Boccaccio describes the Plague in Florence in the Introduction of the *Decameron*


Beginning in 1346 and recurring at irregular intervals through the early part of the eighteenth century, came one of the greatest, scourges in all of human history—the Black Death or Bubonic Plague. Most estimates assert that by the time the first wave of the plague had dissipated, somewhere between one-third and one-half of Europe's population had died. During this era many believed that the end of the world was near and the plague was one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Famine, Pestilence, War, and Death).

Below is a description of the Plague in Florence, the outbreak of which set the stage for one of the great collections of stories from late Medieval literature.

Whenever I reflect how disposed you are by nature to compassion, I cannot help being apprehensive, lest what I now offer to your acceptance should seem to have but a melancholy beginning. For it calls to mind the remembrance of that most fatal plague, so terrible yet in the memories of us all, an account of which is in the front of the book But be not frightened too soon, as if you expected to meet with nothing else. This beginning, disagreeable as it is, is as a rugged and steep mountain placed before a delightful valley, which appears more beautiful and pleasant, as the way to it was more difficult: for as joy usually ends with sorrow, so again the end of sorrow is joy. To this short fatigue (I call it short, because contained in few words) immediately succeeds the mirth and pleasure I had before promised you; and which, but for that promise, you would scarcely expect to find. And in truth could I have brought you by any other way than this, I would gladly have done it: but as the occasion of the occurrences, of which I am going to treat, could not well be made out without such a relation, I am forced to use this Introduction.

In the year then of our Lord 1348, there happened at Florence, the finest city in all Italy, a most terrible plague; which, whether owing to the influence of the planets, or that it was sent from God as a just punishment for our sins, had broken out some years before in the Levant; and after passing from place to place, and making incredible havoc all the way, had now reached the west; where, spite of all the means that art and human foresight could suggest, as keeping the city clear from filth, and excluding all suspected persons; notwithstanding frequent consultations what else ins to be done; nor omitting prayers to God in frequent processions: in the spring of the foregoing year, it began to shew itself in a sad and wonderful manner; and after passing from place to place, and making incredible havoc all the way, had now reached the west; where, spite of all the means that art and human foresight could suggest, as keeping the city clear from filth, and excluding all suspected persons; notwithstanding frequent consultations what else ins to be done; nor omitting prayers to God in frequent processions: in the spring of the foregoing year, it began to shew itself in a sad and wonderful manner; and, different from what it had been in the east, where bleeding from the nose is the fatal prognostic, here there appeared certain tumours in the groin, or under the armpits, some as big as a small apple, others as an egg; and afterwards purple spots in most parts of the body: in some cases large and but few in number, in others less and more numerous, both sorts the usual messengers of death. To the cure of this malady, neither medical knowledge nor the power of drugs was of any effect; whether because the disease was in its own nature mortal, or that the physicians (the number of whom, taking quacks and women pretenders into the account, was grown very great) could form no just
idea of the cause, nor consequently ground a true method of cure; whichever was the reason, few
or none escaped; but they generally died the third day from the first appearance of the symptoms,
without a fever or other bad circumstance attending. And the disease, by being communicated
from the sick to the well, seemed daily to get a-head, and to rage the more, as fire will do by
laying on fresh combustibles. Nor was it given by conversing with only, or coming near the sick,
but even by touching their clothes, or anything that they had before touched. It is wonderful what
I am going to mention; which, had I not seen it with my own eyes, and were there not many
witnesses to attest it besides myself, I should never venture to relate, however credibly I might
have been informed about it: such, I say, was the quality of the pestilential matter, as to pass not
only from man to man, but, what is more strange and has been often known, that anything
belonging to the infected, if touched by any other creature, would certainly infect, and even kill
that creature in a short space of time: and one instance of this kind I took particular notice of,
namely, that the rags of a poor man just dead, being thrown into the street, and two hogs coming
by at the same time! and rooting amongst them, and shaking them about in their! mouths, in less
than an hour turned round and died OD the spot. These accidents, and others of the like sort,
occaisioned various fears and devices amongst those people that survived, all tending to the same
uncharitable and cruel end; which was to avoid the sick, and everything that had been near them;
expecting by that means to save themselves. And some holding it best to live temperately, and to
avoid excesses of all kinds, made parties, and shut themselves up from the rest of the world;
eating and drinking moderately of the best, and diverting themselves with music, and such other
entertainments as they might have within doors; never listening to anything Tom without, to
make them uneasy. Others maintained free living to be a better preservative, and would baulk no
passion or appetite they wished to gratify, drinking and revelling incessantly from tavern to
tavern, or in private houses; which were frequently found deserted by the owners, and therefore
common to everyone; yet avoiding, with all this irregularity, to come near the infected. And such
at that time was the public distress that the laws, human and divines were not regarded: for the
officers to put them in force, being either dead, sick, or in want of persons to assist them;
everyone did just as he pleased. A third sort of people chose a method between these two; not
confining themselves to rules of diet like the former, and yet avoiding the intemperance of the
latter; but eating and drinking what their appetites required, they walked everywhere with odours
and nosegays to smell to; as holding it best to corroborate the brain: for they supposed the whole
atmosphere to be tainted with the stink of dead bodies, arising partly from the distemper itself,
and partly from the fermenting of the medicines within them. Others of a more cruel disposition,
as perhaps the more safe to themselves, declared that the only remedy was to avoid it: persuaded,
therefore, of this, and taking care for themselves only, men and women in great numbers left the
city, their houses, relations, and effects, and tied into the country: as if the wrath of God had been
restrained to visit those only within the walls of the city; or else concluding that none ought to
stay in a place thus doomed to destruction. Divided as they were, neither did all die nor all
escape; but falling sick indifferently, as well those of one as of another opinion; they who first
set the example by forsaking others, now languished themselves without mercy. I pass over the
little regard that citizens and relations shewed to each other- for their terror was such that a
brother even fled from his brother, a wife from her husband, and, what is more uncommon, a
parent from its own child. On which account numbers that fell sick could have no help but what
the charity of friends, who were very few, or the avarice of servants supplied; and even these
were scarce, and at extravagant wages, and so little used to the business, that they were fit only
to reach what was called for, and observe when they died; and this desire of getting money often
cost them their liven. From this desertion of friends, and scarcity of servants, an unheard-of
custom prevailed; no lady, however young or handsome, would disdain being attended by a man-
servant, whether young or old it mattered not; and to expose herself naked to him, the necessity
of the distemper requiring it, as though it was to a woman; which might make those who
recovered less modest for the time to come. And many lost their lives who might have escaped
had they been looked after at all. So that between the scarcity of servants and violence of the
distemper, such numbers were continually dying, as made it terrible to hear as well as to behold.
Whence from mere necessity, many customs were introduced, different from what had been
before known in the city. It had been usual, as it now is, for the women who were friends and
neighbours to the deceased, to meet together at his house, and to lament with his relations; at
the same time the men would get together at the door, with a number of clergy, according to the
person's circumstances; and the corpse was carried by people of his own rank, with the solemnity
of tapers and singing, to that church where the person had desired to be buried; which custom
was now laid aside, and, so far from having a crowd of women to lament over them, that great
numbers passed out of the world without a single person: and few had the tears of their friends at
their departure; but those friends would laugh, and make themselves merry; for even the women
had learned to postpone every other concern to that of their own lives. Nor was a corpse
attended by more than ten or a dozen, nor those citizens of credit, but fellows hired for the
purpose; who would put themselves under the bier, and carry it with all possible haste to the
nearest church; and the corpse was interred, without any great ceremony, where they could find
room.

With regard to the lower sort, and many of a middling rank, the scene was still more affecting;
for they staying at home either through poverty, or hopes of succour in distress, fell sick daily by
thousands, and, having nobody to attend them, generally died: some breathed their last in the
streets, and others shut up in their own houses, when the stench that came from them made the
first discovery of their deaths to the neighbourhood. And, indeed, every place was filled with the
dead. A method now was taken, as cereal out of regard to the living, as pity for the dead, for the
neighbours, assisted by what porters they could meet with, to clear all the houses, and lay the
bodies at the doors; and every morning great numbers might be seen brought out in this manner;
from whence they were carried away on biers, or tables, two or three at a time; and sometimes it
has happened that a wife and her husband, two or three brothers, and a father and son, have been
laid on together: it has been observed also, whilst two or three priests have walked before a
corpse with their crucifix, that two or three sets of porters have fallen in with them; and where
they knew but of one, they have buried six, eight, or more: nor was there any to follow and shed
a few tears over them; for things were come to that pass, that men's lives were no more regarded
than the lives of so many beasts. Hence it plainly appeared, that what the wisest in the ordinary
course of things, and by a common train of calamities, could never be taught, namely, to bear
them patiently; this, by the excess of those calamities, was now grown a familiar lesson to the
most simple and unthinking. The consecrated ground no longer containing the numbers which
were continually brought thither, especially as they were desirous of laying everyone in the parts
allotted to their families; they were forced to dig trenches and to put them in by hundreds, piling
them up in rows, as goods are stowed in a ship, and throwing in little earth till they were filled to
the top. Not to rake any farther into the particulars of our misery, I shall observe that it fared no
better with the adjacent country; for to omit the different castles about us, which presented the
same view in miniature with the city, you might see the poor distressed laboured with their
families, without either the plague or physicians, or help of servants, languishing on the highways, in the fields, and in their own houses, and dying rather like cattle than human creatures; and growing dissolute in their manners like the citizens, and careless of everything, as supposing every day to be their last, their thoughts were not so much employed how to improve as to make use of their substance for their present support: whence it happened that the flocks, herds, tic., and the dogs themselves, ever faithful to their masters, being driven from their own homes, would wander, no regard being had to them, among the forsaken harvest and many times, after they had filled themselves in the day, would return of their own accord like rational creatures at night. What can I say more, if I return to the city? unless that such was the cruelty of Heaven, and perhaps of men, that between March and July following, it is supposed, and made pretty certain, that upwards of a hundred thousand souls perished in the city only; whereas, before that calamity, it was not supposed to have contained so many inhabitants. What magnificent dwellings, what noble palaces were then depopulated to the last person! what families extinct! what riches and vast possessions left, and no known heir to inherit! what members of both sexes in the prime and vigour of youth, whom in the morning neither Galen, Hippocrates, nor Aesculapius himself, but would have declared in perfect health, after dining heartily with their friends here, have supped with their departed friends in the other world! But I am weary of recounting our late miseries; therefore, passing by everything that I can well omit, I shall only observe, that the city being left almost without inhabitants, it happened one Tuesday in the evening, as I was informed by persons of good credit, that seven ladies all in deep mourning, as most proper for that time, had been attending Divine service (being the whole congregation), in new St. Mary's Church: who, as united by the ties either of friendship or relation, and of suitable years; viz., the youngest not less than eighteen, nor the eldest exceeding twenty-eight; so were they all discreet, nobly descended, and perfectly accomplished, both in person and behaviour. I do not mention their names, lest they should be displeased with some things said to have passed in conversation, there being a greater restraint on those diversions now; nor would I give a handle to ill-natured persons, who carp at everything that is praiseworthy, to detract in any way from their modesty by injurious rejections. And that I may relate therefore all that occurred without confusion, I shall affix names to everyone bearing some resemblance to the quality of the person. The eldest then I call Pampinea, the next to her Flammetta, the third Philomena, the fourth Emilia, the fifth Lauretta, the sixth Neiphile, and the youngest Eliza: who being got together by chance rather than any appointment, into a corner of the church, and there seated in a ring; and leaving of their devotions, and falling into some discourse together concerning the nature of the times; in a little while Pampinea thus began:

"My dear girls, you have often heard, as well as I, that no one is injured, where we only make an honest use of our own reason: now reason tells us that we are to preserve our lives by all possible means; and, in some cases, at the expense of the lives of others. And if the laws which regard the good of the community allow this, may not we much rather (and all that mean honestly as we do), without giving offence to any, use the means now in our power for our own preservation? Every moment when I think of what has passed to-day, and every day, I perceive, as you may also, that we are all in pain for ourselves. Nor do I wonder at this; but much rather, as we are women, do I wonder that none of us should look out for a remedy, where we have so much reason to be afraid. We stay here for no other purpose, that I can see, but to observe what numbers come to be buried, or to listen if the monks, who are now reduced to a very few, sing their services at the proper times, or else to shew by our habits the greatness of our distress. And
if we go from hence, we are saluted with numbers of the dead and sick carried along the streets; or with persons who had been outlawed for their villanies, now facing it out publicly, in defiance of the lawn. Or we see the scum of the city enriched with the public calamity, and insulting us with reproachful ballads. Nor is anything talked of but that such an one is dead or dying; and, were any left to mourn, we should hear nothing but lamentations. Or if we go home (I know not whether it fares with you as with myself), when I find out of a numerous family not one left, besides a maid-servant, I am frightened out of my senses; and go where I will, the ghosts of the departed seem always before; not like the persons whilst they were living, but assuming a ghastly and dreadful aspect.

"Therefore the case is the same, whether we stay here, depart hence, or go home; especially as there are few who are able to go, and have a place to go to, left but ourselves. And those few, I am told, fall into all sorts of debauchery; and even the religious and ladies shut up in monasteries, supposing themselves entitled to equal liberties with others, are as bad as the worst. And if this be, (as you see plainly it is) what do we here? What are we dreaming of? Why less regardful of our lives than other people of theirs? Are we of less value to ourselves, or are our souls and bodies more firmly united, and so in less danger of dissolutions? 'Tis monstrous to think in such a manner; so many of both sexes dying of this distemper in the very prime of their youth affords us an undeniable argument to the contrary. Wherefore, lest through our own wilfulness or neglect, this calamity, which might have been prevented, should befall us, I should think it best (and I hope you will join with me) for us to quit the town, and avoiding, as we would death itself, the bad example of others, to choose some place of retirement, of which every one of us has more than one, where we may make ourselves innocently merry, without offering the least violence to the dictates of reason and our own consciences. There will our ears be entertained with the warbling of the birds, and our eyes with the verdure of the hills and valleys; with the waving of corn-fields like the sea itself; with trees of a thousand different kinds, and a more open and serene sky? which, however overcast, yet affords a far more agreeable prospect than these desolate walls. The air also is pleasanter, and there is greater plenty of everything, attended with fewer inconveniences: for, though people die there as well as here, yet we shall have fewer such objects before us, as the inhabitants are less in number; and on the other part, if I judge right, we desert nobody, but are rather ourselves forsaken. For all our friends, either by death, or endeavouring to avoid it, have left us, as if we in no way belonged to them. As no blame then can ensue by following this advice, and perhaps sickness and death by not doing so, I would have us take our maids, and everything we may be supposed to want, and to remove every day to a different place, taking all the diversions in the meantime which the seasons will permit; and there continue, unless death should interpose, till we see what end Providence designs for these things. And this I remind you of, that your character will stand as fair by our going away reputedly, as the characters of others will do, who stay at home with discrerts.

The ladies having heard what Pampinea had to offer, not only approved of it, but were going to concert measures for their departure, when Philomena, who was a most discreet person, made answer: "Though Pampinea has spoken well, yet there is no occasion to run hand over head into it, as you are about to do. We ape bat women, nor is any of us so ignorant not to know how little able we shall be to conduct such an affair, without some man to help us. We are naturally fickle, obstinate, suspicious, and fearful; and I doubt much, unless we take somebody into our scheme
to manage it for us, lest it soon be at an end; and perhaps, little to our reputation. Let us provide against this, therefore, before we begin."

Eliza then replied "It is true, man is the head of a woman, and without his management it seldom happens that any undertaking of ours succeeds well. But how are these men to be come at? We all know that the greatest part of our male acquaintance are dead, and the rest all dispersed abroad, avoiding what we seek to avoid, and without our knowing where to find them. And to take strangers with us, would not be altogether so proper; for, whilst we have regard to our health, we should so contrive matters that, wherever we go to repose and divert ourselves, no scandal may ensue from it." Whilst this was debated, behold, three gentlemen came into the church, the youngest not less than twenty-five years of age, and in whom neither the adversity of the times, the loss of relations and friends, nor even fear for themselves, could stifle, or indeed cool, the passion of love. One was called Pamphilus, the second Philostratus, and the third Dioneus, all of them well bred, and pleasant companions; and who, to divert themselves in this time of affliction, were then in pursuit of their mistresses, who by chance were three of these seven ladies, and the other four all related to one or other of them. These gentlemen were no sooner within view, but the ladies had immediately their eyes upon them; and Pampinea said, with a smile, "See, fortune is with us, and has thrown in our way three prudent and worthy gentlemen, who will conduct and wait upon us, if we think fit to accept of their service."

Neiphile, with a blush, because she was one that had an admirer, answered: "Take care what you say; I know them all indeed to be persons of character, and fit to be trusted, even in affairs of more consequence, and in better company; but, as some of them are enamoured of certain ladies here, I am only concerned lest we be drawn into some scrape or scandal, without either our fault or theirs." Philomena replied: "Never tell me, so long as I know myself to be virtuous, what other people may think; God and the truth will be my defence: and if they be willing to go, we will say with Pampinea, that fortune is with us." The rest hearing her speak in this manner, gave consent that they should be called, and invited to partake in this expedition. And, without more words, Pampinea, related to one of the three, rose up, and made towards them, who were standing at a distance, attentive to what passed, and, after a cheerful salutation, acquainted them with their design, and entreated that they would, out of pure friendship, oblige them with their company. The gentlemen at first took it all for a jest; but, being assured to the contrary, immediately answered that they were ready; and to lose no time, gave the necessary orders for what they would have done. Everything being thus prepared, and a messenger dispatched before, whither they intended to go, the next morning, which was Wednesday, by break of day, the ladies, with some of their women, and the gentlemen, with every one his servant, set out from the city, and, after they had travelled two short miles, came to the place appointed. It was a little eminence, remote from any great road, covered with trees and plants of an agreeable verdure, on the top of which was a stately palace, with a grand and beautiful court in the middle: within were galleries, and fine apartments elegantly fitted up, and adorned with most curious paintings; around it were fine meadows, and most delightful gardens, with fountains of the purest and best water. The vaults also were stored with the richest wines, suited rather to the taste of debauchees, than of modest and virtuous ladies. This palace they found cleared out, and everything set in order for their reception, with the rooms all graced with the flowers of the season, to their great satisfaction. Being seated, Dioneus, who was the pleasantest of them all, and full of words, began: "Your wisdom it is, ladies, rather than any foresight of ours, which has brought us hither. I know not how you have disposed of your cares; as for mine I left them all behind me when I
came from home. Either prepare, then, to be as merry as myself (I mean with decency), or give me leave to go back again, and resume my cares where I left them." To whom Pampinea, as if she had disposed of hers in like manner, answered: "You say right, sir, we will be merry; we fled from our troubles for no other reason. But, as extremes are never likely to last, I who first proposed the means by which such an agreeable set of company is now got together, and being desirous to make our mirth of some continuance, find there is a necessity for our appointing a principal, whom we should honour and obey in all things as our head; whose province it shall be to regulate our diversions. And that every one may make trial of the burthen which attends care, as well as the pleasure which there is in superiority, nor, therefore envy what he hath not yet tried, I hold it best that every one should experience both the trouble and the honour for one day. The first to be elected by us shall, and who on the approach of the evening, shall name a person to succeed for the following day; who, during the time of their government, are to give orders concerning the place where, and the manner how, we are to live. These words gave a general satisfaction, and they named her, with one consent, for the first day: whilst Philomena, running to a laurel tree, as having often heard how much that tree had always been esteemed, and what honour was conferred on those who were deservedly crowned with it, made a garland, and put it upon her head, which whilst the company continued together, was hereafter to be the ensign of sovereignty.

Pampinea, thus elected queen, enjoined silence, and having summoned the gentlemen's servants and their own women, who were four in number, before her: "To give you the first example," said she, "how, by proceeding from good to better, we may live orderly and pleasantly, and continue together, without the least reproach, as long as we please: in the first place I declare Parmeno, Dioneus's servant, master of my household, and to him I commit the care of my family, and everything relating to my hall. Siriscus, Pamphilus's servant, I appoint my treasurer, and to be under the direction of Parmeno; and Tindarus I command to wait on Philostratus and the other two gentlemen, whilst their servants are thus employed. Mysia, my woman, and Licisca, Philomena's, I order into the kitchen, there to get ready what shall be provided by Parmeno. To Chimera, Lauretta's, and Stratilia, Flammetta's, I give the care of the ladies' chambers, and to keep the room clean where we sit. And I will and command you all, on pain of my displeasure, that wherever you go, or whatever you hear and see, you bring me no news here but what is good." These orders were approved by them all; and she, rising from her seat, with a good deal of gaiety, added, "Here are gardens and meadows, where you may divert yourselves till three o'clock, when I shall expect you back, that we may dine in the cool of the day."

The company were now at liberty, and the gentlemen and ladies took a pleasant walk in the garden, talking over a thousand merry things by the way, and diverting themselves there by singing love songs, and weaving garlands of flowers, and returned at the time appointed, when they found Parmeno busy in the execution of his office: for in a saloon below was the table set forth, covered with the neatest linen, with glasses rejecting a lustre like silver; and having washed their hands, by the queen's order, Parmeno desired them to sit down. The dishes now were served up in the most elegant manner, and the best wines brought in, the servants waiting all the time with the most profound silence; and, being cell pleased with their entertainment, they dined with all the facetiousness and mirth imaginable. When dinner was over, as they could all dance, and some both play and sing well, the queen ordered in the musical instruments, and commanding Dioneus to take a lute, and Flammetta a viol, they struck up a dance, and the queen,
with the rest of the company, took an agreeable turn or two, whilst the servants were sent to dinner; and when the dance was ended, they began to sing, and continued till the queen thought it time to break up. Her permission being given, the gentlemen retired to their chambers, remote from the ladies' lodging rooms, and the ladies did the same, and undressed themselves for bed.

It was no sooner nine, than the queen arose, and ordered all to be called, alleging, that much sleep in the day-time was unwholesome; and they went into a meadow of deep grass, where the sun had little power; and having the benefit of a pleasant breeze, they sat down in a circle, as the queen had commanded, who spoke in this manner:—" As the sun is high, and the heat excessive, and nothing is to be heard but the chirping of the grasshoppers among the olives, it would be madness for us to think of moving yet; this is an airy place, and here are chessboards and gammon-tables to divert yourselves with; but if you are ruled by the, you will not play at all, since it often makes one party uneasy, without any great pleasure to the other, or to the looker-on; but let us begin and tell stories, and in this manner one person will entertain the whole company; and by the time it has gone round, the worst part of the day will be over, and then we can divert ourselves as we like best. If this be agreeable to you, then, for I wait to know your pleasure, let us begin; if not, you are at your own disposal till the evening." This motion was approved by all; whilst the queen continued, " Let every one for this first day take what subject he fancies most:" and turning to Pamphilus, who sat on her right hand, bade him begin, who, in ready obedience to her command and being well heard, spoke to this effects.