A Journal of the Plague Year

Daniel Defoe

Extracts from
A Journal of the Plague Year: being observations on memorials of the most remarkable occurrences, as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665. Written by a Citizen who continued all the while in London.

.../... it was a rule with those who had thus two houses in their keeping or care, that if anybody was taken sick in a family, before the master of the family let the examiners or any other officer know of it, he immediately would send all the rest of his family, whether children or servants, as it fell out to be, to such other house which he had so in charge, and then giving notice of the sick person to the examiner, have a nurse or nurses appointed, and have another person to be shut up in the house with them (which many for money would do), so to take charge of the house in case the person should die.

.../In the execution of this office I could not refrain speaking my opinion among my neighbours as to this shutting up the people in their houses; in which was saw most evidently the severities that were used, though grievous in themselves, had also this particular objection against them: namely, that they did not answer the end, as I have said, but that the distempered people went day by day about the streets; and it was our united opinion that a method to have removed the sound from the sick, in case of a particular house being visited, would have been much more reasonable on many accounts, leaving nobody with the sick persons but such as should on such occasion request to stay and declare themselves content to be shut up with them.

Our scheme for removing those that were sound from those that were sick was only in such houses as were infected, and confining the sick was no confinement; those that could not stir would not complain while they were in their senses and while they had the power of judging. Indeed, when they came to be delirious and light-headed, then they would cry out of the cruelty of being confined; but for the removal of those that were well, we thought it highly reasonable and just, for their own sakes, they should be removed from the sick, and that for other people’s safety they should keep retired for a while, to see that they were sound, and might not infect others; and we thought 20 or 30 days enough for this.

.../One John Cock, a barber in St Martin’s-le-Grand, was an eminent example of this; I mean of the hasty return of the people when the plague was abated. This John Cock had left the town with his whole family, and locked up his house, and was gone in the country, as many others did; and finding the plague so decreased in November that there died but 905 per week of all diseases, he ventured home again. He had in his family 10 persons; that is to say, himself and wife, five children, two apprentices, and a maid-servant. He had not returned to his house above a week, and began to open his shop and carry on his trade, but the distemper broke out in his family, and within about 5 days they all died, except one; that is to say, himself, his wife, all his five children, two apprentices; and only the maid remained alive.

.../Great was the reproach thrown on those physicians who left their patients during the sickness, and now they came to town again nobody cared to employ them. They were called deserters, and frequently bills were set upon their doors and written, ‘Here is a doctor to be let’, so that several of those physicians were fain for a while to sit still and look about them, or at least remove their dwellings, and set up in new places and among new acquaintance. The like was the case with the clergy, whom the people were indeed very abusive to, writing verses and scandalous reflections upon them, setting upon the church-door, ‘Here is a pulpit to be let’, or sometimes, ‘to be sold’, which was worse.