

The Door Creaked

The door creaked as I opened it. "Drat that door," I thought. "It'll give me away."

Not that I was worried about waking anyone in the house. Those remaining there were now dead and would not wake till Doomsday; my father and three of my siblings had already been taken at night when the cry "Bring out your dead" was heard. The next time there would be no one to answer the cry; I did not want to stay a moment longer and join the rest of my family in that dreadful sleep. So far I had shown no signs of the plague: no black patches on my skin, no buboes, no sickness or swollen tongue. I had to get away if I possibly could.

The plague had begun in Spring in the suburbs to the west of the city and as Summer approached it had spread eastward to the suburbs north of the city where our house was. Before our house was locked up and that dreaded red cross painted on our door, we had heard that the plague had begun to spread inside the city walls as well.

So began that dreadful time when we were locked in. But when they took my father and my siblings away, in their haste they had been careless about locking the house again. I noticed the door was not properly fastened. So now at the dead of night I would make my escape from the pestilence. As I heard that dratted creak, my heart almost missed a beat. "That's sure to waken the warden," I thought.

I peered out cautiously into the night; I could make out the figure of the warden outside our house. I breathed a sigh of relief; he was deep in slumber. I suppose he thought we would by now all be dead inside and grew careless; also I smelled spirits on his breath. I pulled the door gently to and crept quietly passed the sleeping warden and made my way down the alley and out into the street.

I went cautiously; it was dark and it was difficult to see the way clearly and, besides, I wanted to keep in the shadows as much as I could. I must not be seen in this parish. Before dawn I must get to where no one will recognize me.

Fortunately it was Summer so the night was not cold and dawn came early. I had got beyond the parish boundary before the sun was up. I sat and thought what to do. I had taken what little money I could find in the house and counted the coins. First, I thought, I must get some food; it is no good escaping the plague just to die of starvation.

I was tempted to stop at a tavern to break my fast. But I was wary of crowds and getting too close to others. Someone might be carrying the plague; or, indeed, if I were carrying the plague, as I might well have been, coming from that house of death, I might pass it on to others. "Best to avoid meeting anyone more than I have to," I thought.

But I had to have food. I stopped at small shop which had bread and bought some. By carefully eating a little at a time I would make it last as long as I could. I would drink where I could.

I asked the woman in shop if she knew of Little Anford, the village where my mother's sister lived.

"It's about forty miles away," she said, and told me which way to take when the road left this suburb and you got into the countryside.

"Forty miles," I thought. "I could get there by tomorrow evening."

I set off with hope. When I got out into the fields, I thought I would be safe now, leaving the miasma of London behind. But it would still be as well to avoid meeting people if I could. I stuck to byways and lanes. I eked out what little food I had and drank sparingly at clear brooks and

springs. By nightfall I was tired; I reckoned I had made a good twenty miles that day. I looked for somewhere to lie down and get some sleep. I found an old barn and slept there among the hay.

I had a restless night and a strange dream. It seemed there was a plague about and a rotund buffoon with dishevelled, straw-coloured hair kept turning, facing first one way then another, as he chanted:

“Stay at home, stay at home;
“Eat out to help out,
“Eat out, eat out!
“No, no, stay at home
“Work from home;
“Don’t work from home;
“Yes, work from home.
“Hands, face, space –
“Hands, face space.”

As the buffoon chanted “Hands, face, space” the strange crowd around him joined in the chant “Hands, face, space; hands, face, space.”

I woke up wondering what it all meant. There was another long day ahead if I was to reach my aunt before nightfall. I was slower on the second day; I must have been tired after a restless night and weak after so little food. But I kept going that day. It was dark before I could reach my aunt’s village. I found a sheltered place to sleep and had again the same strange dream.

I woke later than I had intended and finished the last crumbs of the bread I had bought before leaving the London suburbs. I was about two hours from the village.

The village was not large and I soon found my aunt’s cottage and called out to her. She was surprised.

“I heard you had all died of the plague,” she said.

“I haven’t,” I said, but I told her she had heard aright about the rest of the family. I asked if I could come in.

“Not like that!” she said. “Your clothes are filthy. You’re not bringing those into the house. Go round to the back garden, take them all off and clean yourself all over under the pump.”

“Mind you clean all over” she repeated. “I’ll send John out with fresh clothes and I’ll get him to burn those old ones. I hate to think what might be breeding in them.”

I did as she bade me. I was cleaned and the clothes were burnt. I learnt that John was a boy whom she paid to help with odd jobs, mainly in her garden.

“I’ll take you in for my dead sister’s sake,” she said. “But how can I be sure you are not carrying the plague? We’ll make up a bed in the outhouse and bring your meals there. We’ll purge your plate and eating things with vinegar.”

I was happy for her offer. I certainly did not want to bring plague to the village, but I welcomed the offer of food and a bed to sleep on.

That night I slept well and did not have that strange dream again. Indeed, I have never had it since. After a week my aunt said that it was obvious I did not have the plague and I must move into the house. I spent the Autumn and Winter there.

We heard that in February King Charles had moved back to Westminster from Oxford so things must be getting better in London. The following Summer I thought about returning to London; but I had no family to go back to and life was pleasant in the village. I helped in the garden when John was not able to. Then in September we heard about the Great Fire that

destroyed much of the city.

“I can’t go back now,” I said to my aunt. “They’ll be nothing to go back to.”

“Nonsense,” said my aunt. “London will recover; it always does. Besides, you’re a grown lad now – almost a man. What are you going to do? There’s no future hanging around the village. You need to learn a trade.”

I remembered the apothecary who had visited us before our house was shut up. He had done what he could for my father and our family before it was confirmed that my father was dying of plague and our house was shut up. I had listened to him and had taken the herbs as he had prescribed. Had he save my life?

I do not know. But I did go back to London; I found that apothecary and told him my story. He took me on as his apprentice.

But all this was many years ago. I am now a qualified and practicing apothecary. I visit my aunt at least once each year and am happy to use my skills in easing the pains of old age.

But whenever I hear a door creak, I am reminded of the night I escaped from the house of death those many years ago and of that strange dream I had at the time. I wonder what it meant.