

THE  
VIZARD  
MASK

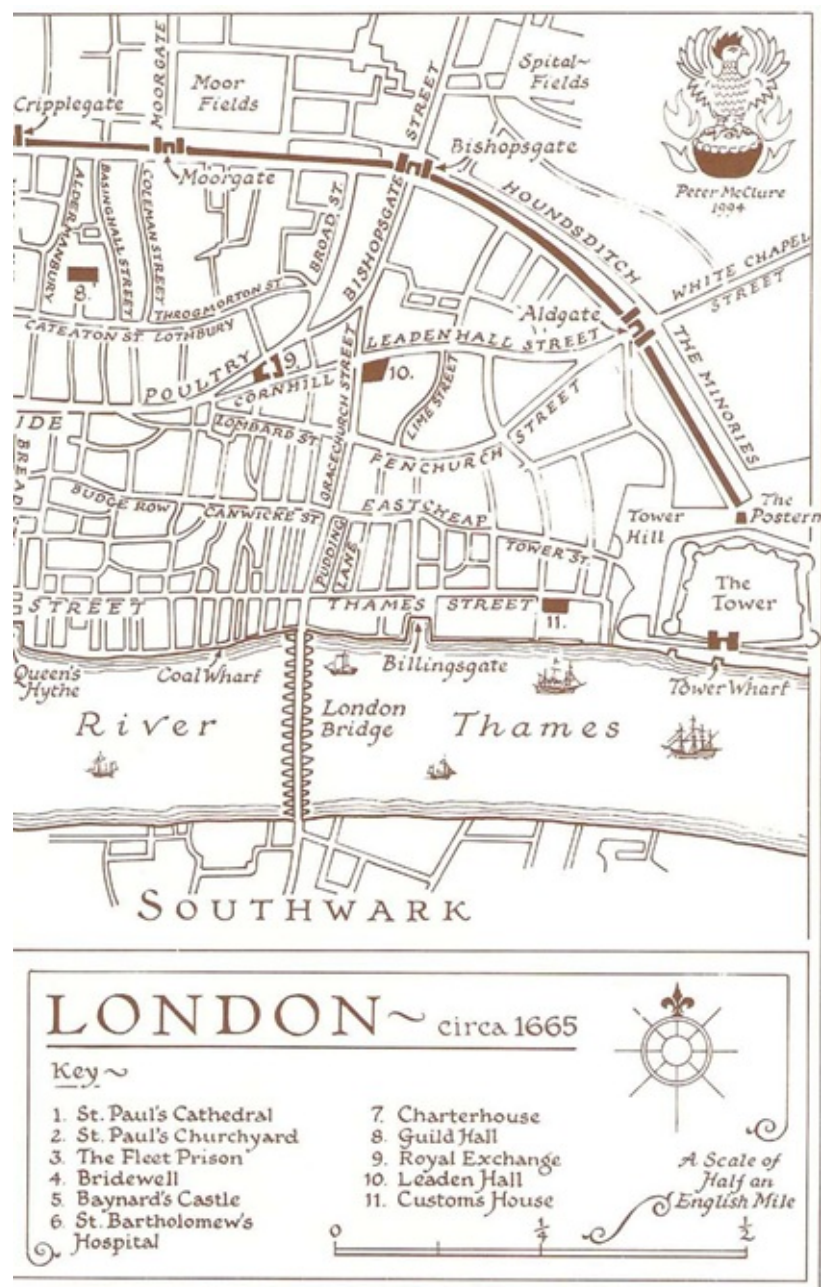


DIANA NORMAN









THE VIZARD MASK

Also by Diana Norman



Fiction

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Fitzempress' Law  
King of the Last Days  
The Morning Gift  
Daughter of Lir  
The Pirate Queen

**NON-FICTION**

The Stately Ghosts of England  
Road From Singapore  
Terrible Beauty

**THE  
VIZARD MASK**

Diana Norman

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To Bertie and Oliver Norman

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## Author's Note

THERE was

a Restoration actress called Peg Hughes and she was the first woman to play Desdemona on stage. She became Prince Rupert's mistress and bore him a child, Ruperta. I have adapted and elaborated what little is known about her life to my purposes, including in it a few - though by no means all - of the humiliations imposed on those real-life first actresses.

William III, while still a very young Prince of Orange, was made roaring, door-battering drunk during his first visit to England.

The King Philip War as it was called, between the New England settlers and the Indians in 1675, is said to have cost proportionally more lives than any war fought by Americans since.

Judge Jeffreys's treatment of the rebels is true to the record, though I've swapped the trials' locations here and there. He died in the Tower.

Aphra Behn's title should be more than that of the first woman to earn her living by her pen.

**Oroonoko**

was translated into French and German and became popular in France during the French revolutionary period. In England it was reprinted repeatedly during the eighteenth century and, along with the play adapted from it by Southerne, helped form part of the literature of the abolitionist movement which became a political force a century after Aphra's death.

Like all women who break out of the stereotype she was subjected to the process that begins with detraction and ends in oblivion. The nineteenth century, when she was mentioned at all, found it necessary to apologize for her. By the beginning of the twentieth she had all but disappeared. An article in 1913 by a Mr Ernest Bernbaum declared that she never went to Surinam, never spied on the Dutch for Charles II - despite evidence in the State Papers that she did - virtually, that she didn't exist.

The lines on her tombstone in the east cloister of Westminster Abbey are typical of the smart, uncaring

age she lived

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through and are said to have been written by John Hoyle:

Here lies proof that wit can never be

Defence against mortality.

A more accurate memorial is in Virginia Woolf's

## A Room of One's Own

where she points out that genius is a succession:

'Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of

Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the shade of

Eliza Carter

...  
all women together ought to let flowers fall

upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned

them the right to speak their minds.'

Incidentally, there is no evidence for the fight between her

friends and the Chapter of Westminster Abbey over that same

tomb.

But she should have been buried in Poets' Corner.





## PENITENCE HURD

and the Plague arrived in London on the same day.

Penitence was eighteen and carried a beaded satchel.

The Plague travelled by fur-lined carriage and was as old as sin. It had been to London before - part of it had never left - but this time conditions were perfect for its purpose. The summer of 1664 had been the hottest in living memory and an overcrowded population was being swelled daily by workers in the luxury trade catering for the merry monarchy of Charles II — the number of ribbon-makers alone ran into thousands. In the poor areas people were crammed so close they breathed in air that had just been breathed out by everybody else.

Master Endicott, captain of the

### Deliverance,

was being flustered by Customs men. Thee wait now, Pen, until I can take thee to the minister.'

Penitence had no intention of waiting, especially for a minister. Her experience with the Reverend Block back in Massachusetts had rendered her fearful of all ministers. She stood still until Master Endicott took the Customs men into the hold and then she scurried down the gangplank.

From another ship further along the Plague was carried down a hawser to the wharf.

A rat whisked across Penitence's path, but she barely noticed it. She'd encountered rats before, it was London she was new to. The smell along this piece of its river frontage was a combination of dockside and country; the stink of fish, tar and dirty water was almost wiped out by the manure rotted on the towering heaps of dung gathered from the streets, ready to be shipped to the gardens of Whitehall.

But it was the noise. Drivers of wagons going down to the wharf altercated with the drivers of wagons coming up. Wheels rumbled as dockers yelled, ships and cranes creaked, rigging flapped and water-boatmen called 'Ho's' eastward and westward. Beyond it all, like a titanic millwheel, was the resonance of a city that shook with the vibration of half a million people.

Deafened, Penitence just in time jumped out of the way of a wagon carting strong-smelling wool.

'Some trust in chariots, and some in horses,'

she scolded it,

---

'but we will remember the name of the Lord our God.

Psalm 20, verse 7.' She glanced up at the sun

to take her bearings. It was setting now, and London Bridge with its houses was a black cut-out against vermilion.

'West.'

To go west she had first to go north along the

narrow, loomed-over street that had led up from the river, but

she turned left as soon as she could. Politely, she dropped a

curtsey to everyone in her path, but, since that meant bobbing

up and down like a sanddipper and nobody saluted her back,

she became tired of the exercise.

"They have mouths but they speak not: eyes have they but they see not. Noses have they and they smell ..

. awful.' The school joke was to cheer herself up.

Master Endicott, bless him, had tried to tell her. Thee cannot

contain the thought of it, Pen. 'Tis a Leviathan. Thee could put

all Boston in one of its parishes and lose it.'

He was right; she had been unable to imagine it. She was

used to distant horizons. Here the few open spaces were

cross-angled by buildings that blocked in her vision, buildings

that bent over her, seeming to shuffle up and claim her

attention with beautiful woodwork and worn gargoyles. Overhead a forest of signboards splattered her face with raindrops

from an earlier shower as she gawped up at them.

She was an odd figure, her neatness pointing up the chaos

through which she moved. Her black dress covered her thin

body from her throat down to the tops of her ploughboy

boots and showed that she had no breasts to speak of and was

stiff-backed. Her walk was ungainly for a woman, the lope of

one who covers long distances easily. Plainer women were

more attractive than she was because Penitence Hurd not only

was not aware that she had beauty, but would have been

ashamed of that fact if had she known it.

Even without the high-crowned hat — its buckle exactly

centred - covering every inch of her hair, she would have

declared herself a Puritan by her care to avoid physical contact

with passers-by and the purse of her lips as she looked about

her. London had known that look during the days of the

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Commonwealth; it had toppled maypoles, cancelled Christmas,

closed theatres, killed its king and forbidden sin. Now it had

set up a new king along with the maypoles, the bears were

back, sin was in fashion, and no disapproving sniff from

Penitence Hurd's nose was going to get rid of them, thank her

kindly. She sniffed on, occasionally jeered at as an oddity by

rude boys, though no more than they jeered at beggars,

madmen, amputees, soldiers, richly dressed women and jugglers in this modern Babylon. Men and women openly tumbled

each other in the doorways of taverns. Others fought, some

vomited. A lady in a carriage passed by with her bosom

exposed and was not arrested.

"'Tis an habitation of dragons.'

Crime she had expected, but

not this engulfing wickedness, not foul words from men as she

passed, not a flaunting of sin that was an aggression aiming

itself at her, as if hers alone was the innocence it meant to

destroy.

' The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them.'

Clutching her righteousness and her satchel,

Penitence travelled on. The sun had long gone down, but, instead

of retiring to bed like a Christian, London lit the flambeaux in its

streets, illuminated its windows and intensified its wickedness.

A crowd at the top of Ludgate Hill stopped Penitence's

progress and in trying to press through it she was trapped

between a wall and a well-covered gentleman. Penitence's hat

had been pushed to the back of her head and, glancing round,

the well-covered gentleman saw her eyes. 'Keep close.' Unable

to do anything else, Penitence kept close as, shouting 'Make

way', the gentleman whacked a path with his staff for them

both through to the front. 'Get along there.'

His was the first amiable countenance she'd seen since

leaving Master Endicott and, as she couldn't move anyway,

Penitence stayed by him.

'Sir John Lawrence, heard of him?' asked her new acquaintance.

## Penitence shook her head.

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'He's our new Lord Mayor, Sir John. Queenhithe man. Being chaired today. And what do you think of our little city?' It was a rhetorical question. Penitence's acquaintance was revelling in unfolding the wonders of it to this country bumpkin.

Trumpets and drums sounded in the distance, the crowd began cheering the empty street in anticipation until runners in the King's livery and carrying torches filled it. 'Now then,' said the well-covered gentleman, 'here they be.'

The City and Charles II were still on their honeymoon, and a wild affection suffused the crowd as coaches carrying the court presaged that of the King's. Penitence's acquaintance showed off, sweeping his hat to each coach, listing his familiarity with the great in a litany of names for his own benefit as much as Penitence's. 'Count Cominges, the Frog. Hyde, the old devil. Duke of Buckingham. Albemarle. Southampton. Arlington. Ormonde .

and here he is, bless him. Got the Queen with him tonight.'

Ignoring the presence of the Queen, the crowd emitted rutting noises in appreciation of its king's libido. Forearms imitated the sexual act as voices in the cheering advised him to 'Swive 'em, Rowley'. The loudest calls, however, were for war with the Dutch. 'Blow the butterboxes to hell.'

## Charles Stuart himself. Shall I spit? Turn my back? Who else in

this mass of sinners would reprove the man? It was Christ the Lord should be ruling England, not this Papist-sympathizing wench. She risked a peek at Satan rampant. No smell of sulphur, no forked tail. Penitence's nose sniffed perfume, and for a second her eyes, instead of the hackneyed evil she'd expected, saw something more complex and more awful.

Sobered, she followed her new friend through the dispersing crowd. 'Now then, young lady, where do you want to go?' Penitence delved into her satchel-bag and brought out the slate she had prepared with the words: 'I do search for my aunt. Last known address, the Rookery, St Giles-in-the-Fields.' She held it up.

The gentleman was pitying. 'Dumb eh? Poor maid, poor maid.' Then his expression hardened. 'The Rookery? You don't want to go to the Rookery.'

But the girl's expression too had changed, the eyes he'd admired were dull with the obstinacy often observed in the afflicted. Very well, I'll show you your way, but I warn you .

. ' He warned her all down Ludgate Hill to the gate and up Fleet Street. Civilization was the City: its extension into the Strand, Covent Garden, Whitehall and Westminster was still the home of gentlemen, but half-way up Drury Lane things became dubious and by Holborn, and especially St Giles, downright barbaric.

That his beloved city had no charitable alternative to offer the poor girl made his warnings increasingly angry, so that by the time they had reached Drury Lane he shouted: 'I have a care for my purse, mistress, if you have not', and stumped away, giving her no chance to thank him. After a few paces, however, he paused and watched the strange small person in its dreadful hat and boots lope out of sight. Her chances of reaching her destination without assault were slim, her chances of staying unraped once there were non-existent. Well, he'd told her, done his best, gone out of his way, couldn't think why he'd bothered. The memory of her eyes put him out of temper the rest of the night.

By a quicker route than Penitence's the Plague's carriage took itself to the Fleet Ditch by the time Penitence and her companion crossed it. It could have settled more than once, but a force stronger than itself twitched the rat on towards even greater congestions of people. It liked the habitation of people, the more crowded the better.

Finding itself in the gardens of Bedford House, it sensed there was nothing for it in these spaces. Its teeth couldn't gnaw marble and stone, it couldn't breed in roof-tiles. Its shadow elongated as it slipped along a gutter at the edge of Covent Garden Piazza. It turned left and north.

Better. Better. Thatch, and rotten wood, open cesspits, the warmth of human bodies living close. There was no point in going on; its flickering whiskers brought the message that not far away habitation thinned into fields which were no use to it.

It was glad to stop. It wasn't feeling at all well.

As her acquaintance had noted, there was a stubbornness

under Penitence's apparent vulnerability which had been formed as a protection against a religion, guardians and a

community demanding absolute obedience. Penitence approved of the religion, had dutifully loved her mother and

grandparents — and just as dutifully grieved for their sudden

death; she had done her best to conform to the community,

but to preserve an unbroken spirit under such an upbringing

had necessitated reserving a place in her mind and soul against

the lot of them, and in that place had grown the obstinacy

which had brought her three thousand miles against all advice.

All at once Drury Lane's smart roofs lowered, becoming tile

or thatch rather than slate. Its traffic was as thick as it had

been further back, but here it consisted of single horsemen and

pedestrians, and the jollity was cruder. Penitence's mouth

gaped as she was turned this way and that by the entertainment on offer. There was singing and dancing everywhere. A

seven-foot giant was teetering along on stilts which put his

head on a level with upper windows while a dwarf ran

alongside collecting pennies in a hat. From the windows ladies

showing too much of their anatomy leaned out, screaming and

laughing, to try and push him off.

'She painted her face, and tired her head, and looked out at a window.

Kings II, chapter 9.'

Everywhere she looked there was evil, and, more appalling,

the

enjoyment

of evil. She broke into a run. At any moment the

Lord would destroy this Sodom and Gomorrah with fire.

It was darker further up, what light there was showed

meaner houses and fewer people, but it was quieter and she

could slow her pace. Back home she could have walked ten

times as far and not felt as tired.

I'm in peril.

The familiar sense of danger cut through her

fatigue and was immediately trusted. She knew it well.

Penitence's twice-weekly journeys to school had involved



paddling a canoe five miles down the Pocumscut and a subsequent walk of three miles through forest. She'd carried a satchel of books and a primed flintlock. Attack by men was unheard of, unless you counted the occasional Iroquois raid, but bear, moose and wolverine, especially wolverine, posed a threat that required instant reaction to the inexplicable shadow or the leaf moving when there was no wind. Reading the signs had become an instinct that had twice saved her life.

Now, here, in this dark lane, there was a wolverine.

She had no flintlock, but she slipped the knife from its sheath on her wrist in one concealed movement, as Matoonas had taught her to do.

Just as the Drury Lane beadle's nose could detect a possible charge on his parish, so the Reverend Robert Boreman, rector of St Giles-in-the-Fields, had suffered enough from Puritans in the Interregnum to smell them at forty paces. The one at his gate was young and female, but stank of bigotry. 'What do you want?'

Penitence was no more amicable towards the Reverend Boreman than he to her. To be seeking assistance at the gate of an Anglican church was nearly as bad as asking help from the Pope. However, she knew she'd been lucky to get this far. In the walk between Drury Lane and here she had been pestered, pawed and propositioned. Two women, one old, one young, had tried to enrol her for Lord-knew-what. ('Put you in the way of riches, dearie.') A man had tried to steal her purse and she had been forced to jab her knife at him.

From this high point above the river, she had looked around at the jumbled roofscape and known that unless she had a guide she was defeated. She'd made for the spire. The Reverend Boreman groped for his spectacles and took the proffered slate to the lamp by his lych-gate. "'Penitence Hurd.'" He was right, only damned Puritans could have called a child 'Penitence'. Searching for her aunt, last address St Giles Rookery. Despite himself he was touched. 'My child,' he said, 'go home. Go back to where you came from. Where

do  
you  
come from?'

New

---

England. What was wrong with the old one? Stiff-

necked, hypocritical heretics calling themselves pilgrims sailing off to create their joyless Zion and plague the poor savages.

New England indeed. Still, he could hardly send her back there.

Was your aunt born here? Married here?' Another shake of the head that wobbled the ridiculous hat. No, of course not.

Her aunt was probably not married at all; indeed, if this was the child of Dissenters, she was a bastard whose parents imagined that some words said over them by a magistrate rendered them married. Nothing the Puritans had done had

upset the Reverend Boreman more than denying the sacraments of the wedding service. On the other hand, if the aunt

was a Puritan, what was she doing in the Rookery? He found himself curious. 'Are you dumb?' Obviously, she wasn't deaf.

'Shall I try to tell him?'

She was tired, it would be too hard,

and she wanted no involvement with a church that had persecuted her people. Besides, he was the height and shape of the Reverend Block back home, dressed in black, white tippet to his collar just like the Reverend Block's, only older. The sooner she got away from him the sooner her stomach would stop heaving. Insistently, she pointed to the slate.

The Reverend Boreman shrugged. 'On your own head be it.

I must warn you that the Rookery is the lowest sink of sin, and that if your aunt is still in it she is undoubtedly defiled or dead, probably both.' He didn't believe in sugaring the pill, and merely having to admit the existence of such a place in his parish shamed him. God knows he'd done his best. 'Ah, Peter Simkin.'

His clerk joined him at the gate. 'I'm away to alert the Searcher, Rector.'

'Peter, here is a person from the Americas trying to find her aunt. Last known address the Rookery.' The two men exchanged looks.

Peter Simkin turned to Penitence: 'What's her name?' It

might be that the Rookery woman was a member of the congregation, though unlikely; precious few were.

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As Penitence wrote, the rector said acidly: 'Our young friend from the Americas, though not dumb it seems, does not deign to speak to us.'

"Margaret Hughes" read Peter Simkin. 'Plain. Also unknown.'

'Oh, take her along to the Searcher,' said the Reverend Boreman. 'If anyone knows this woman, she will.' It had been a long day and he wanted his supper. 'And don't forget to get Sexton to toll the bell and ask John Gere to dig the grave.' Reluctantly, he added to Penitence: 'If you don't find your aunt, you'd better come back.' He'd have to procure her employment, or put her in the workhouse if she was indigent, which he was sure she was.

He lingered to watch Penitence and the slightly shorter figure of his clerk disappear along the High Street into the shadows. Another bit of jetsam washed into this penance of a backwater. How long, O Lord, how long before he procured a

decent parish? How had he offended? He did his best, badgering the authorities for drainage, an almshouse, more help to

save souls. And what did he get? Jetsam. By the day more poor were coughed out by the overcrowded city to turn this once pleasant suburb into a Gehenna.

Whores, pimps, beggars, buggerers, playwrights, even Jews - and poor Jews at that - washed up in St Giles-in-the-Fields.

Fields indeed. He remembered the fields, he'd walked there with his wife, God rest her soul. And now they were a laystall and had gained their first American Puritan. Well, she'd have to take her chance with the rest.

He strode off to the rectory and the supper provided by his housekeeper. First he washed his hands, as he always did, and wished he felt less like Pontius Pilate while doing it.

There's a death in the Buildings, see.' The neat little clerk was brightly informative. 'Lucky for you, else you'd have had to wait for another corpse. Can't call on the Searcher except to view the corpse for the cause of death. Against the rules. Mind you, you wouldn't've waited long. They die here pretty frequent.'

Penitence could believe it. The difficulty would be not to. Her boots were fouled with the excreta, mud and rubbish of the alley they had turned into. The only light, apart from Peter Simkin's lantern, was a moon that came and went between cloud. The few shutters were closed; where they'd rotted or broken off, scraps of sacking hung between the night and the even darker interiors.

*'They retire early round here' said Simkin, 'saves candles.'*

Here and there the holes emitted the cries of a baby or an altercation, but otherwise there was the quiet imposed by hopelessness. Her home had been in a wilderness miles from other human habitation and it hadn't been as silent as this. Penitence bent over in a sudden cramp that was part hunger and part homesickness for river sounds, a nightjar, her grandmother humming a psalm.

*'Careful,' said Simkin, 'falling down here ain't recommended.'*

They went deeper into the maze and stopped before an afterthought of a house squeezed in between two others, with a door that was at least intact, if small. The clerk hammered on it.

'Threepence a corpse,' he said to Penitence. 'Penny under the going rate, but she gets more business than most. Stand back if I was you.' He stood back himself as shuffling footsteps approached the other side of the door and it opened.

Penitence had been expecting something horrible, but even worse was the shrouding of the old woman's face so that neither then nor later did she see it, leaving her to imagine leprosy, or even a blank.

'Harrison. The Buildings,' said the clerk. 'And this young

lady's looking for a Margaret Hughes, last seen in the Rookery.'

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There was a wheeze from within the shawl. 'Tuppence.'

Peter Simkin turned to Penitence. 'She wants paying for finding. You got tuppence?' Penitence nodded. 'Off you go then.' He left.

After much wheezing and muttering within the house, the Searcher emerged, more be-shawled than ever and carrying a white staff. A movement of the bundle that was her head indicated that Penitence should fall in behind her and she went off at a brisk shuffle. It was almost the nastiest of all the nasty walks Penitence had taken that day. She wasn't interfered with - the few pedestrians pressed against walls as the Searcher went by - but every step took her deeper into this unclued labyrinth until they were going along tiny alleys so dark that the Searcher's white wand was the only thing visible and moved as if with a life of its own. Some inhabitant, a woman, was screaming but it was impossible to locate the sound.

This was the Rookery. As they passed each closed door, the Searcher whispered. Reluctantly, Penitence caught her up to listen. The whisper wasn't for her benefit; each building was eliciting a response of memory from this basic brain. Top floor, convulsions.' 'Second floor back, childbed.' 'Basement, frightened.' 'Worms, attic.'

They passed 'Palsy, third floor front', and stopped before a door. A frightened-looking man opened it and retreated before the Searcher. From outside Penitence could see a candle held over a bed in a room that contained little else. The Searcher went to the bed and drew back a cover. Penitence heard children crying and a woman's voice, weeping and pleading. The Searcher came shuffling back to the door, followed by the man who was begging: 'It ain't the you-know. You'll say it ain't. It's rickets, she had rickets.'

'Shilling,' said the Searcher, and the man counted some coins into her hand.

As they continued up the alley, Penitence heard more wheezing. The Searcher was laughing. Ain't Plague, but Tom Fool thought it were.' The shawls caught sight of Penitence,

the voice stopped talking to itself and addressed her: 'Rickets.

Ain't Plague.' Penitence, hypnotized, shook her head. 'Rickets

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and hectick fever. They're frit of Plague round here. Had it

bad in the twenties.' She pointed ahead: Dog Yard.'

Penitence pressed ahead into a courtyard of light and noise

so welcome that it took time to absorb how sinful it was.

Here, in a broken-cobbled area about sixty feet long and thirty

wide, was the Rookery's largest and only professional alehouse

and, therefore, its social centre. Here, every human degradation

which London had forced on Penitence's attention was represented in the women drinking on the doorsteps, their knees

wide apart, their mouths loose and shrieking, in the men who

staggered and lolled, in the children who dabbled in the

guttered sewers. A young woman sitting at an open window

fed a toddler from one breast and clutched a bottle against the

other. A cock-fight was exciting wagers and shouts in one

corner, a dice game in another where, high above it, an

altercation was in progress between two women over the

washing-line strung between their windows.

Penitence saw no good in the place; she had gone beyond

seeing good at all in this terrible capital city. Quick to

recognize and resent disdain, the Dog Yarders didn't see much

in her either. Catcalls commenting on her appearance and

making suggestions as to her hat broke out - until the

Searcher emerged beside her, at which they stopped.

Everything stopped. Like a small, muffled Gorgon, the

Searcher hobbled through a crowd frozen in mid-movement

into a tableau in which the only sound was the flutter of

cocks' wings and the tap of the Searcher's wand.

Nobody followed them as they climbed steep street steps

to the high north side of the Yard and stopped outside a door

on the edge of it. The shawls whispered to Penitence: 'Margaret Hughes.'

Three thousand miles of anticipation, and she was here. She

had expected a feeling of the momentous, but it escaped her in

fatigue and confusion. She was not sure she was here at all;

any reality she recognized had been left behind on Master

Endicott's ship. The Searcher grabbed her arm. 'Tuppence.'

Penitence had no idea of the rate of exchange, but in the

circumstances she was prepared to overpay. She felt in her

satchel and brought out her smallest string of wampum. The

shawls directed their attention on it, and said again: 'Tuppence.' Penitence pressed the wampum, the shawls rejected it.

'Tuppence.'

---

Penitence panicked. Back home this many shells, a fifth of a fathom, would be worth five shillings. True, she hadn't seen any wampum changing hands since she'd been in London, but her grandfather and other merchants had traded in little else. If its value hadn't survived the Atlantic crossing, she was in extreme trouble, unless her aunt had money, which, considering the surroundings, was unlikely.

The Searcher had turned nasty and was spitting words with which Penitence was unacquainted. Penitence held open her satchel and shrugged.

## 'Wampum or nothing.'<sup>1</sup>

The Searcher

sniffed at the satchel, sniffed again and was suddenly scrabbling like a burrowing animal at earth.

Relieved that she had means to pay the old woman after all, Penitence held her off with one hand while managing to open the box inside her satchel and extract one of its carefully packed contents.

The Searcher took the pipe into her disfigured hands, sniffed the tobacco in its bowl with the reverence of a communicant receiving the host and hobbled off with it, leaving Penitence to knock on the door.

Down below, Dog Yard relaxed at the departure of the Searcher, but much of its interest remained on Penitence. She sensed a change of mood; the catcalls redoubled but with a difference. Where before the Yarders had merely resented her as an uppity stranger, now they appeared to have placed her. The mewing to which she was subjected was as derisory as the hoots had been, but more amicable. The words, as far as she could understand them, were definitely filthier, with a tinge of contempt. The Yarders seemed to have gained advantage over her.

One of the washing-line quarrelers remarked: 'I thought I seen all the quiffs there was, but that's a new one on me.' She called down to Penitence: 'Here you. Under the tile. Her Ladyship running a new line?'



Even had she been able to answer it, Penitence did not understand the question. She knocked more smartly and made a show of studying the house before her.

It was a peculiar house, the biggest in Dog Yard, and the only one in good repair from what she could see of it. In height and breadth it was reassuringly like the large farmhouses back home that the settlers of Massachusetts had built for themselves, copying the medieval halls of England. It was the wrong way round. Impatiently pacing, Penitence peered down the alleys on either side and saw that it continued irregularly backwards for at least fifty feet. Its age suggested that it had once stood in solitary grandeur, looking over the fields of St Giles, until tenements accommodating the City's overflow had sidled up on its back and front so that its southerly side was now the frontage that faced her and the Yard.

What was bizarre was the addition to this frontage, a rectangular extension of brick which stood out from the main wall of the house by what seemed only four or five unnecessary feet. It was like a shield, windowless and with a door that could have withstood a battering ram. Its only ornamentation was a red lantern hanging above the door and, along its top, which rose over half-way to the house's gable, six china medallions containing life-sized portraits of ladies. The inevitable sign protruding from above the door showed a cockerel rampant on the crust of an enormous pie, though the words beneath it read, confusingly: 'Her Ladyship'. Presumably her aunt had gone into the catering trade, since the place didn't seem to be an inn.

### What will she say when she reads my name?

Penitence got out her slate and rehearsed several enjoyable possibilities in all of which her aunt ended by weeping tears over the niece who had come to save her. 'Thy aunt fell from grace, child. We have cast her out. Let thee be silent.' Thin-lipped, her mother and her grandparents had refused to tell her anything more, always the same answer in the same words since she'd been old enough to ask. In Puritan terms a fall from grace could involve anything: adultery, murder, dancing round the maypole, celebrating Christmas, or using starch. It must have been for one of the deeper sins, probably you-know-what. How deplorable, how shameful, how

different.

The young Penitence had obediently condemned this fallen

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aunt, but her censure had been tinged with curiosity and the older she got, the more curious she became. Her own adolescent falls from grace, though petty, had made even more intriguing an aunt who had fallen on a grand scale. She had begun to dream that naughty Aunt Margaret would one day arrive at the Hurd trading post; sometimes she imagined her as being rowed up the Pocumscut in a scarlet barge, dripping jewels and wickedness, sometimes as emerging from the forest, a thin, dying figure begging forgiveness with its last breath.

Whatever she needed forgiveness for, Penitence, as one of the saints of the Pure Church, had come three thousand miles to save her from it. And she needed to do it quickly. There were footsteps prancing up and down behind her in what she guessed was mimicry and might, at any moment, become attack.

**Pray thee hurry, Aunt.**

She knocked again. There was an

impression that life was going on in the house's deeper recesses, but it wasn't coming to the door.

At last, footsteps approached from inside. The door opened, not to let Penitence in, but to allow half a dozen black-clad gentlemen out. In the glow from the shop's interior their clothes had the unmistakable sheen of richness, a phenomenon almost as sinister as the holes where their faces should have been. All of them were masked. They passed the shrinking Penitence so that she saw their glossy, contained shapes against the rags of the crowd and the untidy clutter of the Yard buildings. It flashed into her mind that these, predatory and beautiful, were the Rookery's rooks.

Migratory rooks. From the shadows around the Yard emerged a succession of attendants carrying sedan chairs; a fat one turned back. There was a glimpse of flesh and teeth as the mask said 'Most interesting, Your Ladyship.'

'Come again, my lord.' The chairs were trotted across the court, be-ringed hands through the windows scattering coins on the cobbles. In an instant Dog Yard became patched with heaps of struggling bodies.

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