

At Death's Door

Death visits a 14th-century English home as a mother lies gravely ill with symptoms of the plague—with an unexpected outcome. . . .

by Craig Sodaro

Characters

GILES DAWES, 12

ANORA DAWES, his 10-year-old sister

SABINA DAWES, his 9-year-old sister

REINA DAWES, 30s, their mother

AUNT GUNILDA, about 30,

Reina's sister

GALFRID BRUDLEY, 20s, a thief

MASTER MOREWELL, *Death*

curtain, is right of fireplace. Table with a few stools or stumps down left.

AT RISE: ANORA and SABINA sit on floor right, each playing with a doll. GILES sits at table with his head resting in his arms.

ANORA (*Haughtily*): Mistress Mary has arrived to see Her Majesty, the Queen.

SABINA: The Queen doesn't want to see Mistress Mary.

ANORA: Pray tell, why not?

SABINA: The Queen is indisposed.

ANORA: Is she afraid of the plague?

SABINA: The Queen is afraid of nothing! She has faced far worse things than the plague.

ANORA: She's had her hands and feet swell? Her skin covered with sores? Her tongue and eyes burn with fever?

SCENE 1

TIME: *A summer evening, 1349.*

SETTING: *The kitchen behind the Dawes carpenter shop in an English city. Exit right leads to shop and street. Exit left leads to bedroom. Up center is small fireplace with logs stacked beside it and pot with ladle hanging above fire. Window, covered with a ragged*

GILES (*Looking up; angrily*): Stop it, Anora! Say not another word.

ANORA: We're just playing, Giles.

GILES: Do not play with so wicked a thing as the plague! (*Moan and coughing are heard off left.*)

SABINA (*Rushing left*): Mama! (*GILES catches her.*)

GILES: No, Sabina! You mustn't!

ANORA: We don't want you sick, too. (*AUNT GUNILDA enters left, wiping her hands. She has her face covered with a cloth, which she drops.*)

GILES (*Tensely*): Aunt Gunilda!

SABINA: Is Mama dead?

AUNT: No, my child, she is not dead. She just has a bit of a cough.

ANORA: She's not going to die, is she?

AUNT: We. . . we had a chance to talk, your mother and I. She feels as I do. You will come with me to my house in the country, away from this city where the disease is rampant.

GILES: But how will we bring Mother? We have no cart.

ANORA: Nor beast to pull one if we did.

AUNT: Your mother doesn't want to leave.

GILES: But she can't stay alone!

AUNT: I can return in a few days to check on her.

GILES (*Protesting*): No! No! Who will feed her? Who will give her water?

ANORA: Who will help her once she's feeling better?

AUNT: Oh, children, you must understand she wants you to leave for your own good.

GILES: What good would we be if we forever knew that we abandoned our mother?

AUNT: But your own lives are at stake!

SABINA: We feel perfectly fine!

ANORA (*Dancing about*): I can dance as I've always danced!

SABINA: I haven't an ache or a snuffle.

GILES: It's not us Death seeks.

AUNT: Giles, my boy. . . you don't know whom Death seeks. These days he's hungry. They say he stops at the door of a house and knocks twice. He waits a heartbeat, then knocks twice again.

SABINA: We just won't let him in!

ANORA: We'll protect Mama!

AUNT: If you don't let him in, he slips under the door like a mist and steals off with everyone in the house. Everyone!

GILES: You're telling tales. You just want us to give up on Mother. *You* want to give up on Mother.

AUNT: Oh, Giles, I could never give up on her. . . on any one of you! You know that. Who was it that came to take care of all of you after your poor father was killed in the wagon accident? And the minute I got news that your mother was sick, I came. I have fed her, bathed her, held her hand—I am doing everything I can to help her get well.

GILES: And we are grateful, Aunt Gunilda. (*Determined*) But if you must go, go. We aren't leaving.

AUNT (*Pleading*): Please, Giles. . .there is nothing for you here except misery.

SABINA (*Suddenly*): We have plenty of gold!

GILES (*Sharply*): Sabina!

AUNT (*Puzzled*): Gold? What gold? What are you talking about?

ANORA (*Quickly*): Mother has been saving it. Hiding it in a tin box she's got in there. (*She points left.*)

GILES: Sh-h-h!

AUNT (*Shaking head*): No wonder you've struggled so.

GILES: We wanted to find a doctor for mother.

ANORA: But she wouldn't hear of it.

GILES: The gold is for school.

AUNT: School? (*Looks off left*) Oh, Reina! What are you thinking? You can't afford schooling for these children.

GILES: Master Windham is holding a place for me at his school. I'll learn to read and write and cipher.

ANORA (*Proudly*): Giles is going to do wonderful things.

SABINA: Perhaps he'll even discover medicine that can make Mama well again.

AUNT: But you'll do nothing if you're dead! (*Children look uneasily at each other.*) I have to leave now. I do not

want to be here when Death knocks at the door. I can't face that. Come now if you've got any sense! (*AUNT moves right. The children look one to another. ANORA almost takes a step toward AUNT, but GILES holds her back.*) This is your last chance! (*Children do not move, then AUNT brusquely exits right. After a moment, she speaks off-stage.*) Get out of my way, beggar! Out of my way! (*For a moment the children are frozen, then SABINA speaks.*)

SABINA (*Quietly*): Giles, is Mama going to be all right?

GILES: Yes. She has to be! (*Briskly*) Fetch some soup, Anora.

ANORA: We're not to go into her room.

GILES: I'll go. Someone has to now. (*REINA, sick and breathing heavily, enters left, leaning on a cane or stick.*)

REINA: Why are you still here? Gunilda! Why are the children here?

ANORA: Aunt Gunilda's gone, Mama!

REINA (*Ignoring her*): You were to take the children! They must not stay here, Gunilda. I don't want them to see me die! (*REINA falls to the floor. GILES rushes to her, catching her as she slips down*) No! No! You must not, my boy! Leave here! Go quickly for your own sakes. I can't fight any more. (*Curtain*)

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SCENE 2

TIME: An hour later.

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: ANORA sits on the floor right, SABINA leaning against her. SABINA cradles her doll, singing softly.

SABINA: Good night my sweet baby,