THE GREAT PLAGUE IN LONDON IN 1665

by

WALTER GEORGE BELL
F.S.A., F.R.A.S.

With forty illustrations comprising contemporary prints, plans and drawings

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PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

THIS book tells a tragedy of the poor. A few men—very few—of birth, position, and wealth stayed in London, sharing the suffering which was the lot of all, and there are names that gained added lustre in that year of calamity; but in its immensity and in overwhelming proportion it was "the poore's Plague."

The Great Plague in London was a tragedy of errors. If only those fated people could have known!

No attempt has heretofore been made to write a full history of the Plague that desolated London in 1665. Defoe has filled the gap, and with such thoroughness that over two centuries his work has been frequently quoted as that of an historian. I have perhaps been daring. The book has to stand or fall beside the "Journal of the Plague Year," a record of fact beside a work which was given to the world as fiction.

I find myself unable to regard the "Journal of the Plague Year" as anything other than an historical novel. The circumstances under which it was written are well known. Plague raged at Marseilles in the years 1720–21; there were grave fears that shipping from Continental ports would bring infection to England, and both the Government and the public at that time showed serious alarm. Defoe found in the last visitation of Plague to London, which was still dimly in the memory of a few aged men, a fitting subject for his pen.

He used historical sources as other fiction writers have used them. The ascription of the "Journal" to a certain *H.F.*, who might be identified with Defoe's uncle, Henry Foe, can have convinced none. There is in it too much of the novelist's craft for that origin. But Defoe was extra-

ordinarily gifted, and by combining with his simple form of narrative documents such as "the Lord Mayor's Orders," the full use made of the published Bills of Mortality and frequent mention of places familiar to every reader, and by the very confusion of his story, he has given to this imaginary journal such an appearance of truth as has deceived many. An American scholar, Dr. Watson Nicholson, who has recently been with us, has written a book upon the historical basis of Defoe to establish his conclusion that the "Journal of the Plague Year" is authentic history.

With that all too hasty judgment I disagree.

Defoe is at most a part of history, often inaccurately told; how insufficient a part to satisfy, those who persevere with this book to the end will judge for themselves. I hold that the Rev. J. Charles Cox, the learned editor of the Antiquary's Books, when he dismisses the "Journal" as "a highly imaginative work of fiction, based upon vague recollections and untrustworthy hearsay," does less than justice to the pains taken by Defoe in using such historical sources as were at his hand. Large numbers of documents and memoirs not accessible to Defoe are now available, and without the knowledge to be acquired from these no adequate history of the Great Plague in London could be given.

I have written coldly, critically, with a sobering sense of responsibility, careful before making any statement to establish its authenticity, and without resort to artifices which Defoe, as a fiction writer, was justified in employing —the frequent repetitions, the characters typical rather than individual, the piling up of one terror upon another in order to give realistic effect. It is not wholly Defoe's Plague that emerges in these pages. And yet it has seemed to me that this picture I have drawn of a city in its agony is more terrible than all that Defoe imagined. Nothing could, indeed, exceed the unexampled horror of the plain facts. The Bills of Mortality admit a loss of 97,306 lives in the year 1665, and of these 68,596 only are accredited to the Plague. The proportion of loss amidst London's estimated population is discussed later. I have advanced reasons for belief that these Plague figures are largely under-stated, that the Plague alone was responsible

for fully 100,000 deaths—for almost all. That mass of humanity perished in a few months on the small area of ground that London of the day covered. And the proportion must be taken, not from the capital fully populated, but from a reduced populace—from those who were left behind after substantially all the rich and the professional and merchant classes who were able to do so had fled from the City and its infected outskirts, hoping to escape the Plague.

It may occasion surprise that a writer who has enjoyed in full measure the fascination of London should have filled these grim pages; and greater surprise that one who is not a medical man should have undertaken this task. A belief that the book as a record of things done and left undone in the panic conditions of a vast Plague will not be without value in the great profession of medicine has been with me in laborious years. I have not attempted a medical history of the Great Plague, and should not have ventured into that domain, even to the small extent herein essayed, had I not experienced the generous interest of Dr. Edwin Ash, Dr. Francis J. Allan, Medical Officer of Health of Westminster, and others, and benefited by their knowledge and advice. Sir Sydney Russell-Wells had arranged to go over the final page proofs with me in the very week of his lamented death, which has robbed them of the advantage of his revision. To all those mentioned my warm thanks are given. But for anything here said that is open to criticism the responsibility is mine alone. From Mr. A. H. Thomas, F.S.A., the Records Clerk at Guildhall, Mr. Bernard Kettle, the Guildhall Librarian, and the Library Committee I have received the willing assistance that is extended to all who seek out the story of London. The Rev. Howell Williams, Rector of Eyam, has given me valued help concerning the Plague that broke out in that Derbyshire village.

The City was not entirely immune from Plague when in 1666 the Fire destroyed the larger part of it. Restoration London I have described in detail as the flames swept over it, and for its scene and dominant characteristics the reader is referred to the earlier work.[1]

[1] *The Great Fire of London in* 1666, by Walter George Bell, 3rd ed. 1923.

PREFACE TO NEW EDITION

THIS book on its first appearance was most generously received, and there were not wanting those who pointed out that while I was severely critical of Defoe for his all too frequent repetitions, I had been by no means free from the vice of repetition myself. I make no complaint of that, for the charge was true, and I have sought to remove such disfigurements from the pages.

In the intervening years scholars have assisted me by giving references to matters not hitherto tracked down, and some additional finds have come to my hand. The material thus incorporated, if small in bulk, is of considerable interest. The book has undergone revision throughout, and there are additional illustrations.

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THE GREAT PLAGUE IN LONDON IN 1665

CHAPTER I

FIRST SIGNS OF PLAGUE

LATE into dark December nights of the year 1664 London citizens sat up to watch a new blazing star, with "mighty talk" thereupon. King Charles II. and his Queen gazed out of the windows at Whitehall.[1] About east it rose, reaching no great altitude, and sank below the south-west horizon between two and three o'clock.[2] In a week or two it was gone, then letters came from Vienna notifying the like sight of a brilliant comet, and "in the ayre the appearance of a Coffin, which causes great anxiety of thought amongst the people." Erfurt saw with it other terrible apparitions, and listeners detected noises in the air, as of fires, and sounds of cannon and musket-shot.[3]

The report ran that one night in the February following hundreds of persons had seen flames of fire for an hour together, which seemed to be thrown from Whitehall to St. James's, and then back again to Whitehall, whereafter they disappeared.[4]

In March there came into the heavens a yet brighter comet, visible two hours after midnight, and so continuing till daylight. With such ominous portents the Great Plague in London was ushered in. Report of Plague had been on the Continent. The learned in these matters

[1] Pepys's *Diary*, Dec. 17.
[2] John Allin's Letters, Dec. 20, in *Archæologia*, vol. 37, pp. 1–22.
[3] *Newes*, 1665, Jan. 5. [4] Allin, Feb. 24.

held the first comet to be propitious to England, but ominous to France and Holland. The second puzzled the wisest of them. Astrologers found also in a conjunction of Mars and Saturn which had occurred in November a presage of war, pestilence, and famine.[1]

The temptation is strong to dismiss with a gesture of contempt such idle fears and speculations, but we shall little understand London's populace in 1665 by so doing. It obscures the truth to envisage the middle seventeenth century through a medium of popular knowledge in the twentieth. The educated classes generally may have known better, though even of these a goodly part believed in portents, and they had fled before the advancing Plague—the Court, the lawyers, and an unhappily large proportion of physicians and divines. But a leaven of the bulk who remained could read and write. The printed sheet most widely circulating was William Lilly's Almanac, published each year from 1644 till his death. This and others like passed in thousands from hand to hand and were expounded, their mystifying diagrams and spells and forecasts of events satisfying minds to which greater literature was unknown.

The numerals of the year 1666, with their thrice repetition, had inspired a whole book by one Francis Potter, which claimed to prove that the three sixes together made a number " of exquisite and perfect character, truly, exactly, and essentially describing that state of Government to which all other notes of Antichrist doe agree." [2] It found a pleased purchaser in Samuel Pepys,[3] but Londoners in the Great Fire that year had no reason to bless the treble number. A prophet of the Great Plague named Edlin made a fortunate shot, actually predicting the epidemic in its correct time.[4]

But a month or two before the Great Plague appeared three hapless women had been hanged as witches. Their trial at Suffolk Assizes in March, 1665, had all the law's dread formality, and presiding was Sir Matthew Hale, whose high character made him deservedly one of the

[1] John Gadbury's *Londons Deliverance Predicted*, 1665.
[2] *An Interpretation of the Number* 666. Lond. 1642.
[3] *Diary*, 1666, Feb. 17, Nov. 4.
[4] Edlin's *Prænuncius Sydereus*, Lond. 1663[-4].

most renowned of Commonwealth and Restoration Judges. Hale made no doubt at all of the existence of witches, as proved, he said simply, by the Scriptures, general consent, and Acts of Parliament.[1] And if learned men rejected portents in the skies as influencing human affairs, it was with half reservations. Dr. George Thomson was skilled in the medical practice of his day, and seeking to enlarge knowledge, he had the great courage to dissect the corpse of a Plague victim. Although impatient with many idle superstitions held by the common people, he himself wrote: "That comets, or blazing stars, do portend some evil to come upon mortals is confirmed by long observation and sad experience, as likewise phenomena of new stars, battles fought, and coffins carried through the air, howlings, screechings and groans heard about churchyards, also raining of blood, unwonted matter, etc., all of which, having something *extra naturam*, are portentious and prodigious." [2]

They who so testified their faith were able to fleck their pages with passages in Latin and Greek, signs of pedantic learning. Who, then, shall wonder that the ignorant masses, in the terror and distress of a huge public calamity, accepted comets as manifestations of Heaven's wrath, believed that gold, if only obtained pure, would eject all diseases from the human frame, that the toad amulet was a charm against Plague, and unicorn's horn a certain cure? Any who wished to see coffins carried in the air, to hear howlings and groans in churchyards, be sure would see and hear them. To such these events and portents were real, terrifying. The state of medical knowledge gave small confidence in its efficacy to combat the death that stalked abroad. Their minds receptive to wonders, if to little else, the untutored people turned from medicine to the astrologers, the nostrum dealers and the quacks who promised immunity, and in ever increasing numbers fattened upon their fears.

There had been rumours of Plague in Holland towards the close of 1663, and definite evidence of its spread there next summer. Little, however, was known concerning it. London had lost the partisan *Mercuries* and *Diurnals*

[1] Cobbett's *State Trials*, vol. 6, pp. 687–702.
[2] George Thomson's *Loimotomia, or the Pest Anatomized*, 1666, p. 66.

which had been so numerous under the Commonwealth; the printing press was enchained. But two newspapers circulated, Roger L'Estrange's *Intelligencer* and *Newes*, appearing respectively on Mondays and Thursdays each week—actually a bi-weekly issue of one paper, with much repetition. Each was a little quarto sheet of sixteen printed pages (till June 1st, 1665, of eight pages) mostly filled with advices of foreign wars and politics, the movements of the English Fleet, and some sparse home news and advertisements. L'Estrange, himself the Licencer of the Press and a creature of the Court, depended wholly on Court favour for the prosperity of his enterprise, which the franking and free postage of his newsletters made possible. He took care to publish nothing displeasing to Whitehall. Those who had shipping interests or correspondents on the Continent learnt from their sea-captains and from letters that the Plague in Holland for some months past had taken a virulent form, and the mortality from it had been very great.

This was well known to the British Government. Early as June 1664, persons and goods coming from Holland had been subject to strict quarantine.[1] Ships entering the Thames from Dutch ports were laid up at Hole Haven, by Canvey Island. The Lord Mayor was notified by Order in Council that should such persons or goods be found harboured in London without certificate of quarantine being forthcoming, he was to shut up the houses containing them as if these were infected with Plague.[2] In Portsmouth that summer Plague was already seated, twenty-one deaths from it having occurred in a single week in July.[3] The declaration of war with Holland on February 22nd, 1665, cut off direct contact with that source of infection; but the peril of Plague spreading in England no doubt had been in mind when the Privy Council directed that the customary Proclamation for the strict observance of Lent should not be made. Lenten collections for the relief of the poor were ordered to be taken, the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen having petitioned.[4]

[1] Chester Corporation MSS. (*Hist. MSS. Comm., 8th Rep.*, 387b).
[2] Duke of Buckingham to the Lord Mayor, 1664, June 27. Original letter at Guildhall.
[3] Marquis of Bath's MSS. (*Hist. MSS. Comm., 4th Rep.*, p. 229).
[4] Privy Council Register, vol. 58, fos. 25, 61.

A Plague death in the out-parish of St. Giles-in-the-Fields figures in the Bills of Mortality in December 1664, and a second in the following February, but the bill being again clear thereafter these isolated occurrences occasioned no public concern.

In London in 1664 there had been five cases recorded by the Bills of Mortality as Plague, in the year before twelve; others, no doubt, were concealed under names of various diseases. It is wholly a mistake, which we are prone to make after two and a half centuries' immunity, to imagine Plague as something entirely novel—so dreadful in its potentialities that report even of a single case must have given rise to widespread alarm.

The Great Plague of 1665 has so concentrated popular attention upon itself that the frequency of Plague has largely escaped notice. It was no stranger to the Londoners. For thirty years then past London had known Plague, though never with large mortality since the long visitation that reached its culmination in 1647, in which year 3,597 victims perished. Plague was then in Newgate; the coroner refused to view the bodies of its victims, for the reason that juries were so fearful that none would enter the prison.[1]

Indeed, so persistent had been Plague since 1603, from which date weekly Bills of Mortality had been systematically compiled,[2] that only in four widely separated years in the half-century and more had London been reported entirely free from infection. That year 1603, when Queen Elizabeth died, her subjects were terribly visited. There

[1] House of Lords MSS. (*Hist. MSS. Comm.*, *7th Rep.*, 560).

[2] There is an earlier Bill of Mortality of the great year of Plague 1593, March to December; and Dr. Creighton has printed in his *History of Epidemics in Britain*, vol. i. pp. 341–4, from the Cecil MSS. at Hatfield House, complete Bills for the years 1578–82 and January, 1583, which were obtained by Lord Burghley from the Lord Mayor of London. The preparation of Bills in times of Plague seems to have originated in a request by the Privy Council to the Lord Mayor in Oct. 1532 to furnish a return of Plague deaths, and the Bill for a single week of that year, Nov. 16th to 23rd, is the earliest Bill preserved (Brit. Mus. Egerton MSS. 2603, fo. 4). This most interesting document, showing thirty-four Plague deaths in the week and thirty-two as the "sum of other seknes," is printed by Creighton, i. 296. Apparently it is one of a series. Two other Plague bills, prepared in more clerkly fashion, are extant for August, 1535 (Creighton, p. 298), and a few memoranda of Plague bills of 1563 and 1574. But evidence of mortality in epidemics previous to 1592–3 is mostly derived from parish registers and scattered references in State papers and letters.

were 33,347 recorded Plague deaths in London: "Never did the English nation," wrote Dekker, "behold so much black worn as there was at her funeral. It was then but put on to try if it were fit, for the great day of mourning was set down in the book of Heaven to be held afterwards."[1] Trade wholly ceased within the City for almost half the year, and merchants and all others of any estate fled into the country.[2] Elizabeth, retreating to Windsor from a dreadful Plague in London in 1563, a thousand dying weekly, set up a gallows in the market-place of Windsor on which to hang all Londoners who should venture to come there, and those bringing wares from London were alike to be hanged thereon, "without judgment."[3] It was a policy of thorough wherever the Sovereign's safety was at stake. All acquainted with the Elizabethan stage will recall how frequently playhouses were closed and the companies of actors disbanded because of the Plague. Never had two decades passed without a startling upgrowth of the death-roll in London, rising for weeks together, four, seven, and ten times above normal figures, thus indicating the existence of violent Plague. It linked back in a calamitous chain with the "Sweating sickness" which repeatedly had afflicted the capital in King Henry VIII.'s reign and earlier, and by which, in a single week of the year 1485, two Lord Mayors of London in succession had perished. They were Sir Thomas Hills and William Stokker, the last elected the day after the vacancy and himself dead four days later, and with them died six Aldermen. In 1499 a severe Plague in London caused King Henry VII. to retire to Calais. Though early records are few, scattered references to Plague in London are sufficiently numerous to suggest that for centuries back years were rare which did not show some manifestation of endemic disease, with at intervals violent outbursts in epidemics; but these are beyond my present purpose.

In a register of burials of the City church of St. Peter Cornhill, at the close of the entries for the stricken year

[1] Dekker, *The Wonderfull Yeare* 1603.

[2] Letter by East India Committees to their servants in the East, Dec. 1603. W. Foster, *The East India House*, p. 57.

[3] Lambeth Palace MSS. (Stow's *Memoranda*, Camden Society).

1593 the searcher comes unexpectedly upon these lines, penned in a neat Elizabethan hand—

> "In a thousand five hundred ninety and three
> The Lord preserved my house and mee
> When of the pestilence theare died
> Full manie a thousand els beeside."

The clerk of St. Peter's wrote that, satisfied that he should himself be alive. He placed just above the figures of the whole year's mortality: that in London and the out-parishes 15,003 persons had perished of Plague.

The migrations of Parliament are little known, and they are significant. It had been adjourned from Westminster in July, 1467, after several Members of the House of Commons had died of the Plague. King James I.'s earliest Parliament met at Salisbury, and the Law Term was kept at Winchester, where Sir Walter Raleigh was arraigned and received sentence for high treason under which fifteen years later he suffered. The Parliament of King Charles I. on his accession year was adjourned to Oxford. The High Court of Justice sat at Reading. Neither Parliament nor the Judges would dare assemble at Westminster, all London being fearfully stricken with Plague in those years.

The long visitation of 1640–47, when in eight years Plague claimed 14,420 dead (so recorded, and no doubt under-estimated) among the capital's small population, was to those living in Restoration London a comparatively recent memory. The older folk had more terrible memories of the epidemic of 1625. Many recalled with a shudder the ill omens of that year when King Charles I. stepped up to the Throne, which the frightful record of 41,313 dead from Plague in London within twelve months made grimly memorable. The City was one wide mortuary; a reeking prison house of the living, the dying, and the dead. That was the worst Plague that London had ever experienced, save only the Black Death in the Middle Ages, for which figures are wanting; [1] it has been roughly computed that

[1] London owes its possession of Charterhouse to the Black Death A meadow was opened for huge pits into which the City's dead were cast and afterwards a chapel stood there for those who came to pray for the souls of their relatives; the chapel swelled into a monastery, which became in the whirl of events a ducal town house and lastly Thomas Sutton's famous foundation for poor brethren and scholars.