

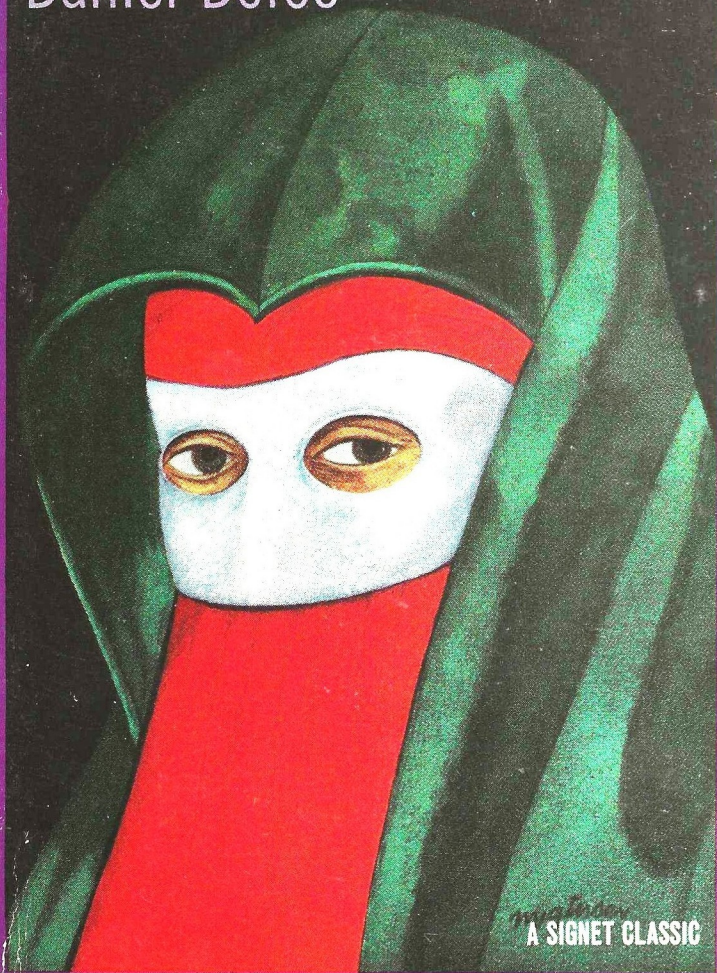
A Journal of the Plague Year

CQ611

SIGNET
CLASSICS

95c

Daniel Defoe



miniature
A SIGNET CLASSIC

A
Journal of the
PLAGUE
YEAR

by DANIEL DEFOE

With a Foreword by
J. H. Plumb



A SIGNET CLASSIC from
NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

TIMES MIRROR

New York and Scarborough, Ontario
The New English Library Limited, London

Foreword

In 1721 the plague swept across Europe from the East and reached Marseilles. Men, women, and children began to die like flies in Provence and it seemed that another great epidemic was going to decimate Europe. The Dutch imposed a strict quarantine on all shipping from the East—even burning cargoes and making sailors swim ashore naked. The English government, equally perturbed, placed an embargo upon shipping from the Mediterranean. This irritated the merchant classes, for memories of the Great Plague of London in 1665 had grown dim; the restrictions threatened serious loss of trade and the ministers of George I were accused of behaving hysterically. So sharp was public criticism that the government requested the help of the ablest bishop in the Church—Edmund Gibson, afterwards Bishop of London, who wrote two trenchant pamphlets on the gravity of the danger. Whether or not they also asked Daniel Defoe to help them is not known. It is, however, possible, for at that time he was secretly working for the government and being paid by them. His *Journal of the Plague Year* may have been his response to the ministry's needs; or it may have been that, being a shrewd journalist, he realized his opportunity without any prompting. Certainly his childhood years were filled with accounts of the Great Plague of 1665, and these, together with his later researches, prepared him to produce the masterpiece of reconstruction here, whatever his motives for undertaking it.

Defoe had been born about 1660 in Cripplegate, London, the son of James Foe, a butcher. The circumstances of Defoe's birth and early education were humble rather than poor. He changed his name to the aristocratic Defoe later in his life for he was an ambitious man, hungry not only for fame but also for social acceptance; the former he acquired, the latter eluded him. His father was a dissenter and he intended Daniel for the ministry, sending him to be educated at the academy of Charles Morton, who afterwards became the first vice-president of Harvard. But Defoe felt no vocation and

eventually took to trade. As a businessman he alternately prospered and failed, travelled to some degree through Europe, and took time out to join in political movements involving considerable personal risk. He participated in the abortive rebellion of the Duke of Monmouth against James II in 1685, barely escaping with his life, and in 1688 he joined William III's volunteer escorts. As he rode his horse on this occasion to the Guildhall of London with the great merchant princes of the city, his success must have seemed assured.

But in 1692 questionable business practices overtook him, and he went bankrupt for seventeen thousand pounds. He had married well some years earlier, but his wife's dowry fell far short of his needs. Suit after suit was filed against him, alleging sharp practice, deceit, false dealing. Some scholars have tried their utmost to exonerate Defoe. It is not possible to do so. His answers to his creditors' allegations were ready enough but they do not ring true and the evidence against him is too vast. Defoe's pitfall lay in his imagination, his instability, his passion for speculation. Before him sparkled the mirage of great riches, and of the honours that were in order for a great London merchant—Alderman, Sheriff, Lord Mayor, Knighthood. He knew well enough those non-conformist virtues—thrift, industry, caution, modesty—yet in practise Defoe seems to have ignored them. He darted like a gadfly from hosiery to tobacco, from marine insurance to diving bells, from brandy to civet cats. He borrowed recklessly, and any expedient would do if it would keep him afloat. And the law helped him, for in his day it thought the dupe as much to blame as the duper. Accordingly, he was able to talk his creditors around with promises, and he succeeded in avoiding a debtor's prison. He then abandoned his career as merchant and took to manufacture, going off to the marshes of Tilbury to make bricks and tiles. Here he subsequently prospered enough to pay some of the debts and to flourish like a gentleman.

In the 1690's the air was full of projects and inventions. It was an atmosphere to which Defoe was eminently suited. His schemes, put forward with all the skill of his superbly realistic imagination, attracted the attention of the government. He became well known,

friendly with the great, and he revelled in a new world. He started to write pamphlets during this period, some for government pay, some to release the teeming ideas that his excited imagination threw off like fireworks. He was a natural writer, fluent and direct. He discovered too that he had a happy turn for doggerel. Sneers from the Tories about William III's Dutch birth led him to write *The True-Born Englishman*, whose vigour may be judged by this description of England:

We have been Europe's sink, the jakes where she
Voids all her offal outcast progeny.

His satiric poem achieved fabulous success, quickly running through twelve authorized and nine pirated editions. For a time, with his brick works thriving and his sales soaring, Defoe lived high. But his ebullience soon proved his undoing. William III died; Queen Anne succeeded, and with her the High-Church Tories came to power. Defoe pulled their leg. He wrote a masterpiece of irony—*The Shortest Way with Dissenters*. Written as if by a Tory, it solemnly recommended that nonconformists be exterminated. At first people were taken in; then a gale of laughter swept the country. The infuriated government ordered Defoe's arrest. They caught him and put him in the pillory where the public treated him like a hero. But jail followed, and to avoid serving his sentence, he sold himself to the government and became a sort of spy. He travelled up and down England, reporting all that his sharp, observant eye and quick intelligence seized upon. Later he used these experiences to create one of the greatest travel books written about England—*A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*.

Spying was not Defoe's sole task for the ministry; his pen too had been bought. As well as pamphlets, he wrote a newspaper, *The Review*. This he wrote almost entirely single-handed, often in impossible conditions, three times a week for seven years—a truly astounding achievement. This alone would have given Defoe an immortal place in English letters, even had he never written a novel, for *The Review* can be compared without disadvantage to Addison's *Spectator*.

Governments fell, the dynasty changed, the years passed, and Defoe lived a hand-to-mouth existence. He dodged creditors for a time, deceived both the government and the opposition, and received pay from both.

Then suddenly, around the age of sixty, his genius flowered. Between 1718 and 1723 he wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, all works of great and enduring quality, as well as several others that were almost as fine. And the flame died as quickly as it had flared. He lived for a time rather grandly in Stoke Newington, but soon the creditors crept back, old quarrels were resumed, new ones flourished. He had to go into hiding, a pathetic old man dodging from attic to attic. And he died on April 26, 1731, alone, without friends or relatives. He had lived a strange life at variance with the principles which he professed, overwhelmed by instincts he could not resist, but endowed with such talent that his name will live as long as the English language lasts.

II

Defoe did not achieve acceptance among the writers of his day. Addison called him "a false, shuffling, prevaricating rascal"; Swift sneered at him. Pope scorned him; the majority ignored him. His work was alien to the polished elegance that they admired. His literary gifts were as great as theirs, if not greater; certainly they were more original, but he wrote for a different public. He did not write for a coterie, for the fashionable, polished upper middle class or for the aristocracy. He wrote, like Bunyan before him, for shopkeepers, artisans, clerks, yeomen, for ordinary men and women, and he wrote as one of them. *Moll Flanders*, *Colonel Jack*, *Robinson Crusoe*, the saddler in the *Journal of the Plague Year* are all drawn from this class. Defoe was sensitive to their experience; he knew the horrors of poverty, the terrors of sickness, the joy of a windfall, the wonder of luck. He had known the frightening insecurity of those who had to work to live. There is little romance in Defoe's world, little affection and less love; pity there is and charity, but the excitement, the tension in his writing, springs from his concern with success. Will Robinson

Crusoe survive? Will Moll Flanders achieve respectability? How will the saddler live through the plague? Cheating fate, getting the better of circumstances, surviving, these are the major preoccupations of Defoe's characters. And it is these natural concerns of ordinary men and women that give such exceptional verisimilitude to his characters whether they are pitched on a desert island, shipped to Virginia, or caught in a plague. Defoe's eye was quick and observant; the human scene entranced him and he could report it in direct, vivid prose. Such a natural realist often used real events and historical material so that it is at times difficult to distinguish fact from fiction in Defoe's work.

This is particularly true of his *Journal of the Plague Year*. Some of his sources have been traced with certainty—*The Weekly Bills of Mortality*; *A Collection of Very Valuable and Scarce Pieces Relating to the late Plague in the Year 1665*; Dr. Nathaniel Hodges' *Loimologia, an Historical Account of the Plague*. These were all republished in 1720 or 1721 and must have been on Defoe's desk as he wrote. And it is almost equally certain that he made considerable use of an old pamphlet, *God's Terrible Voice in the City* by Thomas Vincent, printed in 1666.* From these Defoe built up the main structure of his narrative and the general outline of the plague—the way it swept from west to east; how many people took to living in ships moored downstream in the Thames to avoid contact with the city; the desertion of their town houses by the rich and the flight of the poor to the woods and forests about London; the alarm of the country folk; the emptiness of the city streets; the shut houses marked with a great red cross; the terrible carts of the dead, the yawning grave-pits; the bells that never ceased to toll. These things he learned, but on them his imagination worked, stimulating, perhaps, recollections of his remote childhood or recalling tales told him by his elders long ago. On this material, whether true or invented, his creative genius got to work and peopled plague-stricken London with intensely human characters, ordinary men and women caught in a tragedy

* See Watson Nicholson, *The Historical Sources of Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year*, Boston, 1919.

they could scarcely comprehend. We hear again the shrieks of the dying and the lamentations of the living, witness the chicanery, the twists and cheats of men desperate for life, and the heroism, the calm acceptance of fate, of the few ennobled by suffering. For the Londoners of Georgian England, waiting for the plague, Defoe's book must have been terrifying reading. But the plague never came and instead of a caution for the present, Defoe's *Journal* became a memorial to the past.

No one knows why London was not attacked by bubonic plague after 1665. This scourge had swept England repeatedly since the Black Death; after the Great Plague of London only small and isolated outbreaks occurred. The disease can be transmitted by the flea of the black rat, which was being driven out of London by the brown or Hanoverian rat. Some scientists believe this to be the reason for the plague's disappearance; others will not accept it, for it took generations for the brown rat to become dominant. A few historians believe that the Great Fire of 1666 cleansed London, but this did not touch the worst plague spots—St. Giles or Whitechapel. Modern parasitologists incline to the view that, after three centuries, human beings acquired some immunity and that the bacillus itself became less virulent. Certainly the plague of 1665 was both less violent and less widespread than many other visitations. Whatever the reason, it never returned.

From the hygienic comfort of the twentieth century, the terrible calamity which Defoe described with such accurate, vivid realism seems remote, an experience that never can be repeated. But such suffering can still visit mankind—the great influenza epidemic of 1919 killed far more people. The terror for Defoe's London lay in the awful concentration of the disease. In his pages a metropolis dies before our eyes; the streets empty; grass grows where life reigned. *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a tale of horror, told by one of the great masters of realism.

—J. H. PLUMB
Cambridge University

May, 1960

A Journal of the Plague Year

Daniel Defoe

Bring out your dead! The ceaseless chant of doom echoed through a city of emptied streets and filled grave pits. For this was London in the year 1665, the Year of the Great Plague. . . . In 1721, when the Black Death again threatened the European Continent, Daniel Defoe wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year* to alert an indifferent populace to the horror that was almost upon them. Through the eyes of a saddler who had chosen to remain while multitudes fled, the master realist vividly depicted a plague-stricken city. He re-enacted the terror of a helpless people caught in a tragedy they could not comprehend: the weak preying on the dying, the strong administering to the sick, the sinful orgies of the cynical, the quiet faith of the pious. With dramatic insight he captured for all time the death throes of a great city.

With a Foreword by J. H. Plumb