

# A Tale of the Great Plague

By Thomas Hood

This is one of the *pest* discretions.

—Sir Hugh Evans.

About five or six years after that deplorable great Plague of London, there befell a circumstance which, as it is not set forth in Defoe in his history of the pestilence, I shall make bold to write down here, not only on account of the strangeness of the event, but also because it carried a moral pick-a-back, as a good story ought to do.

It is a notoriously known fact, as collected from the bills of mortality, that there died of the plague in the mere metropolis a matter of some hundreds of thousands of human souls: yet notwithstanding this most awful warning to evil doers, the land did nevertheless bring forth such a rank crop of sin and wickedness, that the like was never known before or after; the city of London, especially, being overrun with bands of thieves and murtherers, against whom there was little or no check, the civical police having been utterly disbanded and disrupt during the ravages of the pestilence. Neither did men's minds turn for some time towards the mere safeguard of property, being still distracted with personal fears; for although the pest had, as it were, died of the excess of its own violence, yet from time to time there arose flying rumours of fresh breakings out of the malady. The small-pox and the malignant fever being the prolific parent of such like alarms. Accordingly many notable robberies and divers grievous murthers having been acted with impunity during the horrible crisis of the pest, those which had before been wicked were now hardened, and became a thousand times worse, till the city and the neighbourhood thereof seemed given in prey to devils, who had been loosened for a season from the everlasting fetter of the law.

Now four of these desperadoes having met together at the Dolphin in Deptford, they laid a plot together to rob a certain lone mansion house which stood betwixt the Thames marshes and the Forest of Hainault, and which was left in the charge of only one man, the family being gone off to another mansion house in the county of Wiltshire, for the sake of a more wholesome air. And the manner of the plot was this: one of the villains going in a feigned voice was to knock at the front door and beg piteously for a night's shelter, and then, the door being opened, the other knaves were to rush in and bind the serving-man, or murther him, as might seem best, and so taking his keys they were to ransack the house, where they expected to find a good store of plate. Accordingly one Friday, at the dead of the night, they set forth, having for leader a fellow that was named Blackface, by reason of a vizard which he wore always on such errands, diverting themselves by the way with laying out each man his share of the booty in the manner that pleased him best, wine and the women of Lewkener's Lane coming in, you may be sure, for the main burthen of the song. At last they entered the fore-court of the house which they were to rob, and which was as silent as death, and as dark, excepting a glimmer from one window towards the top. Blackface then, as agreed upon, began to beat at the door, but being flushed with drink, instead of entreating for an entrance, he shouted out to the serving-man, bidding him with many terrible oaths to come down and to render up his keys, for that they were come to relieve him of his charge.

“In the name of God, my masters,” cried the serving-man from the window, “what do you want here?”

“We are come,” returned Blackface, “to relieve you of your trust, so throw us down your keys.”

“An that be all,” said the serving-man, whose name was Adams, “wait but a little while and you shall have the keys and my place to boot. Come again but a few hours hence, and you shall find me dead, when you may do with me and my trust as you list.”

“Come, come,” cries Blackface, “no preaching, but come down and open, or we will bring fire and faggot to the door.”

“Ye shall not need,” answered Adams, “hearken only to what I say, and you shall have free passage; but I give you fair warning, though I be but a single man, and without weapon, and sick even unto death, yet shall your coming in cost you as many lives as ye bear amongst you, for within these walls there is a dismal giant that hath slain his thousands, even the Plague.” At these dreary words the courage of the robbers was taken somewhat aback, but Blackface spirited them on, saying it was no doubt an invention to deter them from the spoil.

“Alas,” answered Adams, who overheard their argument, “what I say is the solemn and sorrowful truth, and which I am speaking for the last time, for I shall never see to-morrow’s blessed sun. As for the door, I will open it to you with my own hands, beseeching you for your own sakes to stand a little apart, and out of the taint of my breath, which is sure destruction. There is one child herein a dead corpse, as you shall behold if you have so much courage, for it lieth unburied in the hall.” So saying he descended, and presently flung open the hall door, the villains withdrawing a little backward, and they saw verily by the light of a rush wick which he carried that he was lapt only in a white sheet, and looking very pale and ghost-like, with a most dismal black circle round each of his eyes.

“If ye disbelieve me still,” he said, “look inwards when I draw back from the door, and ye shall see what was a living child this day, but is now a corpse hastening to corruption. Alas! in the midst of life we are in death: she was seized at play.” With these words he drew aside, and the robbers, looking through the door, perceived it was even as he said, for the dead body of the child was lying on the hall table, with the same black ring round its eyes, and dressed in brocade and riband as though death had carried it off, even as he said, in its holiday clothes. “Now,” said Adams, after they had gazed awhile, “here be the keys,” therewithal passing towards them a huge bunch; but the villains would now no more meddle with them than with so many aspics or scorpions, looking on them as the very keys of death’s door. Accordingly, after venting a few curses on their ill-luck, they began to depart in very ill humour, when Adams again called to them to hear his last words.

“Now,” said he, “though ye came hither with robbery, and perchance murder in your hearts, against me, yet as a true Christian will I not only forgive your wicked intents, but advise you how to shun that miserable end which my own life is coming to so very suddenly. Although your souls have been saved from sins, yet doubtless ye have not stood so long in this infected air without peril to the health of your bodies, wherefore, by the advice of a dying man, go straightway from this over to Laytonstone, where there be tan pits, and sit there for a good hour amidst the strong smell of the tan, and which hath more virtue as a remedy against the infection of the Plague, than even tobacco or the odour of drugs. Do this and live, for the poison is strong and subtle, and seizeth ere one can be aware on the springs of life.” Thereupon, he uttered a dismal groan, and began yelling so fearfully that the robbers with one accord took to flight, and never stopped till they were come to Laytonstone, and into the tanner’s very yard, where they sat

down and stooped over the pit, snuffing up the odours with all the relish of men in whose nostrils it was as the breath of life. In which posture they had been sitting half an hour, when there entered several persons with a lantern, and which they took to be the tanner and his men, and to whom, therefore, they addressed themselves, begging pardon for their boldness, and entreating leave to continue awhile in the tan-yard to disinfect themselves of the plague; but they had hardly uttered these words, when lo! each man was suddenly seized upon, and bound in a twinkling, the constables, for such they were, jeering them withal, and saying the Plague had been too busy to come itself, but had sent them a gallows and a halter instead, which would serve their turn. Whereupon most of the rogues became very chopfallen, but Blackface swore he could die easy but for one thing upon his mind, and that was, what had become of the dead child and the man dying of the plague, both of which he had seen with his own eyes. Hereupon, the man with a lantern turned the light upon his own face which the rogues knew directly to be the countenance of Adams himself, but without any of those black rings round the eyes, and for which he explained he had been indebted to a little charcoal. "As for the dead child," he said, "you must inquire, my masters, of the worshipful company of Barber Surgeons, and they will tell you of a certain waxen puppet of Hygeia, the Goddess of Health, which used to be carried at their pageants, and when it fell into disuse was purchased of them by my Lady Dame Ellinor Wood, for a plaything for her own children. So one head, you see, is worth four pair of hands, and your whole gang, tall and strong knaves though you be, have been overmatched by one old man and a doll."