

## Plot Summary

At the opening of the novel, the plague is vaguely alluded to and the village is desolate, and Anna Frith, the narrator and the housekeeper of the rectory of Eyam, reflects on her marriage at age fifteen during the Puritan years, and her widowhood of two years due to a mining accident after three years of marriage and two sons born. When she next reports to work, she is greeted by the daughter of the local landed gentry of the village, Elizabeth Bradford. Miss Bradford tells Anna that her mother is dying and seeks the Rector Mr. Michael Mompellion's counsel, but the rector directs Anna to tell Miss Bradford to go to Hell. Eventually, he himself confronts Miss Bradford and tells her that he will not see her, or any member of her family, due to their refusal to offer support to the village during their self-imposed quarantine. When he returns to his quarters, Miss Bradford collapses in tears in the rectory's kitchen and is comforted by Anna, who is told that her mother is grievously ill with what was suspected to be a tumor but is now known to not be, but she does not elaborate upon this. She presently leaves and Anna returns to the rector, to read him the 103<sup>d</sup> Psalm, who is impressed by her literacy as taught by the rectoress, Elinor, before her death. He then asks why she did not choose one he finds more ironic — the 128<sup>th</sup> Psalm. He then desecrates the Bible by dropping it to the floor, an action which shocks her. She leaves the rectory and the plot then fully begins

The novel reverts to a year and a half before, when Anna Frith, then a widow of less than a season, is offered the opportunity to take a boarder, George Viccars, from Peakrill near Kinder Scout, a journeyman tailor who had apprenticed in Plymouth and worked in London, York, and most recently, Canterbury. He quickly ingratiates himself with the Widow Frith's sons, and by the summertime, when he receives a box of fabric from London, he is fully a part of the household.

A few days later, Anna comes home to find a woolen dress of green trimmed with Genoese lace. She models the gown, her first since leaving Puritan Sadd colours, for Mr. Viccars and comes to him in an embrace, but immediately sends him to rest as he is fevered. The next day, she mulls on the possibility of marrying Mr. Viccars and the ethics of accepting such a fine gown during her morning's work at the rectory, but completely forgets Mr. Viccars' suggestion that she discuss the matter with her rector or possibly the rectoress. She returns home to find Mr. Viccars abed with acute bubonic plague, and immediately offers him water and fresh bedding, and dismisses his pleadings that she flee for the sake of herself and her sons. He begs her to burn all he brought with him to stop the spread of contagion. She refuses this, thinking him delirious and instead brings the rector, the Mompellions, to ease Mr. Viccars' illness through prayer. As Mr. Viccars dies, she washes and shrouds him and turns him over to the sexton for burial. The rector recommends that she do as he asked and burn his belongings, but as news of the death spreads, Mr. Viccars' clients come to pick up their work and disregard the warning.

The Widow Frith has a few weeks' respite, and then her next door neighbour, Mr. Viccars' employer, falls ill with the plague as well. Within a day, her infant son Tom is ill and dies in less than 24 hours, for which her stepmother, Aphra, rebukes her for her folly in naming and loving a child before it was old enough to walk, whereas the rectoress Elinor Mompellion reads to her of Jesus' love of little children. Within a week, her 3 year old son Jamie dies as well, despite a large variety of remedies being tried. People all over

the village begin to fall ill.

The spate of deaths is blamed on a widow, Mem Gowdie, and her niece, Anys Gowdie, who are the village's herbalists and midwives. To test Widow Gowdie for being a witch, they throw her into a flooded mine shaft. Once she drowns, they immediately begin to repent and call themselves murderers. Her niece is summoned from the village, and being more practical and skilled in physick understands the situation, and immediately begins to perform insufflation. After three breaths, Mem awakens, and Anys, having raised the dead, is dragged away and asked to confess to her consort with the devil, and in attempting to distract the mob, she confesses and accuses the questioners of having themselves cuckolded by the devil. Her ploy causes great confusion and furthers their hysteria, but does not work — she is lynched moments before Rector Mompellion appears. Anna comments at the time that this incident (as Mem Gowdie dies of pneumonia five days later) led the village into a time of great illness and no one skilled in physick to help them, nor midwife their women through their confinements.

The rector consults with the former priest displaced after the fall of the Puritans for advice and formulates a plan, which he shares in the parish on Sunday. He proposes a quarantine, with the town being provisioned in full by the earl of Chatsworth House. The village, with the exception of the Bradfords, its landed gentry, choose to self-quarantine to avoid spreading "Plague seeds" further north. Word of the plague in the village had spread and when a few not held by the Oath (who had been working that Sunday and were not part of the decision) attempt to go to relatives at Bakewell, they are pelted by rocks and rotten fruit from the town market to drive them out of the village. They return to Eyam with this report. They are in turn sheltered by the poor of the town, who house them in their already crowded quarters.

During the course of the novel, not only do Anna and the rectoress Elinor Mompellion attempt to learn the uses of the contents of the Gowdies' physick garden, with the help of the works of Avicenna, they also take on the duties of the Gowdies in midwifing births. At one point, a Quaker orphan child is dependent upon them to bring out enough lead to allow her to keep her claim upon her family's mine, her only source of income. These problems bring them closer, with an unspoken agreement that Mrs. Mompellion and Anna should take care of the needs of the living, and Mr. Mompellion should take care of the spiritual needs of the dying. In token of that understanding, Mrs. Mompellion directs Anna to stop addressing her as a superior but instead by her Christian name, and tells her of her own girlhood in Derbyshire after her mother's death, where she was given an excellent education by a governess which included study of Latin, Greek, history, music, art and natural philosophy, but at the age of fourteen, she was courted by the heir to a duchy, with whom she eloped to the Fleet in London to marry without licence. But once they arrived in London, her suitor suggested entertainments and excursions and delayed the consecration of their marriage while not delaying the consummation. He abandoned her after two weeks and she sent to her father for aid. Her father and brother, who had been searching desperately for her, brought her home, forgave her and agreed to not tell anyone of what had happened. Upon discovering that she was with child, she, "desperate and deranged", "violated her own body with a fire iron." She survived the incident but was left barren due to the extensive scarring in her womb. She concludes this story by explaining that it was Mr. Mompellion who ministered to her spirit and introduced her to

the lives of others less fortunate, and helped her to repent her own sins, and married her in full knowledge of her barrenness.

After the sexton dies of heart failure from digging so many graves, Anna persuades her father, Josiah Bont, to take up the work of gravedigging, but this is an error of judgment. She knew her father to be a physically abusive drunkard who had placed her mother in branks for small offences, and her stepmother, Aphra, to be a selfish, superstitious woman, but she was not prepared for the scope of her father's greed, as he helps himself to most of the contents of the homes for each grave to be dug. Eventually, he attempts to murder a man so as to dig his grave and help himself to the goods of the house, and this final insult leads the villagers to hold a Barmote Court, where he is taken to the victims' mine and impaled there by a dagger through the hands and left unguarded so that his wife may free him — a painful punishment but not fatal. However, Aphra blames him for the plague that has fallen down upon her household that day and does not free him; Anna mistakenly thinks she would comply with the local custom and do so to avoid the horrors of a death by impalement and exposure. Three days later, they find him still impaled at the mine, long dead, and partially consumed by wild animals. Anna offers to help Aphra bury him in the churchyard — however, Aphra argues that he should be buried where he died, and thus they build a cairn, over which Aphra pronounces a curse as Anna recites the Lord's Prayer.

Aphra quickly descends into complete madness upon the death of all of her children from plague and is only brought into the community once it is found that she has been selling charms and spells against the plague for extortionate prices. Mr. Mompellion bade her be kept overnight by those that found her — in their anger, they cast her into a disused well that now serves as a manure pit, in which she nearly drowns. She is completely incoherent and in a catatonic state by the time she is brought out in the morning, and the rector postpones dealing with her until the plague is over.

The rector suggests that a cleansing fire should happen, particularly of bedstraw and other small things that might carry "Plague seeds". The villagers, who had already sacrificed much, now sacrifice all of their worldly possessions to a great bonfire, and this ceases the plague. During a celebration that the plague has ended, Aphra reappears with the skeleton of her youngest child (which she had demanded be left unburied) and stabs Elinor, whom Anna had come to view as a surrogate mother, after which Aphra commits suicide.

Mr. Mompellion dictates two letters to the neighbours in the next town. One is to thank the earl of Chatsworth House, inform him of the end of the plague and ask that the road be opened. The other is to inform his father-in-law of Elinor Mompellion's death. After that, he leaves his rooms no more.

It is at this point that we entered the novel, where Anna is trying to get the rector to leave his rooms occasionally and cope with his parish. The encounter with Elizabeth Bradford did reawaken his mind and he and Anna seize on each other and fornicate, which they do for the next day and night. In quiet pillow talk, she asks if he is greatly reminded of Elinor. And he answers no, as he had never slept with her. Anna is shocked but asks why. Micheal Mompellion reminds her that Elinor was guilty of the sin of fornication with another man, and he wanted to assure that not only had she been punished for her sin but that she had fully atoned for it so that he would be assured of meeting her in Heaven.

Horrified at his selfishness and her own disloyalty to Elinor — as Anna views herself as having taken away the consummation of her marriage, she flees to the church where she again meets Elizabeth Bradford.

Elizabeth confesses that her own mother is close to death, and now reveals the reason why — she is in labor with an adulterine bastard. Anna offers her assistance, as during the Plague quarantine she midwived a number of births. Once she arrives at the family seat, she at first does not understand why the woman was to die — the birth is a simple breech. She quickly realises, however, that the doctor sent by Elizabeth's father was told to be as incompetent as possible.

Anna delivers the baby, a little girl, and leaves for her own cottage, only to see Elizabeth attempting to drown the baby. She rescues the little girl and asks why Elizabeth would do such a thing — Elizabeth said that there is no satisfactory way the child can live. The child was born from another man other than Elizabeth's father. The father had ordered Elizabeth to drown the newborn baby without his wife knowing. Anna, in seeing a way out of the village that had been her prison for the previous year, offers to take the child away from the village, "and you and your mother can say whatever you choose." Elizabeth's mother cries with joy on knowing that her newborn daughter, despite the circumstances of her birth, will be able to live. She gives Anna some emerald jewellery for her and Elizabeth gives her a heavy purse of gold to aid in her flight.

Once she leaves Bradford Hall with the baby, jewellery and purse of money, she meets Rector Mompellion. She asks that her sheep flock and croft be given to the Quaker girl she helped in the mines, but says she no longer wants to see him. He accepts this but informs her that she absolutely must flee — for they will eventually realise that to allow Anna and the baby to live is an unacceptable risk, and that killing her would keep her from testifying to Elizabeth Bradford's attempted infanticide. He offers her a letter of introduction to his wife's family and his own horse so that she may go to them. She accepts them and waves goodbye.

In the epilogue, she briefly narrates the three years since she left Eyam. Once on the road, she tears up the letter of introduction, wishing to be completely estranged from her previous life and all its connections. When she reaches the port of Plymouth, she stays at an inn for several days and hires a wetnurse for the Bradford baby. Several days after her arrival, the innkeeper tells her that the Bradford son, Elizabeth's brother, is in town and looking for her, accusing her of thievery, and particularly keen on finding "her" baby. The innkeeper has no knowledge of the circumstances, but informs her of the Bradford son looking for her and he wisely advises her to leave on the next ship regardless for which port it is bound.

She boards a carrack fittingly carrying Peak-mines pigs, which is destined for the ports of Oran and Venizia for the production of Venetian glass. Throughout the sea voyage, she does not name the Bradfords' baby girl, taking heed of her stepmother's words about her mourning her infant son, as she fears a possible shipwreck and wishes to avoid that omen until she is assured of her and the child's survival.

Upon arrival in Oran, she decides to disembark and seek out one of the Muslim doctors whose writings she and Elinor studied, as she found physick and midwifery to be her vocation. He agrees to take her in, due to his despair at Sex segregation in Islam keeping

women and their husbands from seeking his aid during medical emergencies and labor. To satisfy the customs of the Al-Andalus Arabs, he takes her as one of his wives in name only so that she may continue her study and work with him freely. She is especially pleased with the custom of *Kunya* which leads her to be addressed not as Anna Frith or the Widow Frith, but by the name of her firstborn and now four years' dead son — *umm Jam-ee* (mother of Jamie). The book closes with her taking her two daughters by the hand before going into the city — the Bradford child, who is now named A'isha, for the sustainment she gave Anna during their sea voyage to Oran, and her birth daughter, conceived with Michael Mompellion — Elinor.