11th

August 13th

Six o'clock in the evening

August 15th

Later

August 16th

Seven o'clock the same evening

August 18th

August 19th

Next day

Later that night

Probably August 21st

August 22nd or 23rd

The next day

The next day

Later the same day

I am told 'tis August 25th

Three hours later

August 27th

August 29th

August 31st

September 1st

September 2nd

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Off Leather Lane, London
1665

May 9th, 1665

Tuesday. Today I start my new diary and have a new hiding place for it – behind a beam in the ceiling of my attic bedchamber. There was a small gap which I have made larger with my fingers. No one will find it. The old diary rests deep in my clothes chest at the bottom of the bed. I am fortunate that we live in such a pleasant house. Some families are crammed into one room. If I had to share a bedchamber I could have no secrets.

I start with the news that Papa promises to take us to the Dukes Theatre to see a play called *Mustapha*. That is, myself, Papa and Aunt Nell who is my mother's older sister. My mother, Letitia, died when I was born but I have her dark hair and the same grey eyes. When I was younger I wanted to call Aunt Nell "Mama". 'Twas merely a childish pretence but she would have none of it.

So . . . my first play. Thank you, Papa.

Tomorrow down to Woolwich by water and carrier to spend two days on Uncle John's farm. Aunt Nell has made a vast tray of gingerbread by way of a gift. I have bought an ivory ring for the new child to cut his teeth on.

Maggie's neighbour in St Giles (Maggie is our live-in maidservant) has the spotted fever and they think she will die.

May 11th

Two days later and I am home in my beloved London. (I never take my diary to Uncle John's for fear of prying eyes. Too many children.) Returned from Woolwich with the tide and with a most pleasing waterman. I do believe the cheeky wretch found me to his fancy tho' such a man would never do for me. But he winked at me when Aunt Nell's gaze was busy elsewhere on the water and I feared a blush would betray me. Aunt Nell, however, noticed nothing.

But thank Heavens 'twas only a short visit. Uncle John's children are noisy, boisterous souls, bless them, and the new baby bawls for hours at a time. I gave him the ivory ring but he threw it on the floor. Aunt Mary says she will give it to him when he is older as his teeth are not coming through yet. Grumble yet they are kindly folk and all the family I have on Papa's side. Uncle John is very like Papa but fatter and with more hair. Cousin Annie's limp is less obvious than last time I saw her. She was born with uneven legs. Aunt Mary claimed at first that a local witch had put the evil eye on her but Aunt Nell spoke to her with great patience to dispel the notion. Now the cobbler has made Annie a shoe with a thick heel and sole for the short leg. She is a sunny child and makes little of it and Aunt Mary is content.

Uncle John sent us home as usual loaded with food. I think he believes that town dwellers are always underfed. He gave us three rabbits fresh from the snares, a basket of eggs and two jars of honey from his bees. I kept well away for fear of being stung again. The honey pleased Aunt Nell for sugar is costly and she has such a sweet tooth.

I learned a most shameful secret from Cousin Kate who is now eighteen. She has no husband but she is with child. The child's father is from Newcastle – a seaman on a coalship. They will wed in haste when he next docks in London. She says he is short and scarred from the smallpox but has a sunny disposition. His name is Jem. I shall never have a child out of wedlock for fear of Papa's anger. Uncle John forbade Kate to speak of it to anyone so I dare not tell Aunt Nell. (But have told Maggie.)

Aunt Mary teased me again about my distrust of horses. To prove her wrong I rode the big bay but he fell off on to some hay which made them all laugh. Even Aunt Nell laughed which disappointed me greatly. If I never ride a horse again 'twill be too soon.

I milked one of the cows but the wretched animal was determined to kick over the pail. Farmwork is not at all to my liking. Thank Heavens Papa is not a farmer.

Uncle John's old servant Hannah died the day we arrived. She was 49 – a good age – and died in her own bed a half mile away. Aunt Mary told the bees. She went to the hive and whispered the news and fastened a ribbon of black crepe to the top of the hive. Intrigued, I asked little Beth why she did all this

“If we do not tell the bees they will fly away or die of grief,” she said.

Next day

It is good to be back in London. (The first thing I did was to buy a mutton pie from the pie man and share it with Poppet.) I missed the bustle of the town, the clatter of hooves on cobbles and the cries of the streetsellers. Aunt Nell thinks I am mad. She would move to a cottage in the country if it were possible. She finds the countryside peaceful. Dull, I say. Such a life would not please me. The city is full of life and colour which I have known and loved all my days.

I have a large bruise on my thigh from my fall yesterday. A little more hay would have saved me. 'Tis no laughing matter. I might well have fallen on my head and split my skull.

May 13th

An unlucky day for me. Aunt Nell found a splinter in her thumb and called upon me to take it out. She was stubborn and I was forced to probe deep. She knows how much I hate to do this. It turns my stomach to see her wince. I never could become a doctor or physician.

May 15th

Brushed Poppet who most ungratefully nipped my hand. But he looks very fine and silky. Aunt Ne said I should bath him but he hates it so. I said I would do it in a day or two.

“A stitch in time. . .” she said as I knew she would.

May 16th

Papa was in a sombre mood this evening. He spoke with Aunt Nell in a whisper and told me to pay no attention. Aunt Nell called me “a little pitcher with big ears” but I am thirteen and no longer a child. If something bad is happening I should be told.

I went to the kitchen in a fit of sulks. Maggie is sixteen and she alone treats me as an equal. She told me they speak of the plague and that the news is bad. Plague is come into England from across the water. A year ago it was in Holland and it has been in Italy and elsewhere.

“And now ’tis here,” she said. “In London. Thirty-two folk died in St Giles in the Fields in the past seven days.”

“Of the plague?” I asked, shocked.

She shrugged. “Most pretend ’tis the spotted fever but the authorities have sent women in as ‘searchers’ to discover the truth.”

I found it hard to sleep then, for fear of what might befall our great city.

May 17th

Aunt Nell has come by a new recipe for an ointment to soothe scalds and burns. Unfortunately Maggie was busy washing, with a buck tub full of bed linen. It fell to me to make up the ointment. I spent an hour boiling hog's fat to clarify it. Meanwhile I separated two yolks from the whites of two eggs and then beat this latter into the cooled hog's fat which was not easy. I complained at length that my wrist ached and was told sharply that I was "no longer a child". (Praise be someone has realized that at last!) Then, "Put it in your book of household remedies," says Aunt Nell. Which means I must copy it out in my best handwriting. A tiresome task and not to my liking. And shall I ever use the wretched book? I am thirteen and have no admirers. How shall I come by a home of my own if all men do is wink at me from the far end of a boat?

I was so bored that I offered to help Maggie hang out the sheets but she grumbled that I let the sheets drag on the ground and dirtied it again. Hardly a day to remember. Perhaps I should only write up a good day. But then it might be a very thin diary.

May 18th

Maggie is in a strange mood and I pressed her for a reason.

“If the plague is come I shall surely succumb,” she told me mournfully, “for I am accursed.”

“Accursed? But why? How?”

“I was born on January the 30th, in 1649 – the day they beheaded King Charles.”

Poor soul. I do not envy her such a birthday.

May 20th

I fretted all day about the plague and could not concentrate on my crochet work. That horrid little collar. I swear I shall never wear it. I muddled the stitches until Aunt Nell quite lost patience with me. I wanted to talk of the plague but feared to put it into words. I cannot believe that calamity is just around the corner. I was born in London and have lived here all my life. We cannot have the plague here. Imagine what would become of us if the King were to take the sickness and die. Surely God will not allow it. I trust the rumours are simply that – rumours with no real substance to them.

May 21st

Lordsday. Mighty warm for May. After church Aunt Nell persuaded Papa to let us go upriver to walk and air ourselves. He should come too, she said, and bring his fishing rod. He declined, pleading work and said we should go without him, taking Maggie.

“You want to be rid of the womenfolk,” Aunt Nell teased and he did not deny this.

We packed a basket of food before he could change his mind, and set off. The river looked so serene 'twas hard to recall that two years before the water rose until it flooded Whitehall. And that in late autumn it is frequently hidden by a dense smokeladen fog. Today it flowed smoothly, glittering with sunlight and was full of traffic in both directions. Wherries and skiffs as ever but plenty more craft, some smaller, some larger.

We were overtaken at one point by an elegant boat full of rich courtiers. We were fortunate to see them for next month the Court retires to Oxford to avoid the midsummer heat. Also on board was a small ensemble of viols and lutes playing popular airs. Music on the water. We were all enchanted by it. Papa would have enjoyed it.

“Your father would have sung his heart out,” said Aunt Nell.

True, I thought. Papa fancies himself as a singer and is in truth a pleasing baritone. She told me once that he and my mother used to sing together in the evenings.

“Letty’s favourite was ‘Greensleeves’,” she said, smiling at the memory.

“‘Greensleeves’ is also mine,” I told her, tho’ I had not known it until that very moment.

I wish I could picture the two sisters together before I came along to put an end to their joy. I try to imagine Papa as an earnest suitor or as a young man flushed with the novelty of wedded bliss. But sadly I cannot.

Seeing so many wherries filled with passengers I feared the riverbanks would be overcrowded. Crowded they were but not so much that we could not find a place to step ashore. We moored at the special spot where Letty and Nell used to walk with *their* mother – and a brother now dead. I always wonder if my mother’s spirit lingers there and might come close to me. Would I know it if she did? Would I feel anything?

We had taken cold chicken and a vegetable salad with one of Aunt Nell’s home-made loaves. We drank Uncle John’s cider and finished with a custard tart. We could scarce move afterwards. Aunt Nell dozed beneath a tree and Maggie and I wandered among the fields picking buttercups and making daisy chains. We stayed well clear of a herd of cows and also of some hogs rootling beneath a stand of oaks.

trees. Two gentlemen rode by on horses and raised their caps to us. I liked the one with fair hair and roving eye but Maggie preferred the older man who was swarthy looking and not at all to my taste.

“They are father and son,” I teased. “I shall wed the younger man. That leaves you the father!”

Maggie pretended to be shocked. “My, my, Alice Paynton. You are growing up apace,” and we both fell to giggling.

’Twas fortunate Aunt Nell could not hear us.

We came home around four o’clock, very satisfied with our excursion.

May 22nd

Monday. Nothing of note. Aunt Nell was in a bad mood this evening because of a ruined skirt. She went to visit a friend in Southwark this morning and returned at low tide to find the landing stairs thick with mud. The surly waterman refused to help her out of the boat and she slipped and almost fell into the water. Incensed, she refused to pay her fare and marched from the waterside with his strident curses ringing in her ears. Maggie has washed the petticoat but we can only wait for the skirt to dry so it might be brushed clean of the worst of the mud.

Master Ruddiard came for my singing lesson. I cannot resist his kindly blue eyes and sang scales for him until I longed to scream with boredom. But he promises to bring a new song sheet for me next time he comes. We shall see if he remembers.

May 24th

It seems the searchers have discovered many trickeries. There are numerous cases of plague unreported and Papa says an outbreak is inevitable. Aunt Nell says we must put our trust in the Lord and he will provide. Papa shakes his head and sighs. Aunt Nell says that he lost his faith when my mother died giving birth to me. But I have no such awful memories and will not be cast down by gloomy predictions. On Sunday I shall pray long and hard in church and put my trust in God.

Next day

I write this while my head throbs. I sat with Maggie for nigh on an hour this evening as she struggled with her writing. She forms the letters slowly but at least she can write after a fashion. Papa says this progress. She came to us three years ago with no skills at all – unless you count beating the carpets hard to death. She has strong arms and broad shoulders which come in useful since we have no manservants. Aunt Nell has taught her to read a little and poor Maggie labours over the Bible half an hour at a time. I confess I tire of the writing lessons but Papa says 'tis to our credit to have an educated servant. Aunt Nell says it teaches me patience (which I do not care to learn). I also know that (God willing) I shall one day need to teach my own children to read and write.

May 26th

The tuner came today for the virginals. He said the warm weather does them no good and the smol from winter fires discolours the keys. And he has increased his price. Papa was not best pleased when he returned from the office.

Maggie snapped at me this morning. She has a toothache and used so much oil of cloves that Aunt Nell sent her to the apothecary to fetch more. Then she spent twenty minutes turning the spit for the chicken (a good thing 'twas not a larger one) and complained about the heat from the fire. She suggested that we make Poppet run round in a wheel to turn the spit. I was so put out I did not speak to her until the evening when she apologized.

May 27th

Maggie is in a bad mood again today and has put me quite out of humour. This afternoon I picked up the leather bucket in the yard and found a dead rat in it. I screamed and dropped the bucket and Maggie called me a ninny. I doubt that she would have been one wit braver than I, faced with such a horrid sight. She said it had most likely died of the plague and I was half minded to tell Aunt Nell but thought better of it for we are not to speak of the plague for fear it brings bad luck.

If Maggie leaves us the new servant might be worse. At least we are friends most of the time.

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