

History of the plague in London in 1665; with suitable reflections.

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HISTORY

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PLAGUE in LONDON, in 1665.



A MONGST the many calamities with which the Almighty is pleased to visit the children of men, in order to bring them to a just sense of their weakness, and to an entire dependance upon him, there are scarcely any that shew more true penitent humiliation, and a sight of what is really good, and truly evil, than those catching distempers, which an offended God, sometimes, suffers to rage among the people.

In the year 1665, the city of London was sorely visited by the Plague: an account of the progress and effects of that visitation was kept by a citizen, who remained there during the whole time of the sickness, and who appears to have been true and just in his remarks. It is hoped the reader will, in a short description of that memorable judgment, meet with some lessons of best wisdom, and receive instruction from this close and serious converse with death and the grave. This dreadful contagion in London was introduced by some goods brought from Holland. It first broke out in the house where those goods were opened, from whence



whence it spread to others. In the first house that was infected there died four persons: a neighbour who went to visit them, on returning home, gave the distemper to her family, and died with all her household. The disorder spread, and the parish officers, who were employed about the sick persons, being also infected, the physicians perceived the danger, and upon narrow inspection were assured that it was indeed the Plague, with all its terrifying particulars, and that it threatened a general infection. The people began now to be alarmed all over the town; the number of burials, within the bills of mortality, for a week, was generally about 240 to 300, but from the 24th to the 27th of January the printed bill was 474. However the frost continued very severe 'till near the end of February, the bills decreased, and people began to look upon the danger as over; but in May, the bills greatly increased, and the weather becoming hot, the infection spread again in a dreadful manner.

I lived (says the Author) without Aldgate; and as the distemper had not reached to that side of the city, our neighbourhood continued easy, but at the other end of the town the distraction was very great, and the nobility
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and gentry with their families thronged out of the town in an unusual manner. Nothing was to be seen but waggons, carts, and coaches with goods, and people and horsemen attending them, hurrying away; then empty waggons and carts appeared, which seemed to be returning to fetch more people, besides great crouds appeared on horseback, fitted out for travelling. This was a very melancholy prospect; indeed there was scarcely any thing else to be seen; it filled my mind with very serious thoughts of the misery that was coming upon the city, and the unhappy condition of those who would be left in it. By the end of July the contagion had spread and increased to a great degree: sorrow and sadness sat upon every face; and though some parts were not yet overwhelmed, all looked deeply concerned. London might well be said to be all in tears. The mourners did not go about the streets, for nobody made a formal dress of mourning for their nearest relations; but the voice of mourning was, indeed, heard in the streets: the shrieks of women and children at the windows and doors of their houses, when their dearest relations were dying, were so frequently heard as we passed, that it was
enough

enough to pierce the stoutest heart. Tears and lamentations were perceived in almost every house, especially in the first part of the visitation; for towards the latter end, people did not so much concern themselves for the loss of their friends, expecting that they themselves would be summoned the next hour.

It was a time of very unhappy breaches among us, in matters of religion; but this dreadful visitation reconciled the different parties, and took away all manner of prejudice from the people. Yet after the sickness was over, that spirit of charity was lost, and things returned to their old bad channel. Here we may observe, that a nearer view of death would soon reconcile men of good principles to one another; and that it is chiefly owing to our easy situations in life, and our putting these things far from us, that occasions such a want of christian charity. A close view and converse with death, or with diseases that threaten death, would scum off the gall of our tempers, remove our hatred, and bring us to see with different eyes. On the other side of the grave, we shall all be brethren again.

The inns of court were now all shut up; there were but few lawyers to be seen in
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the city; indeed there was no need of them, for quarrels and divisions about interest had ceased; every body was at peace. It was also worthy of observation, as well as full of instruction, to remark with what eagerness the people, of all persuasions, embraced the opportunities they had of attending upon the public worship, and other appointed times of devotion, as humiliations, fastings, and public confession of sins, to implore the mercy of God, and turn away the judgments which hung over their heads. The churches were so thronged, that there was often no coming near; no, not to the very door of the largest churches. There were also daily prayers appointed, morning and evening, at which the people attended with uncommon devotion. All plays and public places, which had begun to increase among us, were neglected; the gaming-tables, public dancing-rooms, and music-houses, which had multiplied, and begun to debauch the manners of the people, were shut up and suppressed, finding no trade; for the minds of the people were generally humbled and employed with other things. Death was before their eyes, and every body began to think of their graves. The infection con-
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tinued to increase 'till the middle of August, when there died a thousand a day, by the account of the weekly bills, though they never gave a full account by many thousands; many of the parish officers were taken sick themselves, and died when their account was to be given in. The parish of Stepney alone had, within the year, one hundred and sixteen sextons, grave-diggers, carriers of the dead, &c. Indeed the work was not of a nature to allow them time to take an exact account of their dead bodies, which were all thrown together in the dark in a pit, to which no man could come near without the utmost danger. I had (says this author) the care of my brother's house, which obliged me sometimes to go abroad. In these walks I had dismal scenes before my eyes, particularly of persons falling dead in the streets, and heard terrible shrieks of women, who, in their agonies, would throw open their chamber windows, and cry out in a sad and affecting manner. It is impossible to describe the variety of postures, in which the passions of the poor people would express themselves. Passing through Token-house yard, of a sudden a casement violently opened just over my head, and a woman

gave

gave three frightful shrieks, and then cried,—Oh! death, death, death!—which struck me with horror, and caused a chillness in my very blood. There was nobody to be seen in the whole street, neither did any window open, for people had no curiosity, now, in any case. I went on to pass into Bell-Alley, where there was a still greater cry: I could hear women and children run screaming about the rooms like distracted persons. It is hardly to be believed what dreadful cases happened in particular families every day: people in the rage of the distemper, or in the torment of the swelling, which indeed was intolerable, becoming raving and distracted, oftentimes laid violent hands on themselves, or threw themselves out of the windows; or, breaking out of the houses, would dance naked about the streets, not knowing one thing from another. Others, if not prevented, would run directly down to the river, and jump into the water. Some died of mere grief, and some of fright and surprise, without perhaps having received the infection. It often pierced my very soul to hear the groans and cries of those who were thus tormented. But the symptom of swelling was accounted the most particular

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in the whole infection; for if these swellings could be brought to break and run, the patient generally recovered; whereas, those who were struck with death at the beginning of the distemper, and had spots come upon them, often went about tolerably easy, 'till a little before they died, and some 'till the moment they dropped down: such would be taken suddenly very sick, and would run to some convenient place, or to their own houses if possible, and there sit down, grow faint, and die.

The method the magistrates fell into, of locking up the people's doors, where any had taken the distemper, and setting watchmen there night and day, to prevent any going out to spread the infection, looked hard and cruel, as perhaps those who were found in the family might have escaped, if they had been removed from the sick: but the publick good seemed to justify such a conduct, and there was no obtaining the least softening of this conduct from them. This put people, who thought themselves well, upon plans to get out of their confinement. Going out one morning, I heard a great outcry, which prompting my curiosity, I enquired the cause of a person who looked

out of a window. A watchman had been employed to watch at the door of a house, which was infected and shut up; both himself, and the day watchman, attended there a day and two nights. All this while no noise had been heard, nor lights seen in the house, neither had they called for any thing. It seems, that two or three days before, the dead-cart had stopped there, and a servant maid had been brought down to the door dead, wrapped only in a rug, which the buriers had put into the cart and carried away. The next day the watchman heard a great crying and screaming in the house, which he supposed was occasioned by some of the family dying just at that time; upon which he knocked at the door a great while: at last one looked out, and said with an angry quick tone, and the voice of one who was crying, "What d'ye want?" He answered, "I am the watchman, How do you do?" The person replied, "Stop the dead-cart." This was about one o'clock; soon after he stopped the dead-cart, and then knocked again, but nobody answered. He continued knocking, and the bell-man called several times, "Bring out your dead;" but nobody answered; and the man who drove the cart, being

being called to other houses, would stay no longer, and drove the cart away. In the morning, when the day watchman came, they knocked at the door a great while; but nobody answering, they got a ladder, and one of them went up to the window, and looking into the room, he saw a woman lying dead upon the floor, in a dismal situation; but though he called aloud, and knocked on the floor with his staff, nobody stirred or answered. This they made known to the magistrate, who ordered the house to be broke open, when nobody was found in it, but that young woman; who having been infected and past recovery, the rest had left her to die by herself, and were every one gone, having found some way to delude the watchman and go out. As to those cries and shrieks, which he heard, it was supposed they were the passionate cries of the family at the bitter parting, which to be sure it was to them all, this being the sister to the mistress of the family. Many more instances might be given; but these may suffice to shew the deep distress of that day. Death did not now hover over every one's head only, but looked into their houses and chambers, and even stared in their faces; and
 though

though there were some stupidity and dullness of mind, yet there was a great deal of just alarm founded in the inmost soul: many consciences were awakened, many hard hearts melted, many a penitent made confession of crimes long concealed. People might be heard, even in the streets, as we passed along, calling upon God for mercy through Jesus Christ; and saying, "I have been an adulterer, I have been a murderer," and the like: and none durst stop to make an enquiry into such things, or to give comfort to the poor creatures, who, in the anguish both of soul and body, thus cried out. Many were the warnings that were then given by dying penitents, to others, not to put off and delay their repentance to a day of distress, that such a time of calamity as this was not the best time for repentance. I wish, (says this author) I could repeat the very sound of those groans and exclamations, that I heard from some poor dying creatures, when in the height of their agony and distress; and that I could make him who reads this, hear, as I imagine I now hear them; for the sound seems still to ring in my ears. In the beginning of September, the number of burials increasing, the church-wardens

wardens of Aldgate parish ordered a large pit to be dug, to hold all the dead which might die in a month: it was about forty feet long, and sixteen broad. Some blamed the churchwardens for suffering such a frightful gulf to be dug; nevertheless, in two weeks, they had thrown more than eleven hundred bodies into it, when they were obliged to fill it up, as the bodies were come within six feet of the top. My curiosity drove me to go and see this pit, when there had been nearly four hundred people buried in it. I got admittance into the churchyard, by means of the sexton, who was a sensible religious man. He would have persuaded me not to go, saying, that "It was indeed their duty to venture, and in it they might hope to be preserved; but that as I had no particular call, he thought my curiosity could not justify my running the hazard." I told him, 'I had a great desire in my mind to go; and that, perhaps, it might be an instructing sight.' "Nay," says the good man, "if you will venture upon that score, in the name of God, go in; it will be a sermon to you; it may be the best that ever you heard in your life."

This

This discourse had shocked my resolution, and I stood wavering a good while; but just then hearing the bellman, and the cart loaded with dead bodies appearing, I went in.— There was nobody that I could perceive, at first, with the cart, but the buryers, and the man who led the cart; but when they came to the pit, they saw a man muffled in a cloak, who appeared in great agony. The buryers immediately gathered about him, supposing he was one of those poor delirious, or desperate creatures, who would sometimes run to the pit, wrapt in blankets, and throw themselves in; and, as they said, bury themselves. When the buryers came to him, they soon found he was neither desperate nor distempered in mind, but one oppressed with a dreadful weight of grief, having his wife and several children, all in the cart that was just come in with him, and he following in agony and excess of grief. He calmly desired the buryers to let him alone, and said he would only see the bodies thrown in, and go away; so they left begging him; but no sooner was the cart turned round, and the bodies shot into the pit all together, which was a surprise to him, for he at least expected they would have been
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been decently laid in, though, indeed, he was afterwards convinced that was impossible. No sooner did he see this, but he cried out aloud, unable to contain himself, and fell down in a swoon. The buryers ran to him and took him up; and when he came to himself, led him to a place where he was taken care of. He looked into the pit again as he went away, but the buryers had covered the bodies immediately, by throwing in earth, so that nothing could be seen. The cart had in it sixteen or seventeen bodies. Some were wrapt up in linen sheets, some in rugs, some were little otherwise than naked, or so loosely clad, 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, every thing became indifferent, seeing they were to be huddled together into the common grave of mankind; for here was no difference, but rich and poor went together. John Hayward, under-sexton, grave-digger, and bearer of the dead, never had the distemper at all, but lived about twenty years after it. His wife was employed to nurse the infected people, yet she herself never caught it. The only thing he used to keep
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off the infection, was holding garlick and rue in his mouth, and smoaking tobacco; this account I had from himself; his wife used to wash her head in vinegar, and sprinkle her clothes so with it as to keep it moist; and if the smell of any of those she waited on was more than usually bad, she snuffed vinegar up her nose, put it over her cap, and held a handkerchief with it to her mouth.

And here I must not omit mentioning the disposition of the people of that day with respect to their charities, which indeed were very large, both in a publick and private way. Some pious ladies were so zealous in this good work, and so confident in the protection of providence in the discharge of this great duty, that they went about giving alms, and visiting the poor families who were infected, in their very homes, appointing nurses and apothecaries to supply them with what they wanted. Thus giving their blessings to the poor, in solid relief, as well as hearty prayers for them. I will not undertake to say that none of these charitable people were suffered to die of the plague; but this I may say, that I never knew any of them miscarry in their pious work, which I mention for the encouragement of others

in cases of like distress. And doubtless, if they that give to the poor lend to the Lord; and he will repay it; those who hazard their lives to give to the poor, and to comfort and assist them in such a misery as this, may hope to be protected in it. From the middle of August, to the middle of September, the infection still increased, and spread itself with wonderful power, and it was reckoned, that, during that time, there died no less than sixteen hundred a day. It was then that the confusion and terror of the people was inexpressible; the courage of the persons appointed to carry away the dead began to fail them. The watchfulness of the magistrates was now put to the severest trial. At last the violence of the disorder came to such a height, that the people sat still looking upon one another, and seemed quite abandoned to despair.

In a word, people began to give themselves up to a fear that there was nothing to be expected but an universal desolation. This despair made people bold and venturous; they were no more shy of one another, as expecting there was no avoiding the distemper, but that all must go: this brought them to crowd into the churches; they no longer

longer enquired what condition the people who sat near them were in, but came without the least caution, and crowded together, as if their lives were of no consequence, compared with the work which they were come about. Indeed their zeal in coming, and the earnestness and affectionate attention they shewed to what they heard, made it manifest what value people would put upon the worship of God, if they thought every day they attended at the church might be their last.

It was in the height of this despair it pleased God to stay his hand, and to slacken the violence of the contagion, in a manner as surprizing as that of its beginning; and which shewed it to be his own particular hand. Nothing but Almighty power could have done it; the disorder despised all medicine, death raged in every corner, and had it gone on as it did then, a few weeks more would have cleared the town of all its inhabitants.

In that very moment, when thirty thousand were dead in three weeks, nay, when it was reported three thousand died in one night, and an hundred thousand were taken sick; when we might well say, " Vain was
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the help of man;" it pleased God to cause the force of the distemper to abate, and by his immediate hand to disarm the enemy. It was wonderful! the physicians were surpris'd, wherever they visited, to find their patients better, and in a few days every body was recovering. Nor was this by any medicine found out, or by any new method of cure discovered; but it was evidently from the secret invisible hand of Him, who had at first sent this disease as a judgment upon us. Let wise men search for reasons in nature to account for it, and labour as much as they will to lessen the debt they owe their Maker; even those physicians, who had the least share of religion in them were obliged to acknowledge the whole was the power of God. The streets were now full of poor recovering creatures, who appeared very sensible, and thankful to God, for their unexpected deliverance: yet, I must own, that as to the generality of the people, it might too justly be said of them, as was said of the Children of Israel, after they had been delivered from the host of Pharaoh; "They sung his praise, but they soon forgot his works."

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The Author, who was preserved unhurt, with his whole family, during the time of his sickness, gives in his history a particular account of the many reasonings and fears which affected his mind, before he could come to a fixed resolution, whether to stay and take his lot in the station in which God had placed him, or, by leaving the city, run the chance of unsettling himself, and of losing his effects, which lay scattered about. At the earnest intreaties of his brother, he concluded to go; but, being always crossed in this design, by several accidents, it came, one morning, as he expresses it, very warmly in his mind, whether these repeated disappointments, were not intimations to him, that it was the will of heaven he should not go; which was succeeded by another thought, that if this hint were from God, he was able to preserve him, in the midst of all death and dangers that could surround him; and that if he attempted to secure himself, by fleeing from his habitation, and acting contrary to these intimations, which he believed divine, it was a kind of flying from God, who could cause his justice to overtake him, when and where he thought fit.

But

But what finally fixed him in a resolution to stay, and cast himself entirely upon the protection and good pleasure of the Almighty, was the following circumstance:— At a time when his thoughts were more than commonly serious upon this weighty subject, turning over the bible which lay before him, he cried out, “ Well, I know not what to do; Lord, direct me.” At that moment, happening to stop, he cast his eye on the second verse of the 91st Psalm, and read to 10th verse, as follows:

“ I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge, and my fortress; my God, in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver me from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noon-day. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.— Only with thine eye shalt thou behold, and see the reward of the wicked. Because thou hast

hast made the Lord, which is thy refuge,
 even the Most High, thy salvation; there
 shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any
 plague come nigh thy dwelling. &c.”

A HYMN ON DEATH and ETERNITY,

SUITED TO THE FOREGOING OCCASION.

STOOP down, my thoughts, that use to rise,

Converse awhile with death;

Think how a gasping mortal lies,

And pants away his breath.

His quiv'ring lip hangs feebly down,

His pulses faint and few;

Then speechless, with a doleful groan,

He bids the world adieu.

But oh! the soul that never dies!

At once it leaves the clay!

Ye thoughts, pursue it where it flies,

And track its wond'rous way.

Up to the courts where Angels dwell

It mounts, triumphant there;

Or Devils plunge it down to hell,

In infinite despair.

And must my body faint and die?

And must this soul remove?

Oh! for some guardian Angel nigh,

To bear it safe above.

To my Creator's faithful hand,

My naked soul I trust;

And my flesh waits for thy command,

To drop into my dust.

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