



Mrs William Bowles is making her way down from her house in Clerkenwell on foot, skirting the Fleet river on its journey south and staying well clear of the fire that is burning along the Thames.

In spite of its name, this river is far from fleet. It is more of a ditch, at best a backwater, although it has its source in the clear springs and wells of Hampstead. She crosses the Fleet on Cow-bridge, stopping to peer into water so clogged with refuse that even the single oarsman can make little progress upstream. His scull is loaded with his possessions, topped by a wooden lute that is listing towards the river, weeping a few plaintive notes. As the scull passes, Pegge spots a long silvery object flashing just downstream of the straining oar.

She hurries down the river-stairs and grasps a boatman's pole lying on the bank. Kneeling down, she steers and coaxes the fish towards her. Clutching it like a hawk, she lifts it free of the floating waste and teeters above the brackish water, fish aloft, heels sinking, until she regains her balance. Something is amiss, for the fish does not struggle to free itself. When she inspects it, she finds that her nails have perforated the skin like serving forks. The pike has been scotched with a knife and grilled on wood-coal, perhaps in a cookshop in Fishstreete where the fire began two days before. She lets it slip back into the lukewarm Fleet and watches it being churned towards the Thames.

Fish make her think of love. She cannot help herself, though she is aware that other women favour the honey

fragrance of the heliotrope or eating sugar by the spoonful. Often she seeks out fishermen along the River Lea just to watch their sleeves shoot up and their muscles tense as they cast out their lines.

Feeling the heat rising off the water, she tries to judge the height of the sun through the smoky air. *Saffron*, her husband William would call this light, or *ochre*, never a simple pea-green or bilious yellow. There is somewhere she is meant to be. Her tongue feels for the spot where a baby tooth has been nestling in her gums for fifty years. The mud on her petticoat has already dried to a treacly brown. She shakes it off and ties up the ribbons on her stockings. Twisting her skirts into a knot, she walks quickly towards the Strand.

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In a house overlooking St Clement Danes, the dancing-master is nodding out the beats.

“You are distante, Madame Bowles.” Monsieur de la Valière elongates each syllable with a puff of vinegary breath. “Yet the fire is bien loin. No one suggests it will come here, not even the most dire prognosticateur of your Royal Society. You must reverse like the mirror, my right, your left.”

“The air is too close for dancing, Monsieur.”

“London has always this brown fog. It stops up the nose and the sensories.” He pinches his nostrils to show her. “Even the perspirations are brown.”

Why has she come here on such a day? The damp silk feels cold against her skin, unlike good English wool. The

sleeves bind her arms and the fabric bunches against her thighs, as if something is trapped inside the folds. In this garment, she might as well be naked to the eye. Her father once said that draping a woman's bones with silk was like smearing birdlime on twigs to catch unwary songbirds.

"Step, dip, turn, repeat, fa fa fa," he sings out. "En cadence s'il vous plaît."

She cannot seem to please this morning. Even her shoes are unhappy with her feet. She goes to the window, leaving the dancing-master skimming about the floor in lonely minuets. Throwing open the casement, she leans out and lets the wind dishevel her hair.

There is no cool air to be had, for the easterlies are blowing scarlet heat towards them from the fire, now less than a mile away. At her last lesson, London was spread out along the curving Thames like a game of basset on a dealer's table, but today she can scarcely make out the City's steeples. The fire has burnt all along Thames street, and is now engulfing Paul's Deanery, her childhood home, in threatening grey clouds.

St Paul's cathedral stands like a cornered beast on Ludgate hill, taking deep breaths above the smoke. The fire has made terrifying progress in the night and is closing in on the ancient monument from three directions. Built of massive stones, the cathedral is held to be invincible, but suddenly Pegge sees what the flames covet: the two hundred and fifty feet of scaffolding erected around the broken tower. Once the flames have a foothold on the wooden scaffolds, they can jump to the lead roof, and once the timbers burn and the vaulting cracks, the cathedral

will be toppled by its own mass, a royal bear brought down by common dogs.

“I must leave, Monsieur. I was wrong to come today.” Wrong even to think of taking lessons, though she does not say that to him. She has done it only to please William, who is learning the new dances at court.

The dancing-master does something clever with his ankles and arrives at her side, dark calves flashing, his hands outstretched. “La jambe gauche, fa fa fa, la jambe droite.”

Waving him away, Pegge surveys the panorama. The smoke has now cleared at Ludgate, affording a glimpse of refugees jostling to get through the narrow opening with their handcarts.

“Why should you run with the tail between the legs? Your house is well north of the dévastation and, as you see, everything goes on like habit in Westminster.”

“Not everyone sleeps easily here.” Pegge gestures to St Clement’s below, with its parched brown garden. “My mother lies buried in that church, but I do not think her spirit has ever rested.”

“Ah, that is why I felt two women in my arms just now, the light-footed one and the one who crushes on men’s toes. She dances in her grave, to be sure, but you have lead weights on your hem, pulling you down when you should fly up, up”—he rises on his toes, illustrating with fluttering palms—“into a lover’s arms.” Then he slumps down and stares at her. “Are you the fowl or the fish? You have a feather in the hairs, but the complexion—”

He presses close, reeking of soured wine. She would much rather breathe the rank heat of a riverbank. “I must

go at once, Monsieur." Brushing off his hands, Pegge flees, her shoes clattering into the winding stairwell and down the three steep flights of stairs.

"Go if you must, run, trip, fall down," he calls out after her, "be like the rustic if you will, but if you dare to come back to de la Valière after such grossièreté, wear the little slippers not those . . . shoes of the farmer!"

Emerging into the churchyard, she looks up at Monsieur bobbing at the high window, still performing his foreign movements. Then his head, with its tight curls, ducks out of sight.

Soon he is back, leaning over the sill, his arm spiralling. "You have left a thing, Madame. I do not care for the English love-token."

Her old shawl flies out the window, hovers like gossamer, then shrinks into a heavy ball of wool and drops at her feet, molasses brown. Everything in the churchyard is the same burnt-sugar colour from the hot summer. The old honeysuckle has been uprooted and the bower turned into a tavern by apprentices. It stinks of piss and ale and rotting flesh. She kneels to touch a small corpse beside a broken ale-cask. On her last visit, this crow with the one white feather knocked down a wasp's nest, then stood on it while rooting out grubs with its beak. When she approached, it tried to chase her off by mimicking the sexton's irate voice. Now she feels the last few beats of its heart. Its feathers come out without pulling, staining her palms with greasy soot. Apparently it has been on a misguided foray to the east. Suffocated by the burning air, it has flown back to her mother's church to die.

The easterly has sharpened. "Monsieur," she calls up. The dancing-master's wig pokes through the window again. "You must leave London at once. On my way here, I heard this called a Catholic wind and saw a Dutchman being accused of hiding powder and grenades. He was dragged out of his house by a mob. It is only a breath from the Dutch to the French."

A face scowls at her from three storeys up. Ignoring the barrage of wounded English, she gathers up her skirts and runs towards the fire, pushing against the sludge of refugees.

Even those of good fortune have been forced to flee like beggars. A man in a wig like William's is hugging a loaf of bread. A lady's hat flies off, but she does not bother to chase after. The hot wind teases and tosses the hat, spinning it down the alley towards Pegge. She jumps and catches it, her skirts rustling, and twirls it in the air, admiring the glossy blue-black feathers anchored with stitches of the brightest blue.