

The Black Plague, from The Decameron

Giovanni Boccaccio



OVERVIEW

Sweeping across Europe in the mid-1300s, the bubonic plague killed an estimated one-fourth to one-third of Europe's population. Here, in the introduction to his *Decameron* (1353), the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio describes the terrors of the plague. The book itself is a series of tales told by a group of seven ladies, survivors of the plague, who are trying to divert the attention of their companions from the horrors of the Black Death.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following:

- Why do you think the author describes different ways in which people coped with daily life during the course of this infectious disease?
 - Do you think one way of coping is better than the others?
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INTRODUCTION.

TO THE LADIES.

WHEN I reflect how disposed you are by nature to compassion, I cannot help being apprehensive lest what I now offer to your acceptance should seem to have but a harsh and offensive beginning; for it presents at the very outset the mournful remembrance of that most fatal plague, so terrible yet in the memories of us all. But let not this dismay you from reading further, as though every page were to cost you sighs and tears. Rather let this beginning, disagreeable as it is, seem to you but as a rugged and steep mountain placed before a delightful valley, which appears more beautiful and pleasant, as the way to it was more difficult: for as joy usually ends in sorrow, so again the end of sorrow is joy. To this short fatigue (I call it short, because contained in few words,) immediately succeeds the mirth and pleasure I had before promised you; and which, but for that promise you would scarcely expect to find. And in truth could I have brought you by any other way than this, I would gladly have done it; but as the occasion of the occurrences, of which I am going to treat, could not well be made out without such a relation, I am forced to use this introduction.

In the year then of our Lord 1348, there happened at Florence, the finest city in all Italy, a most terrible plague; which, whether owing to the influence of the planets, or that it was sent from God as a just punishment for our sins, had broken out some years before in the Levant, and after passing from place to place, and making incredible havoc all the way, had now reached the west. There, spite of all the means that art and human foresight could suggest, such

as keeping the city clear from filth, the exclusion of all suspected persons, and the publication of copious instructions for the preservation of health; and notwithstanding manifold humble supplications offered to God in processions and otherwise; it began to show itself in the spring of the aforesaid year, in a sad and wonderful manner. Unlike what had been seen in the east, where bleeding from the nose is the fatal prognostic, here there appeared certain tumors in the groin or under the arm-pits, some as big as a small apple, others as an egg; and afterwards purple spots in most parts of the body; in some cases large and but few in number, in others smaller and more numerous—both sorts the usual messengers of death. To the cure of this malady, neither medical knowledge nor the power of drugs was of any effect; whether because the disease was in its own nature mortal, or that the physicians (the number of whom, taking quacks and women pretenders into the account, was grown very great,) could form no just idea of the cause, nor consequently devise a true method of cure; whichever was the reason, few escaped; but nearly all died the third day from the first appearance of the symptoms, some sooner, some later, without any fever or other accessory symptoms. What gave the more virulence to this plague, was that, by being communicated from the sick to the hale, it spread daily, like fire when it comes in contact with large masses of combustibles. Nor was it caught only by conversing with, or coming near the sick, but even by touching their clothes, or anything that they had before touched. It is wonderful, what I am going to mention; and had I not seen it with my own eyes, and were there not many witnesses to attest it besides myself, I should never venture to relate it, however worthy it were of belief. Such, I say, was the quality of the pestilential matter, as to pass not only from man to man, but, what is more strange, it has been often known, that anything belonging to the infected, if touched by any other creature, would certainly infect, and even kill that creature in a short space of time. One instance of this kind I took particular notice of: the rags of a poor man just dead had been thrown into the street; two hogs came up, and after rooting amongst the rags, and shaking them about in their mouths, in less than an hour they both turned round, and died on the spot.

These facts, and others of the like sort, occasioned various fears and devices amongst those who survived, all tending to the same uncharitable and cruel end; which was, to avoid the sick, and everything that had been near them, expecting by that means to save themselves. And some holding best to live temperately, and to avoid excesses of all kind, made parties, and shut themselves up from the rest of the world; eating and drinking moderately of the best, and diverting themselves with music, and such other entertainments as they might have within doors; never listening to anything from without, to make them uneasy. Others maintained free living to be a better preservative, and would baulk no passion or appetite they wished to gratify, drinking and revelling incessantly from tavern to tavern, or in private houses (which were frequently found deserted by the owners and therefore common to every one),

yet strenuously avoiding with all this brutal indulgence, to come near the infected. And such, at this time, was the public distress, that the laws, human and divine, were no more regarded; for the officers, to put them in force, being either dead, sick, or in want of persons to assist them, every one did just as he pleased. A third sort of people chose a method between these two not confining themselves to rules of diet like the former, and yet avoiding the intemperance of the latter; but eating and drinking what their appetites required, they walked everywhere with odors and nosegays to smell to; as holding it best to corroborate the brain: for the whole atmosphere seemed to them tainted with the stench of dead bodies, arising partly from the distemper itself, and partly from the fermenting of the medicines within them. Others with less humanity, but perchance, as they supposed, with more security from danger, decided that the only remedy for the pestilence was to avoid it: persuaded, therefore, of this, and taking care for themselves only, men and women in great numbers left the city, their houses, relations, and effects, and fled into the country: as if the wrath of God had been restrained to visit those only within the walls of the city; or else concluding, that none ought to stay in a place thus doomed to destruction.

Thus divided as they were in their views, neither did all die, nor all escape; but falling sick indifferently, as well those of one as of another opinion; they who first set the example by forsaking others, now languished themselves without pity. I pass over the little regard that citizens and relations showed to each other; for their terror was such, that a brother even fled from his brother, a wife from her husband, and, what is more uncommon, a parent from his own child. Hence numbers that fell sick could have no help but what the charity of friends, who were very few, or the avarice of servants supplied; and even these were scarce and at extravagant wages, and so little used to the business that they were fit only to reach what was called for, and observe when their employer died; and this desire of getting money often cost them their lives. From this desertion of friends, and scarcity of servants, an unheard-of custom prevailed; no lady, however young or handsome, would scruple to be attended by a man-servant, whether young or old it mattered not, and to expose herself naked to him, the necessity of the distemper requiring it, as though it was to a woman; which might make those who recovered less modest for the time to come. And many lost their lives, who might have escaped, had they been looked after at all. So that, between the scarcity of servants, and the violence of the distemper, such numbers were continually dying, as made it terrible to hear as well as to behold. Whence, from mere necessity, many customs were introduced different from what had been before known in the city.

It had been usual, as it now is, for the woman who were friends and neighbors to the deceased, to meet together at his house, and to lament with his relations: at the same time the men would get together at the door, with a number of clergy, according to the person's circumstances; and the corpse was

carried by people of his own rank, with the solemnity of tapers and singing, to that church where the deceased had desired to be buried. The custom was now laid aside, and, so far from having a crowd of women to lament over them, great numbers passed out of the world without a witness. Few were they who had the tears of their friends at their departure; those friends were laughing and making themselves merry the while; for even the women had learned to postpone every other concern to that of their own lives. Nor was a corpse attended by more than ten or a dozen, nor those citizens of credit, but fellows hired for the purpose: who would put themselves under the bier, and carry it with all possible haste to the nearest church; and the corpse was interred, without any great ceremony, where they could find room. With regard to the lower sort, and many of a middling rank, the scene was still more affecting; for they stayed at home either through poverty or hopes of succor in distress, fell sick daily by thousands, and, having nobody to attend them, generally died: some breathed their last in the streets, and others shut up in their own houses, where the stench that came from them made the first discovery of their deaths to the neighborhood. And, indeed, every place was filled with the dead. Hence it became a general practice, as well out of regard for the living as pity for the dead, for the neighbors, assisted by what porters they could meet with, to clear all the houses, and lay the bodies at the doors; and every morning great numbers might be seen brought out in this manner, to be carried away on biers, or tables, two or three at a time; and sometimes it has happened that a wife and her husband, two or three brothers, and a father and son, have been laid on together. It has been observed, also, whilst two or three priests have walked before a corpse with their crucifix, that two or three sets of porters have fallen in with them: and where they knew but of one dead body, they have buried six, eight, or more: nor was there any to follow, and shed a few tears over them; for things were come to that pass, that men's lives were no more regarded than the lives of so many beasts. Thus it plainly appeared, that what the wisest in the ordinary course of things, and by a common train of calamities, could never be taught, namely, to bear them patiently, this, by the excess of calamity, was now grown a familiar lesson to the most simple and unthinking. The consecrated ground no longer containing the numbers which were continually brought thither, especially as they were desirous of laying every one in the parts allotted to their families, they were forced to dig trenches, and to put them in by hundreds, piling them up in rows, as goods are stowed in a ship, and throwing in a little earth till they were filled to the top.

Not to dwell upon every particular of our misery, I shall observe, that it fared no better with the adjacent country; for, to omit the different boroughs about us, which presented the same view in miniature with the city, you might see the poor distressed laborers, with their families, without either the aid of physicians, or help of servants, languishing on the highways, in the fields, and in their own houses, and dying rather like cattle than human creatures. The

consequence was that, growing dissolute in their manners like the citizens, and careless of everything, as supposing every day to be their last, their thoughts were not so much employed how to improve, as how to use their substance for their present support. The oxen, asses, sheep, goats, swine, and the dogs themselves, ever faithful to their masters, being driven from their own homes, were left to roam at will about the fields, and among the standing corn, which no one cared to gather, or even to reap; and many times, after they had filled themselves in the day, the animals would return of their own accord like rational creatures at night.

What can I say more, if I return to the city? unless that such was the cruelty of Heaven, and perhaps of men, that between March and July following, according to authentic reckonings, upwards of a hundred thousand souls perished in the city only; whereas, before that calamity, it was not supposed to have contained so many inhabitants. What magnificent dwellings, what noble palaces were then depopulated to the last inhabitant! what families became extinct! what riches and vast possessions were left, and no known heir to inherit them! what numbers of both sexes, in the prime and vigor of youth, whom in the morning neither Galen, Hippocrates, nor Æsculapius himself, would have denied to be in perfect health, breakfasted in the morning with their living friends, and supped at night with their departed friends in the other world!

But I am weary of recounting our late miseries...