

THE ANGEL AND THE APOTHECARY
by *Kate Rose*

*If half the world knew how the other strives,
T'would spoil the comfort of their easy lives.*

Picture an angel looking down upon this city, what would it see? Street lamps burning in yellow constellation? The serpentine swirl of the river with its floating wilderness of masts? And what if this celestial being were to walk the city's streets: would it marvel at the labyrinth of alleyways, the hotchpotch of buildings? Or sigh in disbelief at the rammed slums, places where even the rats fared better? For in this city sickness seeps into the bodies of rich and poor alike: cankers, fistulas, dropsy, consumption, the pox, agues and bloody fluxes, all seize their opportunity. But for an angel observing such suffering, it might be almost too much to bear...

December, 1741

Feet meeting with London clay, we find ourselves in the parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields. Built on marshland there are no fields to speak of, and despite its new church it remains a poor parish, thronged with vagrants, plentiful gin lovers. But walk this way, eyes to the cobbles to avoid any shit getting on your shoes, and just up from Seven Dials, where seven streets converge on a pillar topped with six sundials, you will see an alleyway. From here, slip within the cramped triangle of Neal's Yard and see between the premises of an astrologer and an alchemist, the apothecary shop of one

Jeremiah I. S. Goode

The shop front comprises wood in a state of disrepair, its bowed plate-glass windows smeared with soot. Just visible behind are the common Cure-alls; the flint glass bottles of the travelling salesmen: *Daffy's Elixir, Evan's Worming Powder, Turlington's Balsam...* Behind stand the blue and white gallipots of the apothecary's trade: jars decorated with baroque scrolls, exuberant plant life, exotic birds and heavy-winged angels, oddly reminiscent, one might say, of the details embellished upon tombs.

Now duck beneath the emblem of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries - Apollo, they say, overcoming pestilence straddling a wyvern - and enter a black door delicately trimmed with gold - mind your head! A melodious bell, wouldn't you agree, for so sombre a façade? See the dust motes hanging inert, as if distant stars! After the stench of the streets, the aromas of cloves, cinnamon, lavender and liquorice combine in olfactory harmony. And when eyes adjust to the light, it is evident that its humble frontage belies the owner's ambitions. Above a resplendent counter of mahogany, hangs a puffer fish whose marble eyes are doomed to eternal vigilance. In the shadows beneath, lurks the desiccated remains of - could it be? - yes, indeed an *alligator*.

Dozens more Delft apothecary jars from the Lambeth potters stake their claim to walls space. Behind the counter, further shelves are loaded with syrup bottles, curved spouts, unguent pots with bright metal lids, bottles of cordial waters, perfumes, ointments, plasters, razors, vials of oil, bags of sugar; a small central space reserved for the expensive drugs - *Paracelsian*, *Helmantians* - those favoured by the physicians. Whilst presiding over all, layered with the thickest dust and surveying the room with a distinct sneer to his skull, stands Nicholas Culpeper, the shop's skeleton!

The shop is otherwise empty. But wait a moment. Grinding and tapping: the ubiquitous sounds of the apothecary's trade. Let us slip behind the counter, through a doorway hung with rich red velvet, and what do we find? The light is dim but if you peer closer you will see two men, both so absorbed in their separate tasks neither has noticed us enter.

Jeremiah regards the quivering feathers of his quill. Without looking up, he asked his apprentice, 'A customer in the shop perhaps?'

Boswell - the boy has long forgotten his age - puts down the pestle and mortar he cradles. 'The wind, I expect, sir.' He brushes cinnamon from his nose with a swipe of a grubby shirtsleeve. 'Shall I take a look?'

Jeremiah listens to the shop bell trill. Does not look up. The boy drags his boots across the *elaboratory*, sliding back the velvet drape as if drawing a sword; Jeremiah returns his attention to his accounting ledger. He frowns at the balance at the bottom of the page. Amount owing to the druggist and other creditors: £240 4s 6d. Amount due from customers: £250 3s 4d. He runs a hand across his face. He need only turn back a few pages to see how this has come about. Barely a handful of customers have paid him in a year with the three previous years being no better.

Two hundred and forty pounds.

A small fortune and yet, if he does not find it, he will soon be sleeping like a hog upon a dunghill in a close ward of nine feet

by six, with a gaol sentence ahead of him as extravagant as the unforgiving nature of his creditors!

He slams the accounts book shut, releasing a dark cloud of dust. He sits back in his chair to survey his *laboratory*. By the guttering light of two cheap tallow candles, its once ordered contents appear neglected. The massive mortar squats in pride of place on the workbench, its pestle hanging overhead; a condemned corpse from its gallows. Of late, they have had no reason to grind ingredients in large quantities. Rather, Boswell's grinding seems to stem from habit as opposed to necessity. For Jeremiah, pushing back guilt with vice becomes his daily battle.

Amongst the ledgers, on a table in the centre of the room, are stacked a variety of books - *A Methodical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Physic*, Nicholas Culpeper's *Complete Herbal*, and the giddily titled Parkinson's *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris* - essentially a gardening book. They sit beside the elixirs Jeremiah fears may bring harm to his customers: *Elixir Proprietatis*, *Vatican pills*, *Fioravanti's Balsam*; the most fanciful of the *Cure-alls* imposed on him by the more insistent salesmen. He has found them effective in staving off rats.

Scales and weights, funnel, flasks, alembics and curcubits - all gather soot. Before the fire rests a great copper crucible for making tinctures. Distillation is the best way to concentrate a plant's essence. Like so much else it sits empty.

As if in prayer, the young apothecary now clasps his hands before him. Not much given to moments of piety, however, he daydreams, musing with unabashed sentimentality about his childhood home, his siblings. Then his smiles fades as he remembers - in unrelenting detail - the December day in Dulwich when his father threatened to disown him for his love of botany over physic. He had set off to forget his sorrow, roaming the woods in search of fresh specimens. He had stopped to catch his breath, gazing up through the blocks of low winter through the bare branches toward a patch of cerulean.

'What am I to do?' he spoke aloud.

As if in response, the wind picked up. Fallen leaves began to eddy around him. A vortex formed with the young man at its centre. He stood, arms outstretched and neck extended, gazing past the skeletal branches to the heavens above. Three words gradually swum at the forefront of his mind. He craned back his neck and cried as loud as his lungs would permit:

'Yes! I will serve. *I will* serve!' he cried.

Abruptly, the wind died. Leaves ceased their whirl, drifting to the ground. Jeremiah looked down. Before him a single *galanthus nivalis*, had broken through the soil, a month or so early. The snowdrop: a flower of hope; the first plant Eve saw after leaving the Garden of Eden. Snow transformed by an angel turned into a flower.

Something stirred in his breast, a momentary easing of the burden of perpetual guilt. It was then that he first began to feel aligned with a far greater force than that embodied in his father, *the eminent* Dr. Robert Goode. It was not too farfetched to see this moment as the beginning of an intense communion with Nature; mind and body willingly rendering into a vessel through which She could effect her Cures. It was, indeed, the beginning for him.

Beginning of the end.

A shortness of investment that had brought him to St Giles, not the Strand where any physician worth his weight might be found. He became known as a miracle-maker, his purse, under the weight of such a title soon becoming irrelevant. Only time revealed that miracles and money were truly bad bed partners. Four years of Curing hundreds, if not thousands, who had nothing left to give, and little choice but to become sick again, had left him deep in debt and as devoid of hope as those that he laboured to Cure.

Go to St Giles and disappear!

He opens his eyes and pushes a finger into his ear, attempting the dislodge the echo of his father's curse. The shop bell ceases to ring and a rare silence scatters his thoughts. He opens his herbal compendium, admires a sketch of Archangel: a plant with crumpled, hairy leaves, adorned with hooded flowers of red, white or yellow. He is at least content with the drawing, but as for the plant's uses... well, they remain a little disordered, so far undocumented.

After Archangel comes Arrach, good for yellow jaundice and for cleansing of the womb. He pictures its small round leaves: a little pointed and without serration or lobe, a dusky mealy colour, displayed on slender stalks. He can see the clusters of small flowers, even smell its rotten fish-like odour, the result of roots deeply embedded in dunghills for Jeremiah has a memory for plants like men of this city have for women of pleasure. The rest is derived from scraps of paper, scattered about his laboratory; hasty notes recorded at times of revelation or inspiration, many more inscribed upon his bedchamber walls. Asparagus, he hopes, shall prove less taxing.

He picks up his pen, dipping it into what remains of his ink, and recommences, with the fervour of a dying man digging his own grave, a record of his findings. He reminds himself of both his grit and gift for Curing, a thing he does not properly understand, despite its unfailing accuracy. He rejoices in its imperviousness to his humble surroundings and, slowly but surely, finds the courage to press quill to paper again.

Some time later a shrill cry of '*Potecary? Potecary?*' carries through from the shop. Another customer unable to read the Bailiff's note no doubt.

'She insists upon seeing you, sir,' says Boswell, appearing at the curtain, 'I think this one's a Covent Garden nun, sir.'

Jeremiah lifts an enquiring brow.

‘A bat, a punk, a bit of laced mutton,’ his apprentice elaborates with a wink.

‘Ah,’ says Jeremiah, sitting back in his chair and lacing hands behind his head, ‘another goat’s intestine sheath before the evening’s venereal adventures commence!’ He smiles, mischievousness warping his face. ‘Adventures, Boswell, that kept the men of the city wedded to their wives.’ He pats the boys shoulder. ‘I shall let you tend to her.’

‘But that’s just it, sir, she’s insisting on seeing you and you alone.’

Jeremiah shakes his head as Boswell grins.

‘Do you think that you and this quean might be already – how shall I put it? – acquainted, sir?’ the boy asks, becoming momentarily the ragamuffin he might have remained had his grandfather never fallen sick, had opportunity never plucked him from the streets.

‘Explain to her that I am busy.’ Jeremiah, straightens his notes on Asparagus. ‘Tell her that I trust my well-trained apprentice to deal with her condition.’

‘I have tried, sir. But this one, well, she does insist, sir.’

Jeremiah runs a hand across his face. ‘*Trying*, by its very nature, has no limits,

Boswell. And remember—’

‘To demand payment and on no account to give herbs on credit.’

‘Very good.’ The Bailiff had said credit was to be extended only to those creditworthy, a phrase Jeremiah has still to properly understand. ‘Now go!’

The boy exits the *elaboratory* as another shrill cry of ‘*Potecary, Potecary!*’ threatens to separate the ceiling from its gilded cornice. Jeremiah writes, *asparagus produces fragrant urine*, and regrets that he has made his quill too sharp for it scratches across the page, doing little to alleviate his present irritation.

In theory, all he need do to finish the compendium is find enough paper and ink and a little sobriety – of which he presently has plenty – and fill five hundred or so blank pages with his account of medicinal herbs. Following that he must publish it. Thus described, it seems almost achievable.

So far he has reached Asparagus. To complete studies of five hundred or so herbs, at such a rate, will take him the best part of a year, and a year, he is quite certain, he does not have.

Boiled with white wine or vinegar, asparagus could relieve pain in those troubled by hip-gout or sciatica, though in certain individuals, that are susceptible, it may worsen such pains.

He crosses out this last part, searching his memory for something more uplifting. The exigencies of serving the superior physic have steered him from the individual toward the general, so that every person – whether their disease is ague, dropsy,

pestilence or ulcers – is expected to be healed by similar means. Physicians who come to his shop (admittedly few of them nowadays) dispensed a word or two of medical verbiage and expected it to be interpreted instantly into a Cure. If Jeremiah enquired as to whether the patient was young or old, fat or thin, happy or sad, whether he ate mostly meat or bread, whether he walked ten mile a day or barely got out of bed, he would be scorned for wasting time. Physicians believed that for every disease there was a specific, unchanging (and usually ineffective) medicinal Cure. They treat every ill and pain of each body part individually, when what they needed was to see each bodily part as making up the whole, growing out from a fundamental cause. With this in mind, Jeremiah writes hoping his compendium will one day serve the need for self-physicking by those who cannot afford to consult physician nor apothecary (preferring to forget that most of his parish cannot read, nor afford a book!). His theory stands, however, that a Cure operates primarily through the dispensing healer's understanding of the individual, as well as the nature of plants. Admittedly, on occasion, he has himself relied on emetics, purgatives and a little luck too – for this is often the way when healing – but in final analysis it is always the individual who matters most. And in the interstices where neither Cure nor hope can, there is laudanum.

He reaches for the bottle now, savouring the tonic's bitterness upon his tongue, watching as the fog forms intricate droplets on the plate glass in the haze. Distant hooves clash against cobbles, awakening something in his breast. Unread notes on Asparagus amassed at his elbow, Jeremiah begins picturing her red mouth... the way the tip of her tongue touches her upper lip... the way she tips her head to one side as she studies a plant... Temptation along the path of Salvation! Far better to turn his thoughts to the compendium and this last chance he perhaps has of evading debtors' prison. He opens his eyes, scratches his hair – a head shave being long overdue – and picks up his pen. *Asparagus: a plant good for cancer of the breast, the larynx and lung..*

What else? He ruffles through further scraps of paper strewn across his desk, comes across: *Stirs up lust in man and woman*, and is struck, quite suddenly, by a vision of her ears: pale, intricate whorls like the outer edge of a South Sea shell once seen in a museum of curios. He drops his quill, pressing a thumb and forefinger to the corners of his eyes. Three times he has seen her at the Chelsea Physic Garden, three times dressed invariably in a long black cloak, plucking herbs, rubbing fragrant leaves between her fingertips and bringing them to her lips... three times and each sight more entrancing than the last. He checks his pocket watch. Perhaps, he might reach the Garden before dusk. He could find an Asparagus plant to draw...

'The Potecary! I must see the Potecary!' The woman's cry carries through his Elaboratory like a giant winged irritation.

He abandons Asparagus, skips over Autumnal-water Starwort, and moves straight on to Avens, an excellent plant for dissolving bruises.

‘Sir?’ Boswell asks as he runs a hand through his hair. ‘She will not let me serve her, sir. I have but tried.’

Jeremiah sighs. No avoiding it. As promptly as he allows it to enter, discomfort swells in his abdomen. He sets down his quill. He burps. Regurgitates a little food. A moment later his feet start to swell in his shoes and a nettle-like sting sears at his anus.

‘What in God’s name must a man do for peace in this city!’ he says, pushing back his chair. ‘Cut off his ears?’

Of course, it was not that he did not wish to heal these women; it was that they did little to prevent themselves from falling sick again, or with child again, or drunk again, or succumbing to whatever other vice they used to brighten their miserable days. And in a state of despair they flocked to the threshold of his shop, passing on their symptoms with poorly conveyed astonishment. So it is with some reluctance that Jeremiah clears his throat and with his head a great cathedral of resentment, steps upon his stage.

‘Madam! How may I be of any assistance?’

The woman, standing on boards worn pale by the sick, pushes matted hair from her face. She looks from Boswell to Jeremiah and back again, shuffles her feet and appears to point to a sleeve heavily stained with blood. ‘Can I shew it to you or need we be alone?’

Jeremiah nods whereupon, rather than the sleeve, the woman lifts the hem of her skirt. She tucks the fabric tucked beneath her arms, exhibits, with the modesty of a cow offering full udders (for she wears not a thread of undergarments) the tips of pendulous breasts and a belly a month or so from parturition. Jeremiah experiences a sharp, yet definite, internal kick in his own gut and leans across the counter to conceal Boswell’s eyes with his palms.

‘E not seen mama’s belly afore?’

‘Is this your mother, Boswell?’

‘No, sir.’

‘You happen not to be that particular woman, madam. Examinations are conducted here at my discretion and always in private.’ Jeremiah waits for her to lower her skirts before removing his hands from his apprentice’s face.

‘You want to go somewhere and take a better look?’ she offers, with an intonation of promise.

‘No, madam. I already have a clear idea of your condition.’

A slight huff. ‘Then what shall you give me?’

‘You must find a country nurse.’ He removes a jar from a shelf. ‘That is, if you will not keep the child.’

The whore laughs. ‘In this town?’

‘Many here do manage.’ He thinks: Pepperwort, its potent juices... and Butcher’s Broom for haemorrhoids...

The woman clucks. ‘But I have no husband to depend upon. Being up all the night until I can barely depend upon my own wits. How must I manage?’

‘Alas, I am an apothecary not a politician as such I try to change health, not habits.’ At least this had been his ethos upon arrival. He holds up a jar. ‘Some juice of Pepperwort, taken in ale to quicken the delivery. Butcher’s Broom to be taken as a tea, seep for fifteen minutes before drinking.’

The whore shakes her head. ‘Eleven foundlings God has cursed me with and every one a wretched birth.’

‘Then let us hope number twelve shall be your lucky number.’

‘You misunderstand, Master Potecary. I don’t want it born - I wish to be rid of it.’

They all want to be rid of these unborn children but it is not a thing he enacts. ‘Then you must visit a wise woman.’

‘For her to put a live toad on my back and make the child kick? This one is already quickening... quickening like a beast. The fellow who usually cuts them says it’s too late, and besides I can ill afford a month off work. I must be rid of it. Rid of it quick!’

Doubtless, the wise woman and abortionist would prefer to be paid for their services. ‘I cannot help you,’ he affirms. ‘Two, perhaps three, more weeks and Nature will do the job for you.’ He returns the herb jar to the shelf. ‘An apothecary is in the business of saving lives, not ending them.’

The sound his customer makes next is the snort a donkey might make. Jeremiah shifts the thought that not a gentleman in the whole of London could deny some accountability for the birth of such children. Uncertain whether the woman laughs or cries, he nods conspiratorially to Boswell, who ventures around the counter and places an awkward hand upon her shoulder.

‘The Apothecary knows his business,’ says the boy with practised intent. ‘You would do well to take his advice.’ He pulls a flat lipped smile that serves as a closed door for the more discerning.

‘But the hospital will not take it, and if it goes to a parish workhouse it shall perish, or be sold into work before its bones have hardened. I will leave it upon no man’s door - not even yours, Master Potecary.’

Jeremiah is having difficulty following the woman’s argument. It seems she will be content only if she were the one to kill her child. ‘But with the child placed in the workhouse, you shall never know if it lives or dies.’

‘I shall know. I’m its *mother*.’

He is fighting for the life of a child already doomed. If it does not suffer now, it will assuredly suffer later. He fetches down

two jars and, unable to meet the woman's accusing eyes, weighs out a penny's worth of herbs.

'A pound of raspberry leaf tea. Boil and drink hot, thrice daily,' he tells her.

'God bless you, sir! And what of this other herb, what do I do with it?'

'Seep for a quarter of an hour and apply directly as a compress to your haemorrhoids.'

'To my what?'

'The condition affecting your...' he seeks the correct medicinal term '*...bum*. Porridge oats to break fast and your bowels will empty as they ought. Asparagus, or sparrow-grass, will aid. And plenty of boiled water. But no gin.'

The woman gives a toothless grin and extends both arms. '*Potecary!* How can I possibly show thanks?'

'Money is the usual means,' he says, dodging the embrace.

'Well, I shall give you plenty-'

'Settling your account in coin shall alone suffice.'

'I mean to say, I shall give you plenty of money just as soon as my customers return. Sailors who want to blow off loose corns have no liking for a whale. Sailors see enough whales out at sea! You must understand that as well as the next man, Mr Potecary.'

She laughs her peculiar laugh, or perhaps cries. Jeremiah only wants rid of the woman now so he can work on his compendium undisturbed and forget for a time the shambles that lies beyond his threshold, the confusion he had once considered himself capable of righting.

'You have a kind face and good teeth, Master Potecary. A lucky convenience I am certain you must have.'

'She speaks of *your wife*, sir,' Boswell winks.

'There is no Mrs Goode, madam.'

'Not with those comely blue eyes and black curls!' Concealing her bulging belly under a stained mantle, the whore snatches the bag of herbs from the counter. 'I should say you'll have no trouble finding yourself one, being a clever gentleman with a proper gentleman's voice. You don't see many of your kind in St Giles. None, I should say.

Good day, Potecary!'

Jeremiah opens the shop door and the whore leans toward him.

'Every man needs a good woman.' She fingers the ends of his hair, kisses his cheek and steps out of the shop. Boswell continues to stare.

'Do I have ink on my face?' Jeremiah asks him.

The boy shakes his head. 'No, sir. But I have not seen you do such a thing before as you did with that woman, sir.'

'Pray, what?'

‘You have always taught me to do whatever it takes to make a man, woman or child live a day longer in this wretched world.’

A chuckle catches in Jeremiah’s throat. Brief theatre and a good lesson were provided this afternoon.. He sometimes forgets that despite the boy’s attentiveness and enthusiasm to siphon every bead of information from his employer’s mind, Boswell cannot in fact read it.

‘No cause for concern,’ Jeremiah assures him. ‘Raspberry tea strengthens the uterus. The woman should have a soon and swift birth. The easier the birth, the easier it should be for her to love the unwanted child. Perhaps number twelve she shall keep.’

When a boy with a bleeding nose has had it packed with yarrow leaf and Jeremiah has seen to a case of *la grippe* in the baker’s wife and the King’s Evil in a beggar, the shop slumps into quiet. A surprising amount of custom has reaped the grand total of two ha’pennies. A familiar problem: too much sickness and too little money

He returns to his *elaboratory* and sits at his desk, staring at the Bailiff’s order to cease customers’ credit – *in the midst of winter* – screws it up and tosses it into the dwindling fire. He makes a note: *Asparagus heals haemorrhoids, serves the heart and rids the body of ~~hope~~ salt*. He remembers the favour promised the night soil man and, at this prospect, drains the last of his laudanum.

‘I must depart.’ He checks his pocket watch.

Boswell looks up from bagging herbs. ‘Going abroad, sir?’

‘To Southwark, Boswell. Familiar with Southwark?’ Jeremiah wrestles with his coat.

‘I’ve never had much reason to cross River, sir.’

Jeremiah suspects his apprentice has never gone farther than the parish of St Clement Danes. ‘Southwark is best known for its houses of correction – its prisons,’ he says.

‘Be that your reason for you journeying there, sir?’ says Boswell.

For a moment Jeremiah’s tongue twitches with the truth.

‘No. I have an errand to run.’ Is all he is able to confess.

‘My hat?’

‘Behind you, sir.’

‘I shall not be back for supper. If you could convey my absence...’ He cuts short his request. Given the difficulties of informing his maid about anything, it would perhaps be easier for the boy to consume two suppers. Jeremiah searches for the key to his drug cabinet.

‘Mary’s hearing is much improved, sir.’ Boswell picks up the pestle and mortar as well as the train of Jeremiah’s thoughts. ‘Lately, she has been faithfully...’

But now distracted by the found key, Jeremiah opens a drawer in his drug cabinet where he stores his most valuable ingredients - silver, gold leaf, exotic seeds and roots from the Orient in row upon row of miniature drawers - that is, he *used* to. The chest now lies almost empty aside from a purse of coins from pawning his grandfather’s ring. He misses the ring upon his finger with its generous brilliant set amid gold. Naturally, the money could well be spent more wisely. A muscle twitches in his shoulder and involuntarily lifts as though body and mind had temporarily parted company. Ignoring the irregularity, he tells himself he should be able to make a swift profit on the transaction at the port. By selling some of his supply onto druggists, it should help to keep the bailiff from the door. He wipes off a rim of grime from his finger where the ring once sat, places the purse in the inner pocket of his breeches and spends an age fastening the many buttons of his fashionable waistcoat.

‘I have finished Archangel,’ he muses aloud as he rights his wig.

‘I am glad to hear it, sir.’

‘Well, you needn’t be. I have an entire alphabet ahead of me.’ As well as a Bailiff in his shadow and a list of debtors as long as his waistcoat. What man could complete a great body of work without money? What man could complete a great body of work *for* money! ‘But Archangel,’ he tells Boswell, ‘is good for the spleen. Remember that.’

‘Aye, sir.’ Boswell pulls back the curtain for him. ‘There are more requests for laudanum at the Rookery, sir. A fellow lost his leg after he was hit by a carriage. His wife says he cannot drink enough to drown such suffering.’

Gin was cheap. A large bottle could be bought for a penny. In St Giles people piled up outside the grog shops, barely alive. Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for two.

The boy returns to the *laboratory*. Jeremiah’s shoulder flinches once more. He takes a handful of bagged herbs from the shop counter and stuffs them in his coat pocket. By the time the debt collector is in possession of his drug jars they shall, if nothing else, be empty.

Nicholas Culpeper grins at him from the corner.

‘Shall they not be satisfied until I am a bag of bones like you? You lived until seven and thirty. If I am sent to gaol at four and thirty, I tell you, I shall not be far behind. Confess: did you feel their pain as if it were your own? Did walking these streets fill you, at times, with unbearable agony? Too late to recommend a bottle of laudanum and tell you it is a better Cure than gin.’ He laughs at a joke that seems to be at his own expense. ‘Methinks, God took pity on you with an early death.’

Resting his hand on the once gleaming brass door handle, Jeremiah stands for a moment on the threshold of his shop, observing the drizzle trickling from the waterspouts. Not another sound can be heard from the yard. A place so quiet it hardly seems to exist. Yet, if he were to cup a hand to his ear and listen carefully, he is certain he would hear the city spitting his failings back at him, its message as clear as the water splatting on the cobbles: *Time is running out.*

To the right of his shop lies the astronomer: an eccentric fool, who makes up stories about what he finds in the skies or on his absurdly imaginative charts. The shop to the left belongs to the alchemist: another fool who claims he can prolong life with a band of angels and a philosopher's stone. People assume Jeremiah's beliefs strike a chord with his neighbours. They could not be further from the truth. For his Cures he relies on plants and instinct. He has no concern for the stars or whatever else lies hidden by perpetual fog above his head. His interests lie solely people and their peculiar habits.

'Evening, Apothecary Goode,' says Ludwell the astronomer, appearing on the threshold of his shop, pipe smoke curling into the air around him. 'Saturn is in the fray and thus one never truly knows.'

'Evening, Mr Ludwell.' Jeremiah wonders, as he often does, what exactly it is that the fellow smokes. 'But one always knows. Inevitability is our greatest enemy, rarely uncertainty, Mr Ludwell.'

'Mr Goode, you of all people should know that plants fall under the dominion of the planets. An apothecary cannot Cure if he does not recognise that Taurus has dominion over the neck, ears and throat, for Dygges in his 1555 manuscript...'
Jeremiah lifts his hand. 'Good evening, Mr Ludwell!'

Naturally, he knows that the body must adapt to an ever-changing environment, knows it to be in a state of flux just like the heavens. He knows too that keeping it in balance is important. From this context it is indeed an astrological arrangement - but what Jeremiah does not believe is the popular dogma that planets govern bodily parts or, for that matter, the doctrine of signatures that states that herbs resembling body parts can be used to treat ailments of said body part. Personally, he had never found God to be so blatantly helpful. To his mind, it was merely wishful thinking and if they put him in the stocks for his beliefs then so be it; his Cures work which is more than can be said for most so-called healers in this town.

At the corner of Neal's Yard he passes the lamplighter, who stands with one foot resting on the bottom rung of his ladder, eating an apple.

'How's Mary?' the boy asks.

‘My maid keeps well.’ Jeremiah watches a moth pointlessly flap around the edges of the lamp’s flame.

‘I try to see her at the window of your house...’ The lamplighter’s face twitches as he blinks convulsively. ‘But it is too dark.’

‘You are spying on us?’

The boy resumes control of his features with dignity. ‘No, sir, but on the occasions, I look up to see her face at the window, it is dark... I mean, for a house belonging to a gentleman such as yourself.’

Jeremiah turns back to look at it. Indeed, the place appears empty. It seems even constant twilight one may adapt to. ‘Spearmint and ground fennel seeds. Boil up and drink as a tea.’ ‘Sir?’

‘For the twitching. My maid will not look at you with a face that dance about like a mad March hare.’

He heads toward Queen’s Street before the boy, or anybody else, can bother him further. The watchman – the third St Giles has seen in the space of a year – stands on the corner, swinging his horn lantern, pent-house hat worn to guard against the unrelenting weather.

‘Hang out your light so that honest men may walk along, may see to pass safe without wrong...’

At Seven Dials, Jeremiah realises he has forgotten his hat. Too late. He must press on. At least the extortionate price he once paid for his wig means it is warm, impervious to the rain.

‘Going begging, Master Goode?’

‘Not yet, Manners. Not yet.’

The Bailiff’s vein-cracked eyes appear wilder than usual and his mop of red hair is raised as if in tentacles. ‘I was just coming to visit you at your shop.’ He speaks as if conferring a favour.

‘For any particular reason?’ This pot-bellied wisp of foulness has been tailing him around the parish for a month or more and they both know why.

Manners scowls at the bag of ‘herbs’ in Jeremiah’s hand – remaining scraps from the bottom of his drugjars. ‘I come looking for anything you have left to give, Master Goode. Anything at all.’

‘Then I must disappoint you for you have already taken it all.’

The bailiff’s eyebrows wiggle. ‘Everything, Mr Goode?’

Manners was not a real Bailiff but a *bum-bailiff*, a term Jeremiah now fully understands for the man has grown closer to him than his own shadow. He knows, however, of the 1706 Act of Anne, and that he still stands a chance of discharging himself from debt and avoiding gaol if luck – *God* – is on his side. Once deemed insolvent, however, he will be sent to prison to serve a term dependent upon the forgiving nature of his creditors. In the meantime he must pass on any earnings – however pitiful – to

Manners, or else be found guilty by the courts and swiftly hanged.

‘Everything of value, aye.’

Manners shakes his head. ‘What is not of value to a gentleman may be of great value to a pauper such as myself.’

‘Is that so.’

‘Aren’t you a Good Samaritan!’ Manners swipes a bag of herbs from Jeremiah’s grasp and tucks it into his belt. ‘But what you really need is to Cure yourself, Master Goode. Cure yourself of the disease of penury. There is none sicker, you understand, than the fool who gives away his money. The Bailiff has permitted you one more month of living like a free man. One more month afore you stroll the Fleet’s moat to its tower. Might I suggest you waste no more of it on acts of charity.’

Discreetly, Jeremiah tucks the rest of the herbs into the lining of his coat. ‘And the ten pounds paid but three weeks ago? Does it not bide anymore time?’ He had paid Manners ten pounds from pawning a looking glass; a twenty first birthday present from his mother.

‘Aye, plenty more... once you fetch me the remaining two hundred and forty pounds due. Speaking of time, how shall you be spending your last hours?’ Manners’ tongue hangs limply from his mouth. ‘Kissing your lover’s wet lips?’ He cackles. ‘You have a lover I assume?’

Bile rises in Jeremiah’s throat. ‘I have work to do.’

Manners’ hand falls heavy on Jeremiah’s shoulder, fingers appearing to grip his very bones. ‘I don’t require money, sir, not like the women of the parish.’ He smiles, revealing six blackened teeth, as he continues to grotesquely bat his eyelashes. ‘Maybe you and me could come to an arrangement. Why don’t you have a think about it. Have a *good* think.’ The fella spits laughter. ‘For I am certain we could come to some mutually beneficial arrangement.’ More laughter thick with artifice. ‘Eh? A gentleman - a clever one too - choosing the life of a pauper? - I shall never understand it. One more month, Apot’cry. One more month to Cure your thyself!’

As abruptly as he appeared, the bum bailiff enters the Angel Inn, laughing like the Devil’s own.