

(32) CHAPTER 8.

THE PLAGUE was not in London alone, it was everywhere. It came on us, as Ryland had said, like a thousand packs of wolves, howling through the bleak night, gaunt and fierce.

The population of England's suburban and rural counties knew that the plague was in London, in Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester, York; they'd watched the cities' crisis from afar. When it appeared in their midst they were astonished and dismayed, impatient and angry. Driven by terror, they kept senselessly busy, trying anything to throw off the clinging evil; as long as they were in motion, they imagined themselves safer. The inhabitants of the smaller towns left their houses and pitched tents to camp in the fields, thinking they avoided the disease by keeping separate from each other; while the farmers and cottagers flocked from their fearful solitude to the towns.

Once plague was introduced into the rural districts, its effects assumed a special horror. In London, for instance, there was a companionship in suffering. Neighbors kept constant watch on each other; and with succor at hand, the path of destruction was smoother. But in the country, among the

scattered farmhouses, in lone cottages, in fields and barns, tragedies harrowing to the soul were acted, unseen, unheard, unnoticed. Medical aid was less easily procured, food more difficult to obtain. And human beings, unchecked by shame of being observed, ventured on deeds of greater wickedness, or gave way more readily to abject fears.

Deeds of heroism also occurred: such was human nature, that beauty and deformity were often closely linked. Time and again, our history showed acts of striking generosity and self-sacrifice would follow close on the heels of crime, as our better natures sent redress against the worse. Blood was spilled by murderous hands as the plague advanced; helping hands, meanwhile, extended many lives.

From August, when it first reached England, the plague's ravages had peaked in September and by the end of October mostly dwindled away—only to be replaced by a typhus epidemic of almost equal virulence. The autumn was warm and rainy. The crops had failed; bad corn and grain, and lack of foreign remedies or wines, added vigor to disease. The chronically ill and infirm died off, and were joined in the grave by many young people caught at the peak of health and prosperity.

The rains kept on, and by mid-December had caused flooding over half of England. The windstorms and oceanic tempests of the previous winter were back; but with our shipping already so diminished, we felt fewer effects this year. The floods and storms did more harm to Europe than to us—

landing, as it were, the last blow in the string of calamities which destroyed that continent. Across Italy's depopulated countryside, essential riverbanks were left unwatched, untended; monstrously overflowing, Tiber, Arno, and Po rushed upon the golden plains and wiped out their fertility. Whole villages were carried away. Rome and Florence and Pisa were swamped, and the foundations of their marble palaces, so lately mirrored in tranquil streams, sunken, shaken, cracked. In North and Central Europe and Russia the damage was still more momentous.

But winter was coming, and with winter, hope. The first hard frost would bring a renewal of our lease on earth. Frost would calm the furious winds, and blunt the plague's arrows; and beneath her garment of snow, which she'd throw off in spring, the land would be purified.

In widespread anticipation of this reprieve, autumn witnessed a travel craze, as people rushed back and forth across England in search of amusement. Throngs filled city theatres, restaurants, and hotels, which had all re-opened; the countryside witnessed dances and music festivals almost every night. Wherever the crowds surged, standards of public safety and behavior dipped dangerously. It would have been useless to try and stop people in transit or curb their habits on arrival; opposition would only have driven them to worse excesses. They had money to spend. Most had known only dependence or poverty, until recent bequests had enriched them; that gain had often meant the loss of parents, moral guardians, mentors

and restraints. Public decorum became a thing of the past, while the evils endemic to our day were doubled. Students left their books, artists their studios. Vocations were gone, but life's amusements remained. Indeed, enjoyment might be prolonged to the very end. All dissembling might stop. Death, its threat, cast a protective nightfall in whose murky shadows the blush of modesty, the reserve of pride, the decorum of prudery would be thrown aside as useless veils.

This was not universal. Elsewhere, anguish and dread, the fear of eternal partings, and the awful wonder produced by unprecedented calamity, drew closer the ties of kindred and friendship. Philosophers put their principles to work opposing profligacy and despair. The religious, hoping now for their reward, clung fast to their services and creeds, the life rafts they looked to save them from suffering's vexed sea, and bear them in safety to the harbor of the Unknown Continent. And the loving-hearted, obliged to downscale, bestowed their overflow of affection in triple portion on the few that remained to be loved. Yet, even among these more fortunate souls, the present was all the time they dared to hope for; the present, and the winter to come, that is.

Humanity had evolved to expect to be able to count our enjoyments in years, while modern science had extended our prospect of life decade by decade. The long road threaded a vast labyrinth, and its terminus in the Valley of the Shadow of Death was hidden from sight by intervening things—our life's events. But an earthquake had altered the terrain. A chasm

yawned right at our feet now; in place of our long outlook was a view of a deep and precipitous drop, wide open to receive us; while every hour drove us closer to its edge. But winter was at hand, to bring a pause, when months must elapse before we could be hurled from our security.

We became ephemera, to whom the days were years. We'd never see our children grow up, see their downy cheeks roughen, their blithe hearts be subdued by passion or care; but we had them now—they lived, and we lived—what more could we desire? So Idris schooled herself, with some success, to manage her fears. After all, this wasn't like late July or August, when every hour could bring infection; from now until summer came, we were bound to be safe; a necessarily short-lived certainty which yet for a time satisfied her maternal tenderness, and left her calm. Just as a meteor is brighter than a star, so did the felicity of this coming winter promise the extracted and combined delights of a long, long life. I know not how to express or communicate the sense of concentrated, intense, though transitory bliss, that made our present hours a paradise. Our joys were dearer because we saw their end; they were keener because we felt, to its fullest extent, their value; they were purer because their essence was sympathy.

Winter! In our part of England it took until February, but at last we had three straight days of snowfall. The rivers were frozen nearly solid, and the frost-whitened woods crackled with falls of frozen branches snapped by birds in flight.

On the fourth morning, all vanished. A southwest wind

brought up rain. Then the sun came out, and at once the weather felt like summer. Unseasonable heat prevailed. We took no consolation, that March, in lanes filled with violets, fruit trees in blossom, the vital corn rising, green leaves coming out. We feared the balmy air—we feared the cloudless sky, the flower-covered earth, and delightful woods, for it was as Calderón put it:

*Pisando la tierra dura
de continuo el hombre està
y cada passo que dà
es sobre su sepultura.*

Underfoot we felt our future, the scenes we looked on were our tomb, and the fragrant land smelled to our apprehension like a field of open graves.

Yet how lovely the spring! As we gazed from Windsor Terrace on the fertile counties spread beneath, speckled by happy cottages and prosperous towns, all looked as in former years, heart-cheering and fair. The plough-furrowed fields, new wheat showing through the dark soil, orchards like tinted cloudbanks of bloom and bud: swallows and martins cut the sunny air with their long pointed wings, newborn lambs lay safe among the flocks, new leaves fed green into the air, Wordsworth-style, from every treetop. We humans, too, felt regenerated—maybe too much so. Reason told us that care and sorrow were coming again; but how could we believe an

ominous voice, breathed up with pestiferous vapors from the depths of fear, while nature was laughing, sparkling the waters, scattering fruits and flowers from her green lap, and inviting us to join a party of elastic and warm young life?

While sharing the general hope that plague might not revive with the summer, I remained determined that if it did, it should find us prepared. Pestilence had become a part of our future, our existence; we must develop habits of guarding against it, as we did against floods or violent tides. After long suffering and bitter experience, some cure might be discovered. As it was, the death rate after infection stood at 100%. Those in positions of authority must attempt to fix deep the foundations, and raise high the barriers between contagion and the uninfected; we must also aim to establish and maintain such order as would conduce to the well-being of the victims' survivors, and preserve hope along with some portion of happiness in the midst of tragedy. The systems Adrian had introduced in London, while unable to stop the progress of death, yet prevented other public disorders from rendering the city's awful fate still worse.

But try as I might to imitate his example among the inhabitants of the scattered towns and villages near Windsor, I could find no means of leading where my words were forgotten as soon as misheard, and public opinion veered with every rumor. Social class formed a barrier, too. I talked with landlords who were actuated by the purest benevolence, ready to lend the utmost aid for their tenants' welfare. But this was not enough. A true, intimate sympathy generated by similar hopes and fears,

similar experience and pursuits, was lacking. The poor could see how many more means of preservation the rich possessed than they did: the rich, who had fewer worries to start with, could also seclude themselves better. Perceiving this, no one trusted their rich landlords' friends, but placed ten times the reliance on the succor and advice of their equals.

Here lay the key to my eventual plan. Each village, I'd observed, however small, usually contained a leader, someone widely venerated, whose advice was sought in difficulty, and whose good opinion was cherished. In the village of Little Marlow, for instance, an old woman ruled the community. In those days her threshold was constantly beset by a crowd, seeking her advice and listening to her admonitions. She'd been a soldier, and had seen the world. When plague entered the village, and rendered the inhabitants almost witless with fright, old Martha stepped forward. She'd once been in a town struck by plague; nor had she escaped it—but she'd recovered. After this revelation, Martha reigned supreme in Little Marlow's every heart and mind. I watched her enter the cottages of the sick; she relieved their wants with her own hand; she betrayed no fear, and inspired all who saw her with some portion of her own native courage. For those too poor to purchase food, she shopped and organized supplies, demonstrating how the well-being of each worked to the benefit of all. She wouldn't permit any gardens to be neglected, nor the flowers in a single window box to droop for want of care. Hope, she told me, was the key to health, and everything that could sustain and enliven people's

spirits, had more value than any doctor's prescription.

With Martha in mind, I resolved to seek out her local counterparts; and by systematizing their efforts, and enlightening their views, increase both their power and their use among the other townspeople and villagers. In imagining the reign of peace and happiness on earth, I couldn't help but recall how many writers had placed their utopias in rural settings of small townships, each directed by wise elders—especially when my plan's real success proved so ephemeral. There was the usual ingratitude, watered and fed by vice and folly, which all who ever labored for humanity saw springing from the grain they'd sown. And volatility beset every power structure, however popular. Coups and abdications were frequent. In place of the old and prudent, the ardent youth would step forward, eager for action, indifferent to danger. Often, too, the voice to which everyone listened was suddenly silenced, the helping hand was cold, the sympathetic eye shut was shut. So it was when we stood at old Martha's graveside. The sun beat down; but with the big heart stilled that had beat for them, the mind forever occupied with projects for their welfare reduced to incommunicable annihilation, the people of Little Marlow shivered again in their fear.

May brought pleasant weather. Where was the plague? "Here—There—Everywhere!" our horror and dismay exclaimed—plague the Destroyer, forcing the spirit to leave its organic chrysalis and enter upon an untried life. With one mighty sweep of its potency, all caution, all care, all prudence

were nullified. Death sat at the tables of the great, made itself at home among the poor, seized the cowards who fled, quelled the brave who resisted.

Constant, wide-ranging activity on the public behalf, permitted my observations of our invisible enemy's virulence to be unusually close and extensive. I watched it destroy a village in one short month. The first person sickened there in May; death had triumphed by June, when I found its streets deformed by unburied corpses, and no one left alive indoors. From such scenes, at other times, I saved deserted infants; sometimes I convinced a grieving lone survivor to come away, for fellowship.

But the powers of love, poetry, and creative fancy will dwell even among sights of woe. At the bedsides of the plague-sickened, among the squalid and the dying, amid anguish and pain: even as they grew familiar, I could endure the despairing moans of age, and the more terrible smiles of infancy in the bosom of horror, without being seized by a sudden frenzy to dash myself from some precipice, and so close my eyes forever on the sad end of the world. Instead, feelings of devotion, of duty, of a high and steady purpose, elevated me. A strange joy filled my heart. In the midst of the greatest sadness, while doing good I seemed to walk on air through an ambrosial atmosphere, which blunted the sting of sympathetic grief, and purified the air of sighs.

Idris, too, at the beginning of our calamity, had devoted herself to the care of the sick and helpless all around Windsor. In my worry over the dangers she faced, I raised selfish

objections to what I called her thoughtless enthusiasm. When the knowledge that she was safe strengthened my nerves to endure, constant fears for her well-being only shook my morale, I complained; I also listed several dangers her children incurred when she was absent from home. And she at length submitted, agreeing not to go beyond the forest borders. As it was, within the walls of the Castle we had a colony of the unhappy, mostly destitute of relatives, who could occupy her time and attention; yet she began to languish. Ceaseless anxiety for my welfare and the health of her children, however she strove to curb or conceal it, absorbed all her thoughts, and undermined the vital principle.

Still, after the children's safety, her first care was to hide her anguish and tears from me. Each night I returned to the Castle, and found repose and love waiting. Many times I waited at a deathbed past midnight, and rode many miles through rain and obscurity, with a single thought to sustain me: the safety and sheltered repose of those I loved. Home, fresh from scenes of tremendous agony, I'd lay my crowded head on Idris's lap, and feel the pounding pulses slow. Her smile could raise me from hopelessness, her embrace bathe my sorrowing heart in calm.

High summer. As the plague went crowned with the sun's burning rays, the nations bowed their heads beneath the advance, and died. Corn sprang up in plenty, to rot on the stalk; the melancholy wretches who'd gone out picking lay stiff and plague-struck in the furrows. The green woods waved their boughs majestically above the dying, who lay spread beneath

their shade, answering the solemn melody with inharmonious cries. Bright birds flitted close; careless deer reposed unhurt upon the fern; oxen and horses strayed from their unguarded stables, and grazed among the wheat—for death fell on humanity alone.

My poor love and I looked at each other, looked at our babes. “We’ll save them, Idris,” I said. “And years from now we’ll be telling them about these fears we had for a year or two that they barely remember. I intend to save them—even if they’re the last ones left alive on earth, still they shall live—healthy, strong, and sweet of voice.”

My words were safe from the children’s notice, drowned by their laughter at play. At only ten years old, Alfred already understood what a pandemic was, and we’d talked about why so vast a desolation was happening; but at his age, the natural hilarity of youth quickly chased away frowns. Elvis, the gamesome infant shaking back his light curls from his eyes, an hilarious cherub without any notion of pain or sorrow, could make the halls ring and echo with his artless merriment. And Clara laughed happily, too. Our lovely gentle Clara—our stay, our solace, our delight; who flitted through the rooms like a benevolent spirit sent to illumine our dark hour with the alien splendor of her celestial homeland. Always eager to be of help to Idris, she made it her task to share her work around the Castle and attend the sick, comfort the sorrowing, assist the aged, help entertain the young. Gratitude and praise followed wherever she went. Yet with what unassuming simplicity she sat

playing with our children, on that afternoon of laughter.

July was gone. August must pass, a long tedium, each day eagerly counted that brought us closer to September, when we'd revive our hopes that winter would relive us from plague, at least for the season. That it would vanish altogether was the universal heartfelt hope no one could utter aloud—at least not without crying; so deep were our fears, so small our hopes. With months to go until winter, it was easy to see why some people, who only wanted to leap this dangerous interval, plunged into dissipation, and strove, by riot, and what they wished to imagine to be pleasure, to banish thought and opiate despair.

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