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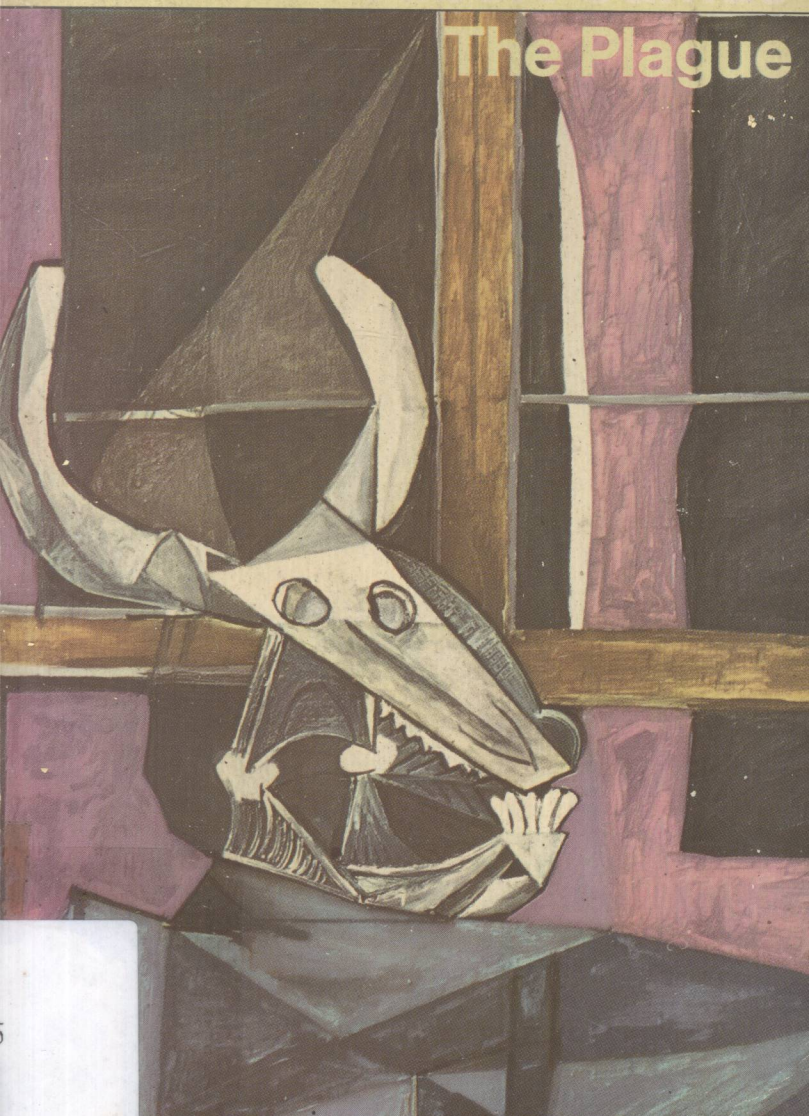
Albert Camus

The Plague



THE PLAGUE

Albert Camus was born in Algeria in 1913 of Breton and Spanish parentage. He was brought up in North Africa and had many jobs there (one of them playing goal for the Algiers football team) before he came to Metropolitan France and took up journalism. He was active in the resistance during the German occupation and became editor of the clandestine paper *Combat*. Before the war he had written a play *Caligula* (1939), and during the war the two books which brought him fame, *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Abandoning politics and journalism he devoted himself to writing and established an international reputation with such books as *La Peste* (The Plague, 1947), *Les Justes* (1949), *L'Homme révolté* (1952), and *La Chute* (1956). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957. In January 1960 he was killed in a road accident.

THE PLAGUE

ALBERT CAMUS

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
STUART GILBERT

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It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not! –

'Robinson Crusoe's Preface' to the third volume of Robinson Crusoe

DANIEL DEFOE

PENGUIN BOOKS

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PART ONE

I

THE unusual events described in this chronicle occurred in 194–, at Oran. Everyone agreed that, considering their somewhat extraordinary character, they were out of place there. For its ordinariness is what strikes one first about the town of Oran, which is merely a large French port on the Algerian coast, headquarters of the Prefect of a French 'Department'.

The town itself, let us admit, is ugly. It has a smug, placid air and you need time to discover what it is that makes it different from so many business centres in other parts of the world. How conjure up a picture, for instance, of a town without pigeons, without any trees or gardens, where you never hear the beat of wings or the rustle of leaves – a thoroughly negative place in short? The seasons are discriminated only in the sky. All that tells you of spring's coming is the feel of the air, or the baskets of flowers brought in from the suburbs by hawkers; it's a spring cried in the market-places. During the summer the sun bakes the houses bone-dry, sprinkles our walls with greyish dust, and you have no option but to survive those days of fire indoors, behind closed shutters. In autumn, on the other hand, we have deluges of mud. Only winter brings really pleasant weather.

Perhaps the easiest way of making a town's acquaintance is to ascertain how the people in it work, how they love, and how they die. In our little town (is this, one wonders, an effect of the climate?) all three are done on much the same lines, with the same feverish yet casual air. The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits. Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is

in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, 'doing business'. Naturally they don't eschew such simpler pleasures as love-making, sea-bathing, going to the pictures. But, very sensibly, they reserve these pastimes for Saturday afternoons and Sundays, and employ the rest of the week in making money, as much as possible. In the evening, on leaving office, they forgather, at an hour that never varies, in the cafés, stroll the same boulevard, or take the air on their balconies. The passions of the young are violent and short-lived; the vices of older men seldom range beyond an addiction to games of bowls, to banquets and 'socials', or clubs where large sums change hands on the fall of a card.

It will be said, no doubt, that these habits are not peculiar to our town; really all our contemporaries are much the same. Certainly nothing is commoner nowadays than to see people working from morn till night and then proceeding to fritter away at card-tables, in cafés, and in small-talk what time is left for living. Nevertheless, there still exist towns and countries where people have now and again an inkling of something different. In general it doesn't change their lives. Still, they have had an intimation, and that's so much to the good. Oran, however, seems to be a town without intimations; in other words, completely modern. Hence I see no need to dwell on the manner of loving in our town. The men and women consume each other rapidly in what is called 'the act of love', or else settle down to a mild habit of conjugality. We seldom find a mean between these extremes. That, too, is not exceptional. At Oran, as elsewhere, for lack of time and thinking, people have to love each other without knowing much about it.

What is more exceptional in our town is the difficulty one may experience there in dying. 'Difficulty', perhaps, is not the right word! 'discomfort' would come nearer. Being ill is never agreeable, but there are towns which stand by you, so to speak, when you are sick; in which you can, after a fashion, let yourself go. An invalid needs small attentions, he likes to have something to rely on, and that's natural enough. But at Oran the violent extremes of temperature, the exigencies of business, the uninspiring surroundings, the sudden nightfalls, and the very nature of its pleasures call for good health. An invalid feels out of it there. Think what it must be for a dying man, trapped

behind hundreds of walls all sizzling with heat, while the whole population, sitting in cafés or hanging on the telephone, is discussing shipments, bills of lading, discounts! It will then be obvious what discomfort attends death, even modern death, when it waylays you under such conditions in a dry place.

These somewhat haphazard observations may give a fair idea of what our town is like. However, we must not exaggerate. Really, all that was to be conveyed was the banality of the town's appearance and of life in it. But you can get through the days there without trouble, once you have formed habits. And since habits are precisely what our town encourages, all is for the best. Viewed from this angle, its life is not particularly exciting; that must be admitted. But, at least, social unrest is quite unknown amongst us. And our frank-spoken, amiable, and industrious citizens have always inspired a reasonable esteem in visitors. Treeless, glamourless, soulless, the town of Oran ends by seeming restful and, after a while, you go complacently to sleep there.

It is only fair to add that Oran is grafted on to a unique landscape, in the centre of a bare plateau, ringed with luminous hills and above a perfectly shaped bay. All we may regret is the town's being so disposed that it turns its back on the bay, with the result that it's impossible to see the sea, you always have to go to look for it.

Such being the normal life of Oran, it will be easily understood that our fellow-citizens had not the faintest reason to apprehend the incidents which took place in the spring of the year in question and were (as we subsequently realized) premonitory signs of the grave events we are to chronicle. To some, these events will seem quite natural; to others, all but incredible. But, obviously, a narrator cannot take account of these difference of outlook. His business is only to say, 'This is what happened', when he knows that it actually did happen, that it closely affected the life of a whole populace, and that there are thousands of eye-witnesses who can appraise in their hearts the truth of what he writes.

In any case the narrator (whose identity will be made known in due course) would have little claim to competence for a task like this, had not chance put him in the way of gathering much information, and had he not been, by the force of things, closely

involved in all that he proposes to narrate. This is his justification for playing the part of an historian. Naturally an historian, even an amateur, always has *data*, personal or at second hand, to guide him. The present narrator has three kinds of *data*; first, what he saw himself; secondly, the accounts of other eye-witnesses (thanks to the part he played, he was enabled to learn their personal impressions from all those figuring in this chronicle); and, lastly, documents which subsequently came into his hands. He proposes to draw on these records whenever this seems desirable, and to employ them as he thinks best. He also proposes . . .

But perhaps the time has come to drop preliminaries and cautionary remarks, and to launch into the narrative proper. The account of the first days needs giving in some detail.

2

WHEN leaving his surgery on the morning of 16 April, Dr Bernard Rieux felt something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat lying in the middle of the landing. On the spur of the moment he kicked it to one side and, without giving it further thought, continued on his way downstairs. Only when he was stepping forth into the street did it occur to him that a dead rat had no business to be on his landing, and he turned back to ask the door-porter of the building to see to its removal. It was not until he noticed old M. Michel's reaction to the news that he realized the peculiar nature of his discovery. Personally, he had thought the presence of the dead rat rather odd, no more than that; the door-porter, however, was genuinely outraged. On one point he was categorical: 'There weren't no rats here.' In vain the doctor assured him that there *was* a rat, presumably dead, on the first-floor landing; M. Michel's conviction wasn't to be shaken. There 'weren't no rats in the building', he repeated, so someone must have brought this one from outside. Some youngster trying to be funny, most likely.

That evening, when Dr Rieux was standing in the entrance, feeling for the latch-key in his pocket before starting up the stairs to his flat, he saw a big rat coming towards him from the dark end of the passage. It moved uncertainly, and its fur was sopping wet. The animal stopped and seemed to be trying to get its balance, moved forward again towards the doctor, halted again, then spun round on itself with a little squeal and fell on its side. Its mouth was slightly open and blood was spurting from it. After gazing at it for a moment the doctor went upstairs.

He wasn't thinking about the rat. That glimpse of spurting blood had switched his thoughts back to something that had been on his mind all day. His wife, who had been ill for a year now, was due to leave next day for a sanatorium in the mountains. He found her lying down in the bedroom, resting, as he had asked her to do, in view of the exhausting journey before her. She gave him a smile.

'Do you know, I'm feeling ever so much better!'

The doctor gazed down at the face that turned towards him, in the glow of the bedside lamp. His wife was thirty, and the long illness had left its mark on her face. Yet the thought that came to Rieux's mind as he gazed at her was, How young she looks, almost like a little girl! But perhaps that was because of the smile, which effaced all else.

'Now try to sleep,' he counselled. 'The nurse is coming at eleven, you know, and you have to catch the midday train.'

He kissed the slightly moist forehead. The smile escorted him to the door.

Next day, 17 April, at eight o'clock the porter buttonholed the doctor as he was going out. Some young scallywags, he said, had dumped three dead rats in the hall. They'd obviously been caught in traps with very strong springs as they were bleeding profusely. The porter had lingered in the doorway for quite a while, holding the rats by their legs, and keeping a sharp eye on the passers-by, on the off chance that the miscreants would give themselves away by grinning, or by some facetious remark. His watch had been in vain.

'But I'll nab 'em all right,' said M. Michel hopefully.

Much puzzled, Rieux decided to begin his round in the outskirts of the town, where his poorer patients lived. The scavenging in these districts was done late in the morning and, as he drove his car along the straight, dusty streets, he cast glances at the garbage bins aligned along the pavement's edge. In one street alone the doctor counted as many as a dozen rats deposited on the vegetable and other refuse in the bins.

He found his first patient, an asthma case of long standing, in bed, in a room which served both as dining-room and bedroom and overlooked the street. The invalid was an old Spaniard with a hard, rugged face. Placed on the coverlet in front of him were two cooking-pots containing dried peas. When the doctor entered the old man was sitting up, bending his neck back, gasping and wheezing in his efforts to recover his breath. His wife brought a bowl of water.

'Well, doctor,' he said, while the injection was being made, 'they're coming out good and proper, have you noticed?'

'The rats, he means,' his wife explained. 'The man next door found three on his doorstep.'

'Aye, they're coming out, you can see them in the dustbins by dozens. It's hunger, that's what it is, driving them out.'

Rieux soon discovered that the rats were the great topic of conversation in that part of the town. After his round of visits he drove home.

'There's a telegram for you, sir, upstairs,' M. Michel informed him.

The doctor asked him if he'd seen any more rats.

'No,' the porter replied, 'there ain't been no more. I'm keeping a sharp look-out, you know. Those youngsters wouldn't dare, not when I'm about.'

The telegram informed Rieux that his mother would be arriving next day. She was going to keep house for her son during his wife's absence. When the doctor entered his flat he found the nurse already there. He looked at his wife. She was in a tailor-made suit, and he noticed that she had used colour. He smiled to her.

'That's splendid,' he said. 'You're looking very nice.'

A few minutes later he was seeing her into the sleeping-car. She glanced round the compartment.

'It's too dear for us, really, isn't it?'

'Don't worry about that,' Rieux replied. 'It had to be done.'

'I say, what's this story about rats that's going round?'

'I can't explain it. It certainly is queer . . . but it'll pass.'

Then hurriedly he begged her to forgive him; he felt he should have looked after her better, he'd been most remiss. When she shook her head, as if to make him stop, he added: 'Anyhow, once you're back everything will be better. We'll make a fresh start, you and I, dear.'

'That's it!' Her eyes were sparkling. 'Let's make a fresh start.'

But then she turned her head and seemed to be gazing through the carriage window at the people on the platform, jostling each other in their haste. The hissing of the locomotive reached their ears. Gently he called his wife's first name; when she looked round he saw her face wet with tears.

'Don't,' he murmured. Behind the tears the smile returned, a little tense. She drew a deep breath.

'Now, off you go! Everything will be quite all right.'

He took her in his arms, then stepped back on to the platform. Now he could only see her smile across the window.

'Please, dear,' he said, 'take great care of yourself.'

But she could not hear him.

As he was leaving the platform, near the exit he met M. Othon, the police magistrate, holding his small boy by the hand. The doctor asked him if he was going away.

Tall and dark, M. Othon had something of the air of what used to be called 'a man of the world', and something of an undertaker's mute.

'No,' the magistrate replied, 'I've come to meet Madame Othon, who's been to present her respects to my family.'

The engine whistled.

'These rats, now . . .' the magistrate began.

Rieux made a brief movement in the direction of the train, then turned back towards the exit.

'The rats?' he said. 'It's nothing. . . .'

The only impression of that moment which, afterwards, he could recall was the passing of a railwayman with a box full of dead rats under his arm.

Early in the afternoon of that day, when his consultations were beginning, a young man called on Rieux. The doctor gathered that he had called before, in the morning, and was a journalist by profession. His name was Raymond Rambert. Short, square-shouldered, with a determined-looking face and keen, intelligent eyes, he gave the impression of someone who could keep his end up in any circumstances. He affected a sporting type of dress. He came straight to the point. His newspaper, one of the leading Paris dailies, had commissioned him to make a report on the living conditions prevailing amongst the Arab population, and especially on the sanitary conditions.

Rieux replied that these conditions were not good. But, before he said any more, he wanted to know if the journalist would be allowed to tell the truth.

'Certainly I shall,' Rambert replied.

'I mean,' Rieux explained, 'would you be allowed to publish an unqualified condemnation of the present state of things?'

'Unqualified? Well, I must own I couldn't go that far. But surely things aren't quite so bad as that?'

'No,' Rieux said quietly, they weren't so bad as that. He had put the question solely to find out if Rambert could or couldn't state the facts without paltering with the truth.

'I've no use for statements in which something is kept back,' he added. 'And that is why I shall not furnish information in support of yours.'

The journalist smiled. 'You talk the language of St Just.'

Without raising his voice Rieux said he knew nothing about that. The language he used was that of a man who was sick and tired of the world he lived in – though he had much liking for his fellow-men – and had resolved, for his part, to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth.

His shoulders hunched, Rambert gazed at the doctor for some moments without speaking. Then, 'I think I understand you,' he said, getting up from his chair.

The doctor accompanied him to the door.

'It's good of you to take it like that,' he said.

'Yes, yes, I understand,' Rambert repeated, with what seemed a hint of impatience in his voice. 'Sorry to have troubled you.'

When shaking hands with him, Rieux suggested that if he was out for curious 'stories' for his paper, he might say something about the extraordinary number of dead rats that were being found in the town just now.

'Ah!' Rambert exclaimed. 'That certainly interests me.'

On his way out at five for another round of visits, the doctor passed on the staircase a stocky, youngish man, with a big, deeply furrowed face and bushy eyebrows. He had met him once or twice in the top-floor flat, which was occupied by some male Spanish dancers. Puffing a cigarette, Jean Tarrou was gazing down at the convulsions of a rat dying on the step in front of him. He looked up, and his grey eyes remained fixed on the doctor for some moments; then, after wishing him good day, he remarked that it was rather odd, the way all these rats were coming out of their holes to die.

'Very odd,' Rieux agreed. 'And it ends by getting on one's nerves.'

'In a way, doctor, only in a way. We've not seen anything of the sort before, that's all. Personally I find it interesting, yes, definitely interesting.'

Tarrou ran his fingers through his hair to brush it off his forehead, looked again at the rat that had now stopped moving, then smiled towards Rieux.

'But really, doctor, it's the porter's headache, isn't it?'

As it so happened the porter was the next person Rieux encountered. He was leaning against the wall, beside the street door; he was looking tired and his normally rubicund face had lost its colour.

'Yes, I know,' the old man told Rieux, who had informed him of the latest casualty amongst the rats. 'I keep finding 'em by twos and threes. But it's the same thing in the other houses in the street.'

He seemed depressed and worried, and was scratching his neck absent-mindedly. Rieux asked him how he felt. The porter wouldn't go so far as to say he was feeling ill. Still he wasn't quite up to the mark. In his opinion it was just due to worry; these damned rats had given him 'a shock like'. It would be a relief when they stopped coming out and dying all over the place.

Next morning – it was 18 April – when the doctor was bringing back his mother from the station, he found M. Michel looking still more out of sorts. The staircase from the cellar to the attics was strewn with dead rats, ten or a dozen of them. The garbage-bins of all the houses in the street were full of rats.

The doctor's mother took it quite calmly.

'It's like that sometimes,' she said vaguely. She was a small woman with silver hair and dark, gentle eyes. 'I'm so glad to be with you again, Bernard,' she added. 'The rats can't change *that*, anyhow.'

He nodded. It was a fact that everything seemed easy when she was there.

However, he rang up the Municipal Office. He knew the man in charge of the department concerned with the extermination of vermin and he asked him if he'd heard about all the rats that were coming out to die in the open. Yes, Mercier knew all about it; in fact, fifty rats had been found in his offices, which were near the harbour. To tell the truth, he was rather perturbed; did the doctor think it meant anything serious? Rieux couldn't give a definite opinion, but he thought the sanitary service should take action of some kind.

Mercier agreed. 'And, if you think it's really worth the trouble, I'll get an order issued as well.'

'It certainly is worth the trouble,' Rieux replied.

His charwoman had just told him that several hundred dead

rats had been collected in the big factory where her husband worked.

It was about this time that our townsfolk began to show signs of uneasiness. For, from 18 April onwards, quantities of dead or dying rats were found in factories and warehouses. In some cases the animals were killed to put an end to their agony. From the outer suburbs to the centre of the town, in all the byways where the doctor's duties took him, in every thoroughfare, rats were piled up in garbage-bins or lying in long lines in the gutters. The evening papers that day took up the matter and inquired whether or not the city fathers were going to take steps, and what emergency measures were contemplated, to abate this particularly disgusting nuisance. Actually the Municipality had not contemplated doing anything at all; but now a meeting was convened to discuss the situation. An order was transmitted to the sanitary service to collect the dead rats at daybreak every morning. When the rats had been collected two municipal vans were to take them to be burnt in the town incinerator.

But the situation worsened in the following days. There were more and more dead vermin in the streets and the scavengers had bigger vanloads every morning. On the fourth day the rats began to come out and die in batches. From basements, cellars and sewers they emerged in long wavering files into the light of day, swayed helplessly, then did a sort of pirouette and fell dead at the feet of the horrified onlookers. At night, in passages and alleys, their shrill little death-cries could be clearly heard. In the mornings the bodies were found lining the gutters, each with a gout of blood, like a red flower, on its tapering muzzle; some were bloated and already beginning to rot, others rigid, with their whiskers still erect. Even in the busy heart of the town you found them piled in little heaps on landings and in backyards. Some stole forth to die singly in the halls of public offices, in school playgrounds, and even on café terraces. Our townsfolk were amazed to find such busy centres as the Place d'Armes, the boulevards, the Strand, dotted with repulsive little corpses. After the daily clean-up of the town, which took place at sunrise, there was a brief respite; then gradually the rats began to appear again in numbers that went on increasing throughout the day. People out at night would often feel under-

foot the squelchy roundness of a still warm body. It was as if the earth on which our houses stood were being purged of its secreted humours – thrusting up to the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that had been forming in its entrails. You must picture the consternation of our little town, hitherto so tranquil, and now, out of the blue, shaken to its core, like a quite healthy man who all of a sudden feels his temperature shoot up and the blood seething like wildfire in his veins.

Things went so far that the Ransdoc Information Bureau (Inquiries on all Subjects Promptly and Accurately Answered), which ran a Free Information talk on the wireless, by way of publicity, began its talk by announcing that no less than 6,231 rats had been collected and burnt in a single day, 25 April. Giving as it did an ampler, more precise view of the scene daily enacted before our eyes, this amazing figure administered a jolt to the public nerves. Hitherto people had merely grumbled at a stupid, rather obnoxious visitation; they now realized that this strange phenomenon, whose scope could not be measured and whose origins escaped detection, had something vaguely menacing about it. Only the old Spaniard whom Dr Rieux was treating for asthma went on rubbing his hands and chuckling, 'They're coming out, they're coming out,' with senile glee.

On 28 April, when the Ransdoc Bureau announced that 8,000 rats had been collected, a wave of something like panic swept the town. There was a demand for drastic measures, the authorities were accused of slackness, and people who had houses on the coast spoke of moving there, early in the year though it was. But next day the Bureau informed them that the phenomenon had abruptly ended and the sanitary service had collected only a trifling number of rats. And everyone breathed more freely.

It was, however, on this same day, at noon, that Dr Rieux when parking his car in front of the block of flats where he lived, noticed the door-porter coming towards him from the end of the street. He was dragging himself along, his head bent, arms and legs curiously splayed out, with the jerky movements of a clockwork doll. The old man was leaning on the arm of a priest, whom the doctor knew. It was Father Paneloux, a learned and militant Jesuit, whom he had met occasionally and who was very highly thought of in our town, even in circles