

**GASQUET
FRANCIS
AIDAN**

THE GREAT PESTILENCE
(A.D. 1348-9)

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Death:*

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Francis Aidan Gasquet **The Great Pestilence (A.D.** **1348-9) / now commonly** **known as The Black Death**

TO THE READER

In publishing this story of a great and overwhelming calamity, which fell upon England in common with the rest of Europe, in the middle of the fourteenth century, I desire to record my grateful thanks to those who have in any way assisted me in gathering together my material, or in weaving it into a connected narrative. Amongst these many kind friends I may specially name Mr. F. Bickley, of the British Museum, Mr. F.J. Baigent, the Rev. Prebendary Hingeston-Randolph, and, above all, Mr. Edmund Bishop, to whom I am greatly indebted for advice, criticism, and ever-patient assistance in revising the proof-sheets.

INTRODUCTION

The story of the Great Pestilence of 1348–9 has never been fully told. In fact, until comparatively recent times, little attention was paid to an event which, nevertheless, whether viewed in the magnitude of the catastrophe, or in regard to its far-reaching results, is certainly one of the most important in the history of our country.

Judged by the ordinary manuals, the middle of the fourteenth century appears as the time of England's greatest glory. Edward III. was at the very height of his renown. The crushing defeat of France at Crecy, in 1346, followed the next year by the taking of Calais, had raised him to the height of his fame. When, wearing the laurels of the most brilliant victory of the age, he landed at Sandwich, on October 14th, 1347, the country, or at least the English courtiers, seemed intoxicated by the success of his arms. "A new sun," says the chronicler Walsingham, "seemed to have arisen over the people, in the perfect peace, in the plenty of all things, and in the glory of such victories. There was hardly a woman of any name who did not possess spoils of Caen, Calais and other French towns across the sea;" and the English matrons proudly decked themselves with the rich dresses and costly ornaments carried off from foreign households. This was, moreover, the golden era of chivalry, and here and there throughout the country tournaments celebrated with exceptional

pomp the establishment of the Order of the Garter, instituted by King Edward to perpetuate the memory of his martial successes. It is little wonder, then, that the Great Pestilence, now known as the "Black Death," coming as it does between Crecy and Poitiers, and at the very time of the creation of the first Knights of the Garter, should seem to fall aside from the general narrative as though something apart from, and not consonant with, the natural course of events.

It is accordingly no matter for wonder that a classic like Hume, in common with our older writers on English history, should have dismissed the calamity in a few lines; but a reader may well feel surprise at finding that the late Mr. J. R. Green, who saw deeper into causes and effects than his predecessors, deals with the great epidemic in a scanty notice only as a mere episode in his account of the agricultural changes in the fourteenth century. Although he speaks generally of the death of one-half the population through the disease, he evidently has not realised the enormous effects, social and religious, which are directly traceable to the catastrophe.

Excellent articles, indeed, such as those from the pen of Professor Seebohm and Dr. Jessop, and chance pages in books on political and social economy, like those of the late Professor Thorold Rogers and Dr. Cunningham, have done much in our time to draw attention to the importance of the subject. Still, so far as I am aware, no writer has yet treated the plague as a whole, or, indeed, has utilised the material available for forming a fairly

accurate estimate of its ravages. The collections for the present study had been entirely made when a book on the *Epidemics in Britain*, by Dr. Creighton, was announced, and, as a consequence, the work was set aside. On the appearance of Dr. Creighton's volume, however, it was found that, whilst treating this pestilence at considerable length as a portion of his general subject, not merely had it not entered into his design to utilise the great bulk of material to be found in the various records of the period, but the author had dealt with the matter from a wholly different point of view.

It is proper, therefore, to state why a detailed treatment of a subject, in itself so uninviting, is here undertaken. The pestilence of 1348–49, for its own sake, must necessarily be treated by the professional writer as an item in the general series of epidemics; but there are many reasons why it has never been dealt with in detail from the mere point of view of the historian. Yet an adequate realisation of its effects is of the first importance for the right understanding of the history of England in the later Middle Ages. The "Black Death" inflicted what can only be called a wound deep in the social body, and produced nothing less than a revolution of feeling and practice, especially of religious feeling and practice. Unless this is understood, from the very circumstances of the case, we shall go astray in our interpretation of the later history of England. In truth, this great pestilence was a turning point in the national life. It formed the real close of the Mediæval period and the beginning of our Modern age. It

produced a break with the past, and was the dawn of a new era. The sudden sweeping away of the population and the consequent scarcity of labourers, raised, it is well recognised, new and extravagant expectations in the minds of the lower classes; or, to use a modern expression, labour began then to understand its value and assert its power.

But there is another and yet more important result of the pestilence which, it would seem, is not sufficiently recognised. To most people, looking back into the past, the history of the Church during the Middle Ages in England appears one continuous and stately progress. It is much nearer to the truth to say that in 1351 the whole ecclesiastical system was wholly disorganised, or, indeed, more than half ruined, and that everything had to be built up anew. As regards education, the effect of the catastrophe on the body of the clergy was prejudicial beyond the power of calculation. To secure the most necessary public ministrations of the rites of religion the most inadequately-prepared subjects had to be accepted, and even these could be obtained only in insufficient numbers. The immediate effect on the people was a religious paralysis. Instead of turning men to God the scourge turned them to despair, and this not only in England, but in all parts of Europe. Writers of every nation describe the same dissoluteness of manners consequent upon the epidemic. In time the religious sense and feeling revived, but in many respects it took a new tone, and its manifestations ran in new channels. If the change is to be

described in brief, I should say that the religion of Englishmen, as it now manifested itself on the recovery of religion, and as it existed from that time to the Reformation, was characterised by a devotional and more self-reflective cast than previously. This is evidenced in particular by the rise of a whole school of spiritual writers, the beginnings of which had been already manifested in the writings of Hampole, himself a victim of the plague. It was subsequently developed by such writers as Walter Hilton and the authors of a mass of anonymous tracts, still in manuscript, which, in so far as they have attracted notice at all, have been commonly set down under the general designation of *Wycliffite*. The reason for this misleading classification is not difficult to understand. Finding on the one hand that these tracts are pervaded by a deeply religious spirit, and on the other being convinced that the religion of those days was little better than a mere formalism, the few persons who have hitherto paid attention to the subject have not hesitated to attribute them to the "religious revival of the Lollards," and were naturally unable to believe them to be inspired by the teaching of "a Church shrivelled into a self-seeking secular priesthood."¹ The reader, who has a practical and personal experience of the tone, spirit, and teaching of works of Catholic piety, will, however, at once recognise that these tracts are perfect Catholic in tone, spirit, and doctrine, and differ essentially from those of men inspired by the teaching of Wycliffe.

¹ Green, *Short History of the English People*, p. 216.

The new religious spirit found outward expression in the multitude of guilds which sprang into existence at this time, in the remarkable and almost, as it may seem to some, extravagant development of certain pious practices, in the singular spread of a more personal devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, to the Blessed Virgin, to the Five Wounds, to the Holy Name, and other such manifestations of a more tender or more familiar piety. Even the very adornment and enrichment of the churches, so distinctive of this period, bears witness to the change. At the close of the fourteenth century and during the course of the fifteenth the supply of ornaments, furniture, plate, statues painted or in highly decked "coats," with which the churches were literally encumbered as time went on, proved a striking contrast to the comparative simplicity which characterised former days, as witnessed by a comparison of inventories. Moreover, the source of all this wealth and elaboration is another indication of the change that had come over the country. Benefactions to the Church are no longer contributed entirely, or at least chiefly, by the great nobles, but they are now the gifts of the burgher folk and middle classes, and this very profusion corresponds, according to the ideas and feelings of those days, to the abundant material comfort which from the early years of the last century to the present has specially characterised the English homes of modern times. In fact, the fifteenth century witnessed the beginnings of a great middle-class movement, which can be distinctly traced to the effect of the great pestilence, and which, whether for good or

for evil, was checked by the change of religion in the sixteenth century.

It is sufficient here to have indicated in the most general way the change which took place in the religious life of the English people and the new tendencies which manifested themselves. If the later religious history of the country is to be understood it is necessary to take this catastrophe, social and religious, as a starting-point, and to bring home to the mind the part the Black Death really played in the national history.

Merely to report what is said of England would tend to raise in the mind of the reader a certain incredulity. A short and rapid review has accordingly been made of the progress of the pestilence from Eastern Europe to these Western shores, and by this means the very distressing unanimity, even to definite forms of language, of writers who recorded events hundreds and even thousands of miles apart, brings home the reality of the catastrophe with irresistible force. The story, so far as England is concerned, is told at greater length, and the progress of the disease is followed as it swept from south to north and passed on to higher latitudes. The state of the country after the pestilence was over is then briefly described, and attention is called to some of the immediate results of the great plague, especially as bearing upon the Church life of the country.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE EPIDEMIC

The Great Pestilence, which first reached Europe in the autumn of 1347, is said to have originated in the East some three or four years previously. So far as actual history goes, however, the progress of the disease can be traced only from the ports of the Black Sea and possibly from those of the Mediterranean, to which traders along the main roads of commerce with Asiatic countries brought their merchandise for conveyance to the Western world. Reports at the time spoke of great earthquakes and other physical disturbances as having taken place in the far East, and these were said to have been accompanied by peculiar conditions of the atmosphere, and followed by a great mortality among the teeming populations of India and China. Pope Clement VI. was informed that the pestilence then raging at Avignon had had its origin in the East, and that, in the countries included under that vague name, the infection had spread so rapidly, and had proved to be so deadly, that the victims were calculated at the enormous, and no doubt exaggerated, number of nearly four-and-twenty millions.

A Prague chronicle speaks of the epidemic in the kingdoms of China, India, and Persia, and the contemporary historian, Matteo

Villani, reports its conveyance to Europe by Italian traders, who had fled before it from the ports on the eastern shores of the Black Sea. The same authority corroborates, by the testimony of one who had been an eye-witness in Asia, the reports of certain Genoese merchants as to earthquakes devastating the continent and pestilential fogs covering the land. "A venerable friar minor of Florence, now a bishop, declared," so says Villani, "that he was then in that part of the country at the city of Lamech, where by the violence of the shock part of the temple of Mahomet was thrown down."²

A quotation from Hecker's "Epidemics of the Middle Ages" will be a sufficient summary of what was reported of the plague in eastern countries before its arrival in Europe. "Cairo lost daily, when the plague was raging with its greatest violence, from 10 to 15,000, being as many as, in modern times, great plagues have carried off during their whole course. In China more than thirteen millions are said to have died, and this is in correspondence with the certainly exaggerated accounts from the rest of Asia. India was depopulated. Tartary, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia were covered with dead bodies; the Kurds fled in vain to the mountains. In Caramania and Cæsarea none were left alive. On the roads, in the camps, in the caravansaries unburied bodies were alone to be seen... In Aleppo 500 died daily; 22,000 people and most of the animals were carried off in Gaza within six weeks. Cyprus lost almost all its inhabitants;

² Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, xiv, col. 14.

and ships without crews were often seen in the Mediterranean, as afterwards in the North Sea, driving about and spreading the plague wherever they went ashore."³

There can be little doubt that the contagion was first spread by means of the great trade routes of the East. The lines of commerce of European countries with India, China, and Asiatic countries generally are first definitely described in 1321 by Marino Sanudo, a Venetian, in a work addressed to Pope John XXI., not thirty years before the outbreak of the pestilence.⁴ His object was to indicate the difficulties and dangers which then beset the traffic of the mercantile world with the East. In so doing he pointed out that the ancient centre of all trade with the far East was Bagdad. To and from this great depôt of Oriental merchandise all the caravan routes led; but, at the time when Sanudo wrote, the incursion of barbarian hordes into Central Asia had rendered trade along these roads difficult and unsafe. Two trading tracts are in particular named by the author as the chief lines of communication. One ran from Bagdad over the plains of Mesopotamia and Syria to Lycia,⁵ where the goods were purchased by the Italian merchants. This, the best known route, was the shortest by which the produce of China and India

³ *The Epidemics of the Middle Ages*, translated by B. G. Babington (Sydenham Society), p. 21.

⁴ Marinus Sanutus, *Liber secretorum Fidelium crucis super Terræ Sanctæ recuperatione et conversatione*, in Bongars, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, vol. ii.

⁵ The most southern part of Asiatic Turkey.

could be conveyed to the European markets; but in the fourteenth century it was the most perilous. The second route also started from Bagdad, and having followed the Tigris to its sources in Armenia, passed on either to Trebizond and other ports of the Black Sea, or taking the road from the Caspian, upon the other side of the Caucasus, passed to the Genoese and other flourishing Italian settlements in the Crimea.

A third route was, however, according to Sanudo, the most used in his day because the least dangerous. By it the produce of eastern lands was brought to Alexandria, whence, after having been heavily taxed by the Sultan, it was transported to Europe. Merchandise coming to Italy and other countries by this route from India was, according to the same authority, shipped from two ports of the peninsula, which he calls Mahabar⁶ and Cambeth.⁷ Thence it was conveyed to ports in the Persian Gulf, to the river Tigris, or to Aden, at the entrance of the Red Sea. From this last point a journey of nine days across the desert brought the caravans to a city called Chus⁸ on the Nile. Fifteen days more of river carriage, however, was required before the produce of the Eastern marts reached Cairo, or Babylon, as it was called by mediæval writers. From Cairo it was conveyed to Alexandria by canal.

These were the three chief routes by which communication

⁶ Probably Mahe, on the Malabar coast.

⁷ Now Cambay, in the Baroda Dominion to the north of Bombay.

⁸ Otherwise Kus, now Koos, in Upper Egypt, not far from Thebes.

between Asiatic countries and Europe was kept up, and the markets of the Western world supplied with the spices, gums, and silks of the East. It is more than probable that the great pestilence was conveyed to Europe by the trading caravans coming from the East by all these roads and by other similar lines of commerce. In the country along one of the trade routes, by which caravans reached the Italian ports established on the Crimea, it is certain that the plague was raging with great virulence in 1346, the year before its appearance in Europe. Moreover, Gabriele de' Mussi, a notary of Piacenza, and an eye-witness of the first outbreak of the plague in Upper Italy, has described the way in which the infection was conveyed in the ships of traders from Caffa,⁹ a Genoese settlement in the Crimea. This account will be found in the next chapter; and here it is only necessary to report what he gathered from the survivors about the outbreak of the plague among the Tartar tribes and its appearance at Caffa.¹⁰

⁹ Sometimes known as S. Feodosia. This port was by the beginning of the 14th century a most important trading settlement of Genoese merchants. In 1316 Pope John XXII issued a Bull making it the cathedral city of an extensive diocese. By the time of the outbreak of the great plague it had become the centre of almost all commerce between Asia and Europe (*Cf.* M. G. Canale, *Della Crimea, del suo commercio et dei suoi dominatori*, i, p. 208 *et seq.*)

¹⁰ The account of Gabriele de' Mussi, called *Ystoria de morbo seu mortalitate qui fuit a. 1348*, was first printed by Henschel, in Haeser's *Archiv für gesammte Medicin* (Jena) ii, 26–59. The editor claims that De' Mussi was actually present at Caffa during the Tartar siege, and came to Europe in the plague-stricken ships which conveyed the infection to Italy. Signor Tonomi, who in 1884 reprinted the *Ystoria* in the *Giornale Ligustico* (Genoa) vol. x (1883), p. 139 *seqq.*, has proved by the acts of the notaries of Piacenza that De' Mussi never quitted the city at this time, and his realistic narrative

"In the year 1346," he writes, "in eastern parts an immense number of Tartars and Saracens fell victims to a mysterious and sudden death. In these regions vast districts, numerous provinces, magnificent kingdoms, cities, castles, and villages, peopled by a great multitude, were suddenly attacked by the mortality, and in a brief space were depopulated. A place in the East called Tana, situated in a northerly direction from Constantinople and under the rule of the Tartars, to which Italian merchants much resorted, was besieged by a vast horde of Tartars and was in a short time taken."¹¹ The Christian merchants violently expelled from the city were then received for the protection of their persons and property within the walls of Caffa, which the Genoese had built in that country.

"The Tartars followed these fugitive Italian merchants, and, surrounding the city of Caffa, besieged it likewise.¹² Completely encircled by this vast army of enemies, the inhabitants were hardly able to obtain the necessaries of life, and their only hope lay in the fleet which brought them provisions. Suddenly 'the death,' as it was called, broke out in the Tartar host, and

must have been consequently derived from the accounts of others. From the same source Tononi has shown that De' Mussi acted as notary between A.D. 1300 and 1356, and was consequently born probably somewhere about 1280. He died in the first half of the year 1356.

¹¹ Tana was the port on the north-western shore of the sea of Azor, which was then known as the sea of Tana. The port is now Azor.

¹² De' Mussi says the siege lasted "three years." Tononi shows that this is clearly a mistake, and adduces it as additional evidence that the author was not himself at Caffa.

thousands were daily carried off by the disease, as if "arrows from heaven were striking at them and beating down their pride."

"At first the Tartars were paralysed with fear at the ravages of the disease, and at the prospect that sooner or later all must fall victims to it. Then they turned their vengeance on the besieged, and in the hope of communicating the infection to their Christian enemies, by the aid of the engines of war, they projected the bodies of the dead over the walls into the city. The Christian defenders, however, held their ground, and committed as many of these plague-infected bodies as possible to the waters of the sea.

"Soon, as might be supposed, the air became tainted and the wells of water poisoned, and in this way the disease spread so rapidly in the city that few of the inhabitants had strength sufficient to fly from it."¹³

The further account of Gabriele de' Mussi describing how a ship from Caffa conveyed the infection to Genoa, from which it spread to other districts and cities of Italy, must be deferred to the next chapter. Here a short space may be usefully devoted to a consideration of the disease itself, which proved so destructive to human life in every European country in the years 1348–1350. And, in the first place, it may be well to state that the name *Black Death*, by which the great pestilence is now generally known, not only in England, but elsewhere, is of comparatively

¹³ Gabriele de' Mussi, *Ystoria de Morbo*, in Haeser, *ut supra*.

modern origin.¹⁴ In no contemporary account of the epidemic is it called by that ominous title; at the time people spoke of it as "the pestilence," "the great mortality," "the death," "the plague of Florence," etc., and, apparently, not until some centuries later was it given the name of "the Black Death." This it seems to have first received in Denmark or Sweden, although it is doubtful whether the *atra mors* of Pontanus is equivalent to the English *Black Death*.¹⁵ It is hard to resist the impression that in England, at least, it was used as the recognised name for the epidemic of 1349 only after the pestilence of the 17th century had assumed to itself the title of the *Great Plague*. Whether the name *Black Death* was first adopted to express the universal state of mourning to which the disease reduced the people of all countries, or to mark the special characteristic symptoms of this epidemic, is, under the circumstances of its late origin, unimportant to determine.

The epidemic would appear to have been some form of the ordinary Eastern or bubonic plague. Together, however, with the usual characteristic marks of the common plague, there were certain peculiar and very marked symptoms, which, although not universal, are recorded very generally in European countries.

In its common form the disease showed itself in swellings and carbuncles under the arm and in the groin. These were either few and large – being at times as large as a hen's egg – or smaller

¹⁴ K. Lechner, *Das grosse Sterben in Deutschland* (Innsbruck, Wagner, 1884), p. 8.

¹⁵ J. J. Pontanus, *Rerum Danicarum Historia* (1631), p. 476.

and distributed over the body of the sufferer. In this the disease does not appear to have been different from the ordinary bubonic plague, which ravaged Europe during many centuries, and which is perhaps best known in England as so destructive to human life in the great plague of London in 1665. In this ordinary form it still exists in Eastern countries, and its origin is commonly traced to the method of burying the dead in vogue there.

The special symptoms characteristic of the plague of 1348–9 were four in number: —

- (1) Gangrenous inflammation of the throat and lungs;
- (2) Violent pains in the region of the chest;
- (3) The vomiting and spitting of blood; and
- (4) The pestilential odour coming from the bodies and breath of the sick.

In almost every detailed account by contemporary writers these characteristics are noted. And, although not all who were stricken with the disease manifested it in this special form, it is clear that, not only were many, and indeed vast numbers, carried off by rapid corruption of the lungs and blood-spitting, without any signs of swellings or carbuncles, but also that the disease was at the time regarded as most deadly and fatal in this special form. "From the carbuncles and glandular swellings," says a contemporary writer, "many recovered; from the blood-spitting none."¹⁶ Matteo Villani, one of the most exact writers about this plague at Florence, says that the sick "who began to vomit blood

¹⁶ See Lechner, *Das grosse Sterben*, p. 15. De' Mussi gives the same account.

quickly died;"¹⁷ whilst Gui de Chauliac, the Pope's physician at Avignon, who watched the course of the disease there and left the most valuable medical account of his observations, says that the epidemic was of two kinds. The first was marked by "constant fever and blood-spitting, and from this the patient died in three days;" the second was the well-known and less fatal bubonic plague.

The characteristic symptoms of this epidemic, noted in numerous contemporary accounts, appear to be identical with those of the disease known as malignant pustule of the lung; and it would appear probable that this outbreak of the plague must be distinguished from every other of which there is any record. "I express my profound conviction," writes an eminent French physician, "that the Black Death stands apart from all those which preceded or followed it. It ought to be classed among the great and new popular maladies."¹⁸

¹⁷ "Chi cominciavano a sputare sangue, morivano chi di subito." The contemporary chronicle of Parma by the Dominican John de Cornazano also notes the same: "Et fuit talis quod aliqui sani, si spuebant sanguinem, subito ibi moriebantur, nec erat ullum remedium" (*Monumenta historica ad provincias Parmensem et Placentinam pertinentia*, vol. v, p. 386).

¹⁸ Anglada, *Étude sur les Maladies Éteintes* (Paris, 1869), p. 416. The idea that this peculiar malady was altogether novel in character is confirmed by its specially malignant nature. According to a well-recognized law new epidemics are always most violent and fatal. The depopulation of the Fiji Islands by the measles is an instance of the way in which a comparatively mild disease may in its first attack upon a people prove terribly destructive. It is commonly thought that it has been the action of some new disease whereby the races which built the great prehistoric cities of Africa and America have been completely swept away.

Be that as it may, the disease, as will be subsequently seen in the accounts of those who lived at the time, showed itself in various ways. Some were struck suddenly, and died within a few hours; others fell into a deep sleep, from which they could not be roused; whilst others, again, were racked with a sleepless fever, and tormented with a burning thirst. The usual course of the sickness, when it first made its appearance, was from three to five days; but towards the close of the epidemic the recovery of those suffering from the carbuncular swellings was extended, as in the case of ordinary Eastern plague, over many months.¹⁹

¹⁹ The following account of an outbreak of disease somewhat similar to the "Black Death" appeared in the *British Medical Journal* of 5 November, 1892: – "An official report of the Governor-General of Turkestan, which has recently been published in St. Petersburg, states that that province has been severely visited by an epidemic of 'Black Death,' which followed upon the footsteps of cholera. On September 10 (22) it appeared suddenly at Askabad, and in six days it killed 1,303 persons in a population of 30,000. 'Black Death' has long been known in Western Asia as a scourge more deadly than the cholera or the plague. It comes suddenly, sweeping over a whole district like a pestilential simoon, striking down animals as well as men, and vanishes as suddenly as it came, before there is time to ascertain its nature or its mode of diffusion. The visit here referred to was no exception to this rule. After raging in Askabad for six days the epidemic ceased, leaving no trace of its presence but the corpses of its victims. These putrified so rapidly that no proper post-mortem could be made. The Governor-General gives some details as to the symptoms and course of the disease, which, though interesting as far as they go, do not throw much light on its pathology. The attack begins with rigors of intense severity, the patient shivering literally from head to foot; the rigors occur every five minutes for about an hour. Next an unendurable feeling of heat is complained of; the arteries become tense, and the pulse more and more rapid, while the temperature steadily rises. Unfortunately no thermometric readings or other precise data are given. Neither diarrhoea nor vomiting has been observed. Convulsions alternate with syncopal attacks, and the patients suffer intense pain. Suddenly the

Such is a brief account of the disease which devastated the world in the middle of the fourteenth century. Before following the course of the epidemic in Italy, to which it was conveyed, as De' Mussi relates, from the Crimea, some account of its ravages in Constantinople and in Sicily may be given. From the Crimea Constantinople lay upon the highway to the west. Italian ships crossing the Black Sea would naturally touch at this city, then the great centre of communication between the Eastern and Western Worlds. From the relation of De' Mussi it appears that Caffa, the plague-stricken Genoese city in the Crimea, besieged by the Tartars, was in communication by ship with countries from which it received supplies. To Constantinople, therefore, it seems not unlikely that the dreaded disease was conveyed by a ship coming from this plague centre in the Crimea. An account of the pestilence at the Imperial city has come from the pen of the Emperor John Cantacuzene, who was an eye-witness of what he reports. And although he adopted the language of Thucydides, about the plague of Athens, to describe his own experiences at Constantinople, he could hardly have done so had the description not been fairly faithful to the reality. "The epidemic which then (1347) raged in northern Scythia," he writes, "traversed almost the entire sea-coasts, whence it was carried over the world. For it invaded not only Pontus, Thrace, and Macedonia, but Greece,

extremities become stiff and cold, and in from 10 to 20 minutes the patient sinks into a comatose condition, which speedily ends in death. Immediately after he has ceased to breathe large black bullæ form on the body, and quickly spread over its surface. Decomposition takes place in a few minutes."

Italy, the Islands, Egypt, Lybia, Judea, Syria, and almost the entire universe."

The disease according to his account was incurable. Neither regularity of life nor bodily strength was any preservation against it. The strong and the weak were equally struck down; and death spared not those of whom care was taken, any more than the poor, destitute of all help. No other illness of any sort showed itself in this year; all sickness took the form of the prevalent disease. Medical science recognised that it was powerless before the foe. The course of the malady was not in all cases the same. Some people died suddenly, others during the course of a day, and some after but an hour's suffering. In the case of those who lingered for two or three days the attack commenced with a violent fever. Soon the poison mounted to the brain, and the sufferer lost the use of speech, became insensible to what was taking place about him, and appeared sunk in a deep sleep. If by chance he came to himself and tried to speak his tongue refused to move, and only a few inarticulate sounds could be uttered, as the nerves had been paralysed; then he died suddenly.

Others who fell sick under the disease were attacked first, not in the head, but in the lungs. The organs of respiration became quickly inflamed, sharp pains were experienced in the chest, blood was vomited, and the breath became fetid. The throat and tongue, burnt up by the excessive fever, became black and congested with blood. "Those who drank copiously experienced no more relief than those who drank but little."

Then, after describing the terrible sleeplessness and restlessness of some sufferers, and the plague spots which broke out over the body in most cases, the Emperor proceeds: – "The few who recovered had no second attack, or at least not of a serious nature." Even some of those who manifested all the symptoms recovered against every expectation. It is certain that no efficacious remedy has been discovered. What had been useful to one appeared a real poison to another. People who nursed the sick took their malady, and on this account the deaths multiplied to such an extent that many houses remained deserted, after all who had lived in them – even the domestic animals – had been carried off by the plague.

The profound discouragement of the sick was specially sad to behold. On the first symptoms of the attack men lost all hope of recovery, and gave themselves up as lost. This moral prostration quickly made them worse and accelerated the hour of their death.

It is impossible in words to give an idea of this malady. All that can be said is that it had nothing in common with the ills to which man is naturally subject, and that it was a chastisement sent by God Himself. By this belief many turned to better things and resolved to change their lives. I do not speak only of those who were swept away by the epidemic, but of those also who recovered and endeavoured to correct their vicious tendencies and devote themselves to the practice of virtue. A large number, too, before they were attacked distributed their goods to the poor, and there were none so insensible or hard-hearted when

attacked as not to show a profound sorrow for their faults so as to appear before the judgment seat of God with the best chances of salvation.

"Amongst the innumerable victims of the epidemic in Constantinople must be reckoned Andronicus, the Emperor's son, who died the third day. This young man was not only remarkable for his personal appearance, but was endowed in the highest degree with those qualities which form the chief adornment of youth; and everything about him testified that he would have followed nobly in the footsteps of his ancestors."

From Constantinople the Italian trading ships passed on towards their own country, everywhere spreading the terrible contagion. Their destinations were Genoa and Venice, as De' Mussi relates; but as the same authority says: "The sailors, as if accompanied by evil spirits, as soon as they approached the land, were death to those with whom they mingled." Thus the advent of the plague can be traced in the ports of the Adriatic in the autumn of 1347, and there can be little doubt that it was due to the arrival of ships bound from the East to Venice. Of the islands of the ocean, and particularly of Sicily, De' Mussi speaks as having been affected by the ships that were bound from the Crimea to Genoa. Of the plague in Sicily there exists a particular account by one who must have been a contemporary of the events he describes.²⁰ "A most deadly pestilence," he says, "sprang up over the entire island. It happened that in the

²⁰ A Franciscan friar, Michael Platiensis (of Piazza).

month of October, in the year of our Lord, 1347, about the beginning of the month, twelve Genoese ships, flying from the divine vengeance which our Lord for their sins had sent upon them, put into the port of Messina, bringing with them such a sickness clinging to their very bones that, did anyone speak to them, he was directly struck with a mortal sickness from which there was no escape." After detailing the terrible symptoms and describing the rapid spread of the infection, how the mere breath of the strangers poisoned those who conversed with them, how to touch or meddle with anything that belonged to them was to contract the fatal malady, he continues: "Seeing what a calamity of sudden death had come to them by the arrival of the Genoese, the people of Messina drove them in all haste from their city and port. But the sickness remained and a terrible mortality ensued. The one thought in the mind of all was how to avoid the infection. The father abandoned the sick son; magistrates and notaries refused to come and make the wills of the dying; even the priests to hear their confessions. The care of those stricken fell to the Friars Minor, the Dominicans and members of other orders, whose convents were in consequence soon emptied of their inhabitants. Corpses were abandoned in empty houses, and there was none to give them Christian burial. The houses of the dead were left open and unguarded with their jewels, money, and valuables; if anyone wished to enter, there was no one to prevent him. The great pestilence came so suddenly that there was no time to organise any measures of protection; from the

very beginning the officials were too few, and soon there were none. The population deserted the city in crowds; fearing even to stay in the environs, they camped out in the open air in the vineyards, whilst some managed to put up at least a temporary shelter for their families. Others, again, trusting in the protection of the virgin, blessed Agatha, sought refuge in Catania, whither the Queen of Sicily had gone, and where she directed her son, Don Frederick, to join her. The Messinese, in the month of November, persuaded the Patriarch²¹ Archbishop of Catania to allow the relics of the Saint to be taken to their city, but the people refused to permit them to leave their ancient resting place. Processions and pilgrimages were organised to beg God's favour. Still the pestilence raged and with greater fury. Everyone was in too great a terror to aid his neighbour. Flight profited nothing, for the sickness, already contracted and clinging to the fugitives, was only carried wherever they sought refuge. Of those who fled some fell on the roads and dragged themselves to die in the fields, the woods, or the valleys. Those who reached Catania breathed their last in the hospitals. At the demand of the terrified populace the Patriarch forbade, under pain of excommunication, the burial of any of these Messina refugees within the city, and their bodies were all thrown into deep pits outside the walls.

"What shall I say more?" adds the historian. "So wicked and timid were the Catanians that they refused even to speak to

²¹ The Archbishop was a member of the Order of St. Francis, and had been created Patriarch of Antioch.

any from Messina, or to have anything to do with them, but quickly fled at their approach. Had it not been for secret shelter afforded by some of their fellow citizens, resident in the town, the unfortunate refugees would have been left destitute of all human aid." The contagion, however, was already spread, and the plague soon became rife. The same scenes were enacted at Catania as before in Messina. The Patriarch, desiring to provide for the souls of the people, gave to the priests, even the youngest, all the faculties he himself possessed, both episcopal and patriarchal, for absolving sins. "The pestilence raged in the city from October, 1347, to April, 1348, and the Patriarch himself, Gerard Otho, of the Order of St. Francis, fell a victim to his duty, and was one of the last to be carried off by the disease. Duke John, who had sought security by avoiding every infected house and person, died of the disease at the same time. The plague was spread in the same way from Messina throughout Sicily; Syracuse, Girgenti, Sciacca, and Trapani were successively attacked; in particular it raged in the district of Trapani, in the extreme west of the island, which," says the writer, "has remained almost without population."²²

Having briefly noticed the origin of the great pestilence which ravaged Europe in the fourteenth century, and its progress towards Italy, the story of Gabriel de' Mussi may again be taken up at the point where he describes the flight of the

²² Gregorio (R.), *Bibliotheca Scriptorum qui res in Sicilia gestas retulere*, tom. i, p. 562 seqq. The historian wrote probably not later than A.D. 1361.

Genoese traders from the Crimea. The narrative has so far anticipated his account only by giving the history of the epidemic in Constantinople and Sicily.

CHAPTER II.

THE EPIDEMIC IN ITALY

The great sickness reached Italy in the early days of 1348. The report at Avignon at the time was that three plague-stricken vessels had put into the port of Genoa in January, whilst from another source it would appear that at the same time another ship brought the contagion from the East to Venice. From these two places the epidemic quickly spread over the entire country. What happened in the early days of this frightful scourge is best told in the actual words of Gabriel de' Mussi, who possessed special means of knowledge, and who has until quite recently been looked upon, but incorrectly, as a passenger by one of the very vessels which brought the plague from the Crimea to Genoa. The history of the progress of the plague may be gathered from the pages of the detailed chronicles, which at that time recorded the principal events in the various large and prosperous cities of the Italian peninsula, as well as from the well-known account of the straits to which Florence was reduced by the sickness, given in the introduction to the "Decameron" of Boccaccio.

On reviewing in detail the testimonies from every land relating to this great calamity, it is impossible to overlook the sameness of the terms in which writers the most diverse in character, and in places far distant from one another, describe what

passed before their eyes. It has already been remarked that the imperial historian, John Cantacuzene, in recounting the horrors of the plague in Constantinople, has borrowed from Thucydides. But the same ideas, the very same words, suggest themselves involuntarily to one and all. The simple monastic annalist of the half-buried cloister in Engelberg, the more courtly chronicler of St. Denis, the notary who writes with the dryness and technicalities of his profession, but displays withal a weakness for rhetoric and gossip, *littérateurs* like Boccaccio, whose *forte* is narrative, or like Petrarch, delighting in a show of words, the business-like town chronicler of an Italian city, and the author who aspires to the rank of historian, the physician whose interest is professional, even the scribbler who takes this strange theme as the subject for his jingling verse, all speak with such complete oneness of expression that it would almost seem that each had copied his neighbour, and that there is here a fine theme for the scientific amusement known as "investigation of sources." It is only when we come to examine the whole body of evidence that there is borne in upon the mind a realisation of the nature of a calamity which, spreading everywhere, was everywhere the same in its horrors, becoming thus nothing less than a world-wide tragedy, and it is seen that even the phrases of the rhetorician can do no more than rise to the terrible reality of fact.

First in importance, as well as in order of time, comes the testimony of De' Mussi, the substance of which is here given. It so happened that when the ships left Caffa – some bound for

Genoa, some for Venice, and some to other parts of the Christian world – a few of the sailors were already infected by the fatal disease. One sick man was enough to infect the whole household, and the corpse as it was carried to the grave brought death to its bearers. "Tell, O Sicily, and ye, the many islands of the sea, the judgments of God. Confess, O Genoa, what thou hast done, since we of Genoa and Venice are compelled to make God's chastisement manifest. Alas! our ships enter the port, but of a thousand sailors hardly ten are spared. We reach our homes; our kindred and our neighbours come from all parts to visit us. Woe to us for we cast at them the darts of death! Whilst we spoke to them, whilst they embraced us and kissed us, we scattered the poison from our lips. Going back to their homes, they in turn soon infected their whole families, who in three days succumbed, and were buried in one common grave. Priests and doctors visiting the sick returned from their duties ill, and soon were numbered with the dead. O, death! cruel, bitter, impious death! which thus breaks the bonds of affection and divides father and mother, brother and sister, son and wife.

"Lamenting our misery, we feared to fly, yet we dared not remain." The terror increased when it was found that even the effects and clothes of the dead were capable of communicating the disease. This was seen in the case of four soldiers at a place near Genoa. Returning to their camp they carried back with them a woollen bed-covering they had found in a house at Rivarolo, on the sea-coast, where the sickness had swept away the entire

population. The night following the four slept under the coverlet, and in the morning all were found to be dead. At Genoa the plague spared hardly a seventh part of the population. At Venice it is said that more than seventy died out of every hundred, and out of four-and-twenty excellent doctors twenty were soon carried off by the sickness.

"But as an inhabitant I am asked to write more of Piacenza so that it may be known what happened there in the year 1348. Some Genoese who fled from the plague raging in their city betook themselves hither. They rested at Bobbio, and there sold the merchandise they had brought with them. The purchaser and their host, together with all his family and many neighbours, were quickly stricken with the sickness and died. One of these, wishing to make his will, called a notary, his confessor, and the necessary witnesses. The next day all these were buried together. So greatly did the calamity increase that nearly all the inhabitants of Bobbio soon fell a prey to the sickness, and there remained in the town only the dead.

"In the spring of 1348 another Genoese infected with the plague came to Piacenza. He sought out his friend Fulchino della Croce, who took him into his house. Almost immediately afterwards he died, and the said Fulchino was also quickly carried off with his entire family and many of his neighbours. In a brief space the plague was rife throughout the city. I know not where to begin; everywhere there was weeping and mourning. So great was the mortality that men hardly dared to breathe. The dead

were without number, and those who still lived gave themselves up as lost, and prepared for the tomb.

"The cemeteries failing, it was necessary to dig trenches to receive the bodies of the dead. It frequently happened that a husband and wife, a father and son, a mother and daughter – nay, whole families – were cast together in the same pit.

"It was the same in the neighbouring towns and villages. One Oberto di Sasso, who had come one day from an infected place to the church of the Friars Minor to make his will, called thither a notary, witnesses, and neighbours. All these, together with others, to the number of more than sixty, died within a short space of time. Also the religious man, friar Sifredo de' Bardi, of the convent and order of Preachers, a man of prudence and great learning, who had visited our Lord's sepulchre, died with twenty-three other members of his order and convent. Also the learned and virtuous friar Bertolin Coxadocha, of Piacenza, of the order of Minorites, with four-and-twenty members of his community was carried off. So too of the convent of Augustinian Hermits – seven; of the Carmelites – seven; of the Servites of Mary – four, and more than sixty dignitaries and rectors of churches in the city and district of Piacenza died. Of nobles, too, many; of young people a vast number."

De' Mussi then proceeds to give examples of the scenes daily passing before his eyes in the plague-stricken cities of northern Italy. The sick man lay languishing alone in his house and no one came near him. Those most dear to him, regardless of the

ties of kindred or affection, withdrew themselves to a distance; the doctor did not come to him, and even the priest with fear and trembling administered the Sacraments of the Church. Men and women, racked with the consuming fever, pleaded – but in vain – for a draught of water, and uselessly raved for someone to watch at their bedside. The father or the wife would not touch the corpse of child or husband to prepare it for the grave, or follow it thither. No prayer was said, nor solemn office sung, nor bell tolled for the funeral of even the noblest citizen; but by day and night the corpses were borne to the common plague-pit without rite or ceremony. The doors of the houses now desolate and empty remained closed, and no one cared, nor, indeed, dared to enter.

Such is the picture of the effect of the malady and the terrible mortality caused by it drawn by one who seems to have seen its first introduction into Italy, and who certainly had the best opportunity of early observing its rapid progress. It might, perhaps, be thought that his description of the horrors of the infected cities was over-coloured and the creation of his imagination. But in the details it bears on the surface the stamp of truth, and in its chief characteristics it is confirmed by too many independent witnesses in other parts of Italy, and even in Europe generally, to leave a doubt that it corresponded to the literal reality.

What happened at Florence is well-known through the graphic description of Boccaccio. So terrible was the mortality in that

prosperous city that the very outbreak became for a time known in Europe as the "Pestilence of Florence." In the spring of the previous year (1347) a severe famine had been experienced, and some 94,000 people had been in receipt of State relief, whilst about 4,000 are supposed to have perished of starvation in the city²³ and its neighbourhood. The people, enfeebled by previous hardships, would naturally fall a prey more easily to the poison of the epidemic. In April, 1348, the dreaded infection began to show itself. "To cure the malady," writes Boccaccio, "neither medical knowledge nor the power of drugs was of any avail, whether because the disease was in its own nature mortal, or that the physicians (the number of whom – taking quacks and women pretenders into account – was grown very great) could form no just idea of the cause, nor consequently ground a true method of cure; of those attacked few or none escaped, but they generally died the third day from the first appearance of the symptoms, without a fever or other form of illness manifesting itself. The disease was communicated by the sick to those in health and seemed daily to gain head and increase in violence, just as fire will do by casting fresh fuel on it. The contagion was communicated not only by conversation with those sick, but also by approaching them too closely, or even by merely handling their clothes or anything they had previously touched.

"What I am going to relate is certainly marvellous, and, had I not seen it with my own eyes, and were there not many witnesses

²³ Sismondi, *Histoire des Républiques Italiennes du Moyen Age*, vi, p. 11.

to attest its truth besides myself, I should not venture to recount it, whatever the credit of persons who had informed me of it. Such, I say, was the deadly character of the pestilential matter, that it passed the infection not only from man to man; but, what is more wonderful, and has been often proved, anything belonging to those sick with the disease, if touched by any other creature, would certainly affect and even kill it in a short space of time. One instance of this kind I took special note of, namely, the rags of a poor man just dead having been thrown into the street, two hogs came by at the time and began to root amongst them, shaking them in their jaws. In less than an hour they fell down and died on the spot.

"Strange were the devices resorted to by the survivors to secure their safety. Divers as were the means, there was one feature common to all, selfish and uncharitable as it was – the avoidance of the sick, and of everything that had been near them; men thought only of themselves.

"Some held it was best to lead a temperate life and to avoid every excess. These making up parties together, and shutting themselves up from the rest of the world, ate and drank moderately of the best, diverting themselves with music and such other entertainments as they might have at home, and never listening to news from without which might make them uneasy. Others maintained that free living was a better preservative, and would gratify every passion and appetite. They would drink and revel incessantly in tavern after tavern, or in those private houses

which, frequently found deserted by the owners, were therefore open to anyone; but they yet studiously avoided, with all their irregularity, coming near the infected. And such at that time was the public distress that the laws, human and divine, were not regarded, for the officers to put them in force being either dead, sick, or without assistants, everyone did just as he pleased."

Another class of people chose a middle course. They neither restricted themselves to the diet of the former nor gave way to the intemperance of the latter; but eating and drinking what their appetites required, they went about everywhere with scents and nosegays to smell at, since they looked upon the whole atmosphere as tainted with the effluvia arising from the dead bodies.

"Others, again, of a more callous disposition declared, as perhaps the safest course in the extremity, that the only remedy was in flight. Persuaded, therefore, of this, and thinking only of themselves, great numbers of men and women left the city, their goods, their house, and kindred, and fled into the country parts; as if the wrath of God had been restricted to a visitation of those only within the city walls, and hence none should remain in the doomed place.

"But different as were the courses pursued, the sickness fell upon all these classes without distinction; neither did all of any class die, nor did all escape; and they who first set the example of forsaking others now languished themselves where there was no one to take pity on them. I pass by the little regard that citizens

and distant relations showed one to the other, for the terror was such that brother even fled from brother, wife from husband, nay, the parent from her own child. The sick could obtain help only from the few who still obeyed the law of charity, or from hired servants who demanded extravagant wages and were fit for little else than to hand what was asked for, and to note when the patient died. Even such paid helpers were scarce, and their desire of gain frequently cost them their lives. The rich passed out of this world without a single person to aid them; few had the tears of friends at their departure. The corpse was attended to the grave only by fellows hired for the purpose, who would put the bier on their shoulders and hurry with it to the nearest church, where it was consigned to the tomb without any ceremony whatever, and wherever there was room.

"With regard to the lower classes, and, indeed, in the case of many of the middle rank of life, the scenes enacted were sadder still. They fell sick by thousands, and, having no one whatever to attend them, most of them died. Some breathed their last in the streets, others shut up in their own houses, when the effluvia which came from their corpses was the first intimation of their deaths. An arrangement was now made for the neighbours, assisted by such bearers as they could get, to clear the houses, and every morning to lay the bodies of the dead at their doors. Thence the corpses were carried to the grave on a bier, two or three at a time. There was no one to follow, none to shed tears, for things had come to such a pass that men's lives were no more

thought of than those of beasts. Even friends would laugh and make themselves merry, and women had learned to consider their own lives before everything else.

"Consecrated ground no longer sufficed, and it became necessary to dig trenches, into which the bodies were put by hundreds, laid in rows as goods packed in a ship; a little earth was cast upon each successive layer until the pits were filled to the top. The adjacent country presented the same picture as the city; the poor distressed labourers and their families, without physicians, and without help, languished on the highways, in the fields, in their own cottages, dying like cattle rather than human beings. The country people, like the citizens, grew dissolute in their manners and careless of everything. They supposed that each day might be their last; and they took no care nor thought how to improve their substance, or even to utilise it for present support. The flocks and herds, when driven from their homes, would wander unwatched through the forsaken harvest fields, and were left to return of their own accord, if they would, at the approach of night."

Between March and the July following it was estimated that upwards of a hundred thousand souls had perished in the city alone.

"What magnificent dwellings," the writer continues, "what stately palaces, were then rendered desolate, even to the last inhabitant! How many noble families became extinct! What riches, what vast possessions were left with no known heir to

inherit them! What numbers of both sexes, in the prime and vigour of youth, whom in the morning Galen, Hippocrates, or Æsculapius himself, would have declared in perfect health, after dining heartily with their friends here, have supped with their departed friends in another world."²⁴

It might perhaps be suspected that this description of Boccaccio as to the terrible nature of the plague in Florence was either a fancy picture of his imagination or intended merely as a rhetorical introduction to the tales told in the "Decameron," with only a slender foundation of fact. Unfortunately other authorities are forthcoming to confirm the graphic relation of the Florentine poet in all its details. Amongst others who were carried off by the pestilence in Florence was the renowned historian, Giovanni Villani. His work was taken up by his brother Matteo, who commences his annals with an account of the epidemic. So terrible did the destruction of human life appear to him that he tells his readers that no greater catastrophe had fallen on the world since the universal Deluge. According to his testimony, it involved the whole of the Italian peninsula, with the exception of Milan and some Alpine districts of northern Lombardy. In each place visited by the scourge it lasted five months, and everywhere Christian parents abandoned their children and kinsfolk, in as callous a way as "might perhaps be expected from infidels and savages." As regards Florence, whilst some few devoted themselves to the care of the sick, many fled from

²⁴ "The Decameron," Introduction.

the plague-stricken city. The epidemic raged there from April till September, 1348, and it is the opinion of Villani that three out of every five persons in the city and neighbourhood fell victims to it. As to the effect of the scourge on the survivors, the historian records that whilst it would naturally have been expected that men, impressed by so terrible a chastisement, would have become better, the very contrary was the fact. Work, too, was given over, and "men gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the worldly riches to which they had succeeded." Idleness, dissolute morals, sins of gluttony, banquets, revels in taverns, unbridled luxury, fickleness in dress and constant changes according to whim, such were the characteristic marks of the well-to-do Italian citizens when the plague had passed. And the poor, also, Villani states, became idle and unwilling to work, considering that when so many had been carried off by the pestilence there could not but be an abundance for those whom Providence had spared.²⁵

The same story is told in all the contemporary chronicles of Italian cities. At Pisa the terrible mortality lasted till September, 1348, and there were few families that did not reckon two or three of their members among the dead. Many names are said to have been completely wiped off from the roll of the living. At least a hundred each week were carried to the grave in the city, whilst those who had been bold enough to watch at the death-bed of a relation or friend appealed in vain to passers-by to aid

²⁵ Muratori, *Scriptores*, xiv, coll. 11–15.

them to bury the corpse. "Help us to bear this body to the pit," they cried, "so that we in our turn may deserve to find some to carry us." The awful suddenness of the death often inflicted by the scourge is noted by the author of the "Chronicle of Pisa," in common with nearly every writer of this period. Men who in the morning were apparently well had before evening been carried to the grave.²⁶

A Paduan chronicler, writing at the time, notes that one sick man as a rule infected the house in which he lay, so that once the sickness entered into a dwelling all were seized by it, "even the animals." To Padua a stranger brought the sickness, and in a brief space the whole city was suffering from it. Hardly a third of the population was left after the scourge had passed.²⁷ At Siena, according to Di Tura, a contemporary chronicler, the plague commenced in April and lasted till October, 1348. All who could fled from the stricken city. In May, July, and August so many died that neither position nor money availed to procure porters to carry the dead to the public pits. "And I, Agniolo di Tura," writes this author, "carried with my own hands my five little sons to the pit; and what I did many others did likewise." All expected death, and people generally said, and believed, that the end of the world had certainly come. In Siena and its neighbourhood, according to Di Tura, about 80,000 people were thought to have

²⁶ Muratori, *Scriptores*, xv. 1021.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xii, 926.

died in these seven months.²⁸

At Orvieto the plague began in May. Some 500 died in a very short space of time, many of them suddenly; the shops remained closed, and business and work was at a standstill. Here it ran its usual five months' course, and finished in September, when many families were found to have become extinct.²⁹ At Rimini it was noticed that the poor were the first to be attacked and the chief sufferers. The sickness first showed itself on May 15th, 1348, and only died out in the following December, when, according to the computation of the chronicler, two out of three of the inhabitants had been swept away.³⁰

An anonymous contemporary Italian writer describes the sickness as a "swift and sharp fever, with blood-spitting, carbuncle or fistula." Only the few, he says, recovered when once stricken with the disease. The sick visibly infected with their corruption the healthy, even by talking with them; for from this mere conversing with the sick an infinite number of men and women died and are buried. "And here," says the writer, "I can give my testimony. A certain man bled me, and the blood

²⁸ *Ibid.* xv, 123. At this period the population at Siena was more than 100,000, and it had been determined to proceed with the building of the vast Cathedral according to the designs of Lando Orefice. The work was hardly undertaken when the plague of 1348 broke out in the city. The operations were suspended, and the money which had been collected for the purpose was devoted to necessary public works (G. Gigli, *Diario Senese*, ii, 428).

²⁹ Muratori, *Scriptores* xv, 653.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 902.

flowing touched his face. On that same day he was taken ill, and the next he died; and by the mercy of God I have escaped. I note this because, as by mere communication with the sick the plague infected mortally the healthy, the father afterwards avoided his stricken son, the brother his brother, the wife her husband, and so in each case the man in health studiously avoided the sick. Priests and doctors even fled in fear from those ill, and all avoided the dead. In many places and houses when an inmate died the rest quickly, one after another, expired. And so great was the overwhelming number of the dead that it was necessary to open new cemeteries in every place. In Venice there were almost 100,000 dead, and so great was the multitude of corpses everywhere that few attended any funeral or dirge... This pestilence did not cease in the land from February till the feast of All Saints (November 1st, 1348), and the offices of the dead were chanted only by the voices of boys; which boys, without learning, and by rote only, sang the office walking through the streets." The writer then notices the general dissoluteness which ensued after the disease, and its effect in lowering the standard of probity and morals.³¹

To the terrible accounts given by De' Mussi of the state of plague-stricken Genoa and Piacenza, and that of Boccaccio, of the ravages of the pestilence in the city of Florence, may be well added the eloquent letters of the poet Petrarch, in which he laments the overwhelming catastrophe, as he experienced

³¹ *Ibid.*, xvi, 286.

it in the town of Parma. Here, as in so many other places, the inhabitants vainly endeavoured to prevent the entry of the disease by forbidding all intercourse with the suffering cities of Florence, Venice, Genoa and Pisa. The measures taken to isolate Parma appear to have been, at least, for a time, successful, as the dreaded plague apparently did not make its appearance till the beginning of June, 1348.³² But in the six months during which it lasted it desolated the entire neighbourhood. In Parma and Reggio many thousands, estimated roundly at 40,000, were carried off by it.³³ Petrarch was at this period a canon of the cathedral of Parma, and had made the acquaintance at Avignon of Laura, who quickly became the object of his admiration as a typical Christian mother of a family, and as a fitting subject to inspire his poetic muse. Laura died at Avignon, one of the many who fell victims to the great pestilence which was then raging in that city. The letter written by a friend named Louis to inform Petrarch of this death found him at Parma on May 19th, 1348.³⁴ A month later the poet wrote to Avignon in the most heart-broken language to his brother, a religious at Monriex, and the only survivor of a convent of five-and-thirty.³⁵ "My brother! my brother! my brother," he wrote. "A new beginning to a letter, though used by Marcus Tullius fourteen hundred years ago. Alas!

³² A. Pezzana, *Storia della città di Parma*, vol. i, p. 12.

³³ *Historiæ Parmensis Fragmenta*, in Muratori, *Scriptores*, xii, 746.

³⁴ T. Michelet, *Histoire de France*, iv, p. 238.

³⁵ A. Phillippe, *Histoire de la Peste Noire* (Paris, 1853), p. 103.

my beloved brother, what shall I say? How shall I begin? Whither shall I turn? On all sides is sorrow; everywhere is fear. I would, my brother, that I had never been born, or, at least, had died before these times. How will posterity believe that there has been a time when without the lightnings of heaven or the fires of earth, without wars or other visible slaughter, not this or that part of the earth, but well-nigh the whole globe, has remained without inhabitants.

"When has any such thing been ever heard or seen; in what annals has it ever been read that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead, and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole earth? Consult your historians, they are silent; question your doctors, they are dumb; seek an answer from your philosophers, they shrug their shoulders and frown, and with their fingers to their lips bid you be silent.

"Will posterity ever believe these things when we, who see, can scarcely credit them? We should think we were dreaming if we did not with our eyes, when we walk abroad, see the city in mourning with funerals, and returning to our home, find it empty, and thus know that what we lament is real.

"Oh, happy people of the future, who have not known these miseries and perchance will class our testimony with the fables. We have, indeed, deserved these (punishments) and even greater; but our forefathers also have deserved them, and may our posterity not also merit the same."

Then, after saying that the universal misery is enough to make one think that God has ceased to have a care for His creatures, and putting this thought aside as blasphemy, the writer continues: "But whatever the causes and however hidden, the effects are manifest. To turn from public to private sorrows; the first part of the second year is passed since I returned to Italy. I do not ask you to look back any further; count these few days, and think what we were and what we are. Where are now our pleasant friends? Where the loved faces? Where their cheering words? Where their sweet and gentle conversation? We were surrounded by a crowd of intimates, now we are almost alone."

Speaking of one special friend, Paganinus of Milan, Petrarch writes: "He was suddenly seized in the evening by the pestilential sickness. After supping with friends he spent some time in conversation with me, in the enjoyment of our common friendship and in talking over our affairs. He passed the night bravely in the last agony, and in the morning was carried off by a swift death. And, that no horror should be wanting, in three days his sons and all his family had followed him to the tomb."³⁶

In other towns of Italy the same tragedy, as told in the words of Boccaccio and Petrarch, was being enacted during the early spring and the summer months of 1348. At Venice, where the pestilence obtained an early foothold, and the position of which rendered it particularly susceptible to infection, the mortality was so great that it was represented by the round numbers of 100,000

³⁶ *Epistolæ Familiares* (Ed. 1601), lib. viii, pp. 290–303.

souls.³⁷

Signor Cecchetti's researches into the history of the medical faculty at Venice at this period furnish many interesting details as to the spread of the sickness.³⁸ Although surgeons were not allowed by law to practise medicine, so great was the need during the prevalence of the dread mortality that one surgeon, Andrea di Padova, was allowed to have saved the lives of more than a hundred people by his timely assistance.³⁹ In the 14th century Venice was troubled by the plague some fifteen times, but that of 1348 was "the great epidemic" – "the horrible mortality" – to the chroniclers of the time. For a long period after, public and other documents make it the excuse for all kinds of irregularities.⁴⁰ The diplomas of merit bestowed upon doctors who remained faithful to their posts by the authorities of Venice speak of death following upon the first infection within a very short space of time. So depopulated was the city that it might be said no one was left in it. Many doctors fled, others shut themselves in their houses. Artisans and even youths undertook the duties of physicians, and helped numbers to recover.⁴¹

On Sunday, March 30th, 1348, the Great Council of Venice

³⁷ Muratori, *Scriptores*, xii, 926.

³⁸ See his article *La Medicina in Venezia nel 1300* in *Archivio Veneto*, tom. xxv, p. 361, *seqq.*

³⁹ p. 369.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

chose a commission of three to watch over the public safety. These a few days later ordered deep pits to be made in one of the islands to receive the bodies of those who died in the hospitals and of the poor, and to convey them thither, ships were appointed to be always in waiting.

The rich fled from the place; officials could not be found, and the Great Council was so reduced that the legal number for transacting business could not be got together. Notaries died in great numbers, and the prisons were thrown open.⁴² When the epidemic had ceased the Senate had great difficulty in finding three doctors for the city. On January 12th, 1349, Marco Leon, a capable physician, and a native of Venice, who was in practice at Perugia, offered to return to his own city "since," as he says, "it has pleased God by the terrible mortality to leave our native place so destitute of upright and capable doctors that it may be said not one has been left."⁴³

Details of a similar nature might be multiplied from the contemporary Italian records. What has been here given, however, will enable the reader to form some estimate of the nature of the terrible disease and of the extent of the universal devastation of the Italian peninsula. The annals relate that in every city, castle, and town death and desolation reigned supreme. In most places, as in Pisa, for example, law and order became things of the past; the administration of justice was

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

impossible; criminals of every kind did what they best pleased,⁴⁴ and for a considerable time after the plague had passed the Courts of Law were occupied in disputes over the possessions of the dead. When the wave of pestilence had rolled on to other lands there came in its wake famine and general distress in Italy, but strangely accompanied with the lavish expenditure of those who considered that, where so many had died, there should be enough and to spare of worldly goods for such as were left. The land lay uncultivated and the harvest was unreaped. Provisions and other necessities of life became dear. Markets ceased to be held, and cities and towns devoid of inhabitants were spectacles of decay and desolation. It is said, and there does not appear to be reason to doubt the statement, in view of the many contemporary accounts of the disaster, that at least one half of the general population of Italy were swept away by the scourge. This relation of the horrors of the year 1348 in Italy may be closed by the account left us of some students from Bohemia, who at this time journeyed back to their country from Bologna.

"At this time," says a chronicle of Prague, "some students, coming from Bologna into Bohemia, saw that in most of the cities and castles they passed through few remained alive, and in some all were dead. In many houses also those who had escaped with their lives were so weakened by the sickness that one could not give another a draught of water, nor help him in any way, and so passed their time in great affliction and distress. Priests,

⁴⁴ Roncioni, *Istorie Pisane* in *Archivio Storico Italiano*, iv, 808.

too, ministering the sacraments, and doctors medicines, to the sick were infected by them and died, and so many passed out of this life without confession or the sacraments of the Church, as the priests were dead. There were generally made great, broad and deep pits in which the bodies of the dead were buried. In many places, too, the air was more infected and more deadly than poisoned food, from the corruption of the corpses, since there was no one left to bury them. Of the foresaid students, moreover, only one returned to Bohemia, and his companions all died on the journey."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Chronicon Pragense*, ed. Loserth in *Fontes rerum Austriacarum, Scriptores*, vol. i, p. 395.

CHAPTER III.

PROGRESS OF THE PLAGUE IN FRANCE

Almost simultaneously with the outbreak of the pestilence in Italy it obtained a foothold in the South of France. According to a contemporary account, written at Avignon in 1348, the disease was brought into Marseilles by one of the three Genoese ships, which had been compelled to leave the port of Genoa when the inhabitants discovered that by their means the dreaded plague had already commenced its ravages in their city. It would consequently appear most likely that the mortality began in Marseilles somewhere about the first days of January, 1348, although one account places the commencement of the sickness as early as All Saints' Day (November 1), 1347.⁴⁶ The number of deaths in this great southern port of France fully equalled that of the populous cities of Italy. In a month the sickness is said to have carried off 57,000 of the inhabitants of Marseilles and its neighbourhood.⁴⁷ One chronicle says that "the Bishop, with the entire chapter of the cathedral, and nearly all the friars, Preachers and Minorites, together with two-thirds of

⁴⁶ Labbe, *Nova Bibliotheca Manuscriptorum*, i, p. 343.

⁴⁷ C. Anglada, *Étude sur les Maladies Éteintes*, p. 432.

the inhabitants, perished" at this time; and adds that upon the sea might be seen ships, laden with merchandise, driven about hither and thither by the waves, the steersman and every sailor having been carried off by the disease.⁴⁸ Another, speaking of Marseilles after the pestilence had passed, says that "so many died that it remained like an uninhabited place."⁴⁹ It is of interest to record that amongst the survivors there was an English doctor, William Grisant, of Merton College, Oxford. He had studied medicine at the then celebrated school of Montpellier, and was in practice at Marseilles during the visitation of the great plague of 1348, dying two years later, in 1350.⁵⁰

At Montpellier the ravages were, if possible, even greater. Of the twelve magistrates, or consuls, ten died, and in the numerous monasteries scarcely one religious was spared. The Dominicans here were very numerous, numbering some 140 members, and of these seven only are said to have been left alive.⁵¹ Simon de Covino, a doctor, of Paris, who probably witnessed the course of the disease at Montpellier, wrote an account of his experiences in a poetical form in 1350. The moral of his verse is the same as Boccaccio's, and the chief interest lies in the fact that, like

⁴⁸ Matthias Nuewenburgensis in Boehmer, *Fontes rerum Germanicarum*, iv, p. 261.

⁴⁹ Henricus Rebdorfensis, *Ibid.*, p. 560. Another account speaks of Marseilles remaining afterwards almost "depopulated," and of "thousands dying in the adjoining towns" (*Chronicon Pragense*, in *Fontes rerum Austriacarum, Scriptores*, i, p. 395).

⁵⁰ J. Astruc, *Histoire de la Faculté de Médecine de Montpellier* (Montpellier, 1862), p. 184.

⁵¹ Anglada, *ut supra*, p. 432.

the Italian poet, Covino was an eye-witness of what he relates, whilst his medical training makes his testimony as to the chief characteristics of the disease specially important. The name he gives to the malady is the *pestis inguinaris*, or bubonic plague of the East. He describes a burning pain, beginning under the arms, or in the groin, and extending to the regions of the heart. A mortal fever then spread to the vital parts; the heart, lungs, and breathing passages were chiefly affected, the strength fell quickly, and the person so stricken was unable to fight any length of time against the poison.

One very singular effect of the disease is noted by the author: – "The pestilence," he asserts, "stamped itself upon the entire population. Faces became pale, and the doom which threatened the people was marked upon their foreheads. It was only necessary to look into the countenances of men and women to read there recorded the blow which was about to fall; a marked pallor announced the approach of the enemy, and before the fatal day the sentence of death was written unmistakably on the face of the victims. No climate appeared to have any effect upon the strange malady. It appeared to be stayed neither by heat nor cold. High and healthy situations were as much subject to it as damp and low places. It spread during the colder season of winter as rapidly as in the heat of the summer months."

About the contagious nature of the epidemic there could be no doubt. "It has been proved," wrote Covino, "that when it once entered a house scarcely one of those who dwelt in it escaped."

The contagion was so great that one sick person, so to speak, would "infect the whole world." "A touch, even a breath, was sufficient to transmit the malady." Those who were obliged to render ordinary assistance to the sick fell victims. "It happened also that priests, those sacred physicians of souls, were seized by the plague whilst administering spiritual aid; and often by a single touch, or a single breath of the plague-stricken, they perished even before the sick person they had come to assist." Clothes were justly regarded as infected, and even the furniture of houses attacked was suspected. At Montpellier, at the time of the visitation, the writer says there were more doctors than elsewhere, but hardly one escaped the infection, and this even although it was recognised that medical skill was of little or no avail.

According to the experience of this Montpellier doctor the mortality was greatest among the poor, because their hard lives and their poverty rendered them more susceptible to the deadly infection, and their condition did not enable them to combat it with the chances of success possessed by the well-to-do classes. As to the extent of the mortality, he says "that the number of those swept away was greater than those left alive; cities are now (*i. e.*, 1350) depopulated, thousands of houses are locked up, thousands stand with their doors wide open, their owners and those who dwelt in them having been swept away." Lastly, this writer bears testimony to the baneful effect the scourge had upon the morals of those who had been spared. Such visitations, he

thinks, must always exercise the most lowering influence upon the general virtue of the world.⁵²

From Marseilles the epidemic quickly spread northwards up the Rhone valley, and in a westerly direction through Languedoc. Montpellier, too, quickly passed on the infection. It commenced at Narbonne in the first week of Lent, 1348, and is said to have carried off 30,000 of the inhabitants. Indeed, so fearful was the visitation, that this ancient city is reported never to have recovered from the desolation it caused.⁵³

At Arles, which was attacked very shortly after the disease had gained a footing on French soil, most of the inhabitants perished.⁵⁴ It reached Avignon as early as January, 1348. In this city Pope Clement VI., then in the sixth year of his pontificate, held his court. Before the arrival of the dreaded visitant was publicly recognised sixty-six religious of the convent of Carmelites had been carried off, and in the first three days 1,800 people are reported to have died. In the seven months during which the scourge lasted the vast roll of the dead in the territory of Avignon had mounted up to 150,000 persons, amongst whom was the friend of Petrarch, Laura de Noves, who died on Good Friday, March 27th, 1348.⁵⁵ Even in England at the

⁵² *Opuscule relatif à la peste de 1348, composé par un contemporain in Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes, 1e Sér., ii, pp. 201–243.*

⁵³ Martin, *Histoire de France* (4th ed.), v, p. 109.

⁵⁴ Phillippe, *Histoire de la Peste Noire*, p. 103.

⁵⁵ Anglada, *Maladies Éteintes*, p. 431.

time the excessive mortality at Avignon was noted and remarked upon.⁵⁶ Great numbers of Jews are said to have been carried off because of the unsanitary conditions in which they lived, and an equally great number of Spaniards resident in the city, whose propensity for good living rendered them most susceptible to the infection.⁵⁷

The alarming mortality quickly caused a panic. "For such terror," writes an author of the lives of the Popes at Avignon, "took possession of nearly everyone, that as soon as the ulcer or boil appeared on anyone he was deserted by all, no matter how nearly they might be related to him. For the father left his son, the son his father, on his sick bed. In any house when a person became sick with the infirmity and died it generally happened that all others there were attacked and quickly followed him to the grave; yea, even the animals in the place, such as dogs, cats, cocks, and hens also died. Hence those who had strength fled for fear of what had taken place, and, as a consequence, many who might otherwise have recovered perished through want of care. Many, too, who were seized with the sickness, being considered certain to die and without any hope of recovery, were carried off at once to the pit and buried. And in this way many were buried alive."

The same writer notices the charity of the Pope at this terrible time, in causing doctors to visit and assist the sick poor. "And

⁵⁶ Higden, *Polychronicon* (ed. Rolls Series), viii, p. 344.

⁵⁷ L. Michon, *Documents inédits sur la grande peste de 1348* (Paris, 1860), p. 22.

since the ordinary cemeteries did not suffice to hold the bodies of the dead, the Pope purchased a large field and caused it to be consecrated as a cemetery where anyone might be buried. And here an infinite number of people were then interred."⁵⁸

The most important and particular account of the pestilence at Avignon, however, is that of a certain Canon of the Low Countries, who wrote at the time from the city to his friends in Bruges. He was in the train of a Cardinal on a visit to the Roman Curia when the plague broke out. "The disease," he writes, "is threefold in its infection; that is to say, firstly, men suffer in their lungs and breathing, and whoever have these corrupted, or even slightly attacked, cannot by any means escape nor live beyond two days. Examinations have been made by doctors in many cities of Italy, and also in Avignon, by order of the Pope, in order to discover the origin of this disease. Many dead bodies have been thus opened and dissected, and it is found that all who have died thus suddenly have had their lungs infected and have spat blood. The contagious nature of the disease is indeed the most terrible of all the terrors (of the time), for when anyone who is infected by it dies, all who see him in his sickness, or visit him, or do any business with him, or even carry him to the grave, quickly follow him thither, and there is no known means of protection.

"There is another form of the sickness, however, at present

⁵⁸ Baluze, *Vitæ Papparum Avenionensium*, i, p. 254. In a second life of Clement VII. (p. 274) it is said that vast pits were dug in the public cemetery, where the dead were buried "ut pecora gregatim."

running its course concurrently with the first; that is, certain aposthumes appear under both arms, and by these also people quickly die. A third form of the disease – like the two former, running its course at this same time with them – is that from which people of both sexes suffer from aposthumes in the groin. This, likewise, is quickly fatal. The sickness has already grown to such proportions that, from fear of contagion, no doctor will visit a sick man, even if the invalid would gladly give him everything he possessed; neither does a father visit his son, nor a mother her daughter, nor a brother his brother, nor a son his father, nor a friend his friend, nor an acquaintance his acquaintance, nor, in fact, does anyone go to another, no matter how closely he may be allied to him by blood, unless he is prepared to die with him or quickly to follow after him. Still, a large number of persons have died merely through their affection for others; for they might have escaped had they not, moved by piety and Christian charity, visited the sick at the time.

"To put the matter shortly, one-half, or more than a half, of the people at Avignon are already dead. Within the walls of the city there are now more than 7,000 houses shut up; in these no one is living, and all who have inhabited them are departed; the suburbs hardly contain any people at all. A field near 'Our Lady of Miracles' has been bought by the Pope and consecrated as a cemetery. In this, from the 13th of March,⁵⁹ 11,000 corpses have

⁵⁹ The writer was sending his letter on April 27th, 1348, so that the period would have been about six weeks.

been buried. This number does not include those interred in the cemetery of the hospital of St. Anthony, in cemeteries belonging to the religious bodies, and in the many others which exist in Avignon. Nor must I be silent about the neighbouring parts, for at Marseilles all the gates of the city, with the exception of two small ones, are now closed, for there four-fifths of the inhabitants are dead.

"The like account I can give of all the cities and towns of Provence. Already the sickness has crossed the Rhone, and ravaged many cities and villages as far as Toulouse, and it ever increases in violence as it proceeds. On account of this great mortality there is such a fear of death that people do not dare even to speak with anyone whose relative has died, because it is frequently remarked that in a family where one dies nearly all the relations follow him, and this is commonly believed among the people. Neither are the sick now served by their kindred, except as dogs would be; food is put near the bed for them to eat and drink, and then those still in health fly and leave the house. When a man dies some rough countrymen, called *gavoti*, come to the house, and, after receiving a sufficiently large reward, carry the corpse to the grave. Neither relatives nor friends go to the sick, nor do priests even hear their confessions nor give them the Sacraments; but everyone whilst still in health looks after himself. It daily happens that some rich man dying is borne to the grave by these ruffians without lights, and without a soul to follow him, except these hired mourners. When a corpse is carried by

all fly through the streets and get into their houses. Nor do these said wretched *gavoti*, strong as they are, escape; but most of them after a time become infected by this contagion and die. All the poor who were wont to receive bread from the rich are dead; that is to say, briefly, where daily in ordinary times there were distributed sixty-four measures of wheat for bread, fifty loaves being made from each measure, now only one measure is given away, and sometimes even a half is found to be sufficient.

"And it is said that altogether in three months – that is from January 25th to the present day (April 27th) – 62,000 bodies have been buried in Avignon. The Pope, however, about the middle of March last past, after mature deliberation, gave plenary absolution till Easter, as far as the keys of the Church extended, to all those who, having confessed and being contrite, should happen to die of the sickness. He ordered likewise devout processions, singing the Litanies, to be made on certain days each week, and to these, it is said, people sometimes come from the neighbouring districts to the number of 2,000; amongst them many of both sexes are barefooted, some are in sackcloth, some with ashes, walking with tears and tearing their hair, and beating themselves with scourges even to the drawing of blood. The Pope was personally present at some of these processions, but they were then within the precincts of his palace. What will be the end, or whence all this has had its beginning, God alone knows..

"Some wretched men have been caught with certain dust, and, whether justly or unjustly God only knows, they are accused of

having poisoned the water, and men in fear do not drink the water from wells; for this many have been burnt and daily are burnt.

"Fish, even sea fish, is commonly not eaten, as people say they have been infected by the bad air. Moreover, people do not eat, nor even touch spices, which have not been kept a year, since they fear they may have lately arrived in the aforesaid ships. And, indeed, it has many times been observed that those who have eaten these new spices and even some kinds of sea fish have suddenly been taken ill.

"I write this to you, my friends, that you may know the dangers in which we live. And if you desire to preserve yourselves, the best advice is to eat and drink temperately, to avoid cold, not to commit excess of any kind, and, above all, to converse little with others, at this time especially, except with the few whose breath is sweet. But it is best to remain at home until this epidemic has passed..

"Know, also, that the Pope has lately left Avignon, as is reported, and has gone to the castle called Stella, near Valence on the Rhone, two leagues off, to remain there till times change. The Curia, however, preferred to remain at Avignon, (but) vacations have been proclaimed till the feast of St. Michael. All the auditors, advocates, and procurators have either left, intend to leave immediately, or are dead. I am in the hands of God, to whom I commend myself. My master will follow the Pope, so they say, and I with him, for there are some castles near the airy mountains where the mortality has not yet appeared, and

it is thought that the best chance is there. To choose and to do what is best may the Omnipotent and merciful God grant us all. Amen."⁶⁰

From another source some corroboration of the mortality, described by the writer of this letter, can be obtained. The 11,000, stated by the anonymous canon to have been buried in the Pope's new cemetery from March 13th to April 27th may appear excessive; still more, the 62,000 reported to have died in the three months between the first outbreak, on January 25th, and the date when the letter was written. The statements of the writer are, however, so circumstantial and given with such detail, that, allowing for the tendency in all such catastrophes to exaggerate rather than minimise the number of the victims, it is probable that his estimate of the terrible destruction of life at Avignon and in the neighbourhood is substantially accurate. Writing, as he does, on the Sunday after Easter, 1348, he evidently points to the time of Lent as the period during which the epidemic was at its height. This is borne out by a statement in a German chronicle, which says: "In Venice, in the whole of Italy and Provence, especially in cities on the sea-coast, there died countless numbers. And at Avignon, where the Roman Curia then was, in the first three days after mid-Lent Sunday, 1,400 people were computed to have been buried."⁶¹ Mid-Lent Sunday,

⁶⁰ *Breve Chronicon clerici anonymi*, in De Smet, *Recueil des Chroniques de Flandre*, iii, pp. 14–18.

⁶¹ Henricus Rebdorfensis, in Boehmer, *Fontes*, iv, p. 560.

in 1348, fell upon March 30th, and, consequently, according to this authority, on the last day of March and the first two days of April the death-rate was over 450 a day.

No account of the plague at Avignon would be complete without some notice of Gui de Chauliac, and some quotations from the work he has left to posterity upon this particular outbreak. De Chauliac was the medical attendant of Pope Clement VI. He devoted himself to the service of the sick during the time of the epidemic, and, although he himself caught the infection, his life was happily spared to the service of others, and to enable him to write an account of the sickness. The mortality, he says, commenced in the month of January, 1348, and lasted for the space of seven months. "It was of two kinds; the first lasted two months, with constant fever and blood-spitting, and of this people died in three days.

"The second lasted for the rest of the time. In this, together with constant fever, there were external carbuncles, or buboes, under the arm or in the groin, and the disease ran its course in five days. The contagion was so great (especially when there was blood-spitting) that not only by remaining (with the sick) but even by looking (at them) people seemed to take it; so much so, that many died without any to serve them, and were buried without priests to pray over their graves.

"A father did not visit his son, nor the son his father. Charity was dead. The mortality was so great that it left hardly a fourth part of the population. Even the doctors did not dare to visit the

sick from fear of infection, and when they did visit them they attempted nothing to heal them, and thus almost all those who were taken ill died, except towards the end of the epidemic, when some few recovered."

"As for me, to avoid infamy, I did not dare to absent myself, but still I was in continual fear." Towards the end of the sickness de Chauillac took the infection, and was in great danger for six weeks, but in the end recovered.⁶²

It was according to the advice of this same Gui de Chauillac that Pope Clement VI. isolated himself and kept large fires always alight in his apartments, just as Pope Nicholas IV. had done in a previous epidemic. In the whole district of Provence the mortality appears to have been very great. In the Lent of 1348 no fewer than 358 Dominicans are said to have died.⁶³ Even by the close of the November of this year the terror of the time had not passed away from Avignon and the Papal Court. Writing to King Louis of Hungary, on the 23rd of that month, the Pope excused himself for not having sent before, "as the deadly plague, which has devastated these and other parts of the world by an unknown and terrible mortality, has not only, by God's will, carried off some of our brethren, but caused others to fly from the Roman Curia to avoid death."⁶⁴

In the early summer of the same year, 1348, just as the plague

⁶² Anglada, *Maladies Éteintes*, pp. 413–14.

⁶³ Barnes, *History of Edward III.*, p. 435.

⁶⁴ Thiener, *Monumenta Historica Hungariae*, i, p. 767.

was lessening its ravages at Avignon, the Pope addressed a letter to the General Chapter of the Friars Minor then being held at Verona. He laments the misery into which the world has been plunged, chiefly "by the mortal sickness which is carrying off from us old and young, rich and poor, in one common, sudden and unforeseen death." He urges them to unite in prayer that the plague may cease, and grants special indulgences "to such among you as, during this Chapter, or whilst returning to your homes, may chance to die."⁶⁵ Of these Franciscans it is said that, in Italy alone, 30,000 died in this sickness.

From its first entry into France in the early days of 1348, the plague was ever spreading far and wide. The letter from Avignon, already given, speaks of the ravages of the mortality in the whole of Provence, and of its having, before the end of April, reached Toulouse on its journey westward. In the August of this year (1348) Bordeaux was apparently suffering from it, since in that month the Princess Joan, daughter of Edward III., who was on her way to be married to Pedro, son of the King of Castille, died suddenly in that city.

In a northerly direction the epidemic spread with equal virulence. At Lyons evidence of the pestilence is afforded by an inscription preserved in the town museum. It relates to the construction of a chapel in 1352 by a citizen, "Michael Pancsus," in which Mass should be said for the souls of several members of

⁶⁵ Wadding, *Annales Minorum*, viii, p. 25 (ed. 1723).

his family "who died in the time of the mortality, 1348."⁶⁶ The anonymous cleric of Bruges, who preserved the Avignon letter, writing probably at the time, gives the following account of its progress: "In the year of our Lord 1348, that plague, epidemic, and mortality, which we have mentioned before, by the will of God has not ceased; but from day to day grows and descends upon other parts. For in Burgundy, Normandy, and elsewhere it has consumed, and is consuming, many thousands of men, animals, and sheep."⁶⁷

It arrived in Normandy probably about the feast of St. James (July 25th), 1348. A contemporary note in a manuscript, which certainly came from the Abbey of Foucarmont, gives the following account: "In the year of grace 1348, about the feast of St. James, the great mortality entered into Normandy. And it came into Gascony, and Poitou, and Brittany, and then passed into Picardy. And it was so horrible that in the towns it attacked more than two-thirds of the population died. And a father did not dare to go and visit his son, nor a brother his sister, and people could not be found to nurse one another, because, when the person breathed the breath of another he could not escape. It came to such a pass that no one could be found even to carry the corpses (to the tomb). People said that the end of the world had

⁶⁶ Olivier de la Haye, *Poème sur la grande peste de 1348*. Introduction par G. Guigue, p. xviii, note.

⁶⁷ *Breve Chronicon* in De Smet, *Recueil des Chroniques de Flandre*, iii, p. 19.

come."⁶⁸ In another manuscript, M. Delisle has found a further note, or portion of a note, referring to the terrible nature of the malady in Normandy. It never entered a city or town without carrying off the greater part of the inhabitants. "And in that time the mortality was so great among the people of Normandy that those in Picardy mocked them."⁶⁹

Paris was, of course, visited by the disease. Apparently, it was some time in the early summer of 1348 when it first manifested itself. In the chronicle of St. Denis it is recorded that "in the year of grace 1348 the said mortality commenced in the Kingdom of France and lasted about a year and a half, more or less. In this way there died in Paris, one day with another, 800 persons... In the space of the said year and a half, as some declare, the number of the dead in Paris rose to more than 50,000, and in the town of St. Denis the number was as high as 16,000."⁷⁰ The chronicle of the Carmelites at Rheims places the total of deaths in Paris at the larger number of 80,000,⁷¹ amongst whom were two Queens, Joan of Navarre, daughter of Louis X., and Joan of Burgundy, wife of King Philip of Valois.

The most circumstantial account of the plague in France at the time when the capital was attacked is given in the continuation of the chronicle of William of Nangis, which was written probably

⁶⁸ Delisle, *Cabinet des Manuscrits*, i, p. 532.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Here the note abruptly finishes.

⁷⁰ H. Martin, *Histoire de France*, v, p. 111.

⁷¹ Marlot, *Histoire de Ville de Reims*, iv, p. 63.

before 1368. "In the same year" (1348), it says, "both in Paris in the kingdom of France, and not less, as is reported, in different parts of the world, and also in the following year, there was so great a mortality of people of both sexes, and of the young rather than the old, that they could hardly be buried. Further they were ill scarcely more than two or three days, and some often died suddenly, so that a man to-day in good health, to-morrow was carried a corpse to the grave. Lumps suddenly appeared under the arm-pits or in the groin, and the appearance of these was an infallible sign of death. This sickness, or pestilence, was called by the doctors the epidemic. And the multitude of people who died in the years 1348 and 1349, was so large that nothing like it was ever heard, read of, or witnessed in past ages. And the said death and sickness often sprung from the imagination, or from the society and (consequent) contagion of another, for a healthy man visiting one sick hardly ever escaped death. So that in many towns, small and great, priests retired through fear, leaving the administration of the Sacraments to religious, who were more bold. Briefly, in many places, there did not remain two alive out of every twenty.

"So great was the mortality in the Hotel-Dieu of Paris that for a long time more than fifty corpses were carried away from it each day in carts to be buried.⁷² And the devout sisters of the

⁷² All copies of this chronicle give "*quingente*," and it has usually been stated that the number so buried each day was 500. M. Géraud, who edited the work for the Société de l'Histoire de France, suggests that it is a mistake for 50, and quotes two MSS., in which in the margin the following note is found: "L corps par jour a l'Hostel-Dieu de

Hotel-Dieu, not fearing death, worked piously and humbly, not out of regard for any worldly honour. A great number of these said sisters were very frequently summoned to their reward by death, and rest in peace with Christ, as is piously believed."

After saying that the plague had passed through Gascony and Spain, the chronicler speaks of it as going "from town to town, village to village, from house to house, and even from person to person; and coming into the country of France, passed into Germany, where, however, it was less severe than amongst us."

"It lasted in France," the writer says, "the greater part of 1348 and 1349, and afterwards there were to be seen many towns, country places, and houses in good cities remaining empty and without inhabitants."

The writer concludes by declaring that nature soon began to make up for losses. "But, alas! the world by this renovation is not changed for the better. For people were afterwards more avaricious and grasping, even when they possessed more of the goods of this world, than before. They were more covetous, vexing themselves by contentious quarrels, strifes, and law suits." Moreover, all things were much dearer; furniture, food, merchandise, of all sorts doubled in price, and servants would work only for higher wages. "Charity, too, from that time began to grow cold, and wickedness with its attendant, ignorance, was rampant, and few were found who could or would teach children

the rudiments of grammar in houses, cities, or villages."⁷³

Whilst the plague was at its height King Philip VI. requested the medical faculty of Paris to consult together and to report upon the best methods by which the deadly nature of the disease could be combated. The result of their consultation was published, probably in June, 1348.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, adhering closely to the text of the question addressed to them, their reply does not furnish any historical details. They broadly state their views as to the probable origin of the epidemic, and confine themselves to suggestions as to its treatment, and to the means by which contagion is to be avoided. They are clear as to the infectious nature of the disease, and earnest in their recommendations that all who were able should have nothing to do with the sick. "It is chiefly the people of one house, and above all those of the same family, who are close together," they say, "who die, for they are always near to those who are sick. We advise them to depart, for it is in this way that a great number have been infected by the plague."⁷⁵

Meanwhile the epidemic was spreading northward. At Amiens, where 17,000 are said to have been carried off by the sickness, it seems probable that the malady was not at its height before the summer of the following year, 1349. The wave

⁷³ *Continuatio Chronici Guillelmi di Nangiaco*, éd. pour la Société de l'Histoire de France par H. Géraud, ii, pp. 211–217.

⁷⁴ They speak in the document of "the 17th of the ensuing month of July."

⁷⁵ Michon, *Documents inédits sur la Peste Noire*, p. 22.

of pestilence from Paris seems to have divided. One stream swept on through Normandy towards the coast, which it probably reached, in the regions round Calais, about July or August of the year 1348. The other stream, checked probably by the autumn and winter, made its way more slowly towards Belgium and Holland.

In the June of 1349 the King granted a petition from the Mayor of Amiens for a new cemetery. In the document the plague in the city is described as having been then so terrible that the cemeteries are full, and no more corpses could safely be buried in them. "The mortality in the said town," says the King's letter, "is so marvellously great that people are dying there suddenly, as quickly, as from one evening to the following morning, and often even quicker than that."⁷⁶ This was in June, 1349, and already by September of the same year the authorities were called upon to deal with a combination of workmen at a tannery to secure for themselves excessive wages "to the great hurt of the people at large." The promptness of the action of the Mayor, and the tone of the proclamation establishing a rate of wages, is a sufficient proof that the crisis was regarded as serious.⁷⁷ This trouble at Amiens is an indication of difficulties which will be seen to have existed elsewhere in France, in Germany, and in England, which had their origin in the dearth of labourers after the scourge had passed.

⁷⁶ Thierry, *Recueil des Monuments inédits de l'Histoire du Tiers Etat*, i, p. 544.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 546.

The account of the ravages of this great pestilence in France, as well as its course in the city of Tournay, where it commenced in August, 1349, is well given in the chronicle of Gilles Li Muisis, Abbot of St. Martin's, Tournay, who was a contemporary of the events he describes. "It is impossible," he says, "to credit the mortality throughout the whole country. Travellers, merchants, pilgrims, and others who have passed through it declare that they have found cattle wandering without herdsmen in fields, towns, and waste lands; that they have seen barns and wine-cellar standing wide open, houses empty, and few people to be found anywhere. So much so that in many towns, cities and villages, where there had been before 20,000 people, scarcely 2,000 are left; and in many cities and country places, where there had been 1,500 people, hardly 100 remain. And in many different lands (*multis climatibus*), both lands and fields are lying uncultivated. I have heard these things from a certain knight well skilled in the law, who was one of the members of the Paris Parliament. He was sent, together with a certain Bishop, by Philip, the most illustrious King of France, to the King of Aragon, and on his return journey passed through Avignon. Both there and in Paris, as he told me, he was informed of the foresaid things by many people worthy of credit."

After speaking of the evidence given by a pilgrim to Santiago, Li Muisis proceeds to relate his own experiences in Tournay in the summer of 1349. This he does in verse and prose. The poem, after speaking of the manifestation of God's anger, describes the

plague beginning in the East and passing through France into Flanders. Like other writers, Li Muisis declares that he hesitates to say what he has seen and heard, because posterity will hardly credit what he would relate.⁷⁸ The reports of all travellers and merchants as to the terrible state of the country generally give one and the same sad story of universal death and distress. The particulars as to the plague in Tournay, the writer's own city, may best be given from his prose account.

John de Pratis, the Bishop of Tournay, was one of the first to be carried off by the sickness. He had gone away for change of air, and on Corpus Christi Day, June 11th, 1349, he carried the blessed Sacrament in the procession at Arras. He left that city the next day for Cambray, but died the day after almost suddenly.⁷⁹ He was buried at Tournay; and "time passed on," says our author, to the beginning of August, up to which no other person of authority died in Tournay. But after the feast of St. John the plague began in the parish of St. Piat, in the quarter of Merdenchor, and afterwards in other parishes. Every day the bodies of the dead were borne to the churches, now five, now ten, now fifteen, and in the parish of St. Brice sometimes twenty or thirty. In all parish churches the curates, parish clerks, and sextons to get their fees, rang morning, evening, and night the passing bells, and by this the whole people of the city, both men and women, began to be filled with fear.

⁷⁸ "Certe dicere timeo Quæ vidi et quæ video De ista pestilentia."

⁷⁹ Gams, *Series Episcoporum*, gives 13th June, 1349, as the day of his death.

The officials of the town consequently seeing that the Dean and Chapter, and the clerics generally, did not care to remedy this matter, since it was in their interest it should go on, as they made profit out of it, having taken counsel together, issued certain orders. Men and women who, although not married, were living together as man and wife, were commanded either to marry or forthwith to separate. The bodies of the dead were to be buried immediately in graves at least six feet deep. There was to be no tolling of any bell at funerals. The corpse was not to be taken to the church, but at the service only a pall was to be spread on the ground, whilst after the service there was to be no gathering together at the houses of the deceased. Further, all work after noon on Saturdays and during the entire Sunday was prohibited, as also was the playing of dice and making use of profane oaths.

These ordinances having lasted for a time, and the sickness still further increasing, it was proclaimed on St. Matthew's Day (September 24th) that there should be no more ringing of bells, that not more than two were to meet for any funeral service, and that no one was to dress in black. This action of the city authorities, the writer declares to have been most beneficial. In his own knowledge, he says, many who had hitherto been living in a state of concubinage were married, that the practice of swearing notably diminished, and that dice were so little used that the manufacturers turned "the square-shaped dice" into "round objects on which people told their *Pater Nosters*."

I have tried, says our author, to write what I know, "and

let future generations believe that in Tournay there was a marvellous mortality. I heard from many about Christmas time who professed to know it as a fact that more than 25,000 persons had died in Tournay, and it was strange that the mortality was especially great among the chief people and the rich. Of those who used wine and kept away from the tainted air and visiting the sick few or none died. But those visiting and frequenting the houses of the sick either became grievously ill or died. Deaths were more numerous about the market places and in poor narrow streets than in broader and more spacious areas. And whenever one or two people died in any house, at once, or at least in a short space of time, the rest of the household were carried off. So much so, that very often in one home ten or more ended their lives together, and in many houses the dogs and even cats died. Hence no one, whether rich, in moderate circumstances, or poor, was secure, but everyone from day to day waited on the will of the Lord. And certainly great was the number of curates and chaplains hearing confessions and administering the Sacraments, and even of parish clerks visiting the sick with them, who died."

In the parishes across the river, the mortality was as great as in Tournay itself. Although death as a rule came so suddenly, still the people for the most part were able to receive the Sacraments. The rapidity of the disease, remarked upon by Petrarch and Boccaccio in Italy, is also spoken of in the same terms by the Abbot of St. Martin's. People that one had seen apparently well and had spoken to one evening were reported dead next day. He

specialy remarks upon the mortality among the clergy visiting the sick,⁸⁰

⁸⁰ "Quia de sacerdotibus Infirmos visitantibus Quamplurimi defecerunt."

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