

A Journal of the Plague Year

by Daniel Defoe

"A Journal of the Plague Year" appeared in 1722. In its second edition it received the title of "A History of the Plague." This book was suggested by the public anxiety caused by a fearful visitation of the plague at Marseilles in the two preceding years. As an account of the epidemic in London, it has all the vividness of Defoe's fiction, while it is acknowledged to be historically accurate. (Defoe biography, see Vol. III, p. 26.)

I.—A Stricken City

It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbours, heard that the plague was returned again in Holland. We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumours and reports of things; but such things as these were gathered from the letters of merchants, and from them were handed about by word of mouth only. In December, two Frenchmen died of the plague in Long Acre, or, rather, at the upper end of Drury Lane. The secretaries of state got knowledge of it, and two physicians and a surgeon were ordered to go to the house and make inspection. This they did, and, finding evident tokens of the sickness upon both the bodies, they gave their opinions publicly, that they died of the plague; whereupon it was given in to the parish clerk, and he also returned them to the Hall; and it was printed in the weekly bill of mortality in the usual manner, thus:

Plague, 2; Parishes infected, 1.

The distemper spread slowly, and in the beginning of May, the city being healthy, we began to hope that as the infection was chiefly among the people at the other end of the town, it might go no further. We continued in these hopes for a few days, but it was only for a few, for the people were no more to be deceived thus; they searched the houses, and found that the plague was really spread every way, and that many died of it every day; and accordingly, in the weekly bill for the next week, the thing began to show itself. There was, indeed, but fourteen set down of the plague, but this was all knavery and collusion.

Now the weather set in hot, and from the first week in June the infection spread in a dreadful manner, and the bills rose high. Yet all that could conceal their distempers did it to prevent their neighbours shunning them, and also to prevent authority shutting up their houses.

I lived without Aldgate, midway between Aldgate church and Whitechapel Bars, and our neighbourhood continued very easy. But at the other end of the town their consternation was very great, and the richer sort of people, especially the nobility and gentry, from the west part of the city, thronged out of town with their families and servants. In Whitechapel, where I lived, nothing was to be seen but waggons and carts, with goods, women, servants, children, etc., all hurrying away. This was a very terrible and melancholy thing to see, and it filled me with very serious thoughts of the misery that was coming upon the city.

I now began to consider seriously how I should dispose of myself, whether I should resolve to stay in London, or shut up my house and flee. I had two important things before me: the carrying on of my business and shop, and the preservation of my life in so dismal a calamity. My trade was a saddler,

and though a single man, I had a family of servants and a house and warehouses filled with goods, and to leave them all without any overseer had been to hazard the loss of all I had in the world.

I had resolved to go; but, one way or other, I always found that to appoint to go away was always crossed by some accident or other, so as to disappoint and put it off again; and I advise every person, in such a case, to keep his eye upon the particular providences which occur at that time, and take them as intimations from Heaven of what is his unquestioned duty to do in such a case. Add to this, that, turning over the Bible which lay before me, I cried out, "Well, I know not what to do; Lord, direct me!" and at that juncture, casting my eye down, I read: "Thou shalt not be afraid for the pestilence that walketh in darkness.... A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee." I scarce need tell the reader that from that moment I resolved that I would stay in the town, casting myself entirely upon the protection of the Almighty.

The court removed in the month of June, and went to Oxford, where it pleased God to preserve them; for which I cannot say they showed any great token of thankfulness, and hardly anything of reformation, though they did not want being told that their crying voices might, without breach of charity, have gone far in bringing that terrible judgment upon the whole nation.

A blazing star or comet had appeared for several months before the plague, and there had been universal melancholy apprehensions of some dreadful calamity. The people were at this time more addicted to prophecies, dreams, and old wives' fables, than ever they were before or since. Some ran about the streets with oral predictions, one crying, "Yet forty days, and London shall be destroyed!" Another poor naked creature cried, "Oh, the great and dreadful God!" repeating these words continually, with voice and countenance full of horror, and a swift pace, and nobody could ever find him to stop. Some saw a flaming sword in a hand coming out of a cloud; others, hearses and coffins in the air; others, heaps of dead bodies unburied. But those who were really serious and religious applied themselves in a truly Christian manner to the proper work of repentance and humiliation. Many consciences were awakened, many hard hearts melted into tears. People might be heard in the streets as we passed along, calling upon God for mercy, and saying, "I have been a thief," or "a murderer," and the like; and none dared stop to make the least inquiry into such things, or to comfort the poor creatures that thus cried out. The face of London was now strangely altered; it was all in tears; the shrieks of women and children at the windows and doors, where their dearest relations were dead, were enough to pierce the stoutest heart.

About June, the lord mayor and aldermen began more particularly to concern themselves for the regulation of the city, by the shutting up of houses. Examiners were appointed in every parish to order the house to be shut up wherever any person sick of the infection was found. A night watchman and a day watchman were appointed to each infected house to prevent any person from coming out or going into the same. Women searchers were appointed in each parish to examine the bodies of such as were dead, to see if they had died of the infection, and over these were appointed physicians and chirurgeons. Other orders were made with regard to giving notice of sickness, sequestration of the sick, airing the goods and bedding of the infected, burial of the dead, cleansing of the streets, forbidding wandering beggars, loose persons, and idle assemblages, and the like. One of these orders was—"That every house visited be marked with a red cross of a foot long, in the middle of the door, with these words, 'LORD HAVE MERCY UPON US,' to be set close over the same cross." Many got out of their houses by stratagem after they were shut up, and thus spread the plague; in one place they blowed up their watchman with gunpowder and burnt the poor fellow dreadfully, and while he made hideous cries, the whole family got out at the windows; others got out by bribing the watchman, and I have seen three watchmen publicly whipped through the streets for suffering people to go out.

II.—How the Dead Were Buried

I went all the first part of the time freely about the streets, and when they dug the great pit in the churchyard of Aldgate I could not resist going to see it. A terrible pit it was, forty feet long, about sixteen wide, and in one part they dug it to near twenty feet deep, until they could go no deeper for the water. It was filled in just two weeks, when they had thrown into it 1,114 bodies from our own parish.

I got admittance into the churchyard by the sexton, who at first refused me, but at last said: "Name of God, go in; depend upon it, 'twill be a sermon to you, it may be the best that ever you heard. It is a speaking sight," says he; and with that he opened the door and said, "Go, if you will." I stood wavering for a good while, but just at that interval I saw two links come over from the end of the Minories, and heard the bellman, and then appeared a dead-cart coming over the streets, so I went in.

The scene was awful and full of terror. The cart had in it sixteen or seventeen bodies; some were wrapped in sheets or rugs, some little other than naked, or so loose that what covering they had fell from them in the shooting out of the cart, and they fell quite naked among the rest. But the matter was not much to them, seeing they were all dead, and were to be huddled together into the common grave of mankind, as we may call it; for here was no difference made, but poor and rich went together. The cart was turned round, and the bodies shot into the pit promiscuously.

There was following the cart a poor unhappy gentleman who fell down in a swoon when the bodies were shot into the pit. The buriers ran to him and took him up, and after he had come to himself, they led him away to the Pye tavern, over against the end of Houndsditch. His case lay so heavy on my mind that after I had gone home I must go out again into the street and go to the Pye tavern, to inquire what became of him.

It was by this time one in the morning, and yet the poor gentleman was there. The people of the house were civil and obliging, but there was a dreadful set of fellows that used their house, and who, in the middle of all this horror, met there every night, and behaved with revelling and roaring extravagances, so that the master and mistress of the house were terrified at them. They sat in a room next the street, and as often as the dead-cart came along, they would open the windows and make impudent mocks and jeers at the sad lamentations of the people, especially if they heard the poor people call upon God to have mercy upon them.

They were at this vile work when I came to the house, ridiculing the unfortunate man, and his sorrow for his wife and children, taunting him with want of courage to leap into the pit and go to Heaven with them, and adding profane and blasphemous expressions.

I gently reproved them, being not unknown to two of them. But I cannot call to mind the abominable raillery which they returned to me, making a jest of my calling the plague the Hand of God. They continued this wretched course three or four days; but they were, every one of them, carried into the great pit before it was quite filled up.

In my walks I had daily many dismal scenes before my eyes, as of persons falling dead in the streets, terrible shrieks and screechings of women, and the like. Passing through Tokenhouse Yard, in Lothbury, of a sudden a casement violently opened just over my head, and a woman gave three frightful screeches, and then cried: "Oh Death! Death! Death!" in a most inimitable tone, which struck me with horror and a chillness in my very blood. There was nobody to be seen in the whole street,

neither did any other window open; for people had no curiosity now, nor could anybody help another. I went on into Bell Alley.

Just in Bell Alley, at the right hand of the passage, there was a more terrible cry than that, and I could hear women and children run screaming about the rooms distracted. A garret window opened, and somebody from a window on the other side of the alley called and asked, "What is the matter?" upon which, from the first window it was answered: "O Lord, my old master has hanged himself!" The other asked again: "Is he quite dead?" And the first answered, "Ay, ay, quite dead—quite dead and cold."

It is scarce credible what dreadful things happened every day, people in the rage of the distemper, or in the torment of their swellings, which was indeed intolerable, oftentimes laying violent hands on themselves, throwing themselves out at their windows, etc.; mothers murdering their own children in their lunacy; some dying of mere fright, without any infection; others frightened into despair, idiocy, or madness.

There were a great many robberies and wicked practices committed even in this dreadful time. The power of avarice was so strong in some that they would run any hazard to steal and to plunder; and in houses where all the inhabitants had died and been carried out, they would break in without regard to the danger of infection, and take even the bedclothes.

III.—Universal Desolation

For about a month together, I believe there did not die less than 1,500 or 1,700 a day, one day with another; and in the beginning of September good people began to think that God was resolved to make a full end of the people in this miserable city. Whole families, and, indeed, whole streets of families were swept away together, and the infection was so increased that at length they shut up no houses at all. People gave themselves up to their fears, and thought that nothing was to be hoped for but an universal desolation. It was even in the height of this despair that it pleased God to stay His hand, and to slacken the fury of the contagion.

When the people despaired of life and abandoned themselves, it had a very strange effect for three or four weeks; it made them bold and venturous; they were no more shy of one another, nor restrained within doors, but went anywhere and everywhere, and ran desperately into any company. It brought them to crowd into the churches; looking on themselves as all so many dead corpses, they behaved as if their lives were of no consequence, compared to the work which they came about there.

The conduct of the lord mayor and magistrates was all the time admirable, so that bread was always to be had in plenty, and cheap as usual; provisions were never wanting in the markets; the streets were kept free from all manner of frightful objects—dead bodies, or anything unpleasant; and for a time fires were kept burning in the streets to cleanse the air of infection.

Many remedies were tried; but it is my opinion, and I must leave it as a prescription, that the best physic against the plague is to run away from it. I know people encourage themselves by saying, "God is able to keep us in the midst of danger," and this kept thousands in the town, whose carcasses went into the great pits by cart-loads. Yet of the pious ladies who went about distributing alms to the poor, and visiting infected families, though I will not undertake to say that none of those charitable people were suffered to fall under the calamity, yet I may say this, that I never knew any of them to fall under it.

Such is the precipitant disposition of our people, that no sooner had they observed that the distemper was not so catching as formerly, and that if it was caught it was not so mortal, and that abundance of people who really fell sick recovered again daily, than they made no more of the plague than of an ordinary fever, nor indeed so much. They went into the very chambers where others lay sick. This rash conduct cost a great many their lives, who had been preserved all through the heat of the infection, and the bills of mortality increased again four hundred in the first week of November.

But it pleased God, by the continuing of wintry weather, so to restore the health of the city that by February following we reckoned the distemper quite ceased. The time was not far off when the city was to be purged with fire, for within nine months more I saw it all lying in ashes.

I shall conclude the account of this calamitous year with a stanza of my own:

A dreadful plague in London was
In the year sixty-five,
Which swept an hundred thousand souls
Away; yet I alive!

Source:

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