



The Great Pestilence (A.D. 1348-9): now commonly known as The Black Death

Francis Aidan Gasquet

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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.

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