All Fall Down

Also by Sally Nicholls

Things a Bright Girl Can Do

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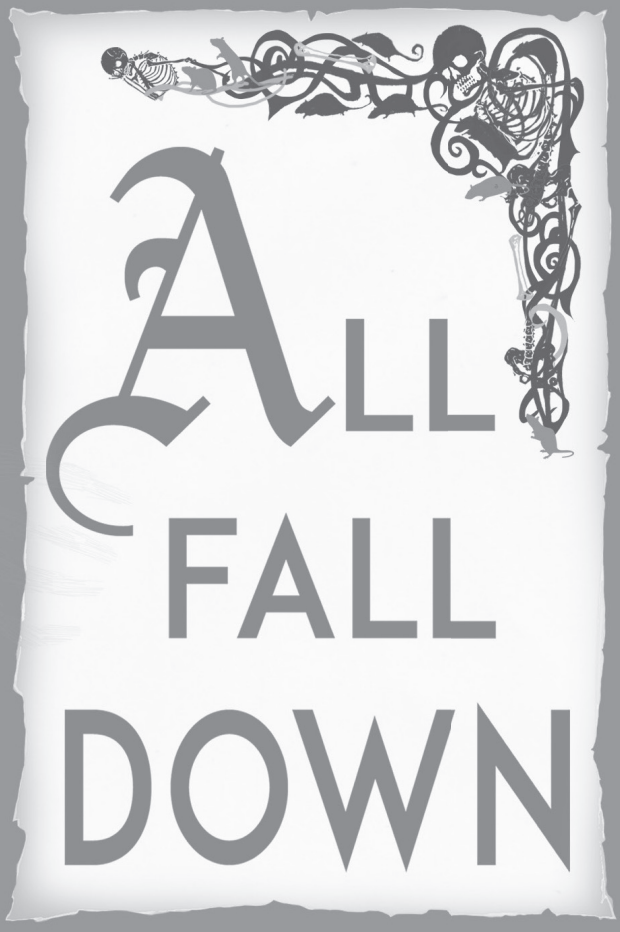

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To Zoe Owlett,
who is, I am assured,
very cool.

Book one
Ingleforn

I buried with my own hands five of my
children in a single grave . . .
No bells. No tears. This is the
end of the world.

Agnolo di Tura
1348

The year I turned thirteen, it rained every day from Midsummer to Christmastide. Sheep, huddled grey and sodden in the fields, caught the murrain and died. What oats and barley and rye we could grow were weak and spindly and covered in strange green mould, which had to be scraped off before the grain could be milled. Everyone was hungry most of the time, and in the villages further up the valley, people died.

Travellers passing through Ingleforn on the road from York told stories of strange happenings in faraway lands. Earthquakes and volcanoes and a new sickness that swept through the people of the cities, leaving not a soul alive. Mostly, the travellers were quite cheerful about these disasters.

'Not a good year to be a Frenchie,' they'd say. And, 'Paris will be King Edward's for the taking, if he wants it.'

Even the wandering holy men, the hermits and friars, the preachers and pardoners, even they seemed to relish all this destruction happening over the seas.

'God sends His angels to wipe the wicked from the earth!' they cried, and the villagers nodded and sighed and agreed that yes, there were a lot of wicked in Castile and Aragon and France indeed, and wasn't it terrible?

But in the summer of the year of grace 1348, the stories

changed. The sickness had come to Bristol, some said. At first it was just a rumour; then as more travellers told the same tale, we started to believe it. Then the sickness – the pestilence – was in London. London!

Now the preachers and pardoners and hermits and friars told a new story.

'The end of the world is coming!' they said, eyes blazing with righteousness, hair wild and untamed. 'Repent! Repent!'

And the villagers muttered together in little huddles, and some of the richer men – the free men, the franklins and the yeomen – talked about selling their land and moving north, to Duresme maybe, or the wild lands beyond, in Scotland, as though they could somehow hide from the wrath of God. Most of them shook their heads and sucked in their teeth. Most of them didn't have the gold to flee. Or they belonged to Sir Edmund, and had no choice in the matter anyway.

We knew then that 1349 would be terrible.

But nobody could have imagined quite how terrible it was going to be.

1. Morning

It's Sunday morning, early, towards the beginning of June. It's dark still, the pale grey light before dawn, and below the floor of the solar my baby brother Edward is crying. On the mattress beside me, Ned groans and buries his head in the bolster, but I lie and listen to the creak of the bed as Alice climbs out of it below me. A few moments later, I hear her footsteps on the earth floor. I push myself up on my elbows and lift aside the blanket-curtain, peering down. Alice is wearing nothing but a woollen slip and a nightcap, her yellow hair impossibly rumpled as always in the mornings. She lowers herself on to a stool and opens her slip, revealing her heavy, mottled breast. Edward's screams are quietened as he suckles. Alice looks up and smiles as she sees me watching.

'Awake, are you?' she says. 'Can you get dressed and get the others up? I'll need someone to go for water.'

There are a lot of people in my family. I have four brothers – two older and two younger – and one little sister. The older boys don't live here any more. Richard lives with his wife Joan in a little house at the other end of the village. Then it's Geoffrey – my favourite brother. He left when he was eleven. He's at St Mary's Abbey, training to be a priest.

I'm next, then red-haired Ned, who's nine, and little Margaret, still a general pet of the family even now we have Edward. They're curled up on the mattress beside me. I shake Ned.

'Nedkin, it's morning. Wake up!'

Ned moans and curls up tighter in his warm little ball of elbows-and-knees.

Margaret is still asleep, a strand of yellow hair falling over her cheek. She wakes easily, blinks her blue eyes and smiles at me.

'Is it morning?'

'Morning. Come on. Get your clothes on.'

Father built our solar, a triangular loft space under the roof of our house. It's almost exactly the right size for our mattress, which is made of sacking stuffed with hay. In the corners where the roof slopes down to the floor, grain sacks and tallow candles and lengths of rope are packed. No space is wasted.

'Ned!' I shake my brother again. 'Come on.'

I pull my gown over my head and climb barefoot down the ladder. Maggie follows behind me, carrying her clothes in a bundle. I help her fasten her shoes and tug the comb through her hair. She squeals.

'You're hurting!'

'Here—'

Alice takes the comb and starts teasing out Maggie's tangles. I sit on the bottom rung of our ladder and pull on my hose. It's dark. Alice hasn't started the hearth-fire, and the shutters are drawn across the narrow windows. The air is cold enough to make me shiver.

The hearth sits in the centre of the room. Alice's pots and flagons and goblets sit round-bellied beside the hams and cheese on the shelves above the table, out of reach of the animals. Other everyday things lean against the walls – buckets and scythes and brooms and sacks of barley and a barrel half-full

of ale and Alice's loom with a bolt of cloth half-woven. In the low space beneath our solar, a blanket is nailed to the cross-beam to hide the bed where Father and Alice and Edward sleep.

At the other end of the room, behind their wattle wall, the animals are waking up. Our cow, Beatrice, snorts at me through her nose. We have two oxen for the plough, a cow, a pig, eight chickens and a fine red cockerel. Father is always talking about building a byre to keep the animals apart, but he never does. I don't mind. I like the cosiness of all sleeping together, the funny snorts and breathy noises in the night, their warmth in winter. They add a rich, earthy, animal smell to the other scents in the house – woodsmoke and straw and thyme and rosemary.

My name is Isabel. I am fourteen years old, and I can't imagine ever living another sort of life to this.

How wrong I am.

'Done?' Alice asks me, as Mag leans back into her knees. 'You look like a girl who wants to fetch some water. Ned! Aren't you up yet? The sun'll be up before you, and we all know what a lay-a-bed she is. Come on!'

But the sun is stirring, turning the frowsy wisps of cloud a pale, early-morning pink. It's still cold, but summer will be here soon. I can feel it as I walk to the well, swinging the empty bucket beside me. Soon there'll be sunshine and harvest and swimming in the river by the church. On a morning like this, the sickness seems very far away.

Our house sits a little apart from the other houses of the village, on the edge of the green, in the shade of two hornbeam trees. It isn't far to the well. As I walk across the

grass, I pass other village houses, built in odd clumps around the watermill, the green, and the river, the distances between them growing as you move further away from the church, which sits at the very centre of Ingleforn. Here is the forge, and the oven, and the Manor Oak, where Sir Edmund's steward holds the manor court three times a year. Beyond the churchyard are the archery butts, where every able-bodied man is supposed to work at his archery, though Sir Edmund doesn't mind too much if sometimes they forget, particularly at harvest time and hay-making.

The road from York runs along the river for as many miles as I've travelled it, crossing into the village at the bridge by the watermill and threading past the church and the front of our gate. The carters come through nearly every day, and the pilgrims in the spring on their way to St William's shrine, and the wandering preachers, the merchants, the lepers, the madmen, and the holy fools.

The two big village fields – Three Oaks and Hilltop – are spread one to the left and one to the right of our door. Father farms nearly a virgate of land divided between the two. Behind the house is a narrow copse of woodland, and behind the woods is Sir Edmund's manor house – we go for the festivities at Christmastide, but mostly we stay away. Why worry the rich, if you don't want them to worry you? Sir Edmund has another, larger estate in Devon, and a big house in London where he lives for most of the year, God keep him.

Behind the manor house is the village of Great Riding, and behind the furthest edge of Great Riding's fields is the abbey, where my brother Geoffrey lives. Behind the abbey is Riding

Edge, and beyond it more farmland – rich, flat ploughland all the way to York, where I've never been, but Alice says isn't worth the journey.

'Not when you could be here, Isabel. Not when you could be here!'

There's a line of women and children already waiting by the well. The others nod in my direction, rumpled and sleepy-eyed. Plump, copper-haired Amabel Dyer, who's about my age and sort of a friend, smiles at me.

The women are talking in little huddles.

'They have it in York!'

'York!'

'Fifty dead already, I heard.'

'I heard a hundred.'

'My man Nicholas said the road from York is full of families fleeing north. Horses and ox-carts and rich men in litters with servants to carry them about so they don't ever need to walk.'

Amabel Dyer catches my eye.

'Is it true about York?' she whispers. 'Does Geoffrey know?'

My belly tightens.

'Of course it's not,' I tell Amabel. 'It's just carters' tales.'

But all the happiness has gone from the bright morning. York is two days' walk away.

York is nearly here.

2. The Romance of Father and Alice

Alice is my stepmother, and one of my favourite people in the world. It's like a mummer's play, how she and Father married. My mother died when Maggie was born, and after that Father didn't want to marry anyone else. He sent Maggie to a woman in the village to nurse, and my brother Richard, who was fifteen, had to look after me and Ned and Geoffrey. He wasn't very good at it, and we got used to living with dirty clothes, and burnt pottage, and stale ale, and a hearth-fire that wouldn't light because all the wood was wet.

The women in the village clicked their tongues at this, and brought us to the manor court, where Sir Edmund's steward ordered Father to remarry within three weeks, or have another wife found for him. But Father wouldn't. He just nodded his head and carried on like he was. So then Sir Edmund's steward looked at Ned and Geoffrey and me, with our red eyes and muddy faces and hair all wild, and told Father that he had to marry Agnes Harelip by Midsummer Day.

Poor Father! And poor us. Agnes Harelip is an old shrew. She works as a spinster, spinning thread for the yeomen's wives in Ingleforn and Great Riding, and she lives in this neat little cottage where everything is just so. She looked at Richard and Geoffrey and Ned and me with absolute horror. Father pursed up his lips, but he didn't say anything. The next day, though, he washed his face and hands, and mine too, and combed my hair, and he took me to the house where Agnes's father lived.

Father knocked on the door, and Agnes's sister Alice answered. I knew her a little, and I liked her even then. Her yellow hair was coiled in a knot at the back of her neck, but these long strands had escaped and were fuzzing up around her ears. Her big hands were covered in malt, but her eyes were laughing and kind.

'Is your father there?' Father said, and Alice said, 'No, he's gone to visit my sister Agnes – but come and take a sup, and bring the child too.'

Inside, the house was neat and swept, and the children were tumbling about by the hearth. Alice gave us a bowl of pottage, and Father asked about the children, and I sat there eating up my bowl and wishing everything was as nice as this at home.

'You've a big family,' said Father, and Alice said yes, she had three little brothers and sisters, and one older, who was Agnes.

'But that's what I like,' she said. 'I'd feel strange in a house that wasn't full of children.'

'We've four in our house,' said Father. 'And the baby. It's a lot to ask a woman to come to.'

'I certainly wouldn't ask Agnes!' said Alice, and she laughed. 'That old fool didn't know what he was letting your lot in for, if you ask me.'

'Would you have them?' said Father, and Alice looked at him, not at all surprised.

'I'd want my own as well,' she said, and Father nodded. 'Of course.'

'Well then,' she said, and that was that. They were married

after mass at the church door. And it wasn't long before we all loved her, apart from Richard, who I think was jealous, being the oldest. But at least he didn't have to look after us any more.

Alice nearly had a baby three times before Edward. Twice the child came too early. Once she had a little girl who only lived a day. But last year, Edward came and stayed.

'Edward's *my* name!' said Ned, when the baby was introduced to us. Ned's really an Edward, after his godfather, Edward Miller, who is baby Edward's godfather too. Father hopes he'll apprentice them both at the mill when they're older.

Richard doesn't like Alice much, and he hates her baby. The more children Father and Alice have, the less land there is for everyone, and without land we'll all go hungry.

'Maybe Edward will marry a lord's daughter and keep us all instead,' I say to Richard, but he just scowls at the crib, as though he's working out exactly how many acres baby Edward will take from his inheritance. I'm glad he's here though. I love Alice. I'm so happy she has a baby of her own.

3. Sunday Mass

The church is full for mass today, but no one is listening to Sir John – our priest – as he drones away in Latin. The news about York runs from body to body, crackling in the air like summer lightning. Nobody can talk of anything but the sickness.

'In London, they don't bury the bodies any more, they just leave them lying in the streets. Anyone who can leave has left.'

'What about the ones who can't?' says John Dyer, in a whisper. There's a pause while no one says anything, and then the muttering starts again.

'You can't outrun it. It travels with you. I heard about a man who fled from Lynn. Went to his sister's. He thought he'd escaped . . . didn't have a mark on him. Two weeks later he was dead. So was his sister and all the children.'

'In the south there are dead places where nobody lives any more. All these little villages, all the houses empty . . .'

'York!'

Amabel and I stand with Robin and listen.

'Everyone isn't dead in London, are they?' says Amabel.

'They can't be,' says Robin. 'How many of those men have been to London? They're just telling stories.'

'York, though . . .'

When I grow up, I'm going to marry Robin. We've been betrothed all our lives. Mother was friends with his mother, and his father, who died of the quinsy when Robin was small. Robin will inherit his land when he's twenty-one.

The tone of the conversations in the church has changed

these last few weeks. William-at-the-Wood is talking in his loud voice to Father. He's leaving the village, selling his land to his eldest son.

'I'll not stay around to watch God destroy my children,' he says. 'I'm off up north tomorrow.'

'Where?' says Father. 'Where will you go?' I close my eyes and picture it, William-at-the-Wood off into the wild north where no one can ever find him again. He'll make his fortune selling ribbons or fool's gold, and his daughters will come back princesses and ladies with ermine cloaks and white skin.

William spits and shakes his head. 'Up to Newcastle,' he says. 'Then Scotland. It's a wild land, Scotland – we'll be safe there, I reckon. I wouldn't stay here if I were you, Walt. I'd pack up while you still can.'

Now the picture has changed – Robin's family and mine, all our household on the back of our oxen, Stumpy and Gilbert, marching down the wide, grassy roads to the land of the mad Scots. Sleeping in inns, running ahead of the pestilence.

But Father sucks his teeth.

'Maybe,' he says, and I know we won't be going. We can no more leave our land than Geoffrey can leave his abbey. On the road, we'd be beggars, or hired labourers at best.

'Good luck to ye, then,' says William, and he turns away.

'Can you really believe,' says Amabel, 'that the pestilence could come here?'

'No,' I say, and I mean it. Plagues and rains of frogs and thunderbolts and sieges where everyone dies happen, I know they do – I've met people who've seen them with their own

eyes. But they happen a long way away, in foreign countries where everyone is a heathen and no one has heard of Jesus Christ. I have tried to imagine such a disaster happening here – in Ingleforn! – but my mind cannot hold it.

At the front of the church, the musicians are playing the opening notes of a hymn. The choir – with them my brother Ned – begin to sing. I close my eyes. I believe God punishes the wicked, just as I believe He speaks to his prophets through burning bushes and cures the lame by laying His hand on them. I believe that.

I just don't believe it could happen here.

Afterwards, we stay behind to admire the new painting on the church wall. Sir John hopes that a holy painting might appease God's anger, and we're not about to argue. The young artist has painted Noah, standing in his ark, watching with mild interest as the sinners are swallowed up and drowned. You can't see much of the sinners, just their arms waving about as the waters cover their heads.

'Which is the most pious of God's creatures?' says Sir John. Emma Baker answers, 'The pelican.'

'The pelican,' says Sir John. 'Who tears her own flesh from her breast to feed her young ones.

'*Pious Pelican, Lord Jesus,*

Cleanse me the impure, in your blood,

Of which one drop can save

The whole world of all sin.'

Maggie likes this new picture, with the elephant and the chimera poking their heads out of the ark, but Ned prefers the

one on the other wall, of the sinners burning in hell and the devils poking them with pitchforks.

'Does the pelican really eat its own stomach?' he asks Alice. 'Why?'

'You do such things for your children,' says Alice. She's holding Edward across her chest. He opens his mouth and dribbles down her shoulder.

'Would you? For Edward?'

'If I had to.' Alice isn't like Mrs Noah in the mystery play, who wails and screams when they try to get her onto the ark. If her children were in danger, Alice would be out there chopping down trees and sawing up planks, as fast as the rain fell down around her.

'Would you do it for me?' asks Mag. Alice laughs and ruffles her hair.

'A big girl like you?' she says. 'I'd send you off to get us a pelican for the pot. Pelican stew, how's that for a feast?'

4. The Exiles

Robin and I go up to the woods after church to gather wood.

'Imagine William-at-the-Wood in Scotland!' says Robin. 'Do you think Robert the Bruce will chop him up? I told Mother we should go too, but she doesn't like to run away and leave Grandmother with the fines.'

'You'd leave Ingleforn?' Just the thought makes me dizzy. Ingleforn is all I know – the fells behind us, the wood below the village, the funny little church with the bent spire. I've worked in Father's strips of field since I was smaller than Maggie, stumbling behind the reapers, picking up the fallen stalks of barley. How could Robin think about leaving so lightly?

Robin smiles at me. 'You've got your farmer's face on.'

'Farmer's face?'

He purses up his mouth and beetles his forehead. 'Why don't you care about the oats, Robin? We've got beans, isn't that exciting? Look, Father's bought another four acres, so we can work twice as hard this year, won't that be wonderful?'

I shove him. 'Better than your face.' Actually, Robin has a lovely face, his slow smile, his dark eyes, but I do asleep-Robin, head lolling, tongue out, eyes closed.

'Is there – work—? Can't – Isabel – do that—? It's – so-o-o nice here . . .'

'Sounds right to me,' says Robin, but he bends to pick up another branch. My own bag is nearly full. 'And yes, I'd leave. I'd rather be poor and alive than here and dead. Did you hear about that convent—'

'Yes, I heard!' The convent story is the worst of all the

stories we've heard this year, and it's been a year of horrors, stories of villages empty except for the dead, of corpses lying mouldering in the streets, eaten by ravens and pigs, of children starving surrounded by fields of unharvested grain, of family leaving family to die and no one left to ring the passing-bells or say the mass.

'I don't believe half the things people say,' I tell Robin. 'And anyway, you can't leave. You belong to Sir Edmund like me, so unless you want to leave your grandmother to pay for your freedom, we're staying here. So what's the point in worrying?'

I push past Robin and start climbing up the rise, the bag of wood bumping against my back, the sticks digging into my spine like unwelcome questions. Maybe the pestilence won't come to us. It might not.

I come out of the edge of the wood. And stop.

There's a caravan of people coming down the road from York. The road isn't too dangerous, except in bad winters, but you do occasionally get highwaymen and outlaws in the woods, so most people travel in convoy. This caravan is bigger than any I've seen before. There are men and animals; voices calling, pigs shrieking, children wailing. There are riders with nothing but what they can fit in their saddlebags, packhorses laden with all of a family's possessions, even what looks like a hay cart piled with bedding and furniture, chickens in boxes and geese skittish with walking, minstrels and holy men next to families with servants and even a canopied litter, drawn between two horses, wobbling precariously as the horses stumble in the potholes and the mud.

Robin's feet sound behind me. His breath catches and wheezes in his throat.

'Where are they going?' I say, without turning my eyes away from the road. Robin leans forward, hands on his knees. He draws in a long breath.

'Duresme. Scotland. Here.'

'They can't come here!' They can't. I know how the pestilence is spread. It lives in the houses of the poor and wretched. It's passed by breathing miasmas – bad airs. If you get too close to the miasmas of the sick, you catch it too. That's why if you want to be saved, you have to wear lavender and rosemary and rose petals and other sweet-smelling things, to keep the dead air away.

'They'll bring it here!' I say, and Robin shakes his head. 'They know. Look!'

He points. Two men from our village are talking to the caravan. Even from this distance I can see Gilbert the reeve and Philip de Coverley, the bailiff. They're talking to a little knot of men, pointing down the road.

'They're sending them away,' says Robin, but . . .

'They're sending them to the abbey!'

St Mary's Abbey is nearly three miles east of Ingleforn. The monks won't turn the travellers away. They give shelter to anyone – soldiers, beggars, even one of King Edward's messengers once. But—

'The abbey's where Geoffrey is!'

Robin looks away, back out towards the road. 'I'm sure he'll be all right, Isabel.'

But he's remembering the convent story. And so am I.

The convent story came from a troop of minstrels who passed through Great Riding in the spring. They were full of the horror of it – a convent in France, where all but one of the nuns caught the pestilence and died.

'They say the nuns were sleeping with devils,' the flautist said, but the drummer shook her head.

'They took in all the sick of the village,' she said. 'That was what killed them.'

'All but one died,' said Alice, amazed.

The drummer said, 'Just one left to bury the dead, write their names in their big book and drown herself in the river.'

That was the story that made us shift and stir uneasily. Nuns – good women – helping the sick and taking in the strangers, like God asked them to. Nuns, killed for their piety, the last nun drowned in the water, with her long hair floating loose around her like a madwoman and her soul pulled down to hell as a suicide.

That was the worst story of all.

5. Boundaries

Will Thatcher is standing with his back to me, watching Gilbert Reeve and Radulf the beadle rustling their bits of parchment. His back is straight, but his helmet is on crooked and there's mud all down the back of his legs. One of Edward Miller's dogs is sniffing at his boots. He looks straight ahead, pretending he can't see.

'He likes you,' Amabel Dyer whispers to me.

'Shh! He can hear you,' I whisper back, slightly too loudly, and we both giggle.

Will Thatcher is sixteen and one of Sir Edmund's soldiers. He was part of the baggage train in King Edward's army at the battle of Crecy, in France. Now he just guards Sir Edmund's manor, but some of the glamour of Crecy still clings to him. He's one of the best archers in the village and he is nice-looking, but whenever he sees me he goes bright red and I just want to giggle. If only he talked more. Or at all.

The whole village is gathered together on the green, under the manor oak. Sir Edmund isn't here, of course – he lives in London. I met him once when I was very small, but I can't remember much about him. He was riding an enormous chestnut palfrey, and he had a fur coat, and he and his steward talked together in a strange language, which Father told me was French.

Someone's taken the table out from the tithing barn and set it up under the manor oak. Gilbert and Radulf are sitting behind it, murmuring to our priest, Sir John. Sir John has the pen and ink from the scriptorium in the tithing barn, and he's

playing with the quill, running it between his fingers. Radulf and Gilbert are arguing – Gilbert's hands are waving in the air. I can't see what they're saying, but Radulf is shaking his head and muttering. Alice glares at them.

'Who died and made them King of England?' she mutters, shifting Edward on her hip. Edward holds out his hands, trying to tug at her veil, and she pulls them down irritably.

'Half of Europe,' says Father drily.

Ned clutches at his throat and makes choking noises.

'And Gilbert the reeve – is going – to be next—'

We're a smaller gathering than we ought to be. Four or five families have left already, selling their land and heading off north, like the exiles we saw from York.

Can the pestilence really be in York?

Sir John the priest is getting to his feet.

'They say the pestilence is in Felton,' he says, and a ripple of fear runs through the crowd. Felton is only a day's walk away. I turn to Alice, and her face is white. She's muttering the Pater Noster under her breath.

'Our only hope is that the Lord spares us,' says Sir John, raising his voice above the hubbub. 'We must repent of our sins and humbly ask the Lord's forgiveness.'

He starts talking about extra masses and prayers and barefoot processions. I try desperately to think of something to repent for. I'm sorry for being rude to Alice. I'm sorry for snapping at Ned and Mag. I'm sorry for being jealous of Alice's yellow hair and for caring so much that mine is limp and orangey-reddish and my nose is covered in freckles and for wondering what it would be like to be kissed by Will Thatcher.

It doesn't sound like very much.

Now Gilbert Reeve is standing up. Gilbert is Sir Edmund's voice and hands in the village – he makes sure we all get to the fields on time and pay our rents and heriot taxes when someone dies, and he buys all the things Sir Edmund needs for the manor – ploughs and yokes and grease and nails, hinges, harnesses, hammers and herrings. Radulf the beadle is his assistant, a tall, waxy-skinned, mournful-looking man, with a long, heavy face and a sticks-and-stones sort of wife, all elbows and nose and pinching fingers. I like Radulf, though. He doesn't say much, but he always has a kind word for Mag and Edward.

Gilbert is stroking his beard as though he doesn't quite know how to begin.

'Ah,' he says. 'Well. You all know why we're here. Something needs to be done – yes – they say Great Riding is shutting itself off, turning all travellers away. We think – ah – we think we should do the same here.'

Radulf's head is down and his mouth is screwed up at the corners. I edge over to Robin.

'Look at Radulf the beadle! What's worrying him?'

'Don't you know?' Amabel isn't listening to Gilbert either. 'Radulf's sister lives in York,' she says importantly. 'He was telling Mother yesterday that we ought to let the exiles stay here. He'd bring the pestilence here and kill us all.'

'He couldn't turn his sister away,' says Robin, and Amabel bristles.

'He can't let her come to Ingleforn!' she says. 'What sort of selfish person would bring the sickness here? She should just stay in York and leave us alone!'

Robin shifts uncomfortably, but it sounds like the other villagers agree with Amabel. The men are talking about organising work parties to guard the roads into the village.

'They steal animals too, these people,' one of the church chaplains says, which is pretty impressive knowledge, given as how we only saw them for the first time yesterday.

'Whatever happened to Christian hospitality?' says Robin. He glances at Alice, but her back is stiff and she doesn't answer. 'Those people will die if nobody takes them in.'

Alice's arms tighten around baby Edward, who tugs at her veil again with a fat fist. Alice is the most religious person in my family, apart from Geoffrey, but this time she won't meet Robin's eyes.

'Most of those people will die anyway,' she says, and I realise that she's afraid.

6. Processional

The abbot leads the procession. He carries a flask of smoking incense which he sways before him as he walks, sending the Latin of the psalms ahead to frighten away the demons and call up the good spirits of the earth. Or the angels. Probably the angels.

The other monks walk behind him in closed ranks, heads bent. I can count thirty-one warty bald heads, which is right because eight of the monks are too old to walk, and the infirmarer and his assistant will stay at the abbey. My brother Geoffrey walks right at the back, neither part of the monks' ranks nor part of the villagers. Poor Geoffrey, not-one-nor-t'other. He's shot up this last year, like a beanstalk, and he has something of the quality of a weed that grows in a dark place, searching for the sun. His thatch of yellow hair spills awkwardly over his ears, the round tonsure in the centre red with sunburn from the hot days last week. Geoffrey isn't a monk. He's too young, for one thing – he's only a year and a half older than I am. He just lives at St Mary's so he can learn Latin and French and Bible stories and all the other things he needs to know to be a priest.

It's a cold day, one of those bleak, windy days which come unexpectedly in the middle of summer, and halfway through the abbot's fourteenth Bible reading, it starts to rain. Mag starts to whine.

'I'm cold. Can't I put my shoes on?'

I shiver and wrap my mantle tighter around myself.

*

We're praying to God to take the pestilence away. To spare us. We're asking His forgiveness for whatever crimes we might have committed against Him, we're abasing ourselves before Him, barefooted and repentant, and asking Him, please, to keep His sickness away from our doors. And from the doors of those we love. Just leave us all alone, really, please. Send Your wrath to the really wicked people, in York, and London, and over the seas.

This worked in foreign lands, in Cornwall and Devon. Some villages the pestilence passed right by, like the Plagues of Egypt passed over the houses of the Israelites. But Geoffrey says that the Pope himself led the processions in Avignon, and it didn't save any of his people.

Afterwards, my feet wear heavy boots of black mud, which is probably the only thing which stops them dropping off, they're so cold. Geoffrey and Robin and I go down to the river to wash them clean. Robin doesn't have many friends amongst the village boys – mostly he just has me, and Amabel, and Alison Spinner. But he and Geoffrey were always friendly, right from when we were small.

I'm a little shy of Geoffrey, the way I always am when I see him again after a time apart. I notice all the things I'd forgotten about him. How tall he is! The Norman accent he picked up from five years living with monks. The way his yellow hair falls into his face, and how he keeps shaking his forehead to keep his eyes free.

'Are you well?' I ask, a little nervously. 'Are you coming to the Midsummer celebrations? Did you really give a bed to all those people from York?'

Geoffrey's face twists as I ask the last question. 'As many as we could. The rest we let sleep in the barn. Don't worry about them, Isabel. Tell me how you are – and Father – and Ned and Maggie—'

'We're well,' I say. 'Edward has three teeth now! And he can roll over – and clap, and—'

'Clever boy,' says Geoffrey, but he doesn't really know Edward, or care much about him. How strange to have a brother that you neither know nor love! I can't imagine it, any more than I can imagine Alice coming into our family and not loving us, or us not loving her.

'I don't think they'll let me come to the Midsummer Fire,' he says. 'It's so busy at the abbey, with all those people! I've been working with Galen. Trying to find out if he's ever come across anything like this pestilence.'

'Galen?' I say. 'Is he the infirmarer?'

Geoffrey laughs. 'He's one of the fathers of medicine!' he says. He must see the confusion still in my face. 'He lived hundreds of years ago, Isabel.'

'Oh.' Geoffrey always knows more than I do, about everything. 'Are you going to be an infirmarer, then?'

Geoffrey's head is bent over his boot buckle. He says, not looking up, 'Can you keep a secret?'

'Of course,' I say. Robin nods.

'It's not decided yet – don't tell Father – but there's a chance I might be ordained early.'

'Early? But why?'

'Why do you *think*?' says Geoffrey, whose mind always leaps ahead to the answer while mine is still trying to understand the

question. Because so many priests have died is why, down south in those places where the pestilence has already reached. Because priests are the ones they send into the houses where pestilence is, to breathe in the foul air and give absolution to the dying. Because now they want to send Geoffrey to some strange parish where the priest is dead and everyone in the village is sick, to do the same.

'Will you do it?' says Robin. 'If they ask you?'

'I want to,' says Geoffrey, but he still doesn't look up. I don't believe he does want to. Geoffrey went to the monastery for the books and for the words and to learn the names of rocks and stars and saints and bones. He didn't go to sit with the dying. I want to tell him not to do it, not to go. But if you die without a priest to give you absolution and hear your confession, you go to hell. So many people – good people: monks, nuns, Christian folk – so many good people are burning in hell now because their priest died and no new parson came in time. If they ask Geoffrey to serve as a priest, I can't tell him not to go. And I know my brother. If they ask him, he'll say yes.

'And anyway,' he says, answering the question I didn't dare ask him, 'it's no more dangerous than staying at St Mary's.'

There's something in his voice that makes me think he wants us to ask him what he means. I don't want to know what's hidden behind his words, but Robin says, 'Why? You don't have the pestilence there, do you?'

Geoffrey's fingers play around the brass buckle on his boot. He doesn't answer.

'You don't, do you?' says Robin. 'Geoffrey! You don't!'

Geoffrey's face is white. 'You're not to tell anyone!' he says.

'The abbot doesn't want anyone in the village to panic. And if Father knew . . .'

I don't care about Father. I don't really care about the abbot. My heart starts racing, and my head is dull and heavy and full of fear. *The pestilence is at St Mary's. The pestilence is three miles away. The pestilence is in the infirmary where my brother Geoffrey works.*

'Isabel?' says Geoffrey, and I turn to see his pinched, funny, worried-looking face blinking at me. 'Isabel—'

I crawl over to him, smearing mud all over my skirts, and put my arms around his neck. He holds me, and I breathe in his ink-and-incense scent, all muddled up with mud and straw and the wet air of the river.

'Don't go back,' I say: 'Please, don't. Come back home with us and be safe.'

Geoffrey's long, bony arms are tight about me. I think of all the things the Bible says, about steadfastness, and faith, and duty, and how I don't care about any of them if they mean my brother has to go back to a place where the sickness is. But all Geoffrey says is, 'Isabel, it's coming here too,' and I know that even the small protection I can offer him is worth nothing at all.

7. Pestilence

So what is it, exactly, the pestilence? Some say it's a plague, sent by God to destroy the wicked or perhaps the whole world, and that that's why there's no cure. A preacher who came to the village last year said that in the Bible it's written that a third of humanity will be destroyed by plague before the end of the world comes. Which means that God is taking more than His share of death this time around, if the stories we've heard are true.

Some say the pestilence is a disease like any other, caused by bad air, poisoned air, blown on the winds across Europe. That's why it creeps north and north and north, why you can't outrun it, why it never stops. But where did that bad air come from? And what happens to it? If the earth is a ball, like Geoffrey says, will the pestilence roll over the top of the world and come back round to greet us again? Or will it kill us all and go roving over the empty world, forever?

All this last year, travellers from the south have told stories about the sickness. Some call it the *morte bleu*, the blue death, but most say the pestilence or just the sickness. Some talk of spitting blood, of hard, black buboes the size of pigeon eggs growing under the armpit or in the groin, of God's tokens – red marks, like blood, below the skin. It stinks – everyone who talks about the pestilence talks about the stink.

'Like the devil himself,' says one soldier, crossing himself.

'You'd know,' says his companion, but nobody laughs. More sinister are those who talk of a sickness that strikes like an adder, without warning.

'My cousin's child – he took ill in the evening and was dead an hour later.'

'My father's pig took a rag that had been used to wipe the blood from a man with the sickness. The pig ate the rag, and fell down dead in the road.'

Others say that the pestilence brings madness. That folk will leap from their windows, run naked through the streets, babble and cry and fight as though all the king's men are after them.

'Maybe it won't be so bad then,' the men say, grinning sideways one to another. 'If the young women start taking their clothes off.'

How do you keep yourself safe? That's the next question, the one everyone wants an answer to. Surely there are medicaments and spells; surely someone, somewhere has found a way?

The preachers hiss.

'By loving God and begging His forgiveness. By turning from the devil and all his works.'

'This bone,' a wandering preacher told us. 'It belonged to St William. Wear it next to your skin and it will save you from harm.'

'Chicken bones and glue,' Alice muttered. 'Either that or he's a grave robber, or a cathedral robber – or worse!'

'Don't look them in the eyes,' said the pardoner who came after Christmas selling forgivenesses for any sin you might ever want to commit and a few you never would. 'That's how it's passed – through the eyes!'

'I walked through the city of London,' said the young man

at the Easter Fair, the young man with the weeping sore in the corner of his mouth and the restless eyes that wouldn't settle on any of us. 'I walked through the houses of the dying, stepping over the corpses of the dead in the street. I passed through the stinking air of the sickness, and I walked out the other side unharmed. And all I had was this!' And he shook a silken pouch stuffed with rosemary and lavender. 'Worn by the skin,' he said. 'Closer than a lover, and surer on a winter's night.'

The silence that followed this was so thick you could lift it with a spoon.

'And you survived?' said Emma Baker.

'And I survived.'

The most important question is the one we ask every traveller. 'Once you have it – once you've caught it – can it be cured?' And the answer is always the same.

'Nothing cures it. Once you have it, you die.'

And now it's here, in the house where my brother lives.

And the monks are coming from that house to walk barefoot through Ingleforn, leading us all to pray for the sickness to pass us by. They look so calm and holy, but the sickness clings to their hands and to their eyes and to the underside of their robes. Every time they come, they bring death closer.

And I've promised Geoffrey not to tell.