

The Plague, Albert Camus

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The Plague

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It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is

to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.

Daniel Defoe

PART I

The unusual events described in this chronicle occurred in 1940- at Oran.

Everyone agreed that, considering their somewhat extraordinary character, they

were out of place there. For its ordinariness is what strikes one first about

the town of Oran, which is merely a large French port on the Algerian coast,

headquarters of the Prefect of a French Department.

The town itself, let us admit, is ugly. It has a smug, placid air and you need

time to discover what it is that makes it different from so many business

centers in other parts of the world. How to conjure up a picture, for instance,

of a town without pigeons, without any trees or gardens, where you never hear

the beat of wings or the rustle of leaves, a thoroughly negative place, in

short?

The seasons are discriminated only in the sky. All that tells you of spring's

coming is the feel of the air, or the baskets of flowers brought in from the

suburbs by peddlers; it's a spring cried in the marketplaces. During the summer

the sun bakes the houses bone-dry, sprinkles our walls with grayish dust, and

you have no option but to survive those days of fire indoors, behind closed

shutters. In autumn, on the other hand, we have deluges of mud. Only winter

brings really pleasant weather.

Perhaps the easiest way of making a town's acquaintance is to ascertain how the

people in it work, how they love, and how they die. In our little town (is this,

one wonders, an effect of the climate? All three are done on much the same

lines, with the same feverish yet casual air. The truth is that everyone is

bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits. Our citizens work hard, but

solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and

their chief aim in life is, as they call it, "doing business." Naturally they

don't eschew such simpler pleasures as love-making, seabathing, going to the

pictures.

But, very sensibly, they reserve these pastimes for Saturday afternoons and

Sundays and employ the rest of the week in making money, as much as possible.

In the evening, on leaving the office, they forgather, at an hour that never

varies, in the cafes, stroll the same boulevard, or take the air on their

balconies. The passions of the young are violent and short-lived; the vices of

older men seldom range beyond an addiction to bowling, to banquets and

"socials," or clubs where large sums change hands on the fall of a card.

It will be said, no doubt, that these habits are not peculiar to our town;

really all our contemporaries are much the same. Certainly nothing is commoner

nowadays than to see people working from morn till night and then proceeding to

fritter away at card-tables, in cafes and in small-talk what time is left for

living. Nevertheless there still exist towns and countries where people have now

and then an inkling of something different.

In general it doesn't change their lives. Still, they have had an intimation,

and that's so much to the good. Oran, however, seems to be a town without

intimations; in other words, completely modern. Hence I see no need to dwell on

the manner of loving in our town. The men and women consume one another rapidly in what is called "the act of love," or else settle down to a mild habit of

conjugality. We seldom find a mean between these extremes. That, too, is not

exceptional. At Oran, as elsewhere, for lack of time and thinking, people have

to love one another without knowing much about it.

What is more exceptional in our town is the difficulty one may experience there

in dying. "Difficulty," perhaps, is not the right word, 'discomfort" would come

nearer. Being ill's never agreeable but there are towns that stand by you, so to

speak, when you are sick; in which you can, after a fashion, let yourself go.

An invalid needs small attentions, he likes to have something to rely on, and

that's natural enough. But at Oran the violent extremes of temperature, the

exigencies of business, the uninspiring surroundings, the sudden nightfalls, and

the very nature of its pleasures call for good health. An invalid feels out of

it there.

Think what it must be for a dying man, trapped behind hundreds of walls all

sizzling with heat, while the whole population, sitting in cafes or hanging on

the telephone, is discussing shipments, bills of lading, discounts! It will then

be obvious what discomfort attends death, even modern death, when it waylays you under such conditions in a dry place.

These somewhat haphazard observations may give a fair idea of what our town is

like. However, we must not exaggerate. Really, all that was to be conveyed was

the banality of the town's appearance and of life in it. But you can get through

the days there without trouble, once you have formed habits. And since habits

are precisely what our town encourages, all is for the best. Viewed from this

angle, its life is not particularly exciting; that must be admitted.

But, at least, social unrest is quite unknown among us. And our frank-spoken,

amiable, and industrious citizens have always inspired a reasonable esteem in

visitors.

Treeless, glamourless, soulless, the town of Oran ends by seeming restful and,

after a while, you go complacently to sleep there.

It is only fair to add that Oran is grafted on to a unique landscape, in the

center of a bare plateau, ringed with luminous hills and above a perfectly

shaped bay. All we may regret is the town's being so disposed that it turns its

back on the bay, with the result that it's impossible to see the sea, you always

have to go to look for it.

Such being the normal life of Oran, it will be easily understood that our fellow

citizens had not the faintest reason to apprehend the incidents that took place

in the spring of the year in question and were (as we subsequently realized)

premonitory signs of the grave events we are to chronicle. To some, these events

will seem quite natural; to others, all but incredible.

But, obviously, a narrator cannot take account of these differences of outlook. His business is only to say: "This is what happened," when he knows that it actually did happen, that it closely affected the life of a whole populace, and that there are thousands of eyewitnesses who can appraise in their hearts the truth of what he writes.

In any case the narrator (whose identity will be made known in due course) would

have little claim to competence for a task like this, had not chance put him in

the way of gathering much information, and had he not been, by the force of

things, closely involved in all that he proposes to narrate. This is his

justification for playing the part of a historian. Naturally, a historian, even

an amateur, always has data, personal or at second hand, to guide him. The

present narrator has three kinds of data: first, what he saw himself; secondly,

the accounts of other eyewitnesses (thanks to the part he played, he was enabled

to learn their personal impressions from all those figuring in this chronicle);

and, lastly, documents that subsequently came into his hands. He proposes to

draw on these records whenever this seems desirable, and to employ them as he

thinks best. He also proposes...

But perhaps the time has come to drop preliminaries and cautionary remarks and

to launch into the narrative proper. The account of the first days needs giving

in some detail.

When leaving his surgery on the morning of April 16, Dr. Bernard Rieux felt

something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat lying in the middle of the

landing.

On the spur of the moment he kicked it to one side and, without giving it a

further thought, continued on his way downstairs. Only when he was stepping out

into the street did it occur to him that a dead rat had no business to be on his

landing, and he turned back to ask the concierge of the building to see to its

removal. It was not until he noticed old M. Michel's reaction to the news that

he realized the peculiar nature of his discovery.

Personally, he had thought the presence of the dead rat rather odd, no more than

that; the concierge, however, was genuinely outraged. On one point he was

categorical: "There weren't no rats here." In vain the doctor assured him that

there was a rat, presumably dead, on the second-floor landing; M. Michel's

conviction wasn't to be shaken. There "weren't no rats in the building," he

repeated, so someone must have brought this one from outside. Some youngster

trying to be funny, most likely.

That evening, when Dr. Rieux was standing in the entrance, feeling for the

latch-key in his pocket before starting up the stairs to his apartment, he saw a

big rat coming toward him from the dark end of the passage. It moved

uncertainly, and its fur was sopping wet. The animal stopped and seemed to be

trying to get its balance, moved forward again toward the doctor, halted again,

then spun round on itself with a little squeal and fell on its side. Its mouth

was slightly open and blood was spurting from it. After gazing at it for a

moment, the doctor went upstairs.

He wasn't thinking about the rat. That glimpse of spurting blood had switched

his thoughts back to something that had been on his mind all day. His wife, who

had been ill for a year now, was due to leave next day for a sanatorium in the

mountains. He found her lying down in the bedroom, resting, as he had asked her

to do, in view of the exhausting journey before her. She gave him a smile.

"Do you know, I'm feeling ever so much better!" she said.

The doctor gazed down at the face that turned toward him in the glow of the

bedside lamp. His wife was thirty, and the long illness had left its mark on her

face. Yet the thought that came to Rieux's mind as he gazed at her was: "How

young she looks, almost like a little girl!" But perhaps that was because of the

smile, which effaced all else.

"Now try to sleep," he counseled. "The nurse is coming at eleven, you know, and

you have to catch the midday train."

He kissed the slightly moist forehead. The smile escorted him to the door. Next

day, April 17, at eight o'clock the concierge buttonholed the doctor as he was

going out. Some young scallywags, he said, had dumped three dead rats in the

hall. They'd obviously been caught in traps with very strong springs, as they

were bleeding profusely. The concierge had lingered in the doorway for quite a

while, holding the rats by their legs and keeping a sharp eye on the passers-by,

on the off chance that the miscreants would give themselves away by grinning or

by some facetious remark. His watch had been in vain.

"But I'll nab 'em all right," said M. Michel hopefully.

Much puzzled, Rieux decided to begin his round in the outskirts of the town,

where his poorer patients lived. The scavenging in these districts was done late

in the morning and, as he drove his car along the straight, dusty streets, he

cast glances at the garbage cans aligned along the edge of the sidewalk. In one

street alone the doctor counted as many as a dozen rats deposited on the

vegetable and other refuse in the cans.

He found his first patient, an asthma case of long standing, in bed, in a room

that served as both dining-room and bedroom and overlooked the street. The

invalid was an old Spaniard with a hard, rugged face. Placed on the coverlet in

front of him were two pots containing dried peas. When the doctor entered, the

old man was sitting up, bending his neck back, gasping and wheezing in his

efforts to recover his breath. His wife brought a bowl of water.

"Well, doctor," he said, while the injection was being made, "they're coming

out, have you noticed?"

"The rats, he means," his wife explained. "The man next door found three."

"They're coming out, you can see them in all the trash cans. It's hunger!" Rieux

soon discovered that the rats were the great topic of conversation in that part

of the town. After his round of visits he drove home.

"There's a telegram for you, sir, upstairs," M. Michel informed him. The doctor

asked him if he'd seen any more rats.

"No," the concierge replied, "there ain't been any more. I'm keeping a sharp

lookout, you know. Those youngsters wouldn't dare when I'm around."

The telegram informed Rieux that his mother would be arriving next day. She was

going to keep house for her son during his wife's absence. When the doctor

entered his apartment he found the nurse already there. He looked at his wife.

She was in a tailor-made suit, and he noticed that she had used rouge. He smiled

to her.

"That's splendid," he said. "You're looking very nice."

A few minutes later he was seeing her into the sleeping-car. She glanced round

the compartment.

"It's too expensive for us really, isn't it?" "It had to be done," Rieux

replied.

"What's this story about rats that's going round?"

"I can't explain it. It certainly is queer, but it'll pass."

Then hurriedly he begged her to forgive him; he felt he should have looked after

her better, he'd been most remiss. When she shook her head, as if to make him

stop, he added: "Anyhow, once you're back everything will be better. We'll make

a fresh start."

"That's it!" Her eyes were sparkling. "Let's make a fresh start."

But then she turned her head and seemed to be gazing through the car window at

the people on the platform, jostling one another in their haste. The hissing of

the locomotive reached their ears. Gently he called his wife's first name; when

she looked round he saw her face wet with tears.

"Don't," he murmured.

Behind the tears the smile returned, a little tense. She drew a deep breath.

"Now off you go! Everything will be all right."

He took her in his arms, then stepped back on the platform. Now he could only

see her smile through the window.

"Please, dear," he said, "take great care of yourself." But she could not hear

him.

As he was leaving the platform, near the exit he met M. Othon, the police

magistrate, holding his small boy by the hand. The doctor asked him if he was

going away.

Tall and dark, M. Othon had something of the air of what used to be called a man

of the world, and something of an undertaker's assistant.

"No," the magistrate replied, "I've come to meet Madame Othon, who's been to

present her respects to my family."

The engine whistled.

"These rats, now?" the magistrate began.

Rieux made a brief movement in the direction of the train, then turned back

toward the exit.

"The rats?" he said. "It's nothing."

The only impression of that moment which, afterwards, he could recall was the

passing of a railroadman with a box full of dead rats under his arm.

Early in the afternoon of that day, when his consultations were beginning, a

young man called on Rieux. The doctor gathered that he had called before, in the

morning, and was a journalist by profession. His name was Raymond Rambert.

Short, square-shouldered, with a determined-looking face and keen, intelligent

eyes, he gave the impression of someone who could keep his end up in any

circumstances. He wore a sports type of clothes. He came straight to the point.

His newspaper, one of the leading Paris dailies, had commissioned him to make a

report on the living-conditions prevailing among the Arab population, and

especially on the sanitary conditions.

Rieux replied that these conditions were not good. But, before he said any more,

he wanted to know if the journalist would be allowed to tell the truth.

"Certainly," Rambert replied.

"I mean," Rieux explained, "would you be allowed to publish an unqualified

condemnation of the present state of things?"

"Unqualified? Well, no, I couldn't go that far. But surely things aren't quite

so bad as that?"

"No," Rieux said quietly, they weren't so bad as that. He had put the question

solely to find out if Rambert could or couldn't state the facts without

paltering with the truth. "I've no use for statements in which something is kept

back," he added. "That is why I shall not furnish information in support of

yours."

The journalist smiled. "You talk the language of Saint-Just."

Without raising his voice Rieux said he knew nothing about that. The language he

used was that of a man who was sick and tired of the world he lived in, though

he had much liking for his fellow men and had resolved, for his part, to have no

truck with injustice and compromises with the truth.

His shoulders hunched, Rambert gazed at the doctor for some moments without

speaking. Then, "I think I understand you," he said, getting up from his chair.

The doctor accompanied him to the door. "It's good of you to take it like that,"

he said.

"Yes, yes, I understand," Rambert repeated, with what seemed a hint of

impatience in his voice. "Sorry to have troubled you."

When shaking hands with him, Rieux suggested that if he was out for curious

stories for his paper, he might say something about the extraordinary number of

dead rats that were being found in the town just now.

"Ah!" Rambert exclaimed. "That certainly interests me."

On his way out at five for another round of visits, the doctor passed on the

stairway a stocky, youngish man, with a big, deeply furrowed face and bushy

eyebrows. He had met him once or twice in the top-floor apartment, which was

occupied by some male Spanish dancers. Puffing a cigarette, Jean Tarrou was

gazing down at the convulsions of a rat dying on the step in front of him. He

looked up, and his gray eyes remained fixed on the doctor for some moments;

then, after wishing him good day, he remarked that it was rather odd, the way

all these rats were coming out of their holes to die.

"Very odd," Rieux agreed, "and it ends by getting on one's nerves."

"In a way, doctor, only in a way. We've not seen anything of the sort before,

that's all. Personally I find it interesting, yes, definitely interesting."

Tarrou ran his fingers through his hair to brush it off his forehead, looked

again at the rat, which had now stopped moving, then smiled toward Rieux.

"But really, doctor, it's the concierge's headache, isn't it?"

As it so happened, the concierge was the next person Rieux encountered. He was

leaning against the wall beside the street door; he was looking tired and his

normally rubicund face had lost its color.

"Yes, I know," the old man told Rieux, who had informed him of the latest

casualty among the rats. "I keep finding 'em by twos and threes. But it's the

same thing in the other houses in the street."

He seemed depressed and worried, and was scratching his neck absentmindedly.

Rieux asked him how he felt. The concierge wouldn't go so far as to say he was

feeling ill. Still he wasn't quite up to the mark. In his opinion it was just

due to worry; these damned rats had given him "a shock, like." It would be a

relief when they stopped coming out and dying all over the place.

Next morning, it was April 18, when the doctor was bringing back his mother from

the station, he found M. Michel looking still more out of sorts. The stairway

from the cellar to the attics was strewn with dead rats, ten or a dozen of them.

The garbage cans of all the houses in the street were full of rats. The doctor's

mother took it quite calmly.

"It's like that sometimes," she said vaguely. She was a small woman with silver

hair and dark, gentle eyes. "I'm so glad to be with you again, Bernard," she

added. "The rats can't change that, anyhow."

He nodded. It was a fact that everything seemed easy when she was there.

However, he rang up the Municipal Office. He knew the man in charge of the

department concerned with the extermination of vermin and he asked him if he'd

heard about all the rats that were coming out to die in the open. Yes, Mercier

knew all about it; in fact, fifty rats had been found in his offices, which were

near the wharves. To tell the truth, he was rather perturbed; did the doctor

think it meant anything serious? Rieux couldn't give a definite opinion, but he

thought the sanitary service should take action of some kind.

Mercier agreed. "And, if you think it's really worth the trouble, I'll get an

order issued as well."

"It certainly is worth the trouble," Rieux replied.

His charwoman had just told him that several hundred dead rats had been

collected in the big factory where her husband worked.

It was about this time that our townsfolk began to show signs of uneasiness.

For, from April 18 onwards, quantities of dead or dying rats were found in

factories and warehouses. In some cases the animals were killed to put an end to

their agony.

From the outer suburbs to the center of the town, in all the byways where the

doctor's duties took him, in every thoroughfare, rats were piled up in garbage

cans or lying in long lines in the gutters. The evening papers that day took up

the matter and inquired whether or not the city fathers were going to take

steps, and what emergency measures were contemplated, to abate this particularly

disgusting nuisance. Actually the municipality had not contemplated doing

anything at all, but now a meeting was convened to discuss the situation.

An order was transmitted to the sanitary service to collect the dead rats at

daybreak every morning. When the rats had been collected, two municipal trucks

were to take them to be burned in the town incinerator.

But the situation worsened in the following days. There were more and more dead

vermin in the streets, and the collectors had bigger truckloads every morning.

On the fourth day the rats began to come out and die in batches. From basements,

cellars, and sewers they emerged in long wavering files into the light of day,

swayed helplessly, then did a sort of pirouette and fell dead at the feet of the

horrified onlookers.

At night, in passages and alleys, their shrill little death-cries could be

clearly heard. In the mornings the bodies were found lining the gutters, each

with a gout of blood, like a red flower, on its tapering muzzle; some were

bloated and already beginning to rot, others rigid, with their whiskers still

erect. Even in the busy heart of the town you found them piled in little heaps

on landings and in backyards. Some stole forth to die singly in the halls of

public offices, in school playgrounds, and even on cafe terraces. Our townsfolk

were amazed to find such busy centers as the Place d'Armes, the boulevards, the

promenade along the waterfront, dotted with repulsive little corpses.

After the daily clean-up of the town, which took place at sunrise, there was a

brief respite; then gradually the rats began to appear again in numbers that

went on increasing throughout the day. People out at night would often feel

underfoot the squelchy roundness of a still warm body. It was as if the earth on

which our houses stood were being purged of its secreted humors; thrusting up to

the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that had been forming in its entrails.

You must picture the consternation of our little town, hitherto so tranquil, and

now, out of the blue, shaken to its core, like a quite healthy man who all of a

sudden feels his temperature shoot up and the blood seething like wildfire in

his veins.

Things went so far that the Ransdoc Information Bureau (inquiries on all

subjects promptly and accurately answered), which ran a free-information talk on

the radio, by way of publicity, began its talk by announcing that no less than

6,231 rats had been collected and burned in a single day, April 25. Giving as it

did an ampler and more precise view of the scene daily enacted before our eyes,

this amazing figure administered a jolt to the public nerves.

Hitherto people had merely grumbled at a stupid, rather obnoxious visitation;

they now realized that this strange phenomenon, whose scope could not be

measured and whose origins escaped detection, had something vaguely menacing

about it. Only the old Spaniard whom Dr. Rieux was treating for asthma went on

rubbing his hands and chuckling: "They're coming out, they're coming out," with

senile glee.

On April 28, when the Ransdoc Bureau announced that 8,ooo rats had been

collected, a wave of something like panic swept the town.

There was a demand for drastic measures, the authorities were accused of

slackness, and people who had houses on the coast spoke of moving there, early

in the year though it was. But next day the bureau informed them that the

phenomenon had abruptly ended and the sanitary service had collected only a

trifling number of rats. Everyone breathed more freely.

It was, however, on this same day, at noon, that Dr. Rieux, when parking his car

in front of the apartment house where he lived, noticed the concierge coming

toward him from the end of the street. He was dragging himself along, his head

bent, arms and legs curiously splayed out, with the jerky movements of a

clockwork doll. The old man was leaning on the arm of a priest whom the doctor

knew. It was Father Paneloux, a learned and militant Jesuit, whom he had met

occasionally and who was very highly thought of in our town, even in circles

quite indifferent to religion. Rieux waited for the two men to draw up to him.

M. Michel's eyes were fever-bright and he was breathing wheezily. The old man

explained that, feeling "a bit off color," he had gone out to take the air. But

he had started feeling pains in all sorts of places, in his neck, armpits, and

groin, and had been obliged to turn back and ask Father Paneloux to give him an

arm.

"It's just swellings," he said. "I must have strained myself somehow." Leaning

out of the window of the car, the doctor ran his hand over the base of

Michel's neck; a hard lump, like a knot in wood, had formed there.

"Go to bed at once, and take your temperature. I'll come to see you this

afternoon."

When the old man had gone, Rieux asked Father Paneloux what he made of this

queer business about the rats.

"Oh, I suppose it's an epidemic they've been having." The Father's eyes were

smiling behind his big round glasses.

After lunch, while Rieux was reading for the second time the telegram his wife

had sent him from the sanatorium, announcing her arrival, the phone rang. It was

one of his former patients, a clerk in the Municipal Office, ringing him up. He

had suffered for a long time from a constriction of the aorta, and, as he was

poor, Rieux had charged no fee.

"Thanks, doctor, for remembering me. But this time it's somebody else. The man

next door has had an accident. Please come at once." He sounded out of breath.

Rieux thought quickly; yes, he could see the concierge afterwards. A few minutes

later he was entering a small house in the rue Faidherbe, on the outskirts of

the town. Halfway up the drafty, foul-smelling stairs, he saw Joseph Grand, the

clerk, hurrying down to meet him. He was a man of about fifty years of age, tall

and drooping, with narrow shoulders, thin limbs, and a yellowish mustache.

"He looks better now," he told Rieux, "but I really thought his number was up."

He blew his nose vigorously.

On the top floor, the third, Rieux noticed something scrawled in red chalk on a

door on the left: Come in, I've hanged myself.

They entered the room. A rope dangled from a hanging lamp above a chair lying on

its side. The dining-room table had been pushed into a corner. But the rope hung

empty.

"I got him down just in time." Grand seemed always to have trouble in finding

his words, though he expressed himself in the simplest possible way. "I was

going out and I heard a noise. When I saw that writing on the door, I thought it

was a a prank. Only, then I heard a funny sort of groan; it made my blood run

cold, as they say." He scratched his head. "That must be a painful way of of

doing it, I should think. Naturally I went in."

Grand had opened a door and they were standing on the threshold of a bright but

scantily furnished bedroom. There was a brass bedstead against one of the walls,

and a plump little man was lying there, breathing heavily. He gazed at them with

bloodshot eyes. Rieux stopped short. In the intervals of the man's breathing he

seemed to hear the little squeals of rats. But he couldn't see anything moving

in the corners of the room. Then he went to the bedside. Evidently the man had

not fallen from a sufficient height, or very suddenly, for the collar-bone had

held.

Naturally there was some asphyxia. An X-ray photograph would be needed.

Meanwhile the doctor gave him a camphor injection and assured him he would be

all right in a few days.

"Thanks, doctor," the man mumbled.

When Rieux asked Grand if he had notified the police, he hung his head. "Well,

as a matter of fact, I haven't. The first thing, I thought, was to?" "Quite so,"

Rieux cut in. "I'll see to it."

But the invalid made a fretful gesture and sat up in bed. He felt much better,

he explained; really it wasn't worth the trouble.

"Don't feel alarmed," Rieux said. "It's little more than a formality. Anyhow, I

have to report this to the police."

"Oh!" The man slumped back on the bed and started sobbing weakly.

Grand, who had been twiddling his mustache while they were speaking, went up to

the bed.

"Come, Monsieur Cottard," he said. "Try to understand. People could say the

doctor was to blame, if you took it into your head to have another shot at it."

Cottard assured him tearfully that there wasn't the least risk of that; he'd had

a sort of crazy fit, but it had passed and all he wanted now was to be left in

peace. Rieux was writing a prescription.

"Very well," he said. "We'll say no more about it for the present. I'll come and

see you again in a day or two. But don't do anything silly."

On the landing he told Grand that he was obliged to make a report, but would ask

the police inspector to hold up the inquiry for a couple of days.

"But somebody should watch Cottard tonight," he added. "Has he any relations?"

"Not that I know of. But I can very well stay with him. I can't say I really

know him, but one's got to help a neighbor, hasn't one?"

As he walked down the stairs Rieux caught himself glancing into the darker

corners, and he asked Grand if the rats had quite disappeared in his part of the

town.

Grand had no idea. True, he'd heard some talk about rats, but he never paid much

attention to gossip like that. "I've other things to think about," he added.

Rieux, who was in a hurry to get away, was already shaking his hand. There was a

letter to write to his wife, and he wanted to see the concierge first.

News-venders were shouting the latest news that the rats had disappeared. But

Rieux found his patient leaning over the edge of the bed, one hand pressed to

his belly and the other to his neck, vomiting pinkish bile into a slop-pail.

After retching for some moments, the man lay back again, gasping. His

temperature was 103, the ganglia of his neck and limbs were swollen, and two

black patches were developing on his thighs. He now complained of internal

pains.

"It's like fire," he whimpered. "The bastard's burning me inside."

He could hardly get the words through his fever-crusted lips and he gazed at the

doctor with bulging eyes that his headache had suffused with tears. His wife

cast an anxious look at Rieux, who said nothing.

"Please, doctor," she said, "what is it?"

"It might be almost anything. There's nothing definite as yet. Keep him on a

light diet and give him plenty to drink."

The sick man had been complaining of a raging thirst.

On returning to his apartment Rieux rang up his colleague Richard, one of the

leading practitioners in the town.

"No," Richard said, "I can't say I've noticed anything exceptional." "No cases

of fever with local inflammation?"

"Wait a bit! I have two cases with inflamed ganglia." "Abnormally so?"

"Well," Richard said, "that depends on what you mean by 'normal.'"

Anyhow, that night the porter was running a temperature of 104 and in delirium,

always babbling about "them rats." Rieux tried a fixation abscess. When he felt

the sting of the turpentine, the old man yelled: "The bastards!"

The ganglia had become still larger and felt like lumps of solid fibrous matter

embedded in the flesh. Mme Michel had completely broken down.

"Sit up with him," the doctor said, "and call me if necessary."

Next day, April 30, the sky was blue and slightly misty. A warm, gentle breeze

was blowing, bringing with it a smell of flowers from the outlying suburbs. The

morning noises of the streets sounded louder, gayer than usual. For everyone in

our little town this day brought the promise of a new lease of life, now that

the shadow of fear under which they had been living for a week had lifted.

Rieux, too, was in an optimistic mood when he went down to see the concierge; he

had been cheered up by a letter from his wife that had come with the first mail.

Old M. Michel's temperature had gone down to 99 and, though he still looked very

weak, he was smiling. "He's better, doctor, isn't he?" his wife inquired. "Well,

it's a bit too early to say."

At noon the sick man's temperature shot up abruptly to 104, he was in constant

delirium and had started vomiting again. The ganglia in the neck were painful to

the touch, and the old man seemed to be straining to hold his head as far as

possible from his body. His wife sat at the foot of the bed, her hands on the

counterpane, gently clasping his feet. She gazed at Rieux imploringly.

"Listen," he said, "we'll have to move him to a hospital and try a special

treatment. I'll ring up for the ambulance."

Two hours later the doctor and Mme Michel were in the ambulance bending over the

sick man. Rambling words were issuing from the gaping mouth, thickly coated now

with sores. He kept on repeating: "Them rats! Them damned rats!" His face had

gone livid, a grayish green, his lips were bloodless, his breath came in sudden

gasps. His limbs spread out by the ganglia, embedded in the berth as if he were

trying to bury himself in it or a voice from the depths of the earth were

summoning him below, the unhappy man seemed to be stifling under some unseen

pressure. His wife was sobbing.

"Isn't there any hope left, doctor?" "He's dead," said Rieux.

Michel's death marked, one might say, the end of the first period, that of

bewildering portents, and the beginning of another, relatively more trying, in

which the perplexity of the early days gradually gave place to panic. Reviewing

that first phase in the light of subsequent events, our townsfolk realized that

they had never dreamed it possible that our little town should be chosen out for

the scene of such grotesque happenings as the wholesale death of rats in broad

daylight or the decease of concierges through exotic maladies. In this respect

they were wrong, and their views obviously called for revision.

Still, if things had gone thus far and no farther, force of habit would

doubtless have gained the day, as usual. But other members of our community, not

all menials or poor people, were to follow the path down which M. Michel had led

the way. And it was then that fear, and with fear serious reflection, began.

However, before entering on a detailed account of the next phase, the narrator

proposes to give the opinion of another witness on the period that has been

described.

Jean Tarrou, whose acquaintance we have already made at the beginning of this

narrative, had come to Oran some weeks before and was staying in a big hotel in

the center of the town. Apparently he had private means and was not engaged in

business. But though he gradually became a familiar figure in our midst, no one

knew where he hailed from or what had brought him to Oran.

He was often to be seen in public and at the beginning of spring was seen on one

or other of the beaches almost every day; obviously he was fond of swimming.

Good-humored, always ready with a smile, he seemed an addict of all normal

pleasures without being their slave. In fact, the only habit he was known to

have was that of cultivating the society of the Spanish dancers and musicians

who abound in our town.

His notebooks comprise a sort of chronicle of those strange early days we all

lived through. But an unusual type of chronicle, since the writer seems to make

a point of understatement, and at first sight we might almost imagine that

Tarrou had a habit of observing events and people through the wrong end of a

telescope. In those chaotic times he set himself to recording the history of

what the normal historian passes over.

Obviously we may deplore this curious kink in his character and suspect in him a

lack of proper feeling. All the same, it is undeniable that these notebooks,

which form a sort of discursive diary, supply the chronicler of the period with

a host of seeming-trivial details which yet have their importance, and whose

very oddity should be enough to prevent the reader from passing hasty judgment

on this singular man.

The earliest entries made by Jean Tarrou synchronize with his coming to Oran.

From the outset they reveal a paradoxical satisfaction at the discovery of a

town

so intrinsically ugly. We find in them a minute description of the two bronze

lions adorning the Municipal Office, and appropriate comments on the lack of

trees, the hideousness of the houses, and the absurd lay-out of the town.

Tarrou sprinkles his descriptions with bits of conversation overheard in

streetcars and in the streets, never adding a comment on them except, this comes

somewhat later' in the report of a dialogue concerning a man named Camps. It was

a chat between two streetcar conductors.

"You knew Camps, didn't you?" asked one of them. "Camps? A tall chap with a

black mustache?"

"That's him. A switchman." "Ah yes, I remember now." "Well, he's dead." "Oh?

When did he die?" "After that business about the rats." "You don't say so! What

did he die of?" "I couldn't say exactly. Some kind of fever.

Of course, he never was what you might call fit. He got abscesses under the

arms, and they did him in, it seems."

"Still, he didn't look that different from other people." "I wouldn't say that.

He had a weak chest and he used to play the trombone in the town band. It's hard

on the lungs, blowing a trombone."

"Ah, if you've got weak lungs, it don't do you any good, blowing down a big

instrument like that."

After jotting down this dialogue Tarrou went on to speculate why Camps had

joined a band when it was so clearly inadvisable, and what obscure motive had

led him to risk his life for the sake of parading the streets on Sunday

mornings.

We gather that Tarrou was agreeably impressed by a little scene that took place

daily on the balcony of a house facing his window. His room at the hotel looked

on to a small side street and there were always several cats sleeping in the

shadow of the walls. Every day, soon after lunch, at a time when most people

stayed indoors, enjoying a siesta, a dapper little old man stepped out on the

balcony on the other side of the street. He had a soldierly bearing, very erect,

and affected a military style of dressing; his snow-white hair was always

brushed to perfect smoothness. Leaning over the balcony he would call: "Pussy!

Pussy!" in a voice at once haughty and endearing. The cats blinked up at him

with sleep-pale eyes, but made no move as yet. He then proceeded to tear some

paper into scraps and let them fall into the street; interested by the

fluttering shower of white butterflies, the cats came forward, lifting tentative

paws toward the last scraps of paper. Then, taking careful aim, the old man

would spit vigorously at the cats and, whenever a liquid missile hit the quarry,

would beam with delight.

Lastly, Tarrou seemed to have been quite fascinated by the commercial character

of the town, whose aspect, activities, and even pleasures all seemed to be

dictated by considerations of business. This idiosyncrasy, the term he uses in

his diary?was warmly approved of by Tarrou; indeed, one of his appreciative

comments ends on the exclamation: "At last!"

These are the only passages in which our visitor's record, at this period,

strikes a seemingly personal note. Its significance and the earnestness behind

it might escape the reader on a casual perusal. For example, after describing

how the discovery of a dead rat led the hotel cashier to make an error in his

bill, Tarrou added: "Query: How contrive not to waste one's time? Answer: By

being fully aware of it all the while.

Ways in which this can be done: By spending one's days on an uneasy chair in a

dentist's waiting-room; by remaining on one's balcony all a Sunday afternoon; by

listening to lectures in a language one doesn't know; by traveling by the

longest and least-convenient train routes, and of course standing all the way;

by lining up at the box-office of theaters and then not buying a seat; and so

forth."

Then, immediately following these eccentricities of thought and expression, we

come on a detailed description of the streetcar service in the town, the

structure of the cars, their indeterminate color, their unvarying dirtiness, and

he concludes his observations with a "Very odd," which explains nothing.

So much by way of introduction to Tarrou's comments on the phenomenon of the

rats.

"The little old fellow opposite is quite disconsolate today. There are no more

cats. The sight of all those dead rats strewn about the street may have excited

their hunting instinct; anyhow, they all have vanished. To my thinking, there's

no question of their eating the dead rats. Mine, I remember, turned up their

noses at dead things. All the same, they're probably busy hunting in the

cellars, hence the old boy's plight. His hair isn't as well brushed as usual,

and he looks less alert, less military. You can see he is worried. After a few

moments he went back into the room. But first he spat once on emptiness.

"In town today a streetcar was stopped because a dead rat had been found in it.

(Query: How did it get there?) Two or three women promptly alighted. The rat

was thrown out. The car went on.

"The night watchman at the hotel, a level-headed man, assured me that all these

rats meant trouble coming. 'When the rat leave a ship...' I replied that this

held good for ships, but for towns it hadn't yet been demonstrated. But he stuck

to his point. I asked what sort of 'trouble' we might expect. That he couldn't

say; disasters always come out of the blue. But he wouldn't be surprised if

there were an earthquake brewing. I admitted that was possible, and then he

asked if the prospect didn't alarm me.

" 'The only thing I'm interested in,' I told him, 'is acquiring peace of mind.'

"He understood me perfectly.

"I find a family that has its meals in this hotel quite interesting. The father

is a tall, thin man, always dressed in black and wearing a starched collar. The

top of his head is bald, with two tufts of gray hair on each side. His small,

beady eyes, narrow nose, and hard, straight mouth make him look like a well-

brought-up owl. He is always first at the door of the restaurant, stands aside

to let his wife, a tiny woman, like a black mouse, go in, and then comes in

himself with a small boy and girl, dressed like performing poodles, at his

heels. When they are at the table he remains standing till his wife is seated

and only then the two poodles can perch themselves on their chairs. He uses no

terms of endearment to his family, addresses politely spiteful remarks to his

wife, and bluntly tells the kids what he thinks of them.

" 'Nicole, you're behaving quite disgracefully.'

"The little girl is on the brink of tears, which is as it should be.

"This morning the small boy was all excitement about the rats, and started

saying something on the subject.

" 'Philippe, one doesn't talk of rats at table. For the future I forbid you to

use the word.'

" 'Your father's right,' approved the mouse.

"The two poodles buried their noses in their plates, and the owl acknowledged

thanks by a curt, perfunctory nod.

"This excellent example notwithstanding, everybody in town is talking about the

rats, and the local newspaper has taken a hand. The town-topics column, usually

very varied, is now devoted exclusively to a campaign against the local

authorities. 'Are our city fathers aware that the decaying bodies of these

rodents constitute a grave danger to the population?' The manager of the hotel

can talk of nothing else. But he has a personal grievance, too; that dead rats

should be found in the elevator of a three-star hotel seems to him the end of

all things. To console him, I said: 'But, you know, everybody's in the same

boat.'

" 'That's just it,' he replied. 'Now we're like everybody else.'

"He was the first to tell me about the outbreak of this queer kind of fever

which is causing much alarm. One of his chambermaids has got it.

" 'But I feel sure it's not contagious,' he hastened to assure me. "I told him

it was all the same to me.

" 'Ah, I understand, sir. You're like me, you're a fatalist.'

"I had said nothing of the kind and, what's more, am not a fatalist. I told him

so...."

From this point onwards Tarrou's entries deal in some detail with the curious

fever that was causing much anxiety among the public. When noting that the

little old man, now that the rats had ceased appearing, had regained his cats

and was studiously perfecting his shooting, Tarrou adds that a dozen or so cases

of this fever were known to have occurred, and most had ended fatally.

For the light it may throw on the narrative that follows, Tarrou's description

of Dr. Rieux may be suitably inserted here. So far as the narrator can judge, it

is fairly accurate.

"Looks about thirty-five. Moderate height. Broad shoulders. Almost rectangular

face. Dark, steady eyes, but prominent jaws. A biggish, well-modeled nose. Black

hair, cropped very close. A curving mouth with thick, usually tight-set lips.

With his tanned skin, the black down on his hands and arms, the dark but

becoming suits he always wears, he reminds one of a Sicilian peasant.

"He walks quickly. When crossing a street, he steps off the sidewalk without

changing his pace, but two out of three times makes a little hop when he steps

on to the sidewalk on the other side. He is absentminded and, when driving his

car, often leaves his side-signals on after he has turned a corner. Always

bareheaded. Looks knowledgeable."

Tarrou's figures were correct. Dr. Rieux was only too well aware of the serious

turn things had taken. After seeing to the isolation of the concierge's body, he

had rung up Richard and asked what he made of these inguinal-fever cases.

"I can make nothing of them," Richard confessed. "There have been two deaths,

one in forty-eight hours, the other in three days. And the second patient showed

all the signs of convalescence when I visited him on the second day."

"Please let me know if you have other cases," Rieux said.

He rang up some other colleagues. As a result of these inquiries he gathered

that there had been some twenty cases of the same type within the last few days.

Almost all had ended fatally. He then advised Richard, who was chairman of the

local Medical Association, to have any fresh cases put into isolation wards.

"Sorry," Richard said, "but I can't do anything about it. An order to that

effect can be issued only by the Prefect. Anyhow, what grounds have you for

supposing there's danger of contagion?"

"No definite grounds. But the symptoms are definitely alarming."

Richard, however, repeated that "such measures were outside his province." The

most he could do was to put the matter up to the Prefect.

But while these talks were going on, the weather changed for the worse. On the

day following old Michel's death the sky clouded up and there were brief

torrential downpours, each of which was followed by some hours of muggy heat.

The aspect of the sea, too, changed; its dark-blue translucency had gone and,

under the lowering sky, it had steely or silvery glints that hurt the eyes to

look at.

The damp heat of the spring made everyone long for the coming of the dry, clean

summer heat. On the town, humped snail-wise on its plateau and shut off almost

everywhere from the sea, a mood of listlessness descended. Hemmed in by lines

and lines of whitewashed walls, walking between rows of dusty shops, or riding

in the dingy yellow streetcars, you felt, as it were, trapped by the climate.

This, however, was not the case with Rieux's old Spanish patient, who welcomed

this weather with enthusiasm.

"It cooks you," he said. "Just the thing for asthma."

Certainly it "cooked you," but exactly like a fever. Indeed, "the whole town was

running a temperature; such anyhow was the impression Dr. Rieux could not shake

off as he drove to the rue Faidherbe for the inquiry into Cottard's attempted

suicide. That this impression was unreasonable he knew, and he attributed it to

nervous exhaustion; he had certainly his full share of worries just at present.

In fact, it was high time to put the brakes on and try to get his nerves into

some sort of order.

On reaching his destination he found that the police inspector hadn't turned up

yet. Grand, who met him on the landing, suggested they should wait in his place,

leaving the door open. The municipal clerk had two rooms, both very sparsely

furnished. The only objects to catch the eye were a bookshelf on which lay two

or three dictionaries, and a small blackboard on which one could just read two

half-obliterated words: "flowery avenues."

Grand announced that Cottard had had a good night. But he'd waked up this

morning with pains in his head and feeling very low. Grand, too, looked tired

and overwrought; he kept pacing up and down the room, opening and closing a

portfolio crammed with sheets of manuscript that lay on the table.

Meanwhile, however, he informed the doctor that he really knew very little about

Cottard, but believed him to have private means in a small way. Cottard was a

queer bird. For a long while their relations went no farther than wishing each

other good-day when they met on the stairs.

"I've only had two conversations with him. Some days ago I upset a box of

colored chalks I was bringing home, on the landing. They were red and blue

chalks. Just then Cottard came out of his room and he helped me pick them up. He

asked me what I wanted colored chalks for."

Grand had then explained to him that he was trying to brush up his Latin. He'd

learned it at school, of course, but his memories had grown blurred.

"You see, doctor, I've been told that a knowledge of Latin gives one a better

understanding of the real meanings of French words."

So he wrote Latin words on his blackboard, then copied out again in blue chalk

the part of each word that changed in conjugation or declension, and in red

chalk the part of the word that never varied.

"I'm not sure if Cottard followed this very clearly, but he seemed interested

and asked me for a red chalk. That rather surprised me, but after all? Of course

I couldn't guess the use he'd put it to."

Rieux asked what was the subject of their second conversation. But just then the

inspector came, accompanied by a clerk, and said he wished to begin by hearing

Grand's statement. The doctor noticed that Grand, when referring to Cottard,

always called him "the unfortunate man," and at one moment used even the

expression "his grim resolve." When discussing the possible motives for the

attempted suicide, Grand showed an almost finical anxiety over his choice of

words. Finally he elected for the expression "a secret grief." The inspector

asked if there had been anything in Cottard's manner that suggested what he

called his "intent to felo-de-se."

"He knocked at my door yesterday," Grand said, "and asked me for a match. I gave

him a box. He said he was sorry to disturb me but that, as we were neighbors, he

hoped I wouldn't mind. He assured me he'd bring back my box, but I told him to

keep it."

The inspector asked Grand if he'd noticed anything queer about Cottard. "What

struck me as queer was that he always seemed to want to start a

conversation. But he should have seen I was busy with my work." Grand turned to

Rieux and added rather shyly: "Some private work."

The inspector now said that he must see the invalid and hear what he had to say.

Rieux thought it would be wiser to prepare Cottard for the visit. When he

entered the bedroom he found Cottard, who was wearing a gray flannel nightshirt,

sitting up in bed and gazing at the door with a scared expression on his face.

"It's the police, isn't it?"

"Yes," Rieux said, "but don't get flustered. There are only some formalities to

be gone through, and then you'll be left in peace."

Cottard replied that all this was quite needless, to his thinking, and anyhow he

didn't like the police.

Rieux showed some irritation.

"I don't love them either. It's only a matter of answering a few questions as

briefly and correctly as you can, and then you'll be through with it."

Cottard said nothing and Rieux began to move to the door. He had hardly taken a

step when the little man called him back and, as soon as he was at the bedside,

gripped his hands.

"They can't be rough with an invalid, a man who's hanged himself, can they,

doctor?"

Rieux gazed down at him for a moment, then assured him that there was no

question of anything like that, and in any case he was here to protect his

patient. This seemed to relieve Cottard, and Rieux went out to get the

inspector.

After Grand's deposition had been read out, Cottard was asked to state the exact

motive of his act. He merely replied, without looking at the police officer,

that "a secret grief" described it well enough. The inspector then asked him

peremptorily if he intended to "have another go at it." Showing more animation,

Cottard said certainly not, his one wish was to be left in peace.

"Allow me to point out, my man," the police officer rejoined with asperity,

"that just now it's you who're troubling the peace of others." Rieux signed to

him not to continue, and he left it at that.

"A good hour wasted!" the inspector sighed when the door closed behind them. "As

you can guess, we've other things to think about, what with this fever

everybody's talking of."

He then asked the doctor if there was any serious danger to the town; Rieux

answered that he couldn't say.

"It must be the weather," the police officer decided. "That's what it is."

No doubt it was the weather. As the day wore on, everything grew sticky to the

touch, and Rieux felt his anxiety increasing after each visit. That evening a

neighbor of his old patient in the suburbs started vomiting, pressing his hand

to his groin, and running a high fever accompanied by delirium. The ganglia were

much bigger than M. Michel's. One of them was beginning to suppurate, and

presently split open like an overripe fruit.

On returning to his apartment, Rieux rang up the medical-stores depot for the

district. In his professional diary for the day the only entry was: "Negative

reply." Already he was receiving calls for similar cases from various parts of

the town. Obviously the abscesses had to be lanced. Two crisscross strokes, and

the ganglion disgorged a mixture of blood and pus. Their limbs stretched out as

far as they could manage, the sick man went on bleeding. Dark patches appeared

on their legs and stomachs; sometimes a ganglion would stop suppurating, then

suddenly swell again. Usually the sick man died, in a stench of corruption.

The local press, so lavish of news about the rats, now had nothing to say. For

rats died in the street; men in their homes. And newspapers are concerned only

with the street. Meanwhile, government and municipal officials were putting

their heads together. So long as each individual doctor had come across only two

or three cases, no one had thought of taking action. But it was merely a matter

of adding up the figures and, once this had been done, the total was startling.

In a very few days the number of cases had risen by leaps and bounds, and it

became evident to all observers of this strange malady that a real epidemic had

set in. This was the state of affairs when Castel, one of Rieux's colleagues and

a much older man than he, came to see him.

"Naturally," he said to Rieux, "you know what it is." "I'm waiting for the

result of the post-mortems."

"Well, I know. And I don't need any post-mortems. I was in China for a good part

of my career, and I saw some cases in Paris twenty years ago. Only no one dared

to call them by their name on that occasion. The usual taboo, of course; the

public mustn't be alarmed, that wouldn't do at all. And then, as one of my

colleagues said, 'It's unthinkable. Everyone knows it's ceased to appear in

western Europe.' Yes, everyone knew that, except the dead men. Come now, Rieux,

you know as well as I do what it is."

Rieux pondered. He was looking out of the window of his surgery, at the tall

cliff that closed the half-circle of the bay on the far horizon. Though blue,

the sky had a dull sheen that was softening as the light declined.

"Yes, Castel," he replied. "It's hardly credible. But everything points to its

being plague."

Castel got up and began walking toward the door.

"You know," the old doctor said, "what they're going to tell us? That it

vanished from temperate countries long ago."

"'Vanished'? What does that word really mean?" Rieux shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes. And don't forget. Just under twenty years ago, in Paris too."

"Right. Let's hope it won't prove any worse this time than it did then. But

really it's incredible."

The word "plague" had just been uttered for the first time. At this stage of the

narrative, with Dr. Bernard Rieux standing at his window, the narrator may,

perhaps, be allowed to justify the doctor's uncertainty and surprise, since,

with very slight differences, his reaction was the same as that of the great

majority of our townsfolk. Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of

recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that

crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars

in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.

In fact, like our fellow citizens, Rieux was caught off his guard, and we should

understand his hesitations in the light of this fact; and similarly understand

how he was torn between conflicting fears and confidence. When a war breaks out,

people say: "It's too stupid; it can't last long." But though a war may well be

"too stupid," that doesn't prevent its lasting. Stupidity has a knack of getting

its way; as we should see if we were not always so much wrapped up in ourselves.

In this respect our townsfolk were like everybody else, wrapped up in

themselves; in other words they were humanists: they disbelieved in pestilences.

A pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure; therefore we tell ourselves

that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But

it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who

pass away, and the humanists first of all, because they haven't taken their

precautions.

Our townsfolk were not more to blame than others; they forgot to be modest, that

was all, and thought that everything still was possible for them; which

presupposed that pestilences were impossible. They went on doing business,

arranged for journeys, and formed views. How should they have given a thought to

anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the

exchange of views. They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so

long as there are pestilences.

Indeed, even after Dr. Rieux had admitted in his friend's company that a handful

of persons, scattered about the town, had without warning died of plague, the

danger still remained fantastically unreal. For the simple reason that, when a

man is a doctor, he comes to have his own ideas of physical suffering, and to

acquire somewhat more imagination than the average. Looking from his window at

the town, outwardly quite unchanged, the doctor felt little more than a faint

qualm for the future, a vague unease.

He tried to recall what he had read about the disease. Figures floated across

his memory, and he recalled that some thirty or so great plagues known to

history had accounted for nearly a hundred million deaths. But what are a

hundred million deaths?

When one has served in a war, one hardly knows what a dead man is, after a

while. And since a dead man has no substance unless one has actually seen him

dead, a hundred million corpses broadcast through history are no more than a

puff of smoke in the imagination. The doctor remembered the plague at

Constantinople that, according to Procopius, caused ten thousand deaths in a

single day. Ten thousand dead made about five times the audience in a biggish

cinema.

Yes, that was how it should be done. You should collect the people at the exits

of five picture-houses, you should lead them to a city square and make them die

in heaps if you wanted to get a clear notion of what it means. Then at least you

could add some familiar faces to the anonymous mass. But naturally that was

impossible to put into practice; moreover, what man knows ten thousand faces?

In any case the figures of those old historians, like Procopius, weren't to be

relied on; that was common knowledge. Seventy years ago, at Canton, forty

thousand rats died of plague before the disease spread to the inhabitants. But,

again, in the Canton epidemic there was no reliable way of counting up the rats.

A very rough estimate was all that could be made, with, obviously, a wide margin

for error.

"Let's see," the doctor murmured to himself, "supposing the length of a rat to

be ten inches, forty thousand rats placed end to end would make a line of..."

He pulled himself up sharply. He was letting his imagination play pranks, the

last thing wanted just now. A few cases, he told himself, don't make an

epidemic; they merely call for serious precautions. He must fix his mind, first

of all, on the observed facts: stupor and extreme prostration, buboes, intense

thirst, delirium, dark blotches on the body, internal dilatation, and, in

conclusion...

In conclusion, some words came back to the doctor's mind; aptly enough, the

concluding sentence of the description of the symptoms given in his medical

handbook: "The pulse becomes fluttering, dicrotic, and intermittent, and death

ensues as the result of the slightest movement." Yes, in conclusion, the

patient's life hung on a thread, and three people out of four (he remembered the

exact figures) were too impatient not to make the very slight movement that

snapped the thread.

The doctor was still looking out of the window. Beyond it lay the tranquil

radiance of a cool spring sky; inside the room a word was echoing still, the

word "plague." A word that conjured up in the doctor's mind not only what

science chose to put into it, but a whole series of fantastic possibilities

utterly out of keeping with that gray and yellow town under his eyes, from which

were rising the sounds of mild activity characteristic of the hour; a drone

rather than a bustling, the noises of a happy town, in short, if it's possible

to be at once so dull and happy.

A tranquillity so casual and thoughtless seemed almost effortlessly to give the

lie to those old pictures of the plague: Athens, a charnel-house reeking to

heaven and deserted even by the birds; Chinese towns cluttered up with victims

silent in their agony; the convicts at Marseille piling rotting corpses into

pits; the building of the Great Wall in Provence to fend off the furious plague-

wind; the damp, putrefying pallets stuck to the mud floor at the Constantinople

lazar-house, where the patients were hauled up from their beds with hooks; the

carnival of masked doctors at the Black Death; men and women copulating in the

cemeteries of Milan; cartloads of dead bodies rumbling through London's ghoul-

haunted darkness, nights and days filled always, everywhere, with the eternal

cry of human pain.

No, all those horrors were not near enough as yet even to ruffle the equanimity

of that spring afternoon. The clang of an unseen streetcar came through the

window, briskly refuting cruelty and pain. Only the sea, murmurous behind the

dingy checkerboard of houses, told of the unrest, the precariousness, of all

things in this world. And, gazing in the direction of the bay, Dr. Rieux called

to mind the plague-fires of which Lucretius tells, which the Athenians kindled

on the seashore.

The dead were brought there after nightfall, but there was not room enough, and

the living fought one another with torches for a space where to lay those who

had been dear to them; for they had rather engage in bloody conflicts than

abandon their dead to the waves. A picture rose before him of the red glow of

the pyres mirrored on a wine-dark, slumbrous sea, battling torches whirling

sparks across the darkness, and thick, fetid smoke rising toward the watchful

sky. Yes, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility....

But these extravagant forebodings dwindled in the light of reason. True, the

word "plague" had been uttered; true, at this very moment one or two victims

were being seized and laid low by the disease. Still, that could stop, or be

stopped. It was only a matter of lucidly recognizing what had to be recognized;

of dispelling extraneous shadows and doing what needed to be done. Then the

plague would come to an end, because it was unthinkable, or, rather, because one

thought of it on misleading lines. If, as was most likely, it died out, all

would be well. If not, one would know it anyhow for what it was and what steps

should be taken for coping with and finally overcoming it.

The doctor opened the window, and at once the noises of the town grew louder.

The brief, intermittent sibilance of a machine-saw came from a near-by workshop.

Rieux pulled himself together. There lay certitude; there, in the daily round.

All the rest hung on mere threads and trivial contingencies; you couldn't waste

your time on it. The thing was to do your job as it should be done.

The doctor's musings had reached this point when the visit of Joseph Grand was

announced. Grand's duties as clerk in the Municipal Office were varied, and he

was sometimes employed in the statistical department on compiling the figures of

births, marriages, and deaths. Thus it had fallen to him to add up the number of

deaths during the last few days, and, being of an obliging disposition, he had

volunteered to bring a copy of the latest figures to the doctor.

Grand, who was waving a sheet of paper, was accompanied by his neighbor,

Cottard.

"The figures are going up, doctor. Eleven deaths in forty-eight hours."

Rieux shook hands with Cottard and asked him how he was feeling. Grand put in a

word explaining that Cottard was bent on thanking the doctor and apologizing for

the trouble he had given. But Rieux was gazing frowningly at the figures on the

sheet of paper.

"Well," he said, "perhaps we'd better make up our minds to call this disease by

its name. So far we've been only shillyshallying. Look here, I'm off to the

laboratory; like to come with me?"

"Quite so, quite so," Grand said as he went down the stairs at the doctor's

heels. "I, too, believe in calling things by their name. But what's the name in

this case?"

"That I shan't say, and anyhow you wouldn't gain, anything by knowing." "You

see," Grand smiled. "It's not so easy after all!"

They started off toward the Place d'Armes. Cottard still kept silent. The

streets were beginning to fill up. The brief dusk of our town was already giving

place to night, and the first stars glimmered above the still clearly marked

horizon. A few moments later all the street-lamps went on, dimming the sky, and

the voices in the street seemed to rise a tone.

"Excuse me," Grand said at the corner of the Place d'Armes, "but I must catch my

car now. My evenings are sacred. As we say in my part of the world: 'Never put

off to tomorrow?'"

Rieux had already noticed Grand's trick of professing to quote some turn of

speech from "his part of the world" (he hailed from MontÃ©limar), and following

up with some such hackneyed expression as "lost in dreams," or "pretty as a

picture."

"That's so," Cottard put in. "You can never budge him from his den after

dinner." Rieux asked Grand if he was doing extra work for the municipality.

Grand said no, he was working on his own account.

"Really?" Rieux said, to keep the conversation going. "And are you getting on

well with it?"

"Considering I've been at it for years, it would be surprising if I wasn't.

Though in one sense there hasn't been much progress."

"May one know", the doctor halted, "what it is that you're engaged on?"

Grand put a hand up to his hat and tugged it down upon his big, protruding ears,

then murmured some half-inaudible remark from which Rieux seemed to gather that

Grand's work was connected with "the growth of a personality." Then he turned

rather hastily and a moment later was hurrying, with short, quick steps, under

the fig trees lining the boulevard de la Marne.

When they were at the laboratory gate, Cottard told the doctor that he would

greatly like to see him and ask his advice about something. Rieux, who was

fingering in his pocket the sheet of paper with the figures on it, said he'd

better call during his consulting-hours; then, changing his mind, told him he

would be in his part of the town next day and would drop in to see him at the

end of the afternoon.

On leaving Cottard the doctor noticed that he was thinking of Grand, trying to

picture him in the midst of an outbreak of plague, not an outbreak like the

present one, which would probably not prove serious, but like one of the great

visitations of the past. "He's the kind of man who always escapes in such

cases." Rieux remembered having read somewhere that the plague spared weak

constitutions and chose its victims chiefly among the robust. Still thinking of

Grand, he decided that he was something of a "mystery man" in his small way.

True, at first sight, Grand manifested both the outward signs and typical manner

of a humble employee in the local administration. Tall and thin, he seemed lost

in the garments that he always chose a size too large, under the illusion that

they would wear longer. Though he still had most of the teeth in his lower jaw,

all the upper ones were gone, with the result that when he smiled, raising his

upper lip, the lower scarcely moved, his mouth looked like a small black hole

let into his face.

Also he had the walk of a shy young priest, sidling along walls and slipping

mouse-like into doorways, and he exuded a faint odor of smoke and basement

rooms; in short, he had all the attributes of insignificance.

Indeed, it cost an effort to picture him otherwise than bent over a desk,

studiously revising the tariff of the town baths or gathering for a junior

secretary the materials of a report on the new garbage-collection tax. Even

before you knew what his employment was, you had a feeling that he'd been

brought into the world for the sole purpose of performing the discreet but

needful duties of a temporary assistant municipal clerk on a salary of sixty-two

francs, thirty centimes a day.

This was, in fact, the entry that he made each month in the staff register at

the Municipal Office, in the column Post in Which Employed. When twenty-two

years previously, after obtaining a matriculation certificate beyond which, for

lack of money, he was unable to progress, he was given this temporary post, he

had been led to expect, or so he said, speedy "confirmation" in it. It was only

a matter of proving his ability to cope with the delicate problems raised by the

administration of our city. Once confirmed, they had assured him, he couldn't

fail to be promoted to a grade that would enable him to live quite comfortably.

Ambition, certainly, was not the spur that activated Joseph Grand; that he would

swear to, wryly smiling. All he desired was the prospect of a life suitably

insured on the material side by honest work, enabling him to devote his leisure

to his hobbies. If he'd accepted the post offered him, it was from honorable

motives and, if he might say so, loyalty to an ideal.

But this "temporary" state of things had gone on and on, the cost of living rose

by leaps and bounds, and Grand's pay, in spite of some statutory rises, was

still a mere pittance.

He had confided this to Rieux, but nobody else seemed aware of his position. And

here lies Grand's originality, or anyhow an indication of it. He could certainly

have brought to official notice, if not his rights, of which he wasn't sure, at

least the promises given him. But, for one thing, the departmental head who had

made them had been dead for some time and, furthermore, Grand no longer

remembered their exact terms. And lastly, this was the real trouble, Joseph

Grand couldn't find his words.

This peculiarity, as Rieux had noticed, was really the key to the personality of

our worthy fellow citizen. And this it was which always prevented him from

writing the mildly protesting letter he had in mind, or taking the steps the

situation called for. According to him, he felt a particular aversion from

talking about his "rights", the word was one that gave him pause, and likewise

from mentioning a "promise", which would have implied that he was claiming his

due and thus bespoken an audacity incompatible with the humble post he filled.

On the other hand, he refused to use expressions such as "your kindness,"

"gratitude," or even "solicit," which, to his thinking, were incompatible with

his personal dignity. Thus, owing to his inability to find the right words, he

had gone on performing his obscure, ill-paid duties until a somewhat advanced

age. Also this, anyhow, was what he told Dr. Rieux he had come, after long

experience, to realize that he could always count on living within his means;

all he had to do was to scale down his needs to his income.

Thus he confirmed the wisdom of an opinion often voiced by our mayor, a business

magnate of the town, when he insisted vehemently that in the last analysis (he

emphasized this choice expression, which indeed clinched his argument, there was

no reason to believe that anyone had ever died of hunger in the town. In any

case, the austere, not to say ascetic life of Joseph Grand was, in the last

analysis, a guarantee against any anxiety in this respect. He went on looking

for his words.

In a certain sense it might well be said that his was an exemplary life. He was

one of those rare people, rare in our town as elsewhere, who have the courage of

their good feelings. What little he told of his personal life vouched for acts

of kindness and a capacity for affection that no one in our times dares own to.

Without a blush he confessed to dearly loving his nephews and sister, his only

surviving near relation, whom he went to France to visit every other year.

He admitted that the thought of his parents, whom he lost when he was very

young, often gave him a pang. He did not conceal the fact that he had a special

affection for a church bell in his part of the town which started pealing very

melodiously at about five every afternoon. Yet to express such emotions, simple

as they were, the least word cost him a terrible effort. And this difficulty in

finding his words had come to be the bane of his life. "Oh, doctor," he would

exclaim, "how I'd like to learn to express myself!" He brought the subject up

each time he met Rieux.

That evening, as he watched Grand's receding form, it flashed on the doctor what

it was that Grand was trying to convey; he was evidently writing a book or

something of the sort. And quaintly enough, as he made his way to the

laboratory, this thought reassured him. He realized how absurd it was, but he

simply couldn't believe that a pestilence on the great scale could befall a town

where people like Grand were to be found, obscure functionaries cultivating

harmless eccentricities. To be precise, he couldn't picture such eccentricities

existing in a plague-stricken community, and he concluded that the chances were

all against the plague's making any headway among our fellow citizens.

NEXT day, by dint of a persistence that many thought ill-advised, Rieux

persuaded the authorities to convene a health committee at the Prefect's office.

"People in town are getting nervous, that's a fact," Dr. Richard admitted. "And

of course all sorts of wild rumors are going round. The Prefect said to me,

'Take prompt action if you like, but don't attract attention.' He personally is

convinced that it's a false alarm."

Rieux gave Castel a lift to the Prefect's office.

"Do you know," Castel said when they were in the car, "that we haven't a gram of

serum in the whole district?"

"I know. I rang up the depot. The director seemed quite startled. It'll have to

be sent from Paris."

"Let's hope they're quick about it." "I sent a wire yesterday," Rieux said.

The Prefect greeted them amiably enough, but one could see his nerves were on

edge.

"Let's make a start, gentlemen," he said. "Need I review the situation?" Richard

thought that wasn't necessary. He and his colleagues were acquainted

with the facts. The only question was what measures should be adopted.

"The question," old Castel cut in almost rudely, "is to know whether it's plague

or not."

Two or three of the doctors present protested. The others seemed to hesitate.

The Prefect gave a start and hurriedly glanced toward the door to make sure it

had prevented this outrageous remark from being overheard in the corridor

Richard said that in his opinion the great thing was not to take an alarmist

view. All that could be said at present was that we had to deal with a special

type of fever, with inguinal complications; in medical science, as in daily

life, it was unwise to jump to conclusions. Old Castel, who was placidly chewing

his draggled yellow mustache, raised his pale, bright eyes and gazed at Rieux.

Then, after sweeping the other members of the committee with a friendly glance,

he said that he knew quite well that it was plague and, needless to say, he also

knew that, were this to be officially admitted, the authorities would be

compelled to take very drastic steps. This was, of course, the explanation of

his colleagues' reluctance to face the facts and, if it would ease their minds,

he was quite prepared to say it wasn't plague. The Prefect seemed ruffled and

remarked that, in any case, this line of argument seemed to him unsound.

"The important thing," Castel replied, "isn't the soundness or otherwise of the

argument, but for it to make you think." Rieux, who had said nothing so far, was

asked for his opinion.

"We are dealing," he said, "with a fever of a typhoidal nature, accompanied by

vomiting and buboes. I have incised these buboes and had the pus analyzed; our

laboratory analyst believes he has identified the plague bacillus. But I am

bound to add that there are specific modifications that don't quite tally with

the classical description of the plague bacillus."

Richard pointed out that this justified a policy of wait-and-see; anyhow, it

would be wise to await the statistical report on the series of analyses that had

been going on for several days.

"When a microbe," Rieux said, "after a short intermission can quadruple in three

days' time the volume of the spleen, can swell the mesenteric ganglia to the

size of an orange and give them the consistency of gruel, a policy of wait-and-

see is, to say the least of it, unwise.

The foci of infection are steadily extending. Judging by the rapidity with which

the disease is spreading, it may well, unless we can stop it, kill off half the

town before two months are out. That being so, it has small importance whether

you call it plague or some rare kind of fever. The important thing is to prevent

its killing off half the population of this town."

Richard said it was a mistake to paint too gloomy a picture, and, moreover, the

disease hadn't been proved to be contagious; indeed, relatives of his patients,

living under the same roof, had escaped it.

"But others have died," Rieux observed. "And obviously contagion is never

absolute; otherwise you'd have a constant mathematical progression and the

death-rate would rocket up catastrophically. It's not a question of painting too

black a picture. It's a question of taking precautions."

Richard, however, summing up the situation as he saw it, pointed out that, if

the epidemic did not cease spontaneously, it would be necessary to apply the

rigorous prophylactic measures laid down in the Code. And, to do this, it would

be necessary to admit officially that plague had broken out. But of this there

was no absolute certainty; therefore any hasty action was to be deprecated.

Rieux stuck to his guns. "The point isn't whether the measures provided for in

the Code are rigorous, but whether they are needful to prevent the death of half

the population. All the rest is a matter of administrative action, and I needn't

remind you that our constitution has provided for such emergencies by empowering

prefects to issue the necessary orders."

"Quite true," the Prefect assented, "but I shall need your professional

declaration that the epidemic is one of plague."

"If we don't make that declaration," Rieux said, "there's a risk that half the

population may be wiped out."

Richard cut in with some impatience.

"The truth is that our colleague is convinced it's plague; his description of

the syndrome proved it."

Rieux replied that he had not described a "syndrome," but merely what he'd seen

with his own eyes. And what he'd seen was buboes, and high fever accompanied by

delirium, ending fatally within forty-eight hours. Could Dr. Richard take the

responsibility of declaring that the epidemic would die out without the

imposition of rigorous prophylactic measures?

Richard hesitated, then fixed his eyes on Rieux.

"Please answer me quite frankly. Are you absolutely convinced it's plague?"

"You're stating the problem wrongly. It's not a question of the term I use; it's

a

question of time."

"Your view, I take it," the Prefect put in, "is this. Even if it isn't plague,

the prophylactic measures enjoined by law for coping with a state of plague

should be put into force immediately?"

"If you insist on my having a View,' that conveys it accurately enough." The

doctors confabulated. Richard was their spokesman:

"It comes to this. We are to take the responsibility of acting as though the

epidemic were plague."

This way of putting it met with general approval.

"It doesn't matter to me," Rieux said, "how you phrase it. My point is that we

should not act as if there were no likelihood that half the population would be

wiped out; for then it would be."

Followed by scowls and protestations, Rieux left the committee-room. Some

minutes later, as he was driving down a back street redolent of fried fish and

urine, a woman screaming in agony, her groin dripping blood, stretched out her

arms toward him.

ON the day after the committee meeting the fever notched another small advance.

It even found its way into the papers, but discreetly; only a few brief

references to it were made. On the following day, however, Rieux observed that

small official notices had been just put up about the town, though in places

where they would not attract much attention. It was hard to find in these

notices any indication that the authorities were facing the situation squarely.

The measures enjoined were far from Draconian and one had the feeling that many

concessions had been made to a desire not to alarm the public. The instructions

began with a bald statement that a few cases of a malignant fever had been

reported in Oran; it was not possible as yet to say if this fever was

contagious. The symptoms were not so marked as to be really perturbing and the

authorities felt sure they could rely on the townspeople to treat the situation

with composure.

None the less, guided by a spirit of prudence that all would appreciate, the

Prefect was putting into force some precautionary measures. If these measures

were carefully studied and properly applied, they would obviate any risk of an

epidemic. This being so, the Prefect felt no doubt that everybody in his

jurisdiction would wholeheartedly second his personal efforts.

The notice outlined the general program that the authorities had drawn up. It

included a systematic extermination of the rat population by injecting poison

gas into the sewers, and a strict supervision of the water-supply. The

townspeople were advised to practice extreme cleanliness, and any who found

fleas on their persons were directed to call at the municipal dispensaries.

Also heads of households were ordered promptly to report any fever case

diagnosed by their doctors and to permit the isolation of sick members of their

families in special wards at the hospital. These wards, it was explained, were

equipped to provide patients with immediate treatment and ensure the maximum

prospect of recovery. Some supplementary regulations enjoined compulsory

disinfection of the sickroom and of the vehicle in which the patient traveled.

For the rest, the Prefect confined himself to advising all who had been in

contact with the patient to consult the sanitary inspector and strictly to

follow his advice.

Dr. Rieux swung round brusquely from the poster and started back to his surgery.

Grand, who was awaiting him there, raised his arms dramatically when the doctor

entered.

"Yes," Rieux said, "I know. The figures are rising."

On the previous day ten deaths had been reported. The doctor told Grand that he

might be seeing him in the evening, as he had promised to visit Cottard.

"An excellent idea," Grand said. "You'll do him good. As a matter of fact, I

find him greatly changed."

"In what way?"

"He's become amiable." "Wasn't he amiable before?"

Grand seemed at a loss. He couldn't say that Cottard used to be unamiable; the

term wouldn't have been correct. But Cottard was a silent, secretive man, with

something

about him that made Grand think of a wild boar. His bedroom, meals at a cheap

restaurant, some rather mysterious comings and goings, these were the sum of

Cottard's days. He described himself as a traveling salesman in wines and

spirits. Now and then he was visited by two or three men, presumably customers.

Sometimes in the evening he would go to a movie across the way. In this

connection Grand mentioned a detail he had noticed, that Cottard seemed to have

a preference for gangster films. But the thing that had struck him most about

the man was his aloofness, not to say his mistrust of everyone he met.

And now, so Grand said, there had been a complete change.

"I don't quite know how to put it, but I must say I've an impression that he is

trying to make himself agreeable to all and sundry, to be in everybody's good

books. Nowadays he often talks to me, he suggests we should go out together, and

I can't bring myself to refuse. What's more, he interests me, and of course I

saved his life."

Since his attempt at suicide Cottard had had no more visitors. In the streets,

in shops, he was always trying to strike up friendships. To the grocer he was

all affability; no one could take more pains than he to show his interest in the

tobacconist's gossip.

"This particular tobacconist, a woman, by the way," Grand explained, "is a holy

terror. I told Cottard so, but he replied that I was prejudiced and she had

plenty of good points, only one had to find them out."

On two or three occasions Cottard had invited Grand to come with him to the

luxury restaurants and cafes of the town, which he had recently taken to

patronizing.

"There's a pleasant atmosphere in them," he explained, "and then one's in good

company."

Grand noticed that the staff made much of Cottard and he soon discovered why,

when he saw the lavish tips his companion gave. The traveling salesman seemed

greatly to appreciate the amiability shown him in return for his largesse. One

day when the head waiter had escorted him to the door and helped him into his

overcoat, Cottard said to Grand:

"He's a nice fellow, and he'd make a good witness." "A witness? I don't follow."

Cottard hesitated before answering.

"Well, he could say I'm not really a bad kind of man."

But his humor had its ups and downs. One day when the grocer had shown less

affability, he came home in a tearing rage.

"He's siding with the others, the swine!" "With what others?"

"The whole damned lot of them."

Grand had personally witnessed an odd scene that took place at the

tobacconist's. An animated conversation was in progress and the woman behind the

counter started airing her views about a murder case that had created some stir

in Algiers. A young commercial employee had killed an Algerian on a beach.

"I always say," the woman began, "if they clapped all that scum in jail, decent

folks could breathe more freely."

She was too much startled by Cottard's reaction, he dashed out of the shop

without a word of excuse, to continue. Grand and the woman gazed after him,

dumbfounded.

Subsequently Grand reported to the doctor other changes in Cottard's character.

Cottard had always professed very liberal ideas, as his pet dictum on economic

questions, "Big fish eat little fish," implied. But now the only Oran newspaper

he bought was the conservative organ, and one could hardly help suspecting that

he made a point of reading it in public places.

Somewhat of the same order was a request he made to Grand shortly before he left

his sick-bed; Grand mentioned he was going to the post office and Cottard asked

him to be kind enough to dispatch a money order for a hundred francs to a sister

living at a distance, mentioning that he sent her this sum every month. Then,

just when Grand was leaving the room, he called him back.

"No, send her two hundred francs. That'll be a nice surprise for her. She

believes I never give her a thought. But actually I'm devoted to her."

Not long after this he made some curious remarks to Grand in the course of

conversation. He had badgered Grand into telling him about the somewhat

mysterious "private work" to which Grand gave his evenings.

"I know!" Cottard exclaimed. "You're writing a book, aren't you?" "Something of

the kind. But it's not so simple as that."

"Ah!" Cottard sighed. "I only wish I had a knack for writing."

When Grand showed his surprise, Cottard explained with some embarrassment that

being a literary man must make things easier in lots of ways.

"Why?" Grand asked.

"Why, because an author has more rights than ordinary people, as everybody

knows. People will stand much more from him."

"It looks," said Rieux to Grand on the morning when the official notices were

posted, "as if this business of the rats had addled his brain, as it has done

for so many other people. That's all it is. Or perhaps he's scared of the

'fever.'"

"I doubt it, doctor. If you want to know my opinion, he?"

He paused; with a machine-gun rattle from its exhaust the "deratization" van was

clattering by. Rieux kept silent until it was possible to make himself audible,

then asked, without much interest, what Grand's opinion was.

"He's a man with something pretty serious on his conscience," Grand said

gravely. The doctor shrugged his shoulders. As the inspector had said, he'd

other fish to

fry.

That afternoon Rieux had another talk with Castel. The serum had not yet come.

"In any case," Rieux said, "I wonder if it will be much use. This bacillus is

such a

queer one."

"There," Castel said, "I don't agree with you. These little brutes always have

an air of originality. But, at bottom, it's always the same thing."

"That's your theory, anyhow. Actually, of course, we know next to nothing on the

subject."

"I grant you, it's only my theory. Still, in a sense, that goes for everybody."

Throughout the day the doctor was conscious that the slightly dazed feeling that

came over him whenever he thought about the plague was growing more pronounced.

Finally he realized that he was afraid! On two occasions he entered crowded

cafes.

Like Cottard he felt a need for friendly contacts, human warmth. A stupid

instinct, Rieux told himself; still, it served to remind him that he'd promised

to visit the traveling salesman.

Cottard was standing beside the dining-table when the doctor entered his room

that evening. A detective story lay open on the tablecloth. But the night was

closing in and it would have been difficult to read in the growing darkness.

Most likely Cottard had been sitting musing in the twilight until he heard the

ring at his door. Rieux asked how he was feeling. Cottard sat down and replied

rather grumpily that he was feeling tolerably well, adding that he'd feel still

better if only he could be sure of being left in peace.

Rieux remarked that one couldn't always be alone. "That's not what I meant. I

was thinking of people who take an interest in you only to make trouble for

you." When Rieux said nothing, he went on: "Mind you, that's not my case. Only

I've been reading that detective story. It's about a poor devil who's arrested

one fine morning, all of a sudden. People had been taking an interest in him and

he knew nothing about it. They were talking about him in offices, entering his

name on card indexes. Now, do you think that's fair? Do you think people have a

right to treat a man like that?"

"Well," Rieux said, "that depends. In one sense I agree, nobody has the right.

But all that's beside the mark. What's important is for you to go out a bit.

It's a mistake staying indoors too much."

Cottard seemed vexed and said that on the contrary he was always going out, and,

if need arose, all the people in the street could vouch for him. What's more, he

knew lots of people in other parts of the town.

"Do you know Monsieur Rigaud, the architect? He's a friend of mine."

The room was in almost complete darkness. Outside, the street was growing

noisier and a sort of murmur of relief greeted the moment when all the street-

lamps lit up, all together. Rieux went out on the balcony, and Cottard followed

him.

From the outlying districts, as happens every evening in our town, a gentle

breeze wafted a murmur of voices, smells of roasting meat, a gay, perfumed tide

of freedom sounding on its way, as the streets filled up with noisy young people

released from shops and offices. Nightfall, with its deep, remote baying of

unseen ships, the rumor rising from the sea, and the happy tumult of the crowd,

that first hour of darkness which in the past had always had a special charm for

Rieux, seemed today charged with menace, because of all he knew.

"How about turning on the lights?" he suggested when they went back into the

room.

After this had been done, the little man gazed at him, blinking his eyes. "Tell

me, doctor. Suppose I fell ill, would you put me in your ward at the

hospital?"

"Why not?"

Cottard then inquired if it ever happened that a person in a hospital or a

nursing home was arrested. Rieux said it had been known to happen, but all

depended on the invalid's condition.

"You know, doctor," Cottard said, "I've confidence in you." Then he asked the

doctor if he'd be kind enough to give him a lift, as he was going into town.

In the center of the town the streets were already growing less crowded and the

lights fewer. Children were playing in front of the doorways. At Cottard's

request the doctor stopped his car beside one of the groups of children. They

were playing hopscotch and making a great deal of noise. One of them, a boy with

sleek, neatly parted hair and a grubby face, stared hard at Rieux with bright,

bold eyes. The doctor looked away.

Standing on the sidewalk Cottard shook his head. He then said in a hoarse,

rather labored voice, casting uneasy glances over his shoulder:

"Everybody's talking about an epidemic. Is there anything in it, doctor?"

"People always talk," Rieux replied. "That's only to be expected."

"You're right. And if we have ten deaths they'll think it's the end of the

world. But it's not that we need here."

The engine was ticking over. Rieux had his hand on the clutch. But he was

looking again at the boy who was still watching him with an oddly grave

intentness. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the child smiled, showing all his teeth.

"Yes? And what do we need here?" Rieux asked, returning the child's smile.

Abruptly Cottard gripped the door of the car and, as he turned to go, almost

shouted in a rageful, passionate voice: "An earthquake! A big one!"

There was no earthquake, and the whole of the following day was spent, so far as

Rieux was concerned, in long drives to every corner of the town, in parleyings

with the families of the sick and arguments with the invalids themselves. Never

had Rieux known his profession to weigh on him so heavily. Hitherto his patients

had helped to lighten his task; they gladly put themselves into his hands.

For the first time the doctor felt they were keeping aloof, wrapping themselves

up in their malady with a sort of bemused hostility. It was a struggle to which

he wasn't yet accustomed. And when, at ten that evening, he parked his car

outside the home of his old asthma patient, his last visit of the day, it was an

effort for Rieux to drag himself from his seat. For some moments he lingered,

gazing up the dark street, watching the stars appear and disappear in the

blackness of the sky.

When Rieux entered the room, the old man was sitting up in bed, at his usual

occupation, counting out dried peas from one pan to another. On seeing his

visitor he looked up, beaming with delight.

"Well, doctor? It's cholera, isn't it?"

"Where on earth did you get that idea from?" "It's in the paper, and the radio

said it, too." "No, it's not cholera."

"Anyhow," the old man chuckled excitedly, "the big bugs are laying it on thick.

Got the jitters, haven't they?"

"Don't you believe a word of it," the doctor said.

He had examined the old man and now was sitting in the middle of the dingy

little dining-room. Yes, despite what he had said, he was afraid. He knew that

in this suburb alone eight or ten unhappy people, cowering over their buboes,

would be awaiting his visit next morning. In only two or three cases had

incision of the buboes caused any improvement. For most of them it would mean

going to the hospital, and he knew how poor people feel about hospitals. "I

don't want them trying their experiments on him," had said the wife one of his

patients. But he wouldn't be experimented on; he would die, that was all. That

the regulations now in force were inadequate was lamentably clear.

As for the "specially equipped" wards, he knew what they amounted to: two

outbuildings from which the other patients had been hastily evacuated, whose

windows had been hermetically sealed, and round which a sanitary cordon had been

set.

The only hope was that the outbreak would die a natural death; it certainly

wouldn't be arrested by the measures the authorities had so far devised.

Nevertheless, that night the official communique was still optimistic. On the

following day Ransdoc announced that the rules laid down by the local

administration had won general approval and already thirty sick persons had

reported. Castel rang up Rieux.

"How many beds are there in the special wards?" "Eighty."

"Surely there are far more than thirty cases in the town?"

"Don't forget there are two sorts of cases: those who take fright, and those,

they're the majority, who don't have time to do so."

"I see. Are they checking up on the burials?"

"No. I told Richard over the phone that energetic measures were needed, not just

words; we'd got to set up a real barrier against the disease, otherwise we might

just as well do nothing."

"Yes? And what did he say?"

"Nothing doing. He hadn't the powers. In my opinion, it's going to get worse."

That was so. Within three days both wards were full. According to Richard, there

was talk of requisitioning a school and opening an auxiliary hospital. Meanwhile

Rieux continued incising buboes and waiting for the anti-plague serum. Castel

went back to his old books and spent long hours in the public library.

"Those rats died of plague," was his conclusion, "or of something extremely like

it. And they've loosed on the town tens of thousands of fleas, which will spread

the infection in geometrical progression unless it's checked in time."

Rieux said nothing.

About this time the weather appeared set fair, and the sun had drawn up the last

puddles left by the recent rain. There was a serene blue sky flooded with golden

light each morning, with sometimes a drone of planes in the rising heat, all

seemed well with the world. And yet within four days the fever had made four

startling strides: sixteen deaths, twenty-four, twenty-eight, and thirty-two. On

the fourth day the opening of the auxiliary hospital in the premises of a

primary school was officially announced. The local population, who so far had

made a point of masking their anxiety by facetious comments, now seemed tongue-

tied and went their ways with gloomy faces.

Rieux decided to ring up the Prefect.

"The regulations don't go anywhere near far enough."

"Yes," the Prefect replied. "I've seen the statistics and, as you say, they're

most perturbing."

"They're more than perturbing; they're conclusive." "I'll ask government for

orders."

When Rieux next met Castel, the Prefect's remark was still rankling. "Orders!"

he said scornfully. "When what's needed is imagination." "Any news of the

serum?"

"It'll come this week."

The Prefect sent instructions to Rieux, through Richard, asking him to draw up a

minute to be transmitted for orders to the central administration of the colony.

Rieux included in it a clinical diagnosis and statistics of the epidemic. On

that day forty deaths were reported. The Prefect took the responsibility, as he

put it, of tightening up the new regulations. Compulsory declaration of all

cases of fever and their isolation were to be strictly enforced.

The residences of sick people were to be shut up and disinfected; persons living

in the same house were to go into quarantine; burials were to be supervised by

the local authorities in a manner which will be described later on. Next day the

serum arrived by plane. There was enough for immediate requirements, but not

enough if the epidemic were to spread. In reply to his telegram Rieux was

informed that the emergency reserve stock was exhausted, but that a new supply

was in preparation.

Meanwhile, from all the outlying districts, spring was making its progress into

the town. Thousands of roses wilted in the flower-venders' baskets in the

market-places and along the streets, and the air was heavy with their cloying

perfume. Outwardly, indeed, this spring was like any other.

The streetcars were always packed at the rush hours, empty and untidy during the

rest of the day. Tarrou watched the little old man, and the little old man spat

on the cats. Grand hurried home every evening to his mysterious literary

activities. Cottard went his usual desultory ways, and M. Othon, the magistrate,

continued to parade his menagerie.

The old Spaniard decanted his dried peas from pan to pan, and sometimes you

encountered Rambert, the journalist, looking interested as ever in all he saw.

In the evening the usual crowd thronged the streets and the lines lengthened

outside the picture-houses. Moreover, the epidemic seemed to be on the wane; on

some days only ten or so deaths were notified. Then, all of a sudden, the figure

shot up again, vertically. On the day when the death-roll touched thirty, Dr.

Rieux read an official telegram that the Prefect had just handed him, remarking:

"So they've got alarmed at last." The telegram ran: Proclaim a state of plague

stop close the town.

PART II

>From now on, it can be said that plague was the concern of all of us. Hitherto,

surprised as he may have been by the strange things happening around him, each

individual citizen had gone about his business as usual, so far as this was

possible. And no doubt he would have continued doing so. But once the town gates

were shut, every one of us realized that all, the narrator included, were, so to

speak, in the same boat, and each would have to adapt himself to the new

conditions of life.

Thus, for example, a feeling normally as individual as the ache of separation

from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike and,

together with fear, the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay

ahead.

One of the most striking consequences of the closing of the gates was, in fact,

this sudden deprivation befalling people who were completely unprepared for it.

Mothers and children, lovers, husbands and wives, who had a few days previously

taken it for granted that their parting would be a short one, who had kissed one

another good-by on the platform and exchanged a few trivial remarks, sure as

they were of seeing one another again after a few days or, at most, a few weeks,

duped by our blind human faith in the near future and little if at all diverted

from their normal interests by this leave-

taking, all these people found themselves, without the least warning, hopelessly

cut off, prevented from seeing one another again, or even communicating with one

another. For actually the closing of the gates took place some hours before the

official order was made known to the public, and, naturally enough, it was

impossible to take individual cases of hardship into account. It might indeed be

said that the first effect of this brutal visitation was to compel our

townspeople to act as if they had no feelings as individuals.

During the first part of the day on which the prohibition to leave the town came

into force the Prefect's office was besieged by a crowd of applicants advancing

pleas of equal cogency but equally impossible to take into consideration.

Indeed, it needed several days for us to realize that we were completely

cornered; that words like "special arrangements," "favor," and "priority" had

lost all effective meaning.

Even the small satisfaction of writing letters was denied us. It came to this:

not only had the town ceased to be in touch with the rest of the world by normal

means of communication, but also, according to a second notification, all

correspondence was forbidden, to obviate the risk of letters carrying infection

outside the town. In the early days a favored few managed to persuade the

sentries at the gates to allow them to get messages through to the outside

world.

But that was only at the beginning of the epidemic, when the sentries found it

natural to obey their feelings of humanity. Later on, when these same sentries

had had the gravity of the situation drummed into them, they flatly refused to

take responsibilities whose possible after-effects they could not foresee. At

first, telephone calls to other towns were allowed, but this led to such

crowding of the telephone booths and delays on the lines that for some days they

also were prohibited, and thereafter limited to what were called "urgent cases,"

such as deaths, marriages, and births. So we had to fall back on telegrams.

People linked together by friendship, affection, or physical love found

themselves reduced to hunting for tokens of their past communion within the

compass of a ten-word telegram. And since, in practice, the phrases one can use

in a telegram are quickly exhausted, long lives passed side by side, or

passionate yearnings, soon declined to the exchange of such trite formulas as:

"Am well. Always thinking of you. Love."

Some few of us, however, persisted in writing letters and gave much time to

hatching plans for corresponding with the outside world; but almost always these

plans came to nothing. Even on the rare occasions when they succeeded, we could

not know this, since we received no answer. For weeks on end we were reduced to

starting the same letter over and over again recopying the same scraps of news

and the same personal appeals, with the result that after a certain time the

living words, into which we had as it were transfused our hearts' blood, were

drained of any meaning.

Thereafter we went on copying them mechanically, trying, through the dead

phrases, to convey some notion of our ordeal. And in the long run, to these

sterile, reiterated monologues, these futile colloquies with a blank wall, even

the banal formulas of a telegram came to seem preferable.

Also, after some days, when it was clear that no one had the least hope of being

able to leave our town, inquiries began to be made whether the return of people

who had gone away before the outbreak would be permitted. After some days'

consideration of the matter the authorities replied affirmatively.

They pointed out, however, that in no case would persons who returned be allowed

to leave the town again; once here, they would have to stay, whatever happened.

Some families, actually very few, refused to take the position seriously and in

their eagerness to have the absent members of the family with them again, cast

prudence to the winds and wired to them to take this opportunity of returning.

But very soon those who were prisoners of the plague realized the terrible

danger to which this would expose their relatives, and sadly resigned themselves

to their absence. At the height of the epidemic we saw only one case in which

natural emotions overcame the fear of death in a particularly painful form. It

was not, as might be expected, the case of two young people, whose passion made

them yearn for each other's nearness at whatever cost of pain.

The two were old Dr. Castel and his wife, and they had been married for very

many years. Mme Castel had gone on a visit to a neighboring town some days

before the epidemic started. They weren't one of those exemplary married couples

of the Darby-and-Joan pattern; on the contrary, the narrator has grounds for

saying that, in all probability, neither partner felt quite sure the marriage

was all that could have been desired. But this ruthless, protracted separation

enabled them to realize that they could not live apart, and in the sudden glow

of this discovery the risk of plague seemed insignificant.

That was an exception. For most people it was obvious that the separation must

last until the end of the epidemic. And for every one of us the ruling emotion

of his life, which he had imagined he knew through and through (the people of

Oran, as has been said, have simple passions), took on a new aspect. Husbands

who had had complete faith in their wives found, to their surprise, that they

were jealous; and lovers had the same experience.

Men who had pictured themselves as Don Juans became models of fidelity. Sons who

had lived beside their mothers hardly giving them a glance fell to picturing

with poignant regret each wrinkle in the absent face that memory cast upon the

screen. This drastic, clean-cut deprivation and our complete ignorance of what

the future held in store had taken us unawares; we were unable to react against

the mute appeal of presences, still so near and already so far, which haunted us

daylong. In fact, our suffering was twofold; our own to start with, and then the

imagined suffering of the absent one, son, mother, wife, or mistress.

Under other circumstances our townsfolk would probably have found an outlet in

increased activity, a more sociable life. But the plague forced inactivity on

them, limiting their movements to the same dull round inside the town, and

throwing them, day after day, on the illusive solace of their memories. For in

their aimless walks they kept on coming back to the same streets and usually,

owing to the smallness of the town, these were streets in which, in happier

days, they had walked with those who now were absent.

Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile. And the narrator

is convinced that he can set down here, as holding good for all, the feeling he

personally had and to which many of his friends confessed. It was undoubtedly

the feeling of exile, that sensation of a void within which never left us, that

irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of

time, and those keen shafts of memory that stung like fire.

Sometimes we toyed with our imagination, composing ourselves to wait for a ring

at the bell announcing somebody's return, or for the sound of a familiar

footstep on the stairs; but, though we might deliberately stay at home at the

hour when a traveler coming by the evening train would normally have arrived,

and though we might contrive to forget for the moment that no trains were

running, that game of make-believe, for obvious reasons, could not last.

Always a moment came when we had to face the fact that no trains were coming in.

And then we realized that the separation was destined to continue, we had no

choice but to come to terms with the days ahead. In short, we returned to our

prison-house, we had nothing left us but the past, and even if some were tempted

to live in the future, they had speedily to abandon the idea anyhow, as soon as

could be, once they felt the wounds that the imagination inflicts on those who

yield themselves to it.

It is noteworthy that our townspeople very quickly desisted, even in public,

from a habit one might have expected them to form, that of trying to figure out

the probable duration of their exile. The reason was this: when the most

pessimistic had fixed it at, say, six months; when they had drunk in advance the

dregs of bitterness of those six black months, and painfully screwed up their

courage to the sticking-place, straining all their remaining energy to endure

valiantly the long ordeal of all those weeks and days, when they had done this,

some friend they met, an article in a newspaper, a vague suspicion, or a flash

of foresight would suggest that, after all, there was no reason why the epidemic

shouldn't last more than six months; why not a year, or even more?

At such moments the collapse of their courage, willpower, and endurance was so

abrupt that they felt they could never drag themselves out of the pit of despond

into which they had fallen. Therefore they forced themselves never to think

about the problematic day of escape, to cease looking to the future, and always

to keep, so to speak, their eyes fixed on the ground at their feet. But,

naturally enough, this prudence, this habit of feinting with their predicament

and refusing to put up a fight, was ill rewarded.

For, while averting that revulsion which they found so unbearable, they also

deprived themselves of those redeeming moments, frequent enough when all is

told, when by conjuring up pictures of a reunion to be, they could forget about

the plague. Thus, in a middle course between these heights and depths, they

drifted through life rather than lived, the prey of aimless days and sterile

memories, like wandering shadows that could have acquired substance only by

consenting to root themselves in the solid earth of their distress.

Thus, too, they came to know the incorrigible sorrow of all prisoners and

exiles, which is to live in company with a memory that serves no purpose. Even

the past, of which they thought incessantly, had a savor only of regret. For

they would have wished to add to it all that they regretted having left undone,

while they might yet have done it, with the man or woman whose return they now

awaited; just as in all the activities, even the relatively happy ones, of their

life as prisoners they kept vainly trying to include the absent one. And thus

there was always something missing in their lives. Hostile to the past,

impatient of the present, and cheated of the future, we were much like those

whom men's justice, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars. Thus the only

way of escaping from that intolerable leisure was to set the trains running

again in one's imagination and in filling the silence with the fancied tinkle of

a doorbell, in practice obstinately mute.

Still, if it was an exile, it was, for most of us, exile in one's own home. And

though the narrator experienced only the common form of exile, he cannot forget

the case of those who, like Rambert the journalist and a good many others, had

to endure an aggravated deprivation, since, being travelers caught by the plague

and forced to stay where they were, they were cut off both from the person with

whom they wanted to be and from their homes as well. In the general exile they

were the most exiled; since while time gave rise for them, as for us all, to the

suffering appropriate to it, there was also for

them the space factor; they were obsessed by it and at every moment knocked

their heads against the walls of this huge and alien lazar-house secluding them

from their lost homes. These were the people, no doubt, whom one often saw

wandering forlornly in the dusty town at all hours of the day, silently invoking

nightfalls known to them alone and the daysprings of their happier land.

And they fed their despondency with fleeting intimations, messages as

disconcerting as a flight of swallows, a dew-fall at sundown, or those queer

glints the sun sometimes dapples on empty streets. As for that outside world,

which can always offer an escape from everything, they shut their eyes to it,

bent as they were on cherishing the all-too-real phantoms of their imagination

and conjuring up with all their might pictures of a land where a special play of

light, two or three hills, a favorite tree, a woman's smile, composed for them a

world that nothing could replace.

To come at last, and more specifically, to the case of parted lovers, who

present the greatest interest and of whom the narrator is, perhaps, better

qualified to speak, their minds were the prey of different emotions, notably

remorse. For their present position enabled them to take stock of their feelings

with a sort of feverish objectivity. And, in these conditions, it was rare for

them not to detect their own shortcomings. What first brought these home to them

was the trouble they experienced in summoning up any clear picture of what the

absent one was doing.

They came to deplore their ignorance of the way in which that person used to

spend his or her days, and reproached themselves for having troubled too little

about this in the past, and for having affected to think that, for a lover, the

occupations of the loved one when they are not together could be a matter of

indifference and not a source of joy. Once this had been brought home to them,

they could retrace the course of their love and see where it had fallen short.

In normal times all of us know, whether consciously or not, that there is no

love which can't be bettered; nevertheless, we reconcile ourselves more or less

easily to the fact that ours has never risen above the average.

But memory is less disposed to compromise. And, in a very definite way, this

misfortune which had come from outside and befallen a whole town did more than

inflict on us an unmerited distress with which we might well be indignant.

It also incited us to create our own suffering and thus to accept frustration as

a natural state. This was one of the tricks the pestilence had of diverting

attention and confounding issues.

Thus each of us had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast

indifference of the sky. This sense of being abandoned, which might in time have

given characters a finer temper, began, however, by sapping them to the point of

futility. For instance, some of our fellow citizens became subject to a curious

kind of servitude, which put them at the mercy of the sun and the rain.

Looking at them, you had an impression that for the first time in their lives

they were becoming, as some would say, weather-conscious. A burst of sunshine

was enough to make them seem delighted with the world, while rainy days gave a

dark cast to their faces and their mood. A few weeks before, they had been free

of this absurd subservience to the weather, because they had not to face life

alone; the person they were living with held, to some extent, the foreground of

their little world. But from now on it was different; they seemed at the mercy

of the sky's caprices, in other words, suffered and hoped irrationally.

Moreover, in this extremity of solitude none could count on any help from his

neighbor; each had to bear the load of his troubles alone. If, by some chance,

one of us tried to unburden himself or to say something about his feelings, the

reply he got, whatever it might be, usually wounded him. And then it dawned on

him that he and the man with him weren't talking about the same thing. For while

he himself spoke from the depths of long days of brooding upon his personal

distress, and the image he had tried to impart had been slowly shaped and proved

in the fires of passion and regret, this meant nothing to the man to whom he was

speaking, who pictured a conventional emotion, a grief that is traded on the

market-place, mass-produced.

Whether friendly or hostile, the reply always missed fire, and the attempt to

communicate had to be given up. This was true of those at least for whom silence

was unbearable, and since the others could not find the truly expressive word,

they resigned themselves to using the current coin of language, the commonplaces

of plain narrative, of anecdote, and of their daily paper. So in these cases,

too, even the sincerest grief had to make do with the set phrases of ordinary

conversation. Only on these terms could the prisoners of the plague ensure the

sympathy of their concierge and the interest of their hearers.

Nevertheless, and this point is most important, however bitter their distress

and however heavy their hearts, for all their emptiness, it can be truly said of

these exiles that in the early period of the plague they could account

themselves privileged. For at the precise moment when the residents of the town

began to panic, their thoughts were wholly fixed on the person whom they longed

to meet again. The egoism of love made them immune to the general distress and,

if they thought of the plague, it was only in so far as it might threaten to

make their separation eternal. Thus in the very heart of the epidemic they

maintained a saving indifference, which one was tempted to take for composure.

Their despair saved them from panic, thus their misfortune had a good side. For

instance, if it happened that one of them was carried off by the disease, it was

almost always without his having had time to realize it. Snatched suddenly from

his long, silent communion with a wraith of memory, he was plunged straightway

into the densest silence of all. He'd had no time for anything.

WHILE our townspeople were trying to come to terms with their sudden isolation,

the plague was posting sentries at the gates and turning away ships bound for

Oran. No vehicle had entered the town since the gates were closed. From that day

onwards one had the impression that all cars were moving in circles.

The harbor, too, presented a strange appearance to those who looked down on it

from the top of the boulevards. The commercial activity that hitherto made it

one of the chief ports on the coast had ceased abruptly. Only a few ships,

detained in quarantine, were anchored in the bay. But the gaunt, idle cranes on

the wharves, tip-carts lying on their sides, neglected heaps of sacks and

barrels, all testified that commerce, too, had died of plague.

In spite of such unusual sights our townsfolk apparently found it hard to grasp

what was happening to them. There were feelings all could share, such as fear

and separation, but personal interests, too, continued to occupy the foreground

of their thoughts. Nobody as yet had really acknowledged to himself what the

disease connoted. Most people were chiefly aware of what ruffled the normal

tenor of their lives or affected their interests.

They were worried and irritated, but these are not feelings with which to

confront plague. Their first reaction, for instance, was to abuse the

authorities. The Prefect's riposte to criticisms echoed by the press. Could not

the regulations be modified and made less stringent? was somewhat unexpected.

Hitherto neither the newspapers nor the Ransdoc Information Bureau had been

given any official statistics relating to the epidemic. Now the Prefect supplied

them daily to the bureau, with the request that they should be broadcast once a

week.

In this, too, the reaction of the public was slower than might have been

expected. Thus the bare statement that three hundred and two deaths had taken

place in the third week of plague failed to strike their imagination. For one

thing, all the three hundred and two deaths might not have been due to plague.

Also, no one in the town had any idea of the average weekly death-rate in

ordinary times. The population of the town was about two hundred thousand. There

was no knowing if the present death-rate were really so abnormal. This is, in

fact, the kind of statistics that nobody ever troubles much about,

notwithstanding that its interest is obvious. The public lacked, in short,

standards of comparison. It was only as time passed and the steady rise in the

death-rate could not be ignored that public opinion became alive to the truth.

For in the fifth week there were three hundred and twenty-one deaths, and three

hundred and forty-five in the sixth.

These figures, anyhow, spoke for themselves. Yet they were still not sensational

enough to prevent our townsfolk, perturbed though they were, from persisting in

the idea that what was happening was a sort of accident, disagreeable enough,

but certainly of a temporary order.

So they went on strolling about the town as usual and sitting at the tables on

cafe terraces. Generally speaking, they did not lack courage, bandied more jokes

than lamentations, and made a show of accepting cheerfully unpleasantnesses that

obviously could be only passing. In short, they kept up appearances. However,

toward the end of the month, about the time of the Week of Prayer which will be

described later on, there were more serious developments, altering the whole

aspect of the town. To begin with, the Prefect took measures controlling the

traffic and the food-supply. Gasoline was rationed and restrictions were placed

on the sale of foodstuffs. Reductions were ordered in the use of electricity.

Only necessaries were brought by road or air to Oran. Thus the traffic thinned

out progressively until hardly any private cars were on the roads; luxury shops

closed overnight, and others began to put up "Sold Out" notices, while crowds of

buyers stood waiting at their doors.

Oran assumed a novel appearance. You saw more pedestrians, and in the slack

hours numbers of people, reduced to idleness because shops and a good many

offices were closed, crowded the streets and cafes. For the present they were

not unemployed; merely on holiday. So it was that on fine days, toward three in

the afternoon, Oran brought to mind a city where public rejoicings are in

progress, shops are shut, and traffic is stopped to give a merry-making populace

the freedom of the streets.

Naturally the picture-houses benefited by the situation and made money hand over

fist. They had one difficulty, however, to provide a change of program, since

the circulation of films in the region had been suspended. After a fortnight the

various cinemas were obliged to exchange films and, after a further lapse of

time, to show always the same program. In spite of this their takings did not

fall off.

The cafes, thanks to the big stocks accumulated in a town where the wine-and-

liquor trade holds pride of place, were equally able to cater for their patrons.

And, to tell the truth, there was much heavy drinking. One of the cafes had the

brilliant idea of putting up a slogan: "The best protection against infection is

a bottle of good wine," which confirmed an already prevalent opinion that

alcohol is a safeguard against infectious disease. Every night, toward two a.m.,

quite a number of drunken men, ejected from the cafes, staggered down the

streets, vociferating optimism.

Yet all these changes were, in one sense, so fantastic and had been made so

precipitately that it wasn't easy to regard them as likely to have any

permanence. With the result that we went on focusing our attention on our

personal feelings.

When leaving the hospital two days after the gates were closed, Dr. Rieux met

Cottard in the street. The little man was beaming with satisfaction. Rieux

congratulated him on his appearance.

"Yes," Cottard said, "I'm feeling very fit. Never was fitter in my life. But

tell me, doctor. This blasted plague, what about it? Getting to look mighty

serious, isn't it?" When the doctor nodded, he continued exuberantly: "And

there's no reason for it to stop now. This town's going to be in an unholy mess,

by the look of things."

They walked a little way together. Cottard told the story of a grocer in his

street who had laid by masses of canned provisions with the idea of selling them

later on at a big profit. When the ambulance men came to fetch him he had

several dozen cans of meat under his bed.

"He died in the hospital. There's no money in plague, that's sure." Cottard was

a mine of stories of this kind, true or false, about the epidemic. One of them

was about a man with all the symptoms and running a high fever who dashed out

into the street, flung himself on the first woman he met, and embraced her,

yelling that he'd "got it."

"Good for him!" was Cottard's comment. But his next remark seemed to belie his

gleeful exclamation. "Anyhow, we'll all be nuts before long, unless I'm much

mistaken."

It was on the afternoon of the same day that Grand at last unburdened himself to

Rieux. Noticing Mme Rieux's photograph on the desk, he looked at the doctor

inquiringly. Rieux told him that his wife was under treatment in a sanatorium

some distance from the town. "In one way," Grand said, "that's lucky." The

doctor agreed that it was lucky in a sense; but, he added, the great thing was

that his wife should recover.

"Yes," Grand said, "I understand."

And then, for the first time since Rieux had made his acquaintance, he became

quite voluble. Though he still had trouble over his words he succeeded nearly

always in finding them; indeed, it was as if for years he'd been thinking over

what he now said.

When in his teens, he had married a very young girl, one of a poor family living

near by. It was, in fact, in order to marry that he'd abandoned his studies and

taken up his present job. Neither he nor Jeanne ever stirred from their part of

the town. In his courting days he used to go to see her at her home, and the

family were inclined to make fun of her bashful, silent admirer. Her father was

a railroadman.

When off duty, he spent most of the time seated in a corner beside the window

gazing meditatively at the passers-by, his enormous hands splayed out on his

thighs. His wife was always busy with domestic duties, in which Jeanne gave her

a hand. Jeanne was so tiny that it always made Grand nervous to see her crossing

a street, the vehicles bearing down on her looked so gigantic. Then one day

shortly before Christmas they went out for a short walk together and stopped to

admire a gaily decorated shop-window. After gazing ecstatically at it for some

moments, Jeanne turned to him. "Oh, isn't it lovely!" He squeezed her wrist. It

was thus that the marriage had come about.

The rest of the story, to Grand's thinking, was very simple. The common lot of

married couples. You get married, you go on loving a bit longer, you work. And

you work so hard that it makes you forget to love. As the head of the office

where Grand was employed hadn't kept his promise, Jeanne, too, had to work

outside.

At this point a little imagination was needed to grasp what Grand was trying to

convey. Owing largely to fatigue, he gradually lost grip of himself, had less

and less to say, and failed to keep alive the feeling in his wife that she was

loved. An overworked husband, poverty, the gradual loss of hope in a better

future, silent evenings at home, what chance had any passion of surviving such

conditions? Probably Jeanne had suffered. And yet she'd stayed; of course one

may often suffer a long time without knowing it.

Thus years went by. Then, one day, she left him. Naturally she hadn't gone

alone. "I was very fond of you, but now I'm so tired. I'm not happy to go, but

one needn't be happy to make another start." That, more or less, was what she'd

said in her letter.

Grand, too, had suffered. And he, too, might, as Rieux pointed out, have made a

fresh start. But no, he had lost faith. Only, he couldn't stop thinking about

her. What he'd have liked to do was to write her a letter justifying himself.

"But it's not easy," he told Rieux. "I've been thinking it over for years. While

we loved each other we didn't need words to make ourselves understood. But

people don't love forever. A time came when I should have found the words to

keep her with me, only I couldn't." Grand produced from his pocket something

that looked like a check duster and blew his nose noisily. Then he wiped his

mustache. Rieux gazed at him in silence. "Forgive me, doctor," Grand added

hastily, "but how shall I put it? I feel you're to be trusted. That's why I can

talk to you about these things. And then, you see, I get all worked up."

Obviously Grand's thoughts were leagues away from the plague.

That evening Rieux sent a telegram to his wife telling her that the town was

closed, that she must go on taking great care of herself, and that she was in

his thoughts.

One evening when he was leaving the hospital, it was about three weeks after the

closing of the gates, Rieux found a young man waiting for him in the street.

"You remember me, don't you?"

Rieux believed he did, but couldn't quite place him.

"I called on you just before this trouble started," the young man said, "for

information about the living-conditions in the Arab quarter. My name is Raymond

Rambert."

"Ah yes, of course. Well, you've now the makings of a good story for your

paper." Rambert, who gave the impression of being much less self-assured than he

had

seemed on the first occasion when they met, said it wasn't that he'd come about.

He wanted to know if the doctor would kindly give him some help.

"I must apologize," he continued, "but really I don't know a soul here, and the

local representative of my paper is a complete dud."

Rieux said he had to go to a dispensary in the center of the town and suggested

they should walk there together. Their way lay through the narrow streets of the

Negro district. Evening was coming on, but the town, once so noisy at this hour,

was strangely still. The only sounds were some bugle-calls echoing through the

air, still golden with the end of daylight; the army, anyhow, was making a show

of carrying on as usual. Meanwhile, as they walked down the steep little streets

flanked by blue, mauve, and saffron-yellow walls, Rambert talked incessantly, as

if his nerves were out of hand.

He had left his wife in Paris, he said. Well, she wasn't actually his wife, but

it came to the same thing. The moment the town was put into quarantine he had

sent her a wire. His impression then was that this state of things was quite

temporary, and all he'd tried to do was to get a letter through to her.

But the post-office officials had vetoed this, his colleagues of the local press

said they could do nothing for him, and a clerk in the Prefect's office had

laughed in his face. It was only after waiting in line for a couple of hours

that he had managed to get a telegram accepted: All goes well. Hope to see you

soon.

But next morning, when he woke up, it had dawned on him that, after all, there

was absolutely no knowing how long this business was going to last. So he'd

decided to leave the town at once. Being able, thanks to his professional

status, to pull some strings, he had secured an interview with a high official

in the Prefect's office. He had explained that his presence in Oran was purely

accidental, he had no connection with the town and no reasons for staying in it;

that being so, he surely was entitled to leave, even if, once outside the town,

he had to undergo a spell of quarantine. The official told him he quite

appreciated his position, but no exceptions could be made. He would, however,

see if anything could be done, though he could hold out little hope of a quick

decision, as the authorities were taking a very serious view of the situation.

"But, confound it," Rambert exclaimed, "I don't belong here!"

"Quite so. Anyhow, let's hope the epidemic will soon be over." Finally, he had

tried to console Rambert by pointing out that, as a journalist, he had an

excellent subject to his hand in Oran; indeed, when one came to think of it, no

event, however disagreeable in some ways, but had its bright side. Whereat

Rambert had shrugged his shoulders petulantly and walked out.

They had come to the center of the town.

"It's so damn silly, doctor, isn't it? The truth is I wasn't brought into the

world to write newspaper articles. But it's quite likely I was brought into the

world to live with a woman. That's reasonable enough, isn't it?"

Rieux replied cautiously that there might be something in what he said.

The central boulevards were not so crowded as usual. The few people about were

hurrying to distant homes. Not a smile was to be seen on any face. Rieux guessed

that this was a result of the latest Ransdoc announcement. After twenty-four

hours our townspeople would begin to hope again. But on the days when they were

announced, the statistics were too fresh in everybody's memory.

"The truth," Rambert remarked abruptly, "is that she and I have been together

only a short time, and we suit each other perfectly." When Rieux said nothing,

he continued: "I can see I'm boring you. Sorry. All I wanted to know was whether

you couldn't possibly give me a certificate stating that I haven't got this

damned disease. It might make things easier, I think."

Rieux nodded. A small boy had just run against his legs and fallen; he set him

on his feet again.

Walking on, they came to the Place d'Armes. Gray with dust, the palms and fig

trees drooped despondently around a statue of the Republic, which too was coated

with grime and dust. They stopped beside the statue. Rieux stamped his feet on

the flagstones to shake off the coat of white dust that had gathered on them.

His hat pushed slightly back, his shirt-collar gaping under a loosely knotted

tie, his cheeks ill-shaven, the journalist had the sulky, stubborn look of a

young man who feels himself deeply injured.

"Please don't doubt I understand you," Rieux said, "but you must see your

argument doesn't hold water. I can't give you that certificate because I don't

know whether you have the disease or not, and even if I did, how could I certify

that between the moment of leaving my consulting-room and your arrival at the

Prefect's office you wouldn't be infected? And even if I did?"

"And even if you did?"

"Even if I gave you a certificate, it wouldn't help." "Why not?"

"Because there are thousands of people placed as you are in this town, and there

can't be any question of allowing them to leave it."

"Even supposing they haven't got plague?"

"That's not a sufficient reason. Oh, I know it's an absurd situation, but we're

all involved in it, and we've got to accept it as it is."

"But I don't belong here."

"Unfortunately, from now on you'll belong here, like everybody else." Rambert

raised his voice a little.

"But, damn it, doctor, can't you see it's a matter of common human feeling? Or

don't you realize what this sort of separation means to people who are fond of

each other?"

Rieux was silent for a moment, then said he understood it perfectly. He wished

nothing better than that Rambert should be allowed to return to his wife and

that all who loved one another and were parted should come together again. Only

the law was the law, plague had broken out, and he could only do what had to be

done.

"No," Rambert said bitterly, "you can't understand. You're using the language of

reason, not of the heart; you live in a world of abstractions."

The doctor glanced up at the statue of the Republic, then said he did not know

if he was using the language of reason, but he knew he was using the language of

the facts as everybody could see them, which wasn't necessarily the same thing.

The journalist tugged at his tie to straighten it.

"So, I take it, I can't count on help from you. Very good. But" his tone was

challenging "leave this town I shall."

The doctor repeated that he quite understood, but all that was none of his

business.

"Excuse me, but it is your business." Rambert raised his voice again. "I

approached you because I'd been told you played a large part in drawing up the

orders that have been issued. So I thought that in one case anyhow you could

unmake what you'd helped to make. But you don't care; you never gave a thought

to anybody, you didn't take the case of people who are separated into account."

Rieux admitted this was true up to a point; he'd preferred not to take such

cases into account.

"Ah, I see now!" Rambert exclaimed. "You'll soon be talking about the interests

of the general public. But public welfare is merely the sum total of the private

welfares of each of us."

The doctor seemed abruptly to come out of a dream.

"Oh, come!" he said. "There's that, but there's much more to it than that. It

doesn't do to rush to conclusions, you know. But you've no reason to feel

angered. I assure you that if you find a way out of your quandary, I shall be

extremely pleased. Only, there are things that my official position debars me

from doing."

Rambert tossed his head petulantly.

"Yes, yes, I was wrong to show annoyance. And I've taken up too much of your

time already."

Rieux asked him to let him know how he got on with his project, and not to bear

him a grudge for not having been more amenable. He was sure, he added, that

there was some common ground on which they could meet. Rambert looked perplexed.

Then, "Yes," he said after a short silence, "I rather think so, too, in spite of

myself, and of all you've just been saying." He paused. "Still, I can't agree

with you."

Pulling down his hat over his eyes, he walked quickly away. Rieux saw him enter

the hotel where Tarrou was staying.

After a moment the doctor gave a slight nod, as if approving of some thought

that had crossed his mind. Yes, the journalist was right in refusing to be

balked of happiness. But was he right in reproaching him, Rieux, with living in

a world of abstractions? Could that term "abstraction" really apply to these

days he spent in his hospital while the plague was battening on the town,

raising its death-toll to five hundred victims a week? Yes, an element of

abstraction, of a divorce from reality, entered into such calamities. Still when

abstraction sets to killing you, you've got to get busy with it. And so much

Rieux knew: that this wasn't the easiest course. Running this auxiliary

hospital, for instance, of which he was in charge' there were now three such

hospitals, was no light task.

He had had an anteroom, leading into his surgery, installed, equipped for

dealing with patients on arrival. The floor had been excavated and replaced by a

shallow lake of water and cresylic acid, in the center of which was a sort of

island made of bricks. The patient was carried to the island, rapidly undressed,

and his clothes dropped into the disinfectant water. After being washed, dried,

and dressed in one of the coarse hospital nightshirts, he was taken to Rieux for

examination, then carried to one of the wards. This hospital, a requisitioned

schoolhouse, now contained five hundred beds, almost all of which were occupied.

After the reception of the patients, which he personally supervised, Rieux

injected serum, lanced buboes, checked the statistics again, and returned for

his afternoon consultations. Only when night was setting in did he start on his

round of visits, and he never got home till a very late hour. On the previous

night his mother, when handing him a telegram from his wife, had remarked that

his hands were shaking.

"Yes," he said. "But it's only a matter of sticking to it, and my nerves will

steady down, you'll see."

He had a robust constitution and, as yet, wasn't really tired. Still his visits,

for one thing, were beginning to put a great strain on his endurance. Once the

epidemic was diagnosed, the patient had to be evacuated forthwith.

Then indeed began "abstraction" and a tussle with the family, who knew they

would not see the sick man again until he was dead or cured. "Have some pity,

doctor!" It was Mme Loret, mother of the chambermaid at Tarrou's hotel, who made

the appeal. An unnecessary appeal; of course he had pity. But what purpose could

it serve? He had to telephone, and soon the ambulance could be heard clanging

down the street. (At first the neighbors used to open windows and watch. Later

they promptly shut them.) Then came a second phase of conflict, tears and

pleadings, abstraction, in a word. In those fever-hot, nerve-ridden sickrooms

crazy scenes took place.

But the issue was always the same. The patient was removed. Then Rieux, too,

could leave.

In the early days he had merely telephoned, then rushed off to see other

patients, without waiting for the ambulance. But no sooner was he gone than the

family locked and barred their doors, preferring contact with the plague to a

parting whose issue they now knew only too well.

There followed objurgations, screams, batterings on the door, action by the

police, and later armed force; the patient was taken by storm. Thus during the

first few weeks Rieux was compelled to stay with the patient till the ambulance

came. Later, when each doctor was accompanied by a volunteer police officer,

Rieux could hurry away to the next patient. But, to begin with, every evening

was like that evening when he was called in for Mme Loret's daughter. He was

shown into a small apartment decorated with fans and artificial flowers. The

mother greeted him with a faltering smile.

"Oh, I do hope it's not the fever everyone's talking about."

Lifting the coverlet and chemise, he gazed in silence at the red blotches on the

girl's thighs and stomach, the swollen ganglia. After one glance the mother

broke into shrill, uncontrollable cries of grief.

And every evening mothers wailed thus, with a distraught abstraction, as their

eyes fell on those fatal stigmata on limbs and bellies; every evening hands

gripped Rieux's arms, there was a rush of useless words, promises, and tears;

every evening the nearing tocsin of the ambulance provoked scenes as vain as

every form of grief. Rieux had nothing to look forward to but a long sequence of

such scenes, renewed again and again. Yes, plague, like abstraction, was

monotonous; perhaps only one factor changed, and that was Rieux himself.

Standing at the foot of the statue of the Republic that evening, he felt it; all

he was conscious of was a bleak indifference steadily gaining on him as he gazed

at the door of the hotel Rambert had just entered.

After these wearing weeks, after all those nightfalls when the townsfolk poured

into the streets to roam them aimlessly, Rieux had learned that he need no

longer steel himself against pity. One grows out of pity when it's useless. And

in this feeling that his heart had slowly closed in on itself, the doctor found

a solace, his only solace, for the almost unendurable burden of his days. This,

he knew, would make his task easier, and therefore he was glad of it.

When he came home at two in the morning and his mother was shocked at the blank

look he gave her, she was deploring precisely the sole alleviation Rieux could

then experience. To fight abstraction you must have something of it in your own

make-up.

But how could Rambert be expected to grasp that? Abstraction for him was all

that stood in the way of his happiness. Indeed, Rieux had to admit the

journalist was right, in one sense. But he knew, too, that abstraction sometimes

proves itself stronger than happiness; and then, if only then, it has to be

taken into account. And this was what was going to happen to Rambert, as the

doctor was to learn when, much later, Rambert told him more about himself. Thus

he was enabled to follow, and on a different plane, the

dreary struggle in progress between each man's happiness and the abstractions of

the plague, which constituted the whole life of our town over a long period of

time.

BUT where some saw abstraction others saw the truth. The first month of the

plague ended gloomily, with a violent recrudescence of the epidemic and a

dramatic sermon preached by Father Paneloux, the Jesuit priest who had given an

arm to old Michel when he was tottering home at the start of his illness. Father

Paneloux had already made his mark with frequent contributions to the Oran

Geographical Society; these dealt chiefly with ancient inscriptions, on which he

was an authority.

But he had also reached a wider, non-specialist public with a series of lectures

on present-day individualism. In these he had shown himself a stalwart champion

of Christian doctrine at its most precise and purest, equally remote from modern

laxity and the obscurantism of the past. On these occasions he had not shrunk

from trouncing his hearers with some vigorous home-truths.

Hence his local celebrity.

Toward the end of the month the ecclesiastical authorities in our town resolved

to do battle against the plague with the weapons appropriate to them, and

organized a Week of Prayer. These manifestations of public piety were to be

concluded on Sunday by a High Mass celebrated under the auspices of St. Roch,

the plague-stricken saint, and Father Paneloux was asked to preach the sermon.

For a fortnight he desisted from the research work on St. Augustine and the

African Church that had won for him a high place in his Order. A man of a

passionate, fiery temperament, he flung himself wholeheartedly into the task

assigned him. The sermon was a topic of conversation long before it was

delivered and, in its way, it marks an important date in the history of the

period.

There were large attendances at the services of the Week of Prayer. It must not,

however, be assumed that in normal times the townsfolk of Oran are particularly

devout. On Sunday mornings, for instance, sea-bathing competes seriously with

churchgoing. Nor must it be thought that they had seen a great light and had a

sudden change of heart. But, for one thing, now that the town was closed and the

harbor out of bounds, there was no question of bathing; moreover, they were in a

quite exceptional frame of mind and, though in their heart of hearts they were

far from recognizing the enormity of what had come on them, they couldn't help

feeling, for obvious reasons, that decidedly something had changed.

Nevertheless, many continued hoping that the epidemic would soon die out and

they and their families be spared. Thus they felt under no obligation to make

any change in their habits as yet. Plague was for them an unwelcome visitant,

bound to take its leave one day as unexpectedly as it had come. Alarmed, but far

from desperate, they hadn't yet reached the phase when plague would seem to them

the very tissue of their existence; when they forgot the lives that until now it

had been given them to lead. In short, they were waiting for the turn of events.

With regard to religion, as to many other problems, plague had induced in them a

curious frame of mind, as remote from indifference as from fervor; the best name

to give it, perhaps, might be "objectivity." Most of those who took part in the

Week of Prayer would have echoed a remark made by one of the churchgoers in Dr.

Rieux's hearing: "Anyhow, it can't do any harm." Even Tarrou, after recording in

his notebook that in such cases the Chinese fall to playing tambourines before

the Genius of Plague, observed that there was no means of telling whether, in

practice, tambourines proved more efficacious than prophylactic measures. He

merely added that, to decide the point, we should need first to ascertain if a

Genius of Plague actually existed, and our ignorance on this point nullified any

opinions we might form.

In any case the Cathedral was practically always full of worshippers throughout

the Week of Prayer. For the first two or three days many stayed outside, under

the palms and pomegranate trees in the garden in front of the porch, and

listened from a distance to the swelling tide of prayers and invocations whose

backwash filled the neighboring streets. But once an example had been given,

they began to enter the Cathedral and join timidly in the responses.

And on the Sunday of the sermon a huge congregation filled the nave, overflowing

on to the steps and precincts. The sky had clouded up on the previous day, and

now it was raining heavily. Those in the open unfurled umbrellas. The air inside

the Cathedral was heavy with fumes of incense and the smell of wet clothes when

Father Paneloux stepped into the pulpit.

He was a stockily built man, of medium height. When he leaned on the edge of the

pulpit, grasping the woodwork with his big hands, all one saw was a black,

massive torso and, above it, two rosy cheeks overhung by steel-rimmed

spectacles. He had a powerful, rather emotional delivery, which carried to a

great distance, and when he launched at the congregation his opening phrase in

clear, emphatic tones: "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren,

you deserved it" there was a flutter that extended to the crowd massed in the

rain outside the porch.

In strict logic what came next did not seem to follow from this dramatic

opening. Only as the sermon proceeded did it become apparent to the congregation

that, by a skillful oratorical device, Father Paneloux had launched at them,

like a fisticuff, the gist of his whole discourse. After launching it he went on

at once to quote a text from Exodus relating to the plague of Egypt, and said:

"The first time this scourge appears in history, it was wielded to strike down

the enemies of God. Pharaoh set himself up against the divine will, and the

plague beat him to his knees. Thus from the dawn of recorded history the scourge

of God has humbled the proud of heart and laid low those who hardened themselves

against Him. Ponder this well, my friends, and fall on your knees."

The downpour had increased in violence, and these words, striking through a

silence intensified by the drumming of raindrops on the chancel windows, carried

such conviction that, after a momentary hesitation, some of the worshippers

slipped forward from their seats on to their knees. Others felt it right to

follow their example, and the movement gradually spread until presently everyone

was kneeling, from end to end of the cathedral. No sound, except an occasional

creak of chairs, accompanied the movement. Then Paneloux drew himself up to his

full height, took a deep breath, and continued his sermon in a voice that

gathered strength as it proceeded.

"If today the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for

taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause

to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor,

and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from

the chaff. There will be more chaff than wheat, few chosen of the many called.

Yet this calamity was not willed by God. Too long this world of ours has

connived at evil, too long has it counted on the divine mercy, on God's

forgiveness.

Repentance was enough, men thought; nothing was forbidden. Everyone felt

comfortably assured; when the day came, he would surely turn from his sins and

repent. Pending that day, the easiest course was to surrender all along the

line; divine compassion would do the rest. For a long while God gazed down on

this town with eyes of compassion; but He grew weary of waiting, His eternal

hope was too long deferred, and now He has turned His face away from us. And so,

God's light withdrawn, we walk in darkness, in the thick darkness of this

plague."

Someone in the congregation gave a little snort, like that of a restive horse.

After a short silence the preacher continued in a lower tone.

"We read in the Golden Legend that in the time of King Umberto Italy was swept

by plague and its greatest ravages took place in Rome and Pavia. So dreadful

were these that the living hardly sufficed to bury the dead. And a good angel

was made visible to human eyes, giving his orders to an evil angel who bore a

great hunting-spear, and bidding him strike the houses; and as many strokes as

he dealt a house, so many dead were carried out of it."

Here Paneloux stretched forth his two short arms toward the open porch, as if

pointing to something behind the tumbling curtain of the rain.

"My brothers," he cried, "that fatal hunt is up, and harrying our streets today.

See him there, that angel of the pestilence, comely as Lucifer, shining like

Evil's very self! He is hovering above your roofs with his great spear in his

right hand, poised to strike, while his left hand is stretched toward one or

other of your houses. Maybe at this very moment his finger is pointing to your

door, the red spear crashing on its panels, and even now the plague is entering

your home and settling down in your bedroom to await your return. Patient and

watchful, ineluctable as the order of the scheme of things, it bides its time.

No earthly power, nay, not even, mark me well, the vaunted might of human

science can avail you to avert that hand once it is stretched toward you. And

winnowed like corn on the blood-stained threshing-floor of suffering, you will

be cast away with the chaff."

At this point the Father reverted with heightened eloquence to the symbol of the

flail. He bade his hearers picture a huge wooden bar whirling above the town,

striking at random, swinging up again in a shower of drops of blood, and

spreading carnage and suffering on earth, "for the seedtime that shall prepare

the harvest of the truth."

At the end of his long phrase Father Paneloux paused; his hair was straggling

over his forehead, his body shaken by tremors that his hands communicated to the

pulpit. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, but vibrant with accusation.

"Yes, the hour has come for serious thought. You fondly imagined it was enough

to visit God on Sundays, and thus you could make free of your weekdays. You

believed some brief formalities, some bendings of the knee, would recompense Him

well enough for your criminal indifference. But God is not mocked. These brief

encounters could not sate the fierce hunger of His love. He wished to see you

longer and more often; that is His manner of loving and, indeed, it is the only

manner of loving. And this is why, wearied of waiting for you to come to Him, He

loosed on you this visitation; as He has visited all the cities that offended

against Him since the dawn of history.

Now you are learning your lesson, the lesson that was learned by Cain and his

offspring, by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, by Job and Pharaoh, by all that

hardened their hearts against Him. And like them you have been beholding mankind

and all creation with new eyes, since the gates of this city closed on you and

on the pestilence. Now, at last, you know the hour has struck to bend your

thoughts to first and last things."

A wet wind was sweeping up the nave, making the candle-flames bend and flicker.

The pungency of burning wax, coughs, a stifled sneeze, rose toward Father

Paneloux, who, reverting to his exordium with a subtlety that was much

appreciated, went on in a calm, almost matter-of-fact voice: "Many of you are

wondering, I know, what I am leading up to. I wish to lead you to the truth and

teach you to rejoice, yes, rejoice, in spite of all that I have been telling

you.

For the time is past when a helping hand or mere words of good advice could set

you on the right path. Today the truth is a command. It is a red spear sternly

pointing to the narrow path, the one way of salvation. And thus, my brothers, at

last it is revealed to you, the divine compassion which has ordained good and

evil in everything; wrath and pity; the plague and your salvation. This same

pestilence which is slaying you works for your good and points your path.

"Many centuries ago the Christians of Abyssinia saw in the plague a sure and

God-sent means of winning eternal life. Those who were not yet stricken wrapped

round them sheets in which men had died of plague, so as to make sure of their

death. I grant you such a frenzied quest of salvation was not to be commended.

It shows an overhaste, indeed, a presumptuousness, which we can but deplore. No

man should seek to force God's hand or to hurry on the appointed hour, and from

a practice that aims at speeding up the order of events which God has ordained

unalterably from all time, it is but a step to heresy. Yet we can learn a

salutary lesson from the zeal, excessive though it was, of those Abyssinian

Christians. Much of it is alien to our more enlightened spirits, and yet it

gives us a glimpse of that radiant eternal light which glows, a small still

flame, in the dark core of human suffering.

And this light, too, illuminates the shadowed paths that lead towards

deliverance. It reveals the will of God in action, unfailingly transforming evil

into good. And once again today it is leading us through the dark valley of

fears and groans towards the holy silence, the wellspring of all life. This, my

friends, is the vast consolation I would hold out to you, so that when you leave

this house of God you will carry away with you not only words of wrath, but a

message, too, of comfort for your hearts."

Everyone supposed that the sermon had ended. Outside, the rain had ceased and

watery sunshine was yellowing the Cathedral square. Vague sounds of voices came

from the streets, and a low hum of traffic, the speech of an awakening town.

Discreetly, with a subdued rustling, the congregation gathered together their

belongings. However, the Father had a few more words to say. He told them that

after having made it clear that this plague came from God for the punishment of

their sins, he would not have recourse, in concluding, to an eloquence that,

considering the tragic nature of the occasion, would be out of keeping. He hoped

and believed that all of them now saw their position in its true light. But,

before leaving the pulpit, he would like to tell them of something he had been

reading in an old chronicle of the Black Death at Marseille. In it Mathieu

Marais, the chronicler, laments his lot; he says he has been cast into hell to

languish without succor and without hope.

Well, Mathieu Marais was blind! Never more intensely than today had he, Father

Paneloux, felt the immanence of divine succor and Christian hope granted to all

alike. He hoped against hope that, despite all the horrors of these dark days,

despite the groans of men and women in agony, our fellow citizens would offer up

to heaven that one prayer which is truly Christian, a prayer of love. And God

would see to the rest.

IT is hard to say if this sermon had any effect on our townsfolk. M. Othon, the

magistrate, assured Dr. Rieux that he had found the preacher's arguments

"absolutely irrefutable." But not everyone took so unqualified a view. To some

the sermon simply brought home the fact that they had been sentenced, for an

unknown crime, to an indeterminate period of punishment. And while a good many

people adapted themselves to confinement and carried on their humdrum lives as

before, there were others who rebelled and whose one idea now was to break loose

from the prison-house.

At first the fact of being cut off from the outside world was accepted with a

more or less good grace, much as people would have put up with any other

temporary inconvenience that interfered with only a few of their habits. But,

now they had abruptly become aware that they were undergoing a sort of

incarceration under that blue dome of sky, already beginning to sizzle in the

fires of summer, they had a vague sensation that their whole lives were

threatened by the present turn of events, and in the evening, when the cooler

air revived their energy, this feeling of being locked in like criminals

prompted them sometimes to foolhardy acts.

It is noteworthy, this may or may not have been due to mere coincidence, that

this Sunday of the sermon marked the beginning of something like a widespread

panic in the town, and it took so deep a hold as to lead one to suspect that

only now had the true nature of their situation dawned on our townspeople. Seen

from this angle, the atmosphere of the town was somewhat changed. But, actually,

it was a problem whether the change was in the atmosphere or in their hearts.

A few days after the sermon, when Rieux, on his way to one of the outlying

districts of the town, was discussing the change with Grand, he collided in the

darkness with a man who was standing in the middle of the pavement swaying from

side to side without trying to advance. At the same moment the street-lamps,

which were being lit later and later in the evening, went on suddenly, and a

lamp just behind Rieux and his companion threw its light full on the man's face.

His eyes were shut and he was laughing soundlessly. Big drops of sweat were

rolling down the face convulsed with silent merriment.

"A lunatic at large," Grand observed.

Rieux took his arm and was shepherding him on when he noticed that Grand was

trembling violently.

"If things go on as they are going," Rieux remarked, "the whole town will be a

madhouse." He felt exhausted, his throat was parched. "Let's have a drink."

They turned into a small cafe. The only light came from a lamp over the bar, the

heavy air had a curious reddish tinge, and for no apparent reason everyone was

speaking in undertones.

To the doctor's surprise Grand asked for a small glass of straight liquor, which

he drank off at a gulp. "Fiery stuff!" he observed; then, a moment later,

suggested making a move.

Out in the street it seemed to Rieux that the night was full of whispers.

Somewhere in the black depths above the street-lamps there was a low soughing

that brought to his mind that unseen flail threshing incessantly the languid air

of which Paneloux had spoken.

"Happily, happily," Grand muttered, then paused. Rieux asked him what he had

been going to say. "Happily, I've my work."

"Ah yes," Rieux said. "That's something, anyhow." Then, so as not to hear that

eerie whistling in the air, he asked Grand if he was getting good results.

"Well, yes, I think I'm making headway." "Have you much more to do?"

Grand began to show an animation unlike his usual self, and his voice took ardor

from the liquor he had drunk.

"I don't know. But that's not the point, doctor; yes, I can assure you that's

not the point."

It was too dark to see clearly, but Rieux had the impression that he was waving

his arms. He seemed to be working himself up to say something, and when he

spoke, the words came with a rush.

"What I really want, doctor, is this. On the day when the manuscript reaches the

publisher, I want him to stand up? after he's read it through, of course, and

say to his staff: 'Gentlemen, hats off!'"

Rieux was dumbfounded, and, to add to his amazement, he saw, or seemed to see,

the man beside him making as if to take off his hat with a sweeping gesture,

bringing his hand to his head, then holding his arm out straight in front of

him. That queer whistling overhead seemed to gather force.

"So you see," Grand added, "it's got to be flawless."

Though he knew little of the literary world, Rieux had a suspicion that things

didn't happen in it quite so picturesquely, that, for instance, publishers do

not keep their hats on in their offices. But, of course, one never can tell, and

Rieux preferred to hold his peace. Try as he might to shut his ears to it, he

still was listening to that eerie sound above, the whispering of the plague.

They had reached the part of the town where Grand lived and, as it was on a

slight eminence, they felt the cool night breeze fanning their cheeks and at the

same time carrying away from them the noises of the town.

Grand went on talking, but Rieux failed to follow all the worthy man was saying.

All he gathered was that the work he was engaged on ran to a great many pages,

and he was at almost excruciating pains to bring it to perfection. "Evenings,

whole weeks, spent on one word, just think! Sometimes on a mere conjunction!"

Grand stopped abruptly and seized the doctor by a button of his coat. The words

came stumbling out of his almost toothless mouth.

"I'd like you to understand, doctor. I grant you it's easy enough to choose

between a 'but' and an 'and.' It's a bit more difficult to decide between 'and'

and 'then.' But definitely the hardest thing may be to know whether one should

put an 'and' or leave it out."

"Yes," Rieux said, "I see your point."

He started walking again. Grand looked abashed, then stepped forward and drew

level.

"Sorry," he said awkwardly. "I don't know what's come over me this evening."

Rieux patted his shoulder encouragingly, saying he'd been much interested in

what Grand had said and would like to help him. This seemed to reassure Grand,

and when they reached his place he suggested, after some slight hesitation, that

the doctor should come in for a moment. Rieux agreed.

They entered the dining-room and Grand gave him a chair beside a table strewn

with sheets of paper covered with writing in a microscopic hand, criscrossed

with corrections.

"Yes, that's it," he said in answer to the doctor's questioning glance. "But

won't you drink something? I've some wine."

Rieux declined. He was bending over the manuscript.

"No, don't look," Grand said. "It's my opening phrase, and it's giving trouble,

no end of trouble."

He too was gazing at the sheets of paper on the table, and his hand seemed

irresistibly drawn to one of them. Finally he picked it up and held it to the

shadeless electric bulb so that the light shone through. The paper shook in his

hand and Rieux noticed that his forehead was moist with sweat.

"Sit down," he said, "and read it to me."

"Yes." There was a timid gratitude in Grand's eyes and smile. "I think I'd like

you to hear it."

He waited for a while, still gazing at the writing, then sat down. Meanwhile

Rieux was listening to the curious buzzing sound that was rising from the

streets as if in answer to the soughings of the plague. At that moment he had a

preternaturally vivid awareness of the town stretched out below, a victim world

secluded and apart, and of the groans of agony stifled in its darkness. Then,

pitched low but clear, Grand's voice came to his ears.

"One fine morning in the month of May an elegant young horsewoman might have

been seen riding a handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de

Boulogne."

Silence returned, and with it the vague murmur of the prostrate town. Grand had

put down the sheet and was still staring at it. After a while he looked up.

"What do you think of it?"

Rieux replied that this opening phrase had whetted his curiosity; he'd like to

hear what followed. Whereat Grand told him he'd got it all wrong. He seemed

excited and slapped the papers on the table with the flat of his hand.

"That's only a rough draft. Once I've succeeded in rendering perfectly the

picture in my mind's eye, once my words have the exact tempo of this ride, the

horse is trotting, one-two-three, one-two-three, see what I mean? the rest will

come more easily and, what's even more important, the illusion will be such that

from the very first words it will be possible to say: 'Hats off!'.

But before that, he admitted, there was lots of hard work to be done. He'd never

dream of handing that sentence to the printer in its present form. For though it

sometimes satisfied him, he was fully aware it didn't quite hit the mark as yet,

and also that to some extent it had a facility of tone approximating, remotely

perhaps, but recognizably, to the commonplace. That was more or less what he was

saying when they heard the sound of people running in the street below the

window.

Rieux stood up.

"Just wait and see what I make of it," Grand said, and, glancing toward the

window, added: "When all this is over."

But then the sound of hurried footsteps came again. Rieux was already halfway

down the stairs, and when he stepped out into the street two men brushed past

him. They seemed to be on their way to one of the town gates. In fact, what with

the heat and the plague, some of our fellow citizens were losing their heads;

there had already been some scenes of violence and nightly attempts were made to

elude the sentries and escape to the outside world.

OTHERS, too, Rambert for example, were trying to escape from this atmosphere of

growing panic, but with more skill and persistence, if not with greater success.

For a while Rambert had gone on struggling with officialdom. If he was to be

believed, he had always thought that perseverance would win through, inevitably,

and, as he pointed out, resourcefulness in emergency was up his street, in a

manner of speaking.

So he plodded away, calling on all sorts of officials and others whose influence

would have had weight in normal conditions. But, as things were, such influence

was unavailing. For the most part they were men with well-defined and sound

ideas on everything concerning exports, banking, the fruit or wine trade; men of

proved ability in handling problems relating to insurance, the interpretation of

ill-drawn contracts, and the like; of high qualifications and evident good

intentions. That, in fact, was what struck one most, the excellence of their

intentions. But as regards plague their competence was practically nil.

However, whenever opportunity arose, Rambert had tackled each of them and

pleaded his cause. The gist of his argument was always the same: that he was a

stranger to our town and, that being so, his case deserved special

consideration.

Mostly the men he talked to conceded this point readily enough. But usually they

added that a good number of other people were in a like case, and thus his

position was not so exceptional as he seemed to suppose. To this Rambert could

reply that this did not affect the substance of his argument in any way. He was

then told that it did affect the position, already difficult, of the

authorities, who were against showing any favoritism and thus running the risk

of creating what, with obvious repugnance, they called "a precedent."

In conversation with Dr. Rieux, Rambert classified the people whom he had

approached in various categories. Those who used the arguments mentioned above

he called the sticklers. Besides these there were the consolers, who assured him

that the present state of things couldn't possibly last and, when asked for

definite suggestions, fobbed him off by telling him he was making too much fuss

about a passing inconvenience.

Then there were the very important persons who asked the visitor to leave a

brief note of his case and informed him they would decide on it in due course;

the triflers, who offered him billeting warrants or gave the addresses of

lodgings; the red-tape merchants, who made him fill up a form and promptly

interred it in a file; overworked officials, who raised their arms to heaven,

and much-harassed officials who simply looked away; and, finally, the

traditionalists, these were by far the greatest number, who referred Rambert to

another office or recommended some new method of approach.

These fruitless interviews had thoroughly worn out the journalist; on the credit

side he had obtained much insight into the inner workings of a municipal office

and a Prefect's headquarters, by dint of sitting for hours on imitation-leather

sofas, confronted by posters urging him to invest in savings bonds exempt from

income-tax, or to enlist in the colonial army; and by dint of entering offices

where human faces were as blank as the filing-cabinets and the dusty records on

the shelves behind them.

The only thing gained by all this expenditure of energy, Rambert told Rieux with

a hint of bitterness, was that it served to keep his mind off his predicament.

In fact, the rapid progress of the plague practically escaped his notice. Also,

it made the days pass more quickly and, given the situation in which the whole

town was placed, it might be said that every day lived through brought everyone,

provided he survived, twenty-four hours nearer the end of his ordeal. Rieux

could but admit the truth of this reasoning, but to his mind its truth was of

rather too general an order.

At one moment Rambert had a gleam of hope. A form was sent him from the

Prefect's office with instructions that he was to fill in carefully all the

blanks. It included questions concerning his identity, his family, his present

and former sources of income; in fact, he was to give what is known as a

curriculum vitae. He got an impression that inquiries were on foot with a view

to drawing up a list of persons who might be instructed to leave the town and

return to their homes. Some vague information gleaned from an employee in one of

the offices confirmed this impression. But on going further into the matter and

finally discovering the office from which the form had emanated, he was told

that this information was being collected with a view to certain contingencies.

"What contingencies?" he asked.

He then learned that the contingency was the possibility of his falling ill and

dying of plague; the data supplied would enable the authorities to notify his

family and also to decide if the hospital expenses should be borne by the

municipality or if, in due course, they could be recovered from his relatives.

On the face of it this implied that he was not completely cut off from the woman

who was awaiting his return, since the powers that be were obviously giving heed

to both of them.

But that was no consolation. The really remarkable thing, and Rambert was

greatly struck by this, was the way in which, in the very midst of catastrophe,

offices could go on functioning serenely and take initiatives of no immediate

relevance, and often unknown to the highest authority, purely and simply because

they had been created originally for this purpose.

The next phase was at once the easiest and the hardest for Rambert. It was a

period of sheer lethargy. He had gone the round of offices, taken every step

that could be taken, and realized that for the present all avenues of that kind

were closed to him. So now he drifted aimlessly from cafe to cafe. In the

mornings he would sit on the terrace of one of them and read a newspaper in the

hope of finding some indication that the epidemic was on the wane.

He would gaze at the faces of the passers-by, often turning away disgustedly

from their look of unrelieved gloom, and after reading for the nth time the

shopsigns on the other side of the street, the advertisements of popular drinks

that were no longer procurable, would rise and walk again at random in the

yellow streets.

Thus he killed time till nightfall, moving about the town and stopping now and

then at a cafe or restaurant. One evening Rieux noticed him hovering round the

door of a cafe, unable to make up his mind to enter. At last he decided to go in

and sat down at a table at the back of the room. It was the time when, acting

under orders, cafe-proprietors

deferred as long as possible turning on their lights. Gray dusk was seeping into

the room, the pink of sunset glowed in the wall mirrors, and the marble-topped

tables glimmered white in the gathering darkness. Seated in the empty cafe,

Rambert looked pathetically lost, a mere shade among the shadows, and Rieux

guessed this was the hour when he felt most derelict. It was, indeed, the hour

of day when all the prisoners of the town realized their dereliction and each

was thinking that something, no matter what, must be done to hasten their

deliverance. Rieux turned hurriedly away.

Rambert also spent a certain amount of time at the railroad station. No one was

allowed on the platforms. But the waiting-rooms, which could be entered from

outside, remained open and, being cool and dark, were often patronized by

beggars on very hot days. Rambert spent much time studying the timetables,

reading the prohibitions against spitting, and the passengers' regulations.

After that he sat down in a corner. An old cast-iron stove, which had been

stone-cold for months, rose like a sort of landmark in the middle of the room,

surrounded by figure-of-eight patterns on the floor, the traceries of long-past

sprinklings. Posters on the walls gaily invited tourists to a carefree holiday

at Cannes or Bandol. And in his corner Rambert savored that bitter sense of

freedom which comes of total deprivation. The evocations which at that time he

found most poignant were, anyhow according to what he told Rieux, those of

Paris.

There rose before his eyes, unsummoned, vistas of old stones and riverbanks, the

pigeons of the Palais-Royal, the Gare du Nord, quiet old streets round the

Pantheon, and many another scene of the city he'd never known he loved so much,

and these mental pictures killed all desire for any form of action. Rieux felt

fairly sure he was identifying these scenes with memories of his love.

And when one day Rambert told him that he liked waking up at four in the morning

and thinking of his beloved Paris, the doctor guessed easily enough, basing this

on his own experience, that that was his favorite time for conjuring up pictures

of the woman from whom he now was parted. This was, indeed, the hour when he

could feel surest she was wholly his. Till four in the morning one is seldom

doing anything and at that hour, even if the night has been a night of betrayal,

one is asleep. Yes, everyone sleeps at that hour, and this is reassuring, since

the great longing of an unquiet heart is to possess constantly and consciously

the loved one, or, failing that, to be able to plunge the loved one, when a time

of absence intervenes, into a dreamless sleep timed to last unbroken until the

day they meet again.

Shortly after Father Paneloux's sermon the hot weather set in with a vengeance.

On the day following the unseasonable downpour of that Sunday, summer blazed

out above the housetops. First a strong, scorching wind blew steadily for a

whole day, drying up the walls. And then the sun took charge, incessant waves of

heat and light swept the town daylong, and but for arcaded streets and the

interiors of houses, everything lay naked to the dazzling impact of the light.

The sun stalked our townsfolk along every byway, into every nook; and when they

paused, it struck.

Since this first onslaught of the heat synchronized with a startling increase in

the number of victims, there were now nearly seven hundred deaths a week, a mood

of profound discouragement settled on the town. In the suburbs little was left

of the wonted animation between the long flat streets and the terraced houses;

ordinarily people living in these districts used to spend the best part of the

day on their doorsteps, but now every door was shut, nobody was to be seen, even

the Venetian blinds stayed down, and there was no knowing if it was the heat or

the plague that they were trying to shut out. In some houses groans could be

heard.

At first, when that happened, people often gathered outside and listened,

prompted by curiosity or compassion. But under the prolonged strain it seemed

that hearts had toughened; people lived beside those groans or walked past them

as though they had become the normal speech of men.

As a result of the fighting at the gates, in the course of which the police had

had to use their revolvers, a spirit of lawlessness was abroad. Some had

certainly been wounded in these brushes with the police, but in the town, where,

owing to the combined influences of heat and terror, everything was exaggerated,

there was talk of deaths. One thing, anyhow, was certain; discontent was on the

increase and, fearing worse to come, the local officials debated lengthily on

the measures to be taken if the populace, goaded to frenzy by the epidemic, got

completely out of hand. The newspapers published new regulations reiterating the

orders against attempting to leave the town and warning those who infringed them

that they were liable to long terms of imprisonment.

A system of patrols was instituted and often in the empty, sweltering streets,

heralded by a clatter of horse hoofs on the cobbles, a detachment of mounted

police would make its way between the parallel lines of close-shut windows. Now

and again a gunshot was heard; the special brigade recently detailed to destroy

cats and dogs, as possible carriers of infection, was at work. And these

whipcrack sounds startling the silence increased the nervous tension already

existing in the town.

For in the heat and stillness, and for the troubled hearts of our townsfolk,

anything, even the least sound, had a heightened significance. The varying

aspects of the sky, the very smells rising from the soil that mark each change

of season, were taken notice of for the first time. Everyone realized with

dismay that hot weather would favor the epidemic, and it was clear that summer

was setting in. The cries of swifts in the evening air above the housetops were

growing shriller. And the sky, too, had lost the spaciousness of those June

twilights when our horizons seem infinitely remote.

In the markets the flowers no longer came in buds; they were already in full

bloom, and after the morning's marketing the dusty pavements were littered with

trampled petals. It was plain to see that spring had spent itself, lavished its

ardor on the myriads of flowers that were bursting everywhere into bloom, and

now was being crushed out by the twofold onslaught of heat and plague. For our

fellow citizens that summer sky, and the streets thick in dust, gray as their

present lives, had the same ominous import as the hundred deaths now weighing

daily on the town. That incessant sunlight and those bright hours associated

with siesta or with holidays no longer invited, as in the past, to frolics and

flirtation on the beaches. Now they rang hollow in the silence of the closed

town, they had lost the golden spell of happier summers. Plague had killed all

colors, vetoed pleasure.

That, indeed, was one of the great changes brought by the epidemic. Hitherto all

of us welcomed summer in with pleasant anticipation. The town was open to the

sea and its young folk made free of the beaches. But this summer, for all its

nearness, the sea was out of bounds; young limbs had no longer the run of its

delights. What could we do under these conditions? It is Tarrou once again who

paints the most faithful picture of our life in those days. Needless to say, he

outlines the progress of the plague and he, too, notes that a new phase of the

epidemic was ushered in when the radio announced no longer weekly totals, but

ninety-two, a hundred and seven, and a hundred and thirty deaths in a day.

"The newspapers and the authorities are playing ball with the plague. They fancy

they're scoring off it because a hundred and thirty is a smaller figure than

nine hundred and ten." He also records such striking or moving incidents of the

epidemic as came under his notice; that, for instance, of the woman in a lonely

street who abruptly opened a shuttered window just above his head and gave two

loud shrieks before closing the shutters again on the dark interior of a

bedroom. But he also noted that peppermint lozenges had vanished from the

drugstores, because there was a popular belief that when sucking them you were

proof against contagion.

He went on watching his pet specimen on the opposite balcony. It seemed that

tragedy had come to the ancient small-game hunter as well. One morning there had

been gunshots in the street and, as Tarrou put it, "some gobs of lead" had

killed off most of the cats and scared away the others; anyhow they were no

longer about. That day the little old man went on to his balcony at the usual

hour, showed some surprise, and, leaning on the rail, closely scanned the

corners of the street. Then he settled down to wait, fretfully tapping the

balustrade with his right hand. After staying there for some time he tore up a

few sheets of paper, went back into his room, and came out again.

After another longish wait he retreated again into the room, slamming the french

windows behind him. He followed the same procedure daily during the rest of the

week, and the sadness and bewilderment on the old face deepened as the days went

by.

On the eighth day Tarrou waited in vain for his appearance; the windows stayed

resolutely closed on all too comprehensible distress. This entry ends with

Tarrou's summing up. "It is forbidden to spit on cats in plague-time."

In another context Tarrou notes that, on coming home in the evenings, he

invariably saw the night watchman pacing the hall, like a sentry on his beat.

The man never failed to remind everyone he met that he'd foreseen what was

happening.

Tarrou agreed that he'd predicted a disaster, but reminded him that the event

predicted by him was an earthquake. To which the old fellow replied: "Ah, if

only it had been an earthquake! A good bad shock, and there you are! You count

the dead and living, and that's an end of it. But this here damned disease, even

them who haven't got it can't think of anything else."

The manager of the hotel was equally downhearted. In the early days travelers,

unable to leave the town, had kept on their rooms. But one by one, seeing that

the epidemic showed no sign of abating, they moved out to stay with friends. And

the same cause that had led to all the rooms' being occupied now kept them

empty, since there were no newcomers to the town.

Tarrou was one of the very few remaining guests, and the manager never lost an

opportunity of informing him that, were he not reluctant to put these gentlemen

to inconvenience, he would have closed the hotel long ago. He often asked Tarrou

to say how long he thought the epidemic would last. "They say," Tarrou informed

him, "that cold weather stamps out diseases of this type." The manager looked

aghast. "But, my dear sir, it's never really cold in these parts. And, anyhow,

that would mean it's going to last many months more." Moreover, he was sure that

for a long while to come travelers would give the town a wide berth. This

epidemic spelt the ruin of the tourist trade, in fact.

After a short absence M. Othon, the owlish paterfamilias, made a reappearance in

the restaurant, but accompanied only by the two "performing poodles," his

offspring. On inquiry it came out that Mme Othon was in quarantine; she had been

nursing her mother, who had succumbed to plague.

"I don't like it a bit," the manager told Tarrou. "Quarantine or not, she's

under suspicion, which means that they are, too."

Tarrou pointed out that, if it came to that, everyone was "under suspicion." But

the manager had his own ideas and was not to be shaken out of them.

"No, sir. You and I, we're not under suspicion. But they certainly are."

However, M. Othon was impervious to such considerations and would not let the

plague change his habits. He entered the restaurant with his wonted dignity, sat

down in front of his children, and addressed to them at intervals the same

nicely worded, unamiable remarks. Only the small boy looked somewhat different;

dressed in black like his sister, a little more shrunken than before, he now

seemed a miniature replica of his father. The night watchman, who had no liking

for M. Othon, had said of him to Tarrou:

"That fine gentleman will pass out with his clothes on. All dressed up and ready

to go. So he won't need no laying-out."

Tarrou has some comments on the sermon preached by Paneloux: "I can understand

that type of fervor and find it not displeasing. At the beginning of a

pestilence and when it ends, there's always a propensity for rhetoric. In the

first case, habits have not yet been lost; in the second, they're returning. It

is in the thick of a calamity that one gets hardened to the truth, in other

words, to silence. So let's wait."

Tarrou also records that he had a long talk with Dr. Rieux; all he remembered

was that it had "good results." In this connection he notes the color of Mme

Rieux's, the doctor's mother's, eyes, a limpid brown, and makes the odd

observation that a gaze revealing so much goodness of heart would always triumph

over plague.

He has also a good deal to say about Rieux's asthma patient. He went with the

doctor to see him, immediately after their conversation. The old man greeted

Tarrou with a chuckle and rubbed his hands cheerfully. He was sitting up in bed

with the usual two pans of dried peas in front of him. "Ah, here's another of

'em!" he exclaimed when he saw Tarrou. "It's a topsy-turvy world all right, more

doctors than patients. Because it's mowing them down, ain't it, more and more.

That priest's right; we were asking for it." Next day Tarrou came to see him

without warning.

From Tarrou's notes we gather that the old man, a dry-goods dealer by

occupation, decided at the age of fifty that he'd done enough work for a

lifetime. He took to his bed and never left it again, but not because of his

asthma, which would not have prevented his getting about. A small fixed income

had seen him through to his present age, seventyfive, and the years had not

damped his cheerfulness. He couldn't bear the sight of a watch, and indeed there

wasn't one in the whole house. "Watches," he said, "are silly gadgets, and dear

at that." He worked out the time, that is to say, the time for meals, with his

two saucepans, one of which was always full of peas when he woke in the morning.

He filled the other, pea by pea, at a constant, carefully regulated speed. Thus

time for him was reckoned by these pans and he could take his bearings in it at

any moment of the day. "Every fifteen pans," he said, "it's feeding-time. What

could be simpler?"

If his wife was to be trusted, he had given signs of his vocation at a very

early age. Nothing, in fact, had ever interested him; his work, friendship,

cafes, music, women,

outings, to all he was indifferent. He had never left his home town except once

when he had been called to Algiers for family affairs, and even then he had

alighted from the train at the first station after Oran, incapable of continuing

the adventure. He took the first train back.

To Tarrou, who had shown surprise at the secluded life he led, he had given the

following explanation, more or less. According to religion, the first half of a

man's life is an upgrade; the second goes downhill. On the descending days he

has no claim, they may be snatched from him at any moment; thus he can do

nothing with them and the best thing, precisely, is to do nothing with them. He

obviously had no compunction about contradicting himself, for a few minutes

later he told Tarrou that God did not exist, since otherwise there would be no

need for priests. But, from some observations which followed, Tarrou realized

that the old fellow's philosophy was closely involved with the irritation caused

by the house-to-house collections in aid of charities, which took place almost

incessantly in that part of the town. What completed the picture of the old man

was a desire he expressed several times, and which seemed deeply rooted: the

desire to die at a very advanced age.

"Is he a saint?" Tarrou asked himself, and answered: "Yes, if saintliness is an

aggregate of habits."

Meanwhile Tarrou was compiling a longish description of a day in the plague-

stricken town; it was to give a full and accurate picture of the life of our

fellow citizens during that summer. "Nobody laughs," Tarrou observes, "except

the drunks, and they laugh too much." After which he embarks on his description.

"At daybreak light breaths of air fan the still empty streets. At this hour,

between the night's victims and the death-agonies of the coming day, it is as if

for a while plague stays its hand and takes breath. All shops are shut. But on

some a notice: Closed owing to plague, shows that when the others open

presently, these will not. Still half-asleep, the newsboys do not yet cry the

news but, lounging at street corners, offer their wares to the lamp-posts, with

the vague gestures of sleepwalkers. Soon, awakened by the early streetcars, they

will fan out through the town, holding at arm's length sheets on which the word

PLAGUE looms large.

Will there be a plague autumn? Professor B. says: 'No.' Toll of the 94th day of

plague: 124 deaths.

"In spite of the growing shortage of paper, which has compelled some dailies to

reduce their pages, a new paper has been launched: the Plague Chronicle, which

sets out 'to inform our townspeople, with scrupulous veracity, of the daily

progress or recession of the disease; to supply them with the most authoritative

opinions available as to its future course; to offer the hospitality of its

columns to all, in whatever walk of life, who wish to join in combating the

epidemic; to keep up the morale of the populace; to publish the latest orders

issued by the authorities; and to centralize the efforts of all who desire to

give active and wholehearted help in the present emergency.' Actually this

newspaper very soon came to devote its columns to advertisements of new,

'infallible' antidotes against plague.

"Toward six in the morning all these papers are being sold to the lines that

begin to form outside the shops over an hour before they open; then to the

passengers alighting from the streetcars coming in, packed to capacity, from the

suburbs. The cars are now the only means of transport, and they have much

difficulty in progressing, what with people standing on the running-boards and

hanging in clusters from the handrails. A queer thing

is how the passengers all try to keep their backs turned to their neighbors,

twisting themselves into grotesque attitudes in the attempt, the idea being, of

course, to avoid contagion. At every stop a cataract of men and women is

disgorged, each in haste to put a safe distance between himself or herself and

the rest.

"When the first cars have gone by, the town gradually wakes up, early cafes open

their doors, and you see an array of cards on the counter: No Coffee, Bring Your

Own Sugar, and the like. Next the shops open and the streets grow livelier. And

meanwhile the light is swelling and the sky, even at this early hour, beginning

to grow leaden-hued with heat. This is the time when those who have nothing to

do venture out on the boulevards. Most of them seem determined to counteract the

plague by a lavish display of luxury. Daily, about eleven, you see a sort of

dress parade of youths and girls, who make you realize the frantic desire for

life that thrives in the heart of every great calamity. If the epidemic spreads,

morals too will broaden, and we may see again the saturnalia of Milan, men and

women dancing round the graves.

"At noon, in a flash, all the restaurants fill up. Very quickly small groups of

people unable to find a seat form at the doors. Because of the intense heat the

sky is losing its brightness. Under big awnings the aspirants to food wait their

turn, aligned along the curbs of streets gaping and sizzling in the fires of

noon. The reason for the restaurants' being so crowded is that they solve for

many the feeding problem. But they do nothing to allay the fear of contagion.

Many of the customers spend several minutes methodically wiping their plates.

Not long ago some restaurants put up notices: Our plates, knives, and forks

guaranteed sterilized. But gradually they discontinued publicity of this order,

since their customers came in any case. People, moreover, spend very freely.

Choice wines, or wines alleged to be such, the costliest extras, a mood of

reckless extravagance is setting in. It seems that there was something like a

panic in a restaurant because a customer suddenly felt ill, went very white, and

staggered precipitately to the door.

"Toward two o'clock the town slowly empties, it is the time when silence,

sunlight, dust, and plague have the streets to themselves. Wave after wave of

heat flows over the frontage of the tall gray houses during these long, languid

hours. Thus the afternoon wears on, slowly merging into an evening that settles

down like a red winding-sheet on the serried tumult of the town. At the start of

the great heat, for some unascertained reason, the evenings found the streets

almost empty.

But now the least ripple of cooler air brings an easing of the strain, if not a

flutter of hope. Then all stream out into the open, drug themselves with

talking, start arguing or love-making, and in the last glow of sunset the town,

freighted with lovers two by two and loud with voices, drifts like a helmless

ship into the throbbing darkness. In vain a zealous evangelist with a felt hat

and flowing tie threads his way through the crowd, crying without cease: 'God is

great and good. Come unto Him.' On the contrary, they all make haste toward some

trivial objective that seems of more immediate interest than God.

"In the early days, when they thought this epidemic was much like other

epidemics, religion held its ground. But once these people realized their

instant peril, they gave their thoughts to pleasure. And all the hideous fears

that stamp their faces in the daytime are transformed in the fiery, dusty

nightfall into a sort of hectic exaltation, an unkempt freedom fevering their

blood.

"And I, too, I'm no different. But what matter? Death means nothing to men like

me. It's the event that proves them right. It was Tarrou who had asked Rieux for

the interview he refers to in his diary. On that evening, as it happened, just

before Tarrou arrived, the doctor had gazed for some moments at his mother, who

was sitting very still in a corner of the dining-room. Once her household tasks

were over, she spent most of her time in that chair.

Her hands folded in her lap, she sat there waiting. Rieux wasn't even sure it

was for him she waited. However, something always changed in his mother's face

when he came in. The silent resignation that a laborious life had given it

seemed to light up with a sudden glow. Then she returned to her tranquillity.

That evening she was gazing out of the window at the now empty street. The

street lighting had been reduced by two thirds, and only at long intervals a

lamp cast flickering gleams through the thick darkness of the town.

"Will they keep to the reduced lighting as long as the plague lasts?" Mme Rieux

asked.

"I expect so."

"Let's hope it doesn't last till winter. It would be terribly depressing."

"Yes," Rieux said.

He saw his mother's gaze settle on his forehead. He knew that the worry and

overwork of the last few days had scored their traces there.

"Didn't things go well today?" his mother asked. "Oh, much as usual."

As usual! That was to say the new consignment of serum sent from Paris seemed

less effective than the first, and the death-rate was rising. It was still

impossible to administer prophylactic inoculations elsewhere than in families

already attacked; if its use was to be generalized, very large quantities of the

vaccine would have been needed. Most of the buboes refused to burst, it was as

if they underwent a seasonal hardening, and the victims suffered horribly.

During the last twenty-four hours there had been two cases of a new form of the

epidemic; the plague was becoming pneumonic. On this very day, in the course of

a meeting, the much-harassed doctors had pressed the Prefect, the unfortunate

man seemed quite at his wits' end, to issue new regulations to prevent contagion

being carried from mouth to mouth, as happens in pneumonic plague. The Prefect

had done as they wished, but as usual they were groping, more or less, in the

dark.

Looking at his mother, he felt an uprush of a half-forgotten emotion, the love

of his boyhood, at the sight of her soft brown gaze intent on him.

"Don't you ever feel alarmed, Mother?" "Oh, at my age there isn't much left to

fear."

"The days are very long, and just now I'm hardly ever at home."

"I don't mind waiting, if I know you're going to come back. And when you aren't

here, I think of what you're doing. Have you any news?"

"Yes, if I'm to believe the last telegram, everything's going as well as could

be expected. But I know she says that to prevent my worrying."

The doorbell rang. The doctor gave his mother a smile and went to open the door.

In the dim light on the landing Tarrou looked like a big gray bear. Rieux gave

his

visitor a seat facing his desk, while he himself remained standing behind the

desk chair. Between them was the only light in the room, a desk lamp.

Tarrou came straight to the point. "I know," he said, "that I can talk to you

quite frankly."

Rieux nodded.

"In a fortnight, or a month at most," Tarrou continued, "you'll serve no purpose

here. Things will have got out of hand."

"I agree."

"The sanitary department is inefficient, understaffed, for one thing, and you're

worked off your feet."

Rieux admitted this was so.

"Well," Tarrou said, "I've heard that the authorities are thinking of a sort of

conscription of the population, and all men in good health will be required to

help in fighting the plague."

"Your information was correct. But the authorities are in none too good odor as

it is, and the Prefect can't make up his mind."

"If he daren't risk compulsion, why not call for voluntary help?" "It's been

done. The response was poor."

"It was done through official channels, and half-heartedly. What they're short

on is imagination. Officialdom can never cope with something really

catastrophic. And the remedial measures they think up are hardly adequate for a

common cold. If we let them carry on like this they'll soon be dead, and so

shall we."

"That's more than likely," Rieux said. "I should tell you, however, that they're

thinking of using the prisoners in the jails for what we call the 'heavy work.'

"

"I'd rather free men were employed."

"So would I. But might I ask why you feel like that?" "I loathe men's being

condemned to death."

Rieux looked Tarrou in the eyes. "So what?" he asked.

"It's this I have to say. I've drawn up a plan for voluntary groups of helpers.

Get me empowered to try out my plan, and then let's sidetrack officialdom. In

any case the authorities have their hands more than full already. I have friends

in many walks of life; they'll form a nucleus to start from. And, of course,

I'll take part in it myself."

"I need hardly tell you," Rieux replied, "that I accept your suggestion most

gladly. One can't have too many helpers, especially in a job like mine under

present conditions. I undertake to get your plan approved by the authorities.

Anyhow, they've, no choice. But?" Rieux pondered. "But I take it you know that

work of this kind may prove fatal to the worker. And I feel I should ask you

this; have you weighed the dangers?"

Tarrou's gray eyes met the doctor's gaze serenely. "What did you think of

Paneloux's sermon, doctor?"

The question was asked in a quite ordinary tone, and Rieux answered in the same

tone.

"I've seen too much of hospitals to relish any idea of collective punishment.

But, as you know, Christians sometimes say that sort of thing without really

thinking it. They're better than they seem."

"However, you think, like Paneloux, that the plague has its good side; it opens

men's eyes and forces them to take thought?"

The doctor tossed his head impatiently.

"So does every ill that flesh is heir to. What's true of all the evils in the

world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves. All the

same, when you see the misery it brings, you'd need to be a madman, or a coward,

or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague."

Rieux had hardly raised his voice at all; but Tarrou made a slight gesture as if

to calm him. He was smiling.

"Yes." Rieux shrugged his shoulders. "But you haven't answered my question yet.

Have you weighed the consequences?"

Tarrou squared his shoulders against the back of the chair, then moved his head

forward into the light.

"Do you believe in God, doctor?"

Again the question was put in an ordinary tone. But this time Rieux took longer

to find his answer.

"No, but what does that really mean? I'm fumbling in the dark, struggling to

make something out. But I've long ceased finding that original."

"Isn't that it, the gulf between Paneloux and you?"

"I doubt it. Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come in contact

with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of the truth, with a

capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners and has heard a

man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do. He'd try to relieve human

suffering before trying to point out its excellence." Rieux stood up; his face

was now in shadow. "Let's drop the subject," he said, "as you won't answer."

Tarrou remained seated in his chair; he was smiling again. "Suppose I answer

with a question."

The doctor now smiled, too.

"You like being mysterious, don't you? Yes, fire away."

"My question's this," said Tarrou. "Why do you yourself show such devotion,

considering you don't believe in God? I suspect your answer may help me to

mine."

His face still in shadow, Rieux said that he'd already answered: that if he

believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to

Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort; no, not even

Paneloux, who believed that he believed in such a God. And this was proved by

the fact that no one ever threw himself on Providence completely. Anyhow, in

this respect Rieux believed himself to be on the right road, in fighting against

creation as he found it.

"Ah," Tarrou remarked. "So that's the idea you have of your profession?" "More

or less." The doctor came back into the light.

Tarrou made a faint whistling noise with his lips, and the doctor gazed at him.

"Yes, you're thinking it calls for pride to feel that way. But I assure you I've

no

more than the pride that's needed to keep me going. I have no idea what's

awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this;

there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they'll think

things over; and so shall I. But what's wanted now is to make them well. I

defend them as best I can, that's all."

"Against whom?"

Rieux turned to the window. A shadow-line on the horizon told of the presence of

the sea. He was conscious only of his exhaustion, and at the same time was

struggling against a sudden, irrational impulse to unburden himself a little

more to his companion; an eccentric, perhaps, but who, he guessed, was one of

his own kind.

"I haven't a notion, Tarrou; I assure you I haven't a notion. When I entered

this profession, I did it 'abstractedly,' so to speak; because I had a desire

for it, because it meant a career like another, one that young men often aspire

to. Perhaps, too, because it was particularly difficult for a workman's son,

like myself. And then I had to see people die. Do you know that there are some

who refuse to die? Have you ever heard a woman scream 'Never!' with her last

gasp? Well, I have. And then I saw that I could never get hardened to it. I was

young then, and I was outraged by the whole scheme of things, or so I thought.

Subsequently I grew more modest. Only, I've never managed to get used to seeing

people die. That's all I know. Yet after all?"

Rieux fell silent and sat down. He felt his mouth dry. "After all?" Tarrou

prompted softly.

"After all," the doctor repeated, then hesitated again, fixing his eyes on

Tarrou, "it's something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but,

since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God

if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death,

without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence."

Tarrou nodded.

"Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that's all." Rieux's face

darkened.

"Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle."

"No reason, I agree. Only, I now can picture what this plague must mean for

you." "Yes. A never ending defeat."

Tarrou stared at the doctor for a moment, then turned and tramped heavily toward

the door. Rieux followed him and was almost at his side when Tarrou, who was

staring at the floor, suddenly said:

"Who taught you all this, doctor?" The reply came promptly: "Suffering."

Rieux opened the door of his surgery and told Tarrou that he, too, was going

out; he had a patient to visit in the suburbs. Tarrou suggested they should go

together and he agreed. In the hall they encountered Mme Rieux, and the doctor

introduced Tarrou to her.

"A friend of mine," he said.

"Indeed," said Mme Rieux, "I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance." When she

left them Tarrou turned to gaze after her. On the landing the doctor

pressed a switch to turn on the lights along the stairs. But the stairs remained

in darkness. Possibly some new light-saving order had come into force. Really,

however, there was no knowing; for some time past, in the streets no less than

in private houses, everything had been going out of order. It might be only that

the concierge, like nearly everyone in the town, was ceasing to bother about his

duties, The doctor had no time to follow up his thoughts; Tarrou's voice came

from behind him.

"Just one word more, doctor, even if it sounds to you a bit nonsensical. You are

perfectly right."

The doctor merely gave a little shrug, unseen in the darkness.

"To tell the truth, all that's outside my range. But you? what do you know about

it?"

"Ah," Tarrou replied quite coolly, "I've little left to learn."

Rieux paused and, behind him, Tarrou's foot slipped on a step. He steadied

himself by gripping the doctor's shoulder.

"Do you really imagine you know everything about life?"

The answer came through the darkness in the same cool, confident tone. "Yes."

Once in the street, they realized it must be quite late, eleven perhaps. All was

silence in the town, except for some vague rustlings. An ambulance bell clanged

faintly in the distance. They stepped into the car and Rieux started the engine.

"You must come to the hospital tomorrow," he said, "for an injection. But,

before embarking on this adventure, you'd better know your chances of coming out

of it alive; they're one in three."

"That sort of reckoning doesn't hold water; you know it, doctor, as well as I. A

hundred years ago plague wiped out the entire population of a town in Persia,

with one exception. And the sole survivor was precisely the man whose job it was

to wash the dead bodies, and who carried on throughout the epidemic."

"He pulled off his one-in-three chance, that's all." Rieux had lowered his

voice. "But you're right; we know next to nothing on the subject."

They were entering the suburbs. The headlights lit up empty streets. The car

stopped. Standing in front of it, Rieux asked Tarrou if he'd like to come in.

Tarrou said: "Yes." A glimmer of light from the sky lit up their faces. Suddenly

Rieux gave a short laugh, and there was much friendliness in it. "Out with it,

Tarrou! What on earth prompted you to take a hand in this?" "I don't know. My

code of morals, perhaps."

"Your code of morals? What code?" "Comprehension."

Tarrou turned toward the house and Rieux did not see his face again until they

were in the old asthma patient's room.

NEXT day Tarrou set to work and enrolled a first team of workers, soon to be

followed by many others.

However, it is not the narrator's intention to ascribe to these sanitary groups

more importance than their due. Doubtless today many of our fellow citizens are

apt to yield to the temptation of exaggerating the services they rendered. But

the narrator is inclined to think that by attributing overimportance to

praiseworthy actions one may, by implication, be paying indirect but potent

homage to the worse side of human nature.

For this attitude implies that such actions shine out as rare exceptions, while

callousness and apathy are the general rule. The narrator does not share that

view. The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good

intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding. On

the whole, men are more good than bad; that, however, isn't the real point. But

they are more or less ignorant, and it is this that we call vice or virtue; the

most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows

everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill. The soul of the

murderer is blind; and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the

utmost clear-sightedness.

Hence the sanitary groups, whose creation was entirely Tarrou's work, should be

considered with objectivity as well as with approval. And this is why the

narrator declines to vaunt in over-glowing terms a courage and a devotion to

which he attributes only a relative and reasonable importance. But he will

continue being the chronicler of the troubled, rebellious hearts of our

townspeople under the impact of the plague.

Those who enrolled in the "sanitary squads," as they were called, had, indeed,

no such great merit in doing as they did, since they knew it was the only thing

to do, and the unthinkable thing would then have been not to have brought

themselves to do it. These groups enabled our townsfolk to come to grips with

the disease and convinced them that, now that plague was among us, it was up to

them to do whatever could be done to fight it. Since plague became in this way

some men's duty, it revealed itself as what it really was; that is, the concern

of all.

So far, so good.

But we do not congratulate a schoolmaster on teaching that two and two make

four, though we may, perhaps, congratulate him on having chosen his laudable

vocation. Let us then say it was praiseworthy that Tarrou and so many others

should have elected to prove that two and two make four rather than the

contrary; but let us add that this good will of theirs was one that is shared by

the schoolmaster and by all who have the same feelings as the schoolmaster, and,

be it said to the credit of mankind, they are more numerous than one would

think, such, anyhow, is the narrator's conviction. Needless to say, he can see

quite clearly a point that could be made against him, which is that these men

were risking their lives. But again and again there comes a time in history when

the man who dares to say that two and two make four is punished with death.

The schoolteacher is well aware of this. And the question is not one of knowing

what punishment or reward attends the making of this calculation. The question

is that of knowing whether two and two do make four. For those of our townsfolk

who risked their lives in this predicament the issue was whether or not plague

was in their midst and whether or not they must fight against it.

Many fledgling moralists in those days were going about our town proclaiming

there was nothing to be done about it and we should bow to the inevitable. And

Tarrou, Rieux, and their friends might give one answer or another, but its

conclusion was always the same, their certitude that a fight must be put up, in

this way or that, and there must be no bowing down. The essential thing was to

save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to

unending separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the

plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical.

Thus it was only natural that old Dr. Castel should plod away with unshaken

confidence, never sparing himself, at making anti-plague serum on the spot with

the makeshift equipment at his disposal. Rieux shared his hope that a vaccine

made with cultures of the bacilli obtained locally would take effect more

actively than serum coming from outside, since the local bacillus differed

slightly from the normal plague bacillus as defined in textbooks of tropical

diseases. And Castel expected to have his first supply ready within a

surprisingly short period.

That, too, is why it was natural that Grand, who had nothing of the hero about

him, should now be acting as a sort of general secretary to the sanitary squads.

A certain number of the groups organized by Tarrou were working in the congested

areas of the town, with a view to improving the sanitary conditions there.

Their duties were to see that houses were kept in a proper hygienic state and to

list attics and cellars that had not been disinfected by the official sanitary

service. Other teams of volunteers accompanied the doctors on their house-to-

house visits, saw to the evacuation of infected persons, and subsequently, owing

to the shortage of drivers, even drove the vehicles conveying sick persons and

dead bodies. All this involved the upkeep of registers and statistics, and Grand

undertook the task.

From this angle, the narrator holds that, more than Rieux or Tarrou, Grand was

the true embodiment of the quiet courage that inspired the sanitary groups. He

had said yes without a moment's hesitation and with the large-hearted-ness that

was a second nature with him. All he had asked was to be allotted light duties:

he was too old for anything else. He could give his time from six to eight every

evening. When Rieux thanked him with some warmth, he seemed surprised.

"Why, that's not difficult! Plague is here and we've got to make a stand, that's

obvious. Ah, I only wish everything were as simple!" And he went back to his

phrase. Sometimes in the evening, when he had filed his reports and worked out

his statistics, Grand and Rieux would have a chat. Soon they formed the habit of

including Tarrou in their talks and Grand unburdened himself with increasingly

apparent pleasure to his two companions.

They began to take a genuine interest in the laborious literary task to which he

was applying himself while plague raged around him. Indeed, they, too, found in

it a relaxation of the strain.

"How's your young lady on horseback progressing?" Tarrou would ask. And

invariably Grand would answer with a wry smile: "Trotting along, trotting

along!" One evening Grand announced that he had definitely discarded the

adjective "elegant" for his horsewoman.

From now on it was replaced by "slim." "That's more concrete," he explained.

Soon after, he read out to his two friends the new version of the sentence:

" 'One fine morning in May a slim young horsewoman might have been seen riding a

handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne.'

"Don't you agree with me one sees her better that way? And I've put 'one fine

morning in May' because 'in the month of May' tended rather to drag out the

trot, if you see what I mean."

Next he showed some anxiety about the adjective "handsome." In his opinion it

didn't convey enough, and he set to looking for an epithet that would promptly

and clearly "photograph" the superb animal he saw with his mind's eye. "Plump"

wouldn't do; though concrete enough, it sounded perhaps a little disparaging,

also a shade vulgar. "Beautifully groomed" had tempted him for a moment, but it

was cumbrous and made the rhythm limp somewhat. Then one evening he announced

triumphantly that he had got it: "A black sorrel mare." To his thinking, he

explained, "black" conveyed a hint of elegance and opulence.

"It won't do," Rieux said. "Why not?"

"Because 'sorrel' doesn't mean a breed of horse; it's a color." "What color?"

"Well, er, a color that, anyhow, isn't black." Grand seemed greatly troubled.

"Thank you," he said warmly. "How fortunate you're here to help me! But you see

how difficult it is."

"How about 'glossy'?" Tarrou suggested.

Grand gazed at him meditatively, then "Yes!" he exclaimed. "That's good." And

slowly his lips parted in a smile.

Some days later he confessed that the word "flowery" was bothering him

considerably. As the only towns he knew were Oran and Montelimar, he sometimes

asked his friends to tell him about the avenues of the Bois de Boulogne, what

sort of flowers grew in them and how they were disposed. Actually neither Rieux

nor Tarrou had ever gathered the impression that those avenues were "flowery,"

but Grand's conviction on the subject shook their confidence in their memories.

He was amazed at their uncertainty. "It's only artists who know how to use their

eyes," was his conclusion. But one evening the doctor found him in a state of

much excitement. For "flowery" he had substituted "flower-strewn." He was

rubbing his hands. "At last one can see them, smell them! Hats off, gentlemen!"

Triumphantly he read out the sentence:

"One fine morning in May a slim young horsewoman might have been seen riding a

glossy sorrel mare along the flower-strewn avenues of the Bois de Boulogne."

But, spoken aloud, the numerous "s" sounds had a disagreeable effect and Grand

stumbled over them, lisping here and there. He sat down, crestfallen; then he

asked the doctor if he might go. Some hard thinking lay ahead of him.

It was about this time, as was subsequently learned, that he began to display

signs of absentmindedness in the office. A serious view was taken of these

lapses of attention, as the municipality not only was working at high pressure

with a reduced staff, but was constantly having new duties thrust upon it. His

department suffered, and his chief took him severely to task, pointing out that

he was paid to do certain work and was failing to do it as it should be done. "I

am told that you are acting as a voluntary helper in the sanitary groups. You do

this out of office hours, so it's no concern of mine. But the best way of making

yourself useful in a terrible time like this is to do your work well. Otherwise

all the rest is useless."

"He's right," Grand said to Rieux. "Yes, he's right," the doctor agreed.

"But I can't steady my thoughts; it's the end of my phrase that's worrying me, I

don't seem able to sort it out."

The plethora of sibilants in the sentence still offended his ear, but he saw no

way of amending them without using what were, to his mind, inferior synonyms.

And that "flower-strewn" which had rejoiced him when he first lit on it now

seemed unsatisfactory. How could one say the flowers were "strewn" when

presumably they had been planted along the avenues, or else grew there

naturally? On some evenings, indeed, he looked more tired than Rieux.

Yes, this unavailing quest which never left his mind had worn him out; none the

less, he went on adding up the figures and compiling the statistics needed for

the sanitary groups. Patiently every evening he brought his totals up to date,

illustrated them with graphs, and racked his brains to present his data in the

most exact, clearest form. Quite often he went to see Rieux at one of the

hospitals and asked to be given a table in an office or the dispensary. He would

settle down at it with his papers, exactly as he settled down at his desk in the

Municipal Office, and wave each completed sheet to dry the ink in the warm air,

noisome with disinfectants and the disease itself. At these times he made honest

efforts not to think about his "horsewoman," and concentrate on what he had to

do.

Yes, if it is a fact that people like to have examples given them, men of the

type they call heroic, and if it is absolutely necessary that this narrative

should include a "hero," the narrator commends to his readers, with, to his

thinking, perfect justice, this insignificant and obscure hero who had to his

credit only a little goodness of heart and a seemingly absurd ideal. This will

render to the truth its due, to the addition of two and two its sum of four, and

to heroism the secondary place that rightly falls to it, just after, never

before, the noble claim of happiness. It will also give this chronicle its

character, which is intended to be that of a narrative made with good feelings,

that is to say, feelings that are neither demonstrably bad nor overcharged with

emotion in the ugly manner of a stage-play.

Such at least was Dr. Rieux's opinion when he read in newspapers or heard on the

radio the messages and encouragement the outer world transmitted to the plague-

ridden populace. Besides the comforts sent by air or overland, compassionate or

admiring comments were lavished on the henceforth isolated town, by way of

newspaper articles or broadcast talks. And invariably their epical or prize-

speech verbiage jarred on the doctor. Needless to say, he knew the sympathy was

genuine enough. But it could be expressed only in the conventional language with

which men try to express what unites them with mankind in general; a vocabulary

quite unsuited, for example, to Grand's small daily effort, and incapable of

describing what Grand stood for under plague conditions.

Sometimes at midnight, in the great silence of the sleep-bound town, the doctor

turned on his radio before going to bed for the few hours' sleep he allowed

himself. And from the ends of the earth, across thousands of miles of land and

sea, kindly, well-meaning speakers tried to voice their fellow-feeling, and

indeed did so, but at the same time proved the utter incapacity of every man

truly to share in suffering that he cannot see. "Oran! Oran!" In vain the call

rang over oceans, in vain Rieux listened hopefully; always the tide of eloquence

began to flow, bringing home still more the unbridgeable gulf that lay between

Grand and the speaker. "Oran, we're with you!" they called emotionally. But not,

the doctor told himself, to love or to die together? "and that's the only way.

They're too remote."

And, as it so happens, what has yet to be recorded before coming to the

culmination, during the period when the plague was gathering all its forces to

fling them at the town and lay it waste, is the long, heartrendingly monotonous

struggle put up by some obstinate people like Rambert to recover their lost

happiness and to balk the plague of that part of themselves which they were

ready to defend in the last ditch. This was their way of resisting the bondage

closing in upon them, and while their resistance lacked the active virtues of

the other, it had (to the narrator's thinking) its point, and moreover it bore

witness, even lit its futility and incoherences, to a salutary pride.

Rambert fought to prevent the plague from besting him. Once assured that there

was no way of getting out of the town by lawful methods, he decided, as he told

Rieux, to have recourse to others. He began by sounding cafe waiters. A waiter

usually knows much of what's going on behind the scenes. But the first he spoke

to knew only of the very heavy penalties imposed on such attempts at evasion.

In one of the cafes he visited he was actually taken for a stool-pigeon and

curtly sent about his business. It was not until he happened to meet Cottard at

Rieux's place that he made a little headway. On that day he and Rieux had been

talking again about his unsuccessful efforts to interest the authorities in his

case, and Cottard heard the tail end of the conversation.

Some days later Cottard met him in the street and greeted him with the hail-

fellow-well-met manner that he now used on all occasions.

"Hello, Rambert! Still no luck?" "None whatever."

"It's no good counting on the red-tape merchants. They couldn't understand if

they tried."

"I know that, and I'm trying to find some other way. But it's damned difficult."

"Yes," Cottard replied. "It certainly is."

He, however, knew a way to go about it, and he explained to Rambert, who was

much surprised to learn this, that for some time past he had been going the

rounds of the cafes, had made a number of acquaintances, and had learned of the

existence of an "organization" handling this sort of business. The truth was

that Cottard, who had been beginning to live above his means, was now involved

in smuggling ventures concerned with rationed goods. Selling contraband

cigarettes and inferior liquor at steadily rising prices, he was on the way to

building up a small fortune.

"Are you quite sure of this?" Rambert asked.

"Quite. I had a proposal of the sort made to me the other day." "But you didn't

accept it."

"Oh, come, there's no need to be suspicious." Cottard's tone was genial. "I

didn't accept it because, personally, I've no wish to leave. I have my reasons."

After a short silence he added: "You don't ask me what my reasons are, I

notice." "I take it," Rambert replied, "that they're none of my business."

"That's so, in a way, of course. But from another angle? Well, let's put it like

this: I've been feeling much more at ease here since plague settled in."

Rambert made no comment. Then he asked:

"And how does one approach this organization, as you call it?" "Ah," Cottard

replied, "that's none too easy. Come with me."

It was four in the afternoon. The town was warming up to boiling-point under a

sultry sky. Nobody was about, all shops were shuttered. Cottard and Rambert

walked some distance without speaking, under the arcades. This was an hour of

the day when the plague lay low, so to speak; the silence, the extinction of all

color and movement, might have been due as much to the fierce sunlight as to the

epidemic, and there was no telling if the air was heavy with menace or merely

with dust and heat. You had to look closely and take thought to realize that

plague was here. For it betrayed its presence only by negative signs. Thus

Cottard, who had affinities with it, drew Rambert's attention to the absence of

the dogs that in normal times would have been seen sprawling in the shadow of

the doorways, panting, trying to find a nonexistent patch of coolness.

They went along the boulevard des Palmiers, crossed the Place d'Armes, and then

turned down toward the docks. On the left was a cafe painted green, with a wide

awning of coarse yellow canvas projecting over the sidewalk. Cottard and Rambert

wiped their brows on entering. There were some small iron tables, also painted

green, and folding chairs.

The room was empty, the air humming with flies; in a yellow cage on the bar a

parrot squatted on its perch, all its feathers drooping. Some old pictures of

military scenes, covered with grime and cobwebs, adorned the walls. On the

tables, including that at which Rambert was sitting, bird-droppings were drying,

and he was puzzled whence they came until, after some wing-flappings, a handsome

cock came hopping out of his retreat in a dark corner.

Just then the heat seemed to rise several degrees more. Cottard took off his

coat and banged on the table-top. A very small man wearing a long blue apron

that came nearly to his neck emerged from a doorway at the back, shouted a

greeting to Cottard, and, vigorously kicking the cock out of his way, came up to

the table. Raising his voice to drown the cock's indignant cacklings, he asked

what the gentlemen would like. Cottard ordered white wine and asked: "Where's

Garcia?" The dwarf replied that he'd not shown up at the cafe for several days.

"Think he'll come this evening?"

"Well, I ain't in his secrets, but you know when he usually comes, don't you?"

"Yes. Really, it's nothing very urgent; I only want him to know this friend of

mine."

The barkeeper rubbed his moist hands on the front of his apron. "Ah, so this

gentleman's in business too?"

"Yes," Cottard said.

The little man made a snuffling noise.

"All right. Come back this evening. I'll send the kid to warn him."

After they had left, Rambert asked what the business in question might be. "Why,

smuggling, of course. They get the stuff in past the sentries at the gates.

There's plenty money in it."

"I see." Rambert paused for a moment, then asked: "And, I take it, they've

friends in court?"

"You've said it!"

In the evening the awning was rolled up, the parrot squawking in its cage, and

the small tables were surrounded by men in their shirt-sleeves. When Cottard

entered, one man, with a white shirt gaping on a brick-red chest and a straw hat

planted well back on his head, rose to his feet. He had a sun-tanned face,

regular features, small black eyes, very white teeth, and two or three rings on

his fingers. He looked about thirty.

"Hi!" he said to Cottard, ignoring Rambert. "Let's have one at the bar." They

drank three rounds in silence.

"How about a stroll?" Garcia suggested.

They walked toward the harbor. Garcia asked what he was wanted to do. Cottard

explained that it wasn't really for a deal that he wanted to introduce his

friend, M. Rambert, but only for what he called a "get-away." Puffing at his

cigarette, Garcia walked straight ahead. He asked some questions, always

referring to Rambert as "he" and appearing not to notice his presence.

"Why does he want to go?" "His wife is in France."

"Ah!" After a short pause he added: "What's his job?" "He's a journalist."

"Is he, now? Journalists have long tongues."

"I told you he's a friend of mine," Cottard replied.

They walked on in silence until they were near the wharves, which were now

railed off. Then they turned in the direction of a small tavern from which came

a smell of fried sardines.

"In any case," Garcia said finally, "it's not up my alley. Raoul's your man. And

I'll have to get in touch with him. It's none too easy."

"That so?" Cottard sounded interested. "He's lying low, is he?"

Garcia made no answer. At the door of the tavern he halted and for the first

time addressed Rambert directly.

"The day after tomorrow, at eleven, at the corner of the customs barracks in the

upper town." He made as if to go, then seemed to have an afterthought. "It's

going to cost something, you know." He made the observation in a quite casual

tone.

Rambert nodded. "Naturally."

On the way back the journalist thanked Cottard.

"Don't mention it, old chap. I'm only too glad to help you. And then, you're a

journalist, I dare say you'll put in a word for me one day or another."

Two days later Rambert and Cottard climbed the wide shadeless street leading to

the upper part of the town. The barracks occupied by the customs officers had

been partly transformed into a hospital, and a number of people were standing

outside the main entrance, some of them hoping to be allowed to visit a patient,

a futile hope, since such visits were strictly prohibited, and others to glean

some news of an invalid, news that in the course of an hour would have ceased to

count. For these reasons there were always a number of people and a certain

amount of movement at this spot, a fact that probably accounted for its choice

by Garcia for his meeting with Rambert.

"It puzzles me," Cottard remarked, "why you're so keen on going. Really, what's

happening here is extremely interesting."

"Not to me," Rambert replied.

"Well, yes, one's running some risks, I grant you. All the same, when you come

to think of it, one ran quite as much risk in the old days crossing a busy

street."

Just then Rieux's car drew up level with them. Tarrou was at the wheel, and

Rieux seemed half-asleep. He roused himself to make the introductions.

"We know each other," Tarrou said. "We're at the same hotel." He then offered to

drive Rambert back to the center.

"No, thanks. We've an appointment here." Rieux looked hard at Rambert.

"Yes," Rambert said.

"What's that?" Cottard sounded surprised. "The doctor knows about it?" "There's

the magistrate." Tarrou gave Cottard a warning glance.

Cottard's look changed. M. Othon was striding down the street toward them,

briskly, yet with dignity. He took off his hat as he came up with them.

"Good morning, Monsieur Othon," said Tarrou.

The magistrate returned the greeting of the men in the car and, turning to

Rambert and Cottard, who were in the background, gave them a quiet nod. Tarrou

introduced Cottard and the journalist. The magistrate gazed at the sky for a

moment, sighed, and remarked that these were indeed sad times.

"I've been told, Monsieur Tarrou," he continued, "that you are helping to

enforce the prophylactic measures. I need hardly say how commendable that is, a

fine example. Do you think, Dr. Rieux, that the epidemic will get worse?"

Rieux replied that one could only hope it wouldn't, and the magistrate replied

that one must never lose hope, the ways of Providence were inscrutable.

Tarrou asked if his work had increased as the result of present conditions.

"Quite the contrary. Criminal cases of what we call the first instance are

growing rarer. In fact, almost my only work just now is holding inquiries into

more serious breaches of the new regulations. Our ordinary laws have never been

so well respected."

"That's because, by contrast, they necessarily appear good ones," Tarrou

observed.

The magistrate, who seemed unable to take his gaze off the sky, abruptly dropped

his mildly meditative air and stared at Tarrou.

"What does that matter? It's not the law that counts, it's the sentence. And

that is something we must all accept."

"That fellow," said Tarrou when the magistrate was out of hearing, "is Enemy

Number One."

He pressed the starter.

Some minutes later Rambert and Cottard saw Garcia approaching. Without making

any sign of recognition he came straight up to them and, by way of greeting,

said: "You'll have to wait a bit."

There was complete silence in the crowd around them, most of whom were women.

Nearly all were carrying parcels; they had the vain hope of somehow smuggling

these in to their sick relatives, and the even crazier idea that the latter

could eat the food they'd brought. The gate was guarded by armed sentries, and

now and then an eerie cry resounded in the courtyard between the barrack rooms

and the entrance. Whenever this happened, anxious eyes turned toward the sick-

wards.

The three men were watching the scene when a brisk "Good morning" from behind

them made them swing round. In spite of the heat Raoul was wearing a well-cut

dark suit and a felt hat with rolled-up brim. He was tall and strongly built,

his face rather pale. Hardly moving his lips, he said quickly and clearly:

"Let's walk down to the center. You, Garcia, needn't come."

Garcia lit a cigarette and remained there while they walked away. Placing

himself between Rambert and Cottard, Raoul set the pace, a fast one.

"Garcia's explained the situation," he said. "We can fix it. But I must warn you

it'll cost you a cool ten thousand."

Rambert said he agreed to these terms.

"Lunch with me tomorrow at the Spanish restaurant near the docks." Rambert said:

"Right," and Raoul shook his hand, smiling for the first time.

After he had gone, Cottard said he wouldn't be able to come to lunch next day,

as he had an engagement, but anyhow Rambert didn't need him any more.

When next day Rambert entered the Spanish restaurant, everyone turned and stared

at him. The dark, cellarlike room, below the level of the small yellow street,

was patronized only by men, mostly Spaniards, judging by their looks. Raoul was

sitting at a table at the back of the room. Once he had beckoned to the

journalist and Rambert started to go toward him, the curiosity left the faces of

others and they bent over their plates again. Raoul had beside him a tall, thin,

ill-shaven man, with enormously wide shoulders, an equine face, and thinning

hair. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, displaying long, skinny arms covered with

black hair. When Rambert was introduced he gave three slow nods. His own name,

however, was not announced and Raoul, when referring to him, always said "our

friend."

"Our friend here thinks he may be able to help you. He is going?" Raoul broke

off, as the waitress had just come to take Rambert's order. "He is going to put

you in touch with two of our friends who will introduce you to some sentries

whom we've squared. But that doesn't mean you can start right away. You'll have

to leave it to the sentries to decide on the best moment. The simplest thing

will be for you to stay some nights with one of them; his home is quite near the

gate. The first thing is for our friend here to give you the contacts needed;

then when everything's set, you'll settle with him for the expenses."

Again the "friend" slowly moved his equine head up and down, without ceasing to

munch the tomato and pimento salad he was shoveling into his mouth. After which

he began to speak, with a slight Spanish accent. He asked Rambert to meet him,

the next day but one, at eight in the morning, in the Cathedral porch.

"Another two days' wait," Rambert observed.

"It ain't so easy as all that, you see," Raoul said. "Them boys take some

finding." Horse-face nodded slow approval once more. Some time was spent looking

for a

subject of conversation. The problem was solved easily enough when Rambert

discovered that horse-face was an ardent football-player. He, too, had been very

keen on soccer. They discussed the French championship, the merits of

professional English teams, and the technique of passing.

By the end of the meal horse-face was in high good humor, was calling Rambert

"old boy," and trying to convince him that the most sporting position by far on

the football field was that of center half. "You see, old boy, it's the center

half that does the placing. And that's the whole art of the game, isn't it?"

Rambert was inclined to agree, though he, personally, had always played center

forward. The discussion proceeded peacefully until a radio was turned on and,

after at first emitting a series of sentimental songs, broke into the

announcement that there had been a hundred and thirty-seven plague deaths on the

previous day. No one present betrayed the least emotion. Horse-face merely

shrugged and stood up.

Raoul and Rambert followed his example.

As they were going out, the center half shook Rambert's hand vigorously. "My

name's Gonzales," he said.

To Rambert the next two days seemed endless. He looked up Rieux and described to

him the latest developments, then accompanied the doctor on one of his calls. He

took leave of him on the doorstep of a house where a patient, suspected to have

plague, was awaiting him. There was a sound of footsteps and voices in the hall;

the family were being warned of the doctor's visit.

"I hope Tarrou will be on time," Rieux murmured. He looked worn out. "Is the

epidemic getting out of hand?" Rambert asked.

Rieux said it wasn't that; indeed, the death-graph was rising less steeply. Only

they lacked adequate means of coping with the disease.

"We're short of equipment. In all the armies of the world a shortage of

equipment is usually compensated for by manpower. But we're short of man-power,

too."

"Haven't doctors and trained assistants been sent from other towns?"

"Yes," Rieux said. "Ten doctors and a hundred helpers. That sounds a lot, no

doubt. But it's barely enough to cope with the present state of affairs. And it

will be quite inadequate if things get worse."

Rambert, who had been listening to the sounds within the house, turned to Rieux

with a friendly smile.

"Yes," he said, "you'd better make haste to win your battle." Then a shadow

crossed his face. "You know," he added in a low tone: "it's not because of that

I'm leaving."

Rieux replied that he knew it very well, but Rambert went on to say:

"I don't think I'm a coward, not as a rule, anyhow. And I've had opportunities

of putting it to the test. Only there are some thoughts I simply cannot endure."

The doctor looked him in the eyes. "You'll see her again," he said.

"Maybe. But I just can't stomach the thought that it may last on and on, and all

the time she'll be growing older. At thirty one's beginning to age, and one's

got to squeeze all one can out of life. But I doubt if you can understand."

Rieux was replying that he thought he could, when Tarrou came up, obviously much

excited.

"I've just asked Paneloux to join us." "Well?" asked the doctor.

"He thought it over, then said yes."

"That's good," the doctor said. "I'm glad to know he's better than his sermon."

"Most people are like that," Tarrou replied. "It's only a matter of giving them

the

chance." He smiled and winked at Rieux. "That's my job in life, giving people

chances." "Excuse me," Rambert said, "I've got to be off."

On Thursday, the day of the appointment, Rambert entered the Cathedral porch at

five minutes to eight. The air was still relatively cool. Small fleecy clouds,

which presently the sun would swallow at a gulp, were drifting across the sky. A

faint smell of moisture rose from the lawns, parched though they were. Still

masked by the eastward houses, the sun was warming up Joan of Arc's helmet only,

and it made a solitary patch of brightness in the Cathedral square. A clock

struck eight. Rambert took some steps in the empty porch. From inside came a low

sound of intoning voices, together with stale wafts of incense and dank air.

Then the voices ceased. Ten small black forms came out of the building and

hastened away toward the center of the town. Rambert grew impatient. Other black

forms climbed the steps and entered the porch. He was about to light a cigarette

when it struck him that smoking might be frowned on here.

At eight fifteen the organ began to play, very softly. Rambert entered. At first

he could see nothing in the dim light of the aisle; after a moment he made out

in the nave the small black forms that had preceded him. They were all grouped

in a corner, in front of a makeshift altar on which stood a statue of St. Roch,

carved in haste by one of our local sculptors. Kneeling, they looked even

smaller than before, blobs of clotted darkness hardly more opaque than the gray,

smoky haze in which they seemed to float. Above them the organ was playing

endless variations.

When Rambert stepped out of the Cathedral, he saw Gonzales already going down

the steps on his way back to the town.

"I thought you'd cleared off, old boy," he said to the journalist. "Considering

how late it is."

He proceeded to explain that he'd gone to meet his friends at the place agreed

on, which was quite near by, at ten to eight, the time they'd fixed, and waited

twenty minutes without seeing them.

"Something must have held them up. There's lots of snags, you know, in our line

of business."

He suggested another meeting at the same time on the following day, beside the

war memorial. Rambert sighed and pushed his hat back on his head.

"Don't take it so hard," Gonzales laughed. "Why, think of all the swerves and

runs and passes you got to make to score a goal."

"Quite so," Rambert agreed. "But the game lasts only an hour and a half."

The war memorial at Oran stands at the one place where one has a glimpse of the

sea, a sort of esplanade following for a short distance the brow of the cliff

overlooking the harbor. Next day, being again the first to arrive at the

meeting-place, Rambert whiled away the time reading the list of names of those

who had died for their country. Some minutes later two men strolled up, gave him

a casual glance, then, resting their elbows on the parapet of the esplanade,

gazed down intently at the empty, lifeless harbor. Both wore short-sleeved

jerseys and blue trousers, and were of much the same height. The journalist

moved away and, seated on a stone bench, studied their appearance at leisure.

They were obviously youngsters, not more than twenty. Just then he saw Gonzales

coming up.

"Those are our friends," he said, after apologizing for being late. Then he led

Rambert to the two youths, whom he introduced as Marcel and Louis. They looked

so much alike that Rambert had no doubt they were brothers.

"Right," said Gonzales. "Now you know each other, you can get down to business."

Marcel, or Louis, said that their turn of guard duty began in two days and

lasted a week; they'd have to watch out for the night when there was the best

chance of bringing it off. The trouble was that there were two other sentries,

regular soldiers, besides themselves, at the west gate. These two men had better

be kept out of the business; one couldn't depend on them, and anyhow it would

pile up expenses unnecessarily. Some evenings, however, these two sentries spent

several hours in the back room of a near-by bar. Marcel, or Louis, said that the

best thing Rambert could do would be to stay at their place, which was only a

few minutes' walk from the gate, and wait till one of them came to tell him the

coast was clear. It should then be quite easy for him to "make his get-away."

But there was no time to lose; there had been talk about setting up duplicate

sentry posts a little farther out.

Rambert agreed and handed some of his few remaining cigarettes to the young men.

The one who had not yet spoken asked Gonzales if the question of expenses had

been settled and whether an advance would be given.

"No," Gonzales said, "and you needn't bother about that; he's a pal of mine.

He'll pay when he leaves."

Another meeting was arranged. Gonzales suggested their dining together on the

next day but one, at the Spanish restaurant. It was at easy walking-distance

from where the young men lived. "For the first night," he added, "I'll keep you

company, old boy."

Next day on his way to his bedroom Rambert met Tarrou coming down the stairs at

the hotel.

"Like to come with me?" he asked. "I'm just off to see Rieux." Rambert

hesitated.

"Well, I never feel sure I'm not disturbing him."

"I don't think you need worry about that; he's talked about you quite a lot."

The journalist pondered. Then, "Look here," he said. "If you've any time to

spare after dinner, never mind how late, why not come to the hotel, both of you,

and have a drink with me?"

"That will depend on Rieux." Tarrou sounded doubtful. "And on the plague," said

Tarrou.

At eleven o'clock that night, however, Rieux and Tarrou entered the small,

narrow bar of the hotel. Some thirty people were crowded into it, all talking at

the top of their voices. Coming from the silence of the plague-bound town, the

two newcomers were startled by the sudden burst of noise, and halted in the

doorway. They understood the reason for it when they saw that liquor was still

to be had here. Rambert, who was perched on a stool at a corner of the bar,

beckoned to them. With complete coolness he elbowed away a noisy customer beside

him to make room for his friends.

"You've no objection to a spot of something strong?" "No," Tarrou replied.

"Quite the contrary."

Rieux sniffed the pungency of bitter herbs in the drink that Rambert handed him.

It was hard to make oneself heard in the din of voices, but Rambert seemed

chiefly concerned with drinking. The doctor couldn't make up his mind whether he

was drunk yet. At one of the two tables that occupied all the remaining space

beyond the half-circle round the bar, a naval officer, with a girl on each side

of him, was describing to a fat, red-faced man a typhus epidemic at Cairo. "They

had camps, you know," he was saying, "for the natives, with tents for the sick

ones and a ring of sentries all round. If a member of the family came along and

tried to smuggle in one of those damn-fool native remedies, they fired at sight.

A bit tough, I grant you, but it was the only thing to do." At the other table,

round which sat a bevy of bright young people, the talk was incomprehensible,

half drowned by the stridence of St. James Infirmary coming from a loud-speaker

just above their heads.

"Any luck?" Rieux had to raise his voice.

"I'm getting on," Rambert replied. "In the course of the week, perhaps." "A

pity!" Tarrou shouted.

"Why?"

"Oh," Rieux put in, "Tarrou said that because he thinks you might be useful to

us here. But, personally, I understand your wish to get away only too well."

Tarrou stood the next round of drinks.

Rambert got off his stool and looked him in the eyes for the first time. "How

could I be useful?"

"Why, of course," Tarrou replied, slowly reaching toward his glass, "in one of

our sanitary squads."

The look of brooding obstinacy that Rambert so often had came back to his face,

and he climbed again on to his stool.

"Don't you think these squads of ours do any good?" asked Tarrou, who had just

taken a sip of his glass and was gazing hard at Rambert.

"I'm sure they do," the journalist replied, and drank off his glass.

Rieux noticed that his hand was shaking, and he decided, definitely, that the

man was far gone in drink.

Next day, when for the second time Rambert entered the Spanish restaurant, he

had to make his way through a group of men who had taken chairs out on the

sidewalk and were sitting in the green-gold evening light, enjoying the first

breaths of cooler air. They were smoking an acrid-smelling tobacco. The

restaurant itself was almost empty. Rambert went to the table at the back at

which Gonzales had sat when they met for the first time. He told the waitress he

would wait a bit. It was seven thirty.

In twos and threes the men from outside began to dribble in and seat themselves

at the tables. The waitresses started serving them, and a tinkle of knives and

forks, a hum of conversation, began to fill the cellarlike room. At eight

Rambert was still waiting. The lights were turned on. A new set of people took

the other chairs at his table. He ordered dinner. At half past eight he had

finished without having seen either Gonzales or the two young men.

He smoked several cigarettes. The restaurant was gradually emptying. Outside,

night was falling rapidly. The curtains hung across the doorway were billowing

in a warm breeze from the sea. At nine Rambert realized that the restaurant was

quite empty and the waitress was eying him curiously. He paid, went out, and,

noticing that a cafe across the street was open, settled down there at a place

from which he could keep an eye on the entrance of the restaurant. At half past

nine he walked slowly back to his hotel, racking his brains for some method of

tracking down Gonzales, whose address he did not know, and bitterly discouraged

by the not unlikely prospect of having to start the tiresome business all over

again.

It was at this moment, as he walked in the dark streets along which ambulances

were speeding, that it suddenly struck him, as he informed Dr. Rieux

subsequently, that all this time he'd practically forgotten the woman he loved,

so absorbed had he been in trying to find a rift in the walls that cut him off

from her. But at this same moment, now that once more all ways of escape were

sealed against him, he felt his longing for her blaze up again, with a violence

so sudden, so intense, that he started running to his hotel, as if to escape the

burning pain that none the less pervaded him, racing like wildfire in his blood.

Very early next day, however, he called on Rieux, to ask him where he could find

Cottard.

"The only thing to do is to pick up the thread again where I dropped it." "Come

tomorrow night," Rieux said. "Tarrou asked me to invite Cottard here, I

don't know why. He's due to come at ten. Come at half past ten."

When Cottard visited the doctor next day, Tarrou and Rieux were discussing the

case of one of Rieux's patients who against all expectation had recovered.

"It was ten to one against," Tarrou commented. "He was in luck."

"Oh, come now," Cottard said. "It can't have been plague, that's all." They

assured him there was no doubt it was a case of plague.

"That's impossible, since he recovered. You know as well as I do, once you have

plague your number's up."

"True enough, as a general rule," Rieux replied. "But if you refuse to be

beaten, you have some pleasant surprises."

Cottard laughed.

"Precious few, anyhow. You saw the number of deaths this evening?"

Tarrou, who was gazing amiably at Cottard, said he knew the latest figures, and

that the position was extremely serious. But what did that prove? Only that

still more stringent measures should be applied.

"How? You can't make more stringent ones than those we have now." "No. But every

person in the town must apply them to himself."

Cottard stared at him in a puzzled manner, and Tarrou went on to say that there

were far too many slackers, that this plague was everybody's business, and

everyone should do his duty. For instance, any able-bodied man was welcome in

the sanitary squads.

"That's an idea," said Cottard, "but it won't get you anywhere. The plague has

the whip hand of you and there's nothing to be done about it."

"We shall know whether that is so", Tarrou's voice was carefully controlled,

"only when we've tried everything."

Meanwhile Rieux had been sitting at his desk, copying out reports. Tarrou was

still gazing at the little business man, who was stirring uneasily in his chair.

"Look here, Monsieur Cottard, why don't you join us?"

Picking up his derby hat, Cottard rose from his chair with an offended

expression. "It's not my job," he said. Then, with an air of bravado, he added:

"What's more,

the plague suits me quite well and I see no reason why I should bother about

trying to stop it."

As if a new idea had just waylaid him, Tarrou struck his forehead. "Why, of

course, I was forgetting. If it wasn't for that, you'd be arrested."

Cottard gave a start and gripped the back of the chair, as if he were about to

fall. Rieux had stopped writing and was observing him with grave interest.

"Who told you that?" Cottard almost screamed.

"Why, you yourself!" Tarrou looked surprised. "At least, that's what the doctor

and I have gathered from the way you speak."

Losing all control of himself, Cottard let out a volley of oaths.

"Don't get excited," Tarrou said quietly. "Neither I nor the doctor would dream

of reporting you to the police. What you may have done is no business of ours.

And, anyway, we've never had much use for the police. Come, now! Sit down

again."

Cottard looked at the chair, then hesitantly lowered himself into it. He heaved

a deep sigh.

"It's something that happened ages ago," he began. "Somehow they've dug it up. I

thought it had all been forgotten. But somebody started talking, damn him! They

sent for me and told me not to budge till the inquiry was finished. And I felt

pretty sure they'd end up by arresting me."

"Was it anything serious?" Tarrou asked.

"That depends on what you mean by 'serious.' It wasn't murder, anyhow." "Prison

or transportation with hard labor?"

Cottard was looking almost abject.

"Well, prison, if I'm lucky." But after a moment he grew excited again. "It was

all a mistake. Everybody makes mistakes. And I can't bear the idea of being

pulled in for that, of being torn from my home and habits and everyone I know."

"And is that the reason," Tarrou asked, "why you had the bright idea of hanging

yourself?"

"Yes. It was a damn-fool thing to do, I admit."

For the first time Rieux spoke. He told Cottard that he quite understood his

anxiety, but perhaps everything would come right in the end.

"Oh, for the moment I've nothing to fear."

"I can see," Tarrou said, "that you're not going to join in our effort."

Twiddling his hat uneasily, Cottard gazed at Tarrou with shifty eyes. "I hope

you won't bear me a grudge."

"Certainly not. But", Tarrou smiled, "do try at least not to propagate the

microbe deliberately."

Cottard protested that he'd never wanted the plague, it was pure chance that it

had broken out, and he wasn't to blame if it happened to make things easier for

him just now. Then he seemed to pluck up courage again and when Rambert entered

was shouting almost aggressively:

"What's more, I'm pretty sure you won't get anywhere."

Rambert learned to his chagrin that Cottard didn't know where Gonzales lived; he

suggested that they'd better pay another visit to the small cafe. They made an

appointment for the following day. When Rieux gave him to understand that he'd

like to be kept posted, Rambert proposed that he and Tarrou should look him up

one night at the end of the week. They could come as late as they liked and

would be sure to find him in his room.

Next morning Cottard and Rambert went to the cafe and left a message for Garcia,

asking him to come that evening, or if this could not be managed, next day. They

waited for him in vain that evening. Next day Garcia turned up. He listened in

silence to what Rambert had to say; then informed him he had no idea what had

happened, but knew that several districts of the town had been isolated for

twenty-four hours for a house-to-house inspection. Quite possibly Gonzales and

the two youngsters hadn't been able to get through the cordon. All he could do

was to put them in touch once more with Raoul. Naturally this couldn't be done

before the next day but one.

"I see," Rambert said. "I'll have to start it all over again, from scratch."

On the next day but one, Raoul, whom Rambert met at a street corner, confirmed

Garcia's surmise; the low-lying districts had, in fact, been isolated and a

cordon put round them. The next thing was to get in contact with Gonzales. Two

days later Rambert was lunching with the footballer.

"It's too damn silly," Gonzales said. "Of course you should have arranged some

way of seeing each other."

Rambert heartily agreed.

"Tomorrow morning," Gonzales continued, "we'll look up the kids and try to get a

real move on."

When they called next day, however, the youngsters were out. A note was left

fixing a meeting for the following day at noon, outside the high school. When

Rambert came back to his hotel, Tarrou was struck by the look on his face.

"Not feeling well?" he asked.

"It's having to start it all over again that's got me down." Then he added:

"You'll come tonight, won't you?"

When the two friends entered Rambert's room that night, they found him lying on

the bed. He got up at once and filled the glasses he had ready. Before lifting

his to his lips, Rieux asked him if he was making progress. The journalist

replied that he'd started the same round again and got to the same point as

before; in a day or two he was to have his last appointment. Then he took a sip

of his drink and added gloomily: "Needless to say, they won't turn up."

"Oh come! That doesn't follow because they let you down last time."

"So you haven't understood yet?" Rambert shrugged his shoulders almost

scornfully.

"Understood what?" "The plague."

"Ah!" Rieux exclaimed.

"No, you haven't understood that it means exactly that, the same thing over and

over and over again."

He went to a corner of the room and started a small phonograph. "What's that

record?" Tarrou asked. "I've heard it before."

"It's St. James Infirmary."

While the phonograph was playing, two shots rang out in the distance. "A dog or

a get-away," Tarrou remarked.

When, a moment later, the record ended, an ambulance bell could be heard

clanging past under the window and receding into silence.

"Rather a boring record," Rambert remarked. "And this must be the tenth time

I've put it on today."

"Are you really so fond of it?"

"No, but it's the only one I have." And after a moment he added: "That's what I

said 'it' was, the same thing over and over again."

He asked Rieux how the sanitary groups were functioning. Five teams were now at

work, and it was hoped to form others. Sitting on the bed, the journalist seemed

to be studying his fingernails. Rieux was gazing at his squat, powerfully built

form, hunched up on the edge of the bed.

Suddenly he realized that Rambert was returning his gaze.

"You know, doctor, I've given a lot of thought to your campaign. And if I'm not

with you, I have my reasons. No, I don't think it's that I'm afraid to risk my

skin again. I took part in the Spanish Civil War."

"On which side?" Tarrou asked.

"The losing side. But since then I've done a bit of thinking." "About what?"

"Courage. I know now that man is capable of great deeds. But if he isn't capable

of a great emotion, well, he leaves me cold."

"One has the idea that he is capable of everything," Tarrou remarked.

"I can't agree; he's incapable of suffering for a long time, or being happy for

a long time. Which means that he's incapable of anything really worth while." He

looked at the two men in turn, then asked: "Tell me, Tarrou, are you capable of

dying for love?"

"I couldn't say, but I hardly think so, as I am now."

"You see. But you're capable of dying for an idea; one can see that right away.

Well, personally, I've seen enough of people who die for an idea. I don't

believe in

heroism; I know it's easy and I've learned it can be murderous. What interests

me is living and dying for what one loves."

Rieux had been watching the journalist attentively. With his eyes still on him

he said quietly:

"Man isn't an idea, Rambert."

Rambert sprang off the bed, his face ablaze with passion.

"Man is an idea, and a precious small idea, once he turns his back on love. And

that's my point; we, mankind, have lost the capacity for love. We must face that

fact, doctor. Let's wait to acquire that capacity or, if really it's beyond us,

wait for the deliverance that will come to each of us anyway, without his

playing the hero. Personally, I look no farther."

Rieux rose. He suddenly appeared very tired.

"You're right, Rambert, quite right, and for nothing in the world would I try to

dissuade you from what you're going to do; it seems to me absolutely right and

proper. However, there's one thing I must tell you: there's no question of

heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may

make some people smile, but the only means of righting a plague is, common

decency."

"What do you mean by 'common decency'?" Rambert's tone was grave.

"I don't know what it means for other people. But in my case I know that it

consists in doing my job."

"Your job! I only wish I were sure what my job is!" There was a mordant edge to

Rambert's voice. "Maybe I'm all wrong in putting love first."

Rieux looked him in the eyes.

"No," he said vehemently, "you are not wrong." Rambert gazed thoughtfully at

them.

"You two," he said, "I suppose you've nothing to lose in all this. It's easier,

that way, to be on the side of the angels."

Rieux drained his glass.

"Come along," he said to Tarrou. "We've work to do." He went out.

Tarrou followed, but seemed to change his mind when he reached the door. He

stopped and looked at the journalist.

"I suppose you don't know that Rieux's wife is in a sanatorium, a hundred miles

or so away."

Rambert showed surprise and began to say something; but Tarrou had already left

the room.

At a very early hour next day Rambert rang up the doctor.

"Would you agree to my working with you until I find some way of getting out of

the town?"

There was a moment's silence before the reply came. "Certainly, Rambert.

Thanks."

PART III

Thus week by week the prisoners of plague put up what fight they could. Some,

like Rambert, even contrived to fancy they were still behaving as free men and

had the power of choice. But actually it would have been truer to say that by

this time, mid-August, the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No

longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of

plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense

of exile and of deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set

up by these. That is why the narrator thinks this moment, registering the climax

of the summer heat and the disease, the best for describing, on general lines

and by way of illustration, the excesses of the living, burials of the dead, and

the plight of parted lovers.

It was at this time that a high wind rose and blew for several days through the

plague-stricken city. Wind is particularly dreaded by the inhabitants of Oran,

since the plateau on which the town is built presents no natural obstacle, and

it can sweep our streets with unimpeded violence. During the months when not a

drop of rain had refreshed the town, a gray crust had formed on everything, and

this flaked off under the wind, disintegrating into dust-clouds. What with the

dust and scraps of paper whirled against peoples' legs, the streets grew

emptier. Those few who went out could be seen hurrying along, bent forward, with

handkerchiefs or their hands pressed to their mouths.

At nightfall, instead of the usual throng of people, each trying to prolong a

day that might well be his last, you met only small groups hastening home or to

a favorite cafe. With the result that for several days when twilight came, it

fell much quicker at this time of the year, the streets were almost empty, and

silent but for the long-drawn stridence of the wind. A smell of brine and

seaweed came from the unseen, storm-tossed sea. And in the growing darkness the

almost empty town, palled in dust, swept by bitter sea-spray, and loud with the

shrilling of the wind, seemed a lost island of the damned.

Hitherto the plague had found far more victims in the more thickly populated and

less well-appointed outer districts than in the heart of the town. Quite

suddenly, however, it launched a new attack and established itself in the

business center. Residents accused the wind of carrying infection, "broadcasting

germs," as the hotel manager put it. Whatever the reason might be, people living

in the central districts realized that their turn had come when each night they

heard oftener and oftener the ambulances clanging past, sounding the plague's

dismal, passionless tocsin under their windows.

The authorities had the idea of segregating certain particularly affected

central areas and permitting only those whose services were indispensable to

cross the cordon. Dwellers in these districts could not help regarding these

regulations as a sort of taboo specially directed at themselves, and thus they

came, by contrast, to envy residents in other areas their freedom. And the

latter, to cheer themselves up in despondent moments,

fell to picturing the lot of those others less free than themselves. "Anyhow,

there are some worse off than I," was a remark that voiced the only solace to be

had in those days.

About the same time we had a recrudescence of outbreaks of fire, especially in

the residential area near the west gate. It was found, after inquiry, that

people who had returned from quarantine were responsible for these fires. Thrown

off their balance by bereavement and anxiety, they were burning their houses

under the odd delusion that they were killing off the plague in the holocaust.

Great difficulty was experienced in fighting these fires, whose numbers and

frequency exposed whole districts to constant danger, owing to the high wind.

When the attempts made by the authorities to convince these well-meaning

incendiaries that the official fumigation of their houses effectively removed

any risk of infection had proved unavailing, it became necessary to decree very

heavy penalties for this type of arson.

And most likely it was not the prospect of mere imprisonment that deterred these

unhappy people, but the common belief that a sentence of imprisonment was

tantamount to a death sentence, owing to the very high mortality prevailing in

the town jail. It must be admitted that there was some foundation for this

belief. It seemed that, for obvious reasons, the plague launched its most

virulent attacks on those who lived, by choice or by necessity, in groups:

soldiers, prisoners, monks, and nuns. For though some prisoners are kept

solitary, a prison forms a sort of community, as is proved by the fact that in

our town jail the guards died of plague in the same proportion as the prisoners.

The plague was no respecter of persons and under its despotic rule everyone,

from the warden down to the humblest delinquent, was under sentence and, perhaps

for the first time, impartial justice reigned in the prison.

Attempts made by the authorities to redress this leveling-out by some sort of

hierarchy?the idea was to confer a decoration on guards who died in the exercise

of their duties, came to nothing. Since martial law had been declared and the

guards might, from a certain angle, be regarded as on active service, they were

awarded posthumously the military medal. But though the prisoners raised no

protest, strong exception was taken in military circles, and it was pointed out,

logically enough, that a most regrettable confusion in the public mind would

certainly ensue. The civil authority conceded the point and decided that the

simplest solution was to bestow on guards who died at their post a "plague

medal."

Even so, since as regards the first recipients of the military medal the harm

had been done and there was no question of withdrawing the decoration from them,

the military were still dissatisfied. Moreover, the plague medal had the

disadvantage of having far less moral effect than that attaching to a military

award, since in time of pestilence a decoration of this sort is too easily

acquired. Thus nobody was satisfied.

Another difficulty was that the jail administration could not follow the

procedure adopted by the religious and, in a less degree, the military

authorities. The monks in the two monasteries of the town had been evacuated and

lodged for the time being with religious-minded families. In the same way,

whenever possible, small bodies of men had been moved out of barracks and

billeted in schools or public buildings. Thus the disease, which apparently had

forced on us the solidarity of a beleaguered town, disrupted at the same time

longestablished communities and sent men out to live, as individuals, in

relative isolation. This, too, added to the general feeling of unrest.

Indeed, it can easily be imagined that these changes, combined with the high

wind, also had an incendiary effect on certain minds. There were frequent

attacks on the gates of the town, and the men who made them now were armed.

Shots were exchanged, there were casualties, and some few got away. Then the

sentry posts were reinforced, and such attempts quickly ceased. None the less,

they sufficed to start a wave of revolutionary violence, though only on a small

scale. Houses that had been burnt or closed by the sanitary control were looted.

However, it seemed unlikely that these excesses were premeditated. Usually it

was some chance incentive that led normally well-behaved people to acts which

promptly had their imitators.

Thus you sometimes saw a man, acting on some crazy impulse, dash into a blazing

house under the eyes of its owner, who was standing by, dazed with grief,

watching the flames. Seeing his indifference, many of the onlookers would follow

the lead given by the first man, and presently the dark street was full of

running men, changed to hunched, misshapen gnomes by the flickering glow from

the dying flames and the ornaments or furniture they carried on their shoulders.

It was incidents of this sort that compelled the authorities to declare martial

law and enforce the regulations deriving from it. Two looters were shot, but we

may doubt if this made much impression on the others; with so many deaths taking

place every day, these two executions went unheeded, a mere drop in the ocean.

Actually scenes of this kind continued to take place fairly often, without the

authorities' making even a show of intervening. The only regulation that seemed

to have some effect on the populace was the establishment of a curfew hour. From

eleven onwards, plunged in complete darkness, Oran seemed a huge necropolis.

On moonlight nights the long, straight streets and dirty white walls, nowhere

darkened by the shadow of a tree, their peace untroubled by footsteps or a dog's

bark, glimmered in pale recession. The silent city was no more than an

assemblage of huge, inert cubes, between which only the mute effigies of great

men, carapaced in bronze, with their blank stone or metal faces, conjured up a

sorry semblance of what the man had been. In lifeless squares and avenues these

tawdry idols lorded it under the lowering sky; stolid monsters that might have

personified the rule of immobility imposed on us, or, anyhow, its final aspect,

that of a defunct city in which plague, stone, and darkness had effectively

silenced every voice.

But there was darkness also in men's hearts, and the true facts were as little

calculated to reassure our townsfolk as the wild stories going round about the

burials. The narrator cannot help talking about these burials, and a word of

excuse is here in place. For he is well aware of the reproach that might be made

him in this respect; his justification is that funerals were taking place

throughout this period and, in a way, he was compelled, as indeed everybody was

compelled, to give heed to them.

In any case it should not be assumed that he has a morbid taste for such

ceremonies; quite the contrary, he much prefers the society of the living and,

to give a concrete illustration, sea-bathing. But the bathing-beaches were out

of bounds and the company of the living ran a risk, increasing as the days went

by, of being perforce converted into the company of the dead. That was, indeed,

self-evident. True, one could always refuse to face this disagreeable fact, shut

one's eyes to it, or thrust it out of mind, but there is a terrible cogency in

the self-evident; ultimately it breaks down all defenses. How, for instance,

continue to ignore the funerals on the day when somebody you loved needed one?

Actually the most striking feature of our funerals was their speed. Formalities

had been whittled down, and, generally speaking, all elaborate ceremonial

suppressed. The plague victim died away from his family and the customary vigil

beside the dead body was forbidden, with the result that a person dying in the

evening spent the night alone, and those who died in the daytime were promptly

buried. Needless to say, the family was notified, but in most cases, since the

deceased had lived with them, its members were in quarantine and thus

immobilized. When, however, the deceased had not lived with his family, they

were asked to attend at a fixed time; after, that is to say, the body had been

washed and put in the coffin and when the journey to the cemetery was about to

begin.

Let us suppose that these formalities were taking place at the auxiliary

hospital of which Dr. Rieux was in charge. This converted school had an exit at

the back of the main building. A large storeroom giving on the corridor

contained the coffins. On arrival, the family found a coffin already nailed up

in the corridor. Then came the most important part of the business: the signing

of official forms by the head of the family. Next the coffin was loaded on a

motor-vehicle, a real hearse or a large converted ambulance. The mourners

stepped into one of the few taxis still allowed to ply and the vehicles drove

hell-for-leather to the cemetery by a route avoiding the center of the town.

There was a halt at the gate, where police officers applied a rubber stamp to

the official exit permit, without which it was impossible for our citizens to

have what they called a last resting-place. The policeman stood back and the

cars drew up near a plot of ground where a number of graves stood open, waiting

for inmates. A priest came to meet the mourners, since church services at

funerals were now prohibited.

To an accompaniment of prayers the coffin was dragged from the hearse, roped up,

and carried to the graveside; the ropes were slipped and it came heavily to rest

at the bottom of the grave. No sooner had the priest begun to sprinkle holy

water than the first sod rebounded from the lid. The ambulance had already left

and was being sprayed with disinfectant, and while spadefuls of clay thudded

more and more dully on the rising layer of earth, the family were bundling into

the taxi. A quarter of an hour later they were back at home.

The whole process was put through with the maximum of speed and the minimum of

risk. It cannot be denied that, anyhow in the early days, the natural feelings

of the family were somewhat outraged by these lightning funerals. But obviously

in time of plague such sentiments can't be taken into account, and all was

sacrificed to efficiency. And though, to start with, the morale of the

population was shaken by this summary procedure, for the desire to have a

"proper funeral" is more widespread than is generally believed, as time went on,

fortunately enough, the food problem became more urgent and the thoughts of our

townsfolk were diverted to more instant needs.

So much energy was expended on filling up forms, hunting round for supplies, and

lining up that people had no time to think of the manner in which others were

dying around them and they themselves would die one day. Thus the growing

complications of our everyday life, which might have been an affliction, proved

to be a blessing in disguise. Indeed, had not the epidemic, as already

mentioned, spread its ravages, all would have been for the best.

For then coffins became scarcer; also there was a shortage of winding-sheets,

and of space in the cemetery. Something had to be done about this, and one

obvious step, justified by its practical convenience, was to combine funerals

and, when necessary, multiply the trips between the hospital and the burial-

place.

At one moment the stock of coffins in Rieux's hospital was reduced to five. Once

filled, all five were loaded together in the ambulance. At the cemetery they

were emptied out and the iron-gray corpses put on stretchers and deposited in a

shed reserved for that purpose, to wait their turn. Meanwhile the empty coffins,

after being sprayed with antiseptic fluid, were rushed back to the hospital, and

the process was repeated as often as necessary. This system worked excellently

and won the approval of the Prefect. He even told Rieux that it was really a

great improvement on the death-carts driven by Negroes of which one reads in

accounts of former visitations of this sort.

"Yes," Rieux said. "And though the burials are much the same, we keep careful

records of them. That, you will agree, is progress."

Successful, however, as the system proved itself in practice, there was

something so distasteful in the last rites as now performed that the Prefect

felt constrained to forbid relations of the deceased being present at the actual

interment. They were allowed to come only as far as the cemetery gates, and even

that was not authorized officially. For things had somewhat changed as regards

the last stage of the ceremony.

In a patch of open ground dotted with lentiscus trees at the far end of the

cemetery, two big pits had been dug. One was reserved for the men, the other for

the women. Thus, in this respect, the authorities still gave thought to

propriety and it was only later that, by the force of things, this last remnant

of decorum went by the board, and men and women were flung into the death-pits

indiscriminately. Happily, this ultimate indignity synchronized with the

plague's last ravages.

In the period we are now concerned with, the separation of the sexes was still

in force and the authorities set great store by it. At the bottom of each pit a

deep layer of quicklime steamed and seethed. On the lips of the pit a low ridge

of quicklime threw up bubbles that burst in the air above it. When the ambulance

had finished its trips, the stretchers were carried to the pits in Indian file.

The naked, somewhat contorted bodies were slid off into the pit almost side by

side, then covered with a layer of quicklime and another of earth, the latter

only a few inches deep, so as to leave space for subsequent consignments. On the

following day the next of kin were asked to sign the register of burials, which

showed the distinction that can be made between men and, for example, dogs;

men's deaths are checked and entered up.

Obviously all these activities called for a considerable staff, and Rieux was

often on the brink of a shortage. Many of the gravediggers, stretcher-bearers,

and the like, public servants to begin with, and later volunteers, died of

plague. However stringent the precautions, sooner or later contagion did its

work. Still, when all is said and done, the really amazing thing is that, so

long as the epidemic lasted, there was never any lack of men for these duties.

The critical moment came just before the outbreak touched high-water mark, and

the doctor had good reason for feeling anxious.

There was then a real shortage of man-power both for the higher posts and for

the rough work, as Rieux called it. But, paradoxically enough, once the whole

town was in the grip of the disease, its very prevalence tended to make things

easier, since the disorganization of the town's economic life threw a great

number of persons out of work. Few of the workers thus made available were

qualified for administrative posts, but the recruiting of men for the "rough

work" became much easier.

From now on, indeed, poverty showed itself a stronger stimulus than fear,

especially as, owing to its risks, such work was highly paid. The sanitary

authorities always had a waiting-list of applicants for work; whenever there was

a vacancy the men at the top of the list were notified, and unless they too had

laid off work for good, they never failed to appear when summoned. Thus the

Prefect, who had always been reluctant to employ the prisoners in the jail,

whether short-term men or lifers, was able to avoid recourse to this distasteful

measure. As long, he said, as there were unemployed, we could afford to wait.

Thus until the end of August our fellow citizens could be conveyed to their last

resting-place, if not under very decorous conditions, at least in a manner

orderly enough for the authorities to feel that they were doing their duty by

the dead and the bereaved. However, we may here anticipate a little and describe

the pass to which we came in the final phase. From August onwards the plague

mortality was and continued such as far to exceed the capacity of our small

cemetery. Such expedients as knocking down walls and letting the dead encroach

on neighboring land proved inadequate; some new method had to be evolved without

delay.

The first step taken was to bury the dead by night, which obviously permitted a

more summary procedure. The bodies were piled into ambulances in larger and

larger numbers. And the few belated wayfarers who, in defiance of the

regulations, were abroad in the outlying districts after curfew hour, or whose

duties took them there, often saw the long white ambulances hurtling past,

making the nightbound streets reverberate with the dull clangor of their bells.

The corpses were tipped pell-mell into the pits and had hardly settled into

place when spadefuls of quicklime began to sear their faces and the earth

covered them indisdinctively, in holes dug steadily deeper as time went on.

Shortly afterwards, however, it became necessary to find new space and to strike

out in a new direction. By a special urgency measure the denizens of grants in

perpetuity were evicted from their graves and the exhumed remains dispatched to

the crematorium. And soon the plague victims likewise had to go to a fiery end.

This meant that the old crematorium east of the town, outside the gates, had to

be utilized. Accordingly the east-gate sentry post was moved farther out. Then a

municipal employee had an idea that greatly helped the harassed authorities; he

advised them to employ the streetcar line running along the coastal road, which

was now unused. So the interiors of streetcars and trailers were adapted to this

new purpose, and a branch line was laid down to the crematorium, which thus

became a terminus.

During all the late summer and throughout the autumn there could daily be seen

moving along the road skirting the cliffs above the sea a strange procession of

passengerless streetcars swaying against the skyline. The residents in this area

soon learned what was going on. And though the cliffs were patrolled day and

night, little groups of people contrived to thread their way unseen between the

rocks and would toss flowers into the open trailers as the cars went by. And in

the warm darkness of the summer nights the cars could be heard clanking on their

way, laden with flowers and corpses.

During the first few days an oily, foul-smelling cloud of smoke hung low upon

the eastern districts of the town. These effluvia, all the doctors agreed,

though unpleasant, were not in the least harmful. However, the residents of this

part of the town threatened to migrate in a body, convinced that germs were

raining down on them from the sky, with the result that an elaborate apparatus

for diverting the smoke had to be installed to appease them. Thereafter only

when a strong wind was blowing did a faint, sickly odor

coming from the east remind them that they were living under a new order and

that the plague fires were taking their nightly toll.

Such were the consequences of the epidemic at its culminating point. Happily it

grew no worse, for otherwise, it may well be believed, the resourcefulness of

our administration, the competence of our officials, not to mention the burning-

capacity of our crematorium, would have proved unequal to their tasks.

Rieux knew that desperate solutions had been mooted, such as throwing the

corpses into the sea, and a picture had risen before him of hideous jetsam

lolling in the shallows under the cliffs. He knew, too, that if there was

another rise in the death-rate, no organization, however efficient, could stand

up to it; that men would die in heaps, and corpses rot in the street, whatever

the authorities might do, and the town would see in public squares the dying

embrace the living in the frenzies of an all too comprehensible hatred or some

crazy hope.

Such were the sights and apprehensions that kept alive in our townspeople their

feeling of exile and separation. In this connection the narrator is well aware

how regrettable is his inability to record at this point something of a really

spectacular order, some heroic feat or memorable deed like those that thrill us

in the chronicles of the past. The truth is that nothing is less sensational

than pestilence, and by reason of their very duration great misfortunes are

monotonous. In the memories of those who lived through them, the grim days of

plague do not stand out like vivid flames, ravenous and inextinguishable,

beaconing a troubled sky, but rather like the slow, deliberate progress of some

monstrous thing crushing out all upon its path.

No, the real plague had nothing in common with the grandiose imaginings that had

haunted Rieux's mind at its outbreak. It was, about all, a shrewd, unflagging

adversary; a skilled organizer, doing his work thoroughly and well. That, it may

be said in passing, is why, so as not to play false to the facts, and, still

more, so as not to play false to himself, the narrator has aimed at objectivity.

He has made hardly any changes for the sake of artistic effect, except those

elementary adjustments needed to present his narrative in a more or less

coherent form. And in deference to this scruple he is constrained to admit that,

though the chief source of distress, the deepest as well as the most widespread,

was separation, and it is his duty to say more about it as it existed in the

later stages of the plague, it cannot be denied that even this distress was

coming to lose something of its poignancy.

Was it that our fellow citizens, even those who had felt the parting from their

loved ones most keenly, were getting used to doing without them? To assume this

would fall somewhat short of the truth. It would be more correct to say that

they were wasting away emotionally as well as physically. At the beginning of

the plague they had a vivid recollection of the absent ones and bitterly felt

their loss.

But though they could clearly recall the face, the smile and voice of the

beloved, and this or that occasion when (as they now saw in retrospect) they had

been supremely happy, they had trouble in picturing what he or she might be

doing at the moment when they conjured up these memories, in a setting so

hopelessly remote. In short, at these moments memory played its part, but their

imagination failed them. During the second phase of the plague their memory

failed them, too. Not that they had forgotten the face itself, but, what came to

the same thing, it had lost fleshly substance and they no longer saw it in

memory's mirror.

Thus, while during the first weeks they were apt to complain that only shadows

remained to them of what their love had been and meant, they now came to learn

that even shadows can waste away, losing the faint hues of life that memory may

give. And by the end of their long sundering they had also lost the power of

imagining the intimacy that once was theirs or understanding what it can be to

live with someone whose life is wrapped up in yours.

In this respect they had adapted themselves to the very condition of the plague,

all the more potent for its mediocrity. None of us was capable any longer of an

exalted emotion; all had trite, monotonous feelings. "It's high time it

stopped," people would say, because in time of calamity the obvious thing is to

desire its end, and in fact they wanted it to end. But when making such remarks,

we felt none of the passionate yearning or fierce resentment of the early phase;

we merely voiced one of the few clear ideas that lingered in the twilight of our

minds. The furious revolt of the first weeks had given place to a vast

despondency, not to be taken for resignation, though it was none the less a sort

of passive and provisional acquiescence.

Our fellow citizens had fallen into line, adapted themselves, as people say, to

the situation, because there was no way of doing otherwise. Naturally they

retained the attitudes of sadness and suffering, but they had ceased to feel

their sting. Indeed, to some, Dr. Rieux among them, this precisely was the most

disheartening thing: that the habit of despair is worse than despair itself.

Hitherto those who were parted had not been utterly unhappy; there was always a

gleam of hope in the night of their distress; but that gleam had now died out.

You could see them at street corners, in cafes or friends' houses, listless,

indifferent, and looking so bored that, because of them, the whole town seemed

like a railway waiting-room. Those who had jobs went about them at the exact

tempo of the plague, with dreary perseverance. Everyone was modest. For the

first time exiles from those they loved had no reluctance to talk freely about

them, using the same words as everybody else, and regarding their deprivation

from the same angle as that from which they viewed the latest statistics of the

epidemic. This change was striking since until now they had jealously withheld

their personal grief from the common stock of suffering; now they accepted its

inclusion.

Without memories, without hope, they lived for the moment only. Indeed, the here

and now had come to mean everything to them. For there is no denying that the

plague had gradually killed off in all of us the faculty not of love only but

even of friendship. Naturally enough, since love asks something of the future,

and nothing was left us but a series of present moments.

However, this account of our predicament gives only the broad lines.

Thus, while it is true that all who were parted came ultimately to this state,

we must add that all did not attain it simultaneously; moreover, once this utter

apathy had fallen on them, there were still flashes of lucidity, broken lights

of memory that rekindled in the exiles a younger, keener sensibility. This

happened when, for instance, they fell to making plans implying that the plague

had ended. Or when, quite unexpectedly, by some kindly chance, they felt a

twinge of jealousy, none the less acute for its objectlessness. Others, again,

had sudden accesses of energy and shook off their languor on certain days of the

week, for obvious reasons, on Sundays and Saturday afternoons, because these had

been devoted to certain ritual pleasures in the days when the loved ones were

still accessible.

Sometimes the mood of melancholy that descended on them with the nightfall acted

as a sort of warning, not always fulfilled, however, that old memories were

floating

up to the surface. That evening hour which for believers is the time to look

into their consciences is hardest of all hours on the prisoner or exile who has

nothing to look into but the void. For a moment it held them in suspense; then

they sank back into their lethargy, the prison door had closed on them once

again.

Obviously all this meant giving up what was most personal in their lives.

Whereas in the early days of the plague they had been struck by the host of

small details that, while meaning absolutely nothing to others, meant so much to

them personally, and thus had realized, perhaps for the first time, the

uniqueness of each man's life; now, on the other hand, they took an interest

only in what interested everyone else, they had only general ideas, and even

their tenderest affections now seemed abstract, items of the common stock. So

completely were they dominated by the plague that sometimes the one thing they

aspired to was the long sleep it brought, and they caught themselves thinking:

"A good thing if I get plague and have done with it!" But really they were

asleep already; this whole period was for them no more than a long night's

slumber. The town was peopled with sleepwalkers, whose trance was broken only on

the rare occasions when at night their wounds, to all appearance closed,

suddenly reopened. Then, waking with a start, they would run their fingers over

the wounds with a sort of absentminded curiosity, twisting their lips, and in a

flash their grief blazed up again, and abruptly there rose before them the

mournful visage of their love. In the morning they harked back to normal

conditions, in other words, the plague.

What impression, it may be asked, did these exiles of the plague make on the

observer? The answer is simple; they made none. Or, to put it differently, they

looked like everybody else, nondescript. They shared in the torpor of the town

and in its puerile agitations. They lost every trace of a critical spirit, while

gaining an air of sang-froid. You could see, for instance, even the most

intelligent among them making a show like all the rest of studying the

newspapers or listening to the radio, in the hope apparently of finding some

reason to believe the plague would shortly end.

They seemed to derive fantastic hopes or equally exaggerated fears from reading

the linens that some journalist had scribbled at random, yawning with boredom at

his desk. Meanwhile they drank their beer, nursed their sick, idled, or doped

themselves with work, filed documents in offices, or played the phonograph at

home, without betraying any difference from the rest of us. In other words, they

had ceased to choose for themselves; plague had leveled out discrimination. This

could be seen by the way nobody troubled about the quality of the clothes or

food he bought. Everything was taken as it came.

And, finally, it is worth noting that those who were parted ceased to enjoy the

curious privilege that had been theirs at the outset. They had lost love's

egoism and the benefit they derived from it. Now, at least, the position was

clear; this calamity was everybody's business. What with the gunshots echoing at

the gates, the punctual thuds of rubber stamps marking the rhythm of lives and

deaths, the files and fires, the panics and formalities, all alike were pledged

to an ugly but recorded death, and, amidst noxious fumes and the muted clang of

ambulances, all of us ate the same sour bread of exile, unconsciously waiting

for the same reunion, the same miracle of peace regained. No doubt our love

persisted, but in practice it served nothing; it was an inert mass within us,

sterile as crime or a life sentence.

It had declined on a patience that led nowhere, a dogged expectation. Viewed

from this angle, the attitude of some of our fellow citizens resembled that of

the long queues one saw outside the food-shops. There was the same resignation,

the same long-sufferance, inexhaustible and without illusions. The only

difference was that the mental state of the food-seekers would need to be raised

to a vastly higher power to make it comparable with the gnawing pain of

separation, since this latter came from a hunger fierce to the point of

insatiability.

In any case, if the reader would have a correct idea of the mood of these

exiles, we must conjure up once more those dreary evenings sifting down through

a haze of dust and golden light upon the treeless streets filled with teeming

crowds of men and women. For, characteristically, the sound that rose toward the

terraces still bathed in the last glow of daylight, now that the noises of

vehicles and motors, the sole voice of cities in ordinary times, had ceased, was

but one vast rumor of low voices and incessant footfalls, the drumming of

innumerable soles timed to the eerie whistling of the plague in the sultry air

above, the sound of a huge concourse of people marking time, a never ending,

stifling drone that, gradually swelling, filled the town from end to end, and

evening after evening gave its truest, mournfulest expression to the blind

endurance that had ousted love from all our hearts.

PART IV

Throughout September and October the town lay prostrate, at the mercy of the

plague. There was nothing to do but to "mark time," and some hundreds of

thousands of men and women went on doing this, through weeks that seemed

interminable.

Mist, heat, and rain rang their changes in our streets. From the south came

silent coveys of starlings and thrushes, flying very high, but always giving the

town a wide berth, as though the strange implement of the plague described by

Paneloux, the giant flail whirling and shrilling over the housetops, warned them

off us. At the beginning of October torrents of rain swept the streets clean.

And all the time nothing more important befell us than that multitudinous

marking time.

It was now that Rieux and his friends came to realize how exhausted they were.

Indeed, the workers in the sanitary squads had given up trying to cope with

their fatigue.

Rieux noticed the change coming over his associates, and himself as well, and it

took the form of a strange indifference to everything. Men, for instance, who

hitherto had shown a keen interest in every scrap of news concerning the plague

now displayed none at all. Rambert, who had been temporarily put in charge of a

quarantine station, his hotel had been taken over for this purpose, could state

at any moment the exact number of persons under his observation, and every

detail of the procedure he had laid down for the prompt evacuation of those who

suddenly developed symptoms of the disease was firmly fixed in his mind. The

same was true of the statistics of the effects of anti-plague inoculations on

the persons in his quarantine station. Nevertheless, he could not have told you

the week's total of plague deaths, and he could not even have said if the figure

was rising or falling. And meanwhile, in spite of everything, he had not lost

hope of being able to "make his get-away" from one day to another.

As for the others, working themselves almost to a standstill throughout the day

and far into the night, they never bothered to read a newspaper or listen to the

radio. When told of some unlooked-for recovery, they made a show of interest,

but actually

received the news with the stolid indifference that we may imagine the fighting

man in a great war to feel who, worn out by the incessant strain and mindful

only of the duties daily assigned to him, has ceased even to hope for the

decisive battle or the bugle-call of armistice.

Though he still worked out methodically the figures relating to the plague,

Grand would certainly have been quite unable to say to what they pointed. Unlike

Rieux, Rambert, and Tarrou, who obviously had great powers of endurance, he had

never had good health. And now, in addition to his duties in the Municipal

Office, he had his night work and his secretarial post under Rieux. One could

see that the strain was telling on him, and if he managed to keep going, it was

thanks to two or three fixed ideas, one of which was to take, the moment the

plague ended, a complete vacation, of a week at least, which he would devote,

"hats off," to his work in progress. He was also becoming subject to accesses of

sentimentality and at such times would unburden himself to Rieux about Jeanne.

Where was she now, he wondered; did her thoughts sometimes turn to him when she

read the papers? It was Grand to whom one day Rieux caught himself talking, much

to his own surprise, about his wife, and in the most commonplace terms,

something he had never done as yet to anyone.

Doubtful how far he could trust his wife's telegrams, their tone was always

reassuring, he had decided to wire the house physician of the sanatorium. The

reply informed him that her condition had worsened, but everything was being

done to arrest further progress of the disease. He had kept the news to himself

so far and could only put it down to his nervous exhaustion that he passed it on

to Grand.

After talking to the doctor about Jeanne, Grand had asked some questions about

Mme Rieux and, on hearing Rieux's reply, said: "You know, it's wonderful, the

cures they bring off nowadays." Rieux agreed, merely adding that the long

separation was beginning to tell on him, and, what was more, he might have

helped his wife to make a good recovery; whereas, as things were, she must be

feeling terribly lonely. After which he fell silent and gave only evasive

answers to Grand's further questions.

The others were in much the same state. Tarrou held his own better, but the

entries in his diary show that while his curiosity had kept its depth, it had

lost its diversity. Indeed, throughout this period the only person, apparently,

who really interested him was Cottard. In the evening, at Rieux's apartment,

where he had come to live now that the hotel was requisitioned as a quarantine

center, he paid little or no attention to Grand and the doctor when they read

over the day's statistics. At the earliest opportunity he switched the

conversation over to his pet subject, small details of the daily life at Oran.

More perhaps than any of them, Dr. Castel showed signs of wear and tear. On the

day when he came to tell Rieux that the anti-plague serum was ready, and they

decided to try it for the first time on M. Othon's small son, whose case seemed

all but hopeless, Rieux suddenly noticed, while he was announcing the latest

statistics, that Castel was slumped in his chair, sound asleep. The difference

in his old friend's face shocked him.

The smile of benevolent irony that always played on it had seemed to endow it

with perpetual youth; now, abruptly left out of control, with a trickle of

saliva between the slightly parted lips, it betrayed its age and the wastage of

the years. And, seeing this, Rieux felt a lump come to his throat.

It was by such lapses that Rieux could gauge his exhaustion. His sensibility was

getting out of hand. Kept under all the time, it had grown hard and brittle and

seemed to snap completely now and then, leaving him the prey of his emotions.

No resource was left him but to tighten the stranglehold on his feelings and

harden his heart protectively. For he knew this was the only way of carrying on.

In any case, he had few illusions left, and fatigue was robbing him of even

these remaining few. He knew that, over a period whose end he could not glimpse,

his task was no longer to cure but to diagnose. To detect, to see, to describe,

to register, and then condemn, that was his present function. Sometimes a woman

would clutch his sleeve, crying shrilly: "Doctor, you'll save him, won't you?"

But he wasn't there for saving life; he was there to order a sick man's

evacuation. How futile was the hatred he saw on faces then! "You haven't a

heart!" a woman told him on one occasion. She was wrong; he had one. It saw him

through his twenty-hour day, when he hourly watched men dying who were meant to

live. It enabled him to start anew each morning. He had just enough heart for

that, as things were now. How could that heart have sufficed for saving life?

No, it wasn't medical aid that he dispensed in those crowded days, only

information. Obviously that could hardly be reckoned a man's job. Yet, when all

was said and done, who, in that terror-stricken, decimated populace, had scope

for any activity worthy of his manhood? Indeed, for Rieux his exhaustion was a

blessing in disguise. Had he been less tired, his senses more alert, that all-

pervading odor of death might have made him sentimental. But when a man has had

only four hours' sleep, he isn't sentimental. He sees things as they are; that

is to say, he sees them in the garish light of justice, hideous, witless

justice.

And those others, the men and women under sentence to death, shared his bleak

enlightenment. Before the plague he was welcomed as a savior. He was going to

make them right with a couple of pills or an injection, and people took him by

the arm on his way to the sickroom. Flattering, but dangerous. Now, on the

contrary, he came accompanied by soldiers, and they had to hammer on the door

with rifle-butts before the family would open it. They would have liked to drag

him, drag the whole human race, with them to the grave. Yes, it was quite true

that men can't do without their fellow men; that he was as helpless as these

unhappy people and he, too, deserved the same faint thrill of pity that he

allowed himself once he had left them.

Such, anyhow, were the thoughts that in those endless-seeming weeks ran in the

doctor's mind, along with thoughts about his severance from his wife. And such,

too, were his friends' thoughts, judging by the look he saw on their faces. But

the most dangerous effect of the exhaustion steadily gaining on all engaged in

the fight against the epidemic did not consist in their relative indifference to

outside events and the feelings of others, but in the slackness and supine-ness

that they allowed to invade their personal lives. They developed a tendency to

shirk every movement that didn't seem absolutely necessary or called for efforts

that seemed too great to be worth while.

Thus these men were led to break, oftener and oftener, the rules of hygiene they

themselves had instituted, to omit some of the numerous disinfections they

should have practiced, and sometimes to visit the homes of people suffering from

pneumonic plague without taking steps to safeguard themselves against infection,

because they had been notified only at the last moment and could not be bothered

with returning to a sanitary service station, sometimes a considerable distance

away, to have the necessary instillations. There lay the real danger; for the

energy they devoted to righting the disease made them all the more liable to it.

In short, they were gambling on their luck, and luck is not to be coerced.

There was, however, one man in the town who seemed neither exhausted nor

discouraged; indeed, the living image of contentment. It was Cottard. Though

maintaining contact with Rieux and Rambert, he still kept rather aloof, whereas

he deliberately cultivated Tarrou, seeing him as often as Tarrou's scanty

leisure permitted. He had two reasons for this: one, that Tarrou knew all about

his case, and the other, that he always gave him a cordial welcome and made him

feel at ease.

That was one of the remarkable things about Tarrou; no matter how much work he

had put in, he was always a ready listener and an agreeable companion. Even

when, some evenings, he seemed completely worn out, the next day brought him a

new lease of energy. "Tarrou's a fellow one can talk to," Cottard once told

Rambert, "because he's really human. He always understands."

This may explain why the entries in Tarrou's diary of this period tend to

converge on Cottard's personality. It is obvious that Tarrou was attempting to

give a full-length picture of the man and noted all his reactions and

reflections, whether as conveyed to him by Cottard or interpreted by himself.

Under the heading "Cottard and his Relations with the Plague," we find a series,

of notes covering several pages and, in the narrator's opinion, these are well

worth summarizing here.

One of the entries gives Tarrou's general impression of Cottard at this time:

"He is blossoming out. Expanding in geniality and good humor." For Cottard was

anything but upset by the turn events were taking. Sometimes in Tarrou's company

he voiced his true feelings in remarks of this order: "Getting worse every day,

isn't it? Well, anyhow, everyone's in the same boat."

"Obviously," Tarrou comments, "he's in the same peril of death as everyone else,

but that's just the point; he's in it with the others. And then I'm pretty sure

he doesn't seriously think he runs much personal risk. He has got the idea into

his head, apparently, and perhaps it's not so farfetched as it seems, that a man

suffering from a dangerous ailment or grave anxiety is allergic to other

ailments and anxieties. 'Have you noticed,' he asked me, 'that no one ever runs

two diseases at once?

Let's suppose you have an incurable disease like cancer or a galloping

consumption, well, you'll never get plague or typhus; it's a physical

impossibility. In fact, one might go farther; have you ever heard of a man with

cancer being killed in an auto smash?' This theory, for what it's worth, keeps

Cottard cheerful. The thing he'd most detest is being cut off from others; he'd

rather be one of a beleaguered crowd than a prisoner alone. The plague has put

an effective stop to police inquiries, sleuthings, warrants of arrest, and so

forth. Come to that, we have no police nowadays; no crimes past or present, no

more criminals, only condemned men hoping for the most capricious of pardons;

and among these are the police themselves."

Thus Cottard (if we may trust Tarrou's diagnosis) had good grounds for viewing

the symptoms of mental confusion and distress in those around him with an

understanding and an indulgent satisfaction that might have found expression in

the remark: "Prate away, my friends, but I had it first!"

"When I suggested to him," Tarrou continues, "that the surest way of not being

cut off from others was having a clean conscience, he frowned. 'If that is so,

everyone's always cut off from everyone else.' And a moment later he added: 'Say

what you like, Tarrou, but let me tell you this: the one way of making people

hang together is to give'em a spell of plague. You've only got to look around

you.' Of course I see his point, and I understand how congenial our present mode

of life must be to him.

How could he fail to recognize at every turn reactions that were his; the

efforts everyone makes to keep on the right side of other people; the

obligingness sometimes shown in helping someone who has lost his way, and the

ill humor shown at other times; the way people flock to the luxury restaurants,

their pleasure at being there and their reluctance to leave; the crowds lining

up daily at the picture-houses, filling theaters and music halls and even dance

halls, and flooding boisterously out into the squares and avenues; the shrinking

from every contact and, notwithstanding, the craving for human warmth that urges

people to one another, body to body, sex to sex?

Cottard has been through all that obviously, with one exception; we may rule out

women in his case. With that mug of his! And I should say that when tempted to

visit a brothel he refrains; it might give him a bad name and be held up against

him one day.

"In short, this epidemic has done him proud. Of a lonely man who hated

loneliness it has made an accomplice. Yes, 'accomplice' is the word that fits,

and doesn't he relish his complicity! He is happily at one with all around him,

with their superstitions, their groundless panics, the susceptibilities of

people whose nerves are always on the stretch; with their fixed idea of talking

the least possible about plague and nevertheless talking of it all the time;

with their abject terror at the slightest headache, now they know headache to be

an early symptom of the disease; and, lastly, with their frayed, irritable

sensibility that takes offense at trifling oversights and brings tears to their

eyes over the loss of a trouser-button."

Tarrou often went out with Cottard in the evening, and he describes how they

would plunge together into the dark crowds filling the streets at nightfall; how

they mingled, shoulder to shoulder, in the black-and-white moving mass lit here

and there by the fitful gleam of a street-lamp; and how they let themselves be

swept along with the human herd toward resorts of pleasure whose companionable

warmth seemed a safeguard from the plague's cold breath. What Cottard had some

months previously been looking for in public places, luxury and the lavish life,

the frenzied orgies he had dreamed of without being able to procure them, these

were now the quest of a whole populace.

Though prices soared inevitably, never had so much money been squandered, and

while bare necessities were often lacking, never had so much been spent on

superfluities. All the recreations of leisure, due though it now was to

unemployment, multiplied a hundredfold. Sometimes Tarrou and Cottard would

follow for some minutes one of those amorous couples who in the past would have

tried to hide the passion drawing them to each other, but now, pressed closely

to each other's side, paraded the streets among the crowd, with the trancelike

self-absorption of great lovers, oblivious of the people around them.

Cottard watched them gloatingly. "Good work, my dears!" he'd exclaim. "Go to

it!" Even his voice had changed, grown louder; as Tarrou wrote, he was

"blossoming out" in the congenial atmosphere of mass excitement, fantastically

large tips clinking on cafe tables, love-affairs shaping under his eyes.

However, Tarrou seemed to detect little if any spiteful-ness in Cottard's

attitude. His "I've been through the mill myself" had more pity than triumph in

it. "I suspect," Tarrou wrote, "that he's getting quite fond of these people

shut up under their little patch of sky within their city walls. For instance,

he'd like to explain to them, if he had a

chance, that it isn't so terrible as all that. 'You hear them saying,' he told

me, ' "After the plague I'll do this or that."... They're eating their hearts

out instead of staying put. And they don't even realize their privileges. Take

my case: could I say "After my arrest I'll do this or that"? Arrest's a

beginning, not an end. Whereas plague....

Do you know what I think? They're fretting simply because they won't let

themselves go. And I know what I'm talking about.'"

"Yes, he knows what he's talking about," Tarrou added. "He has an insight into

the anomalies in the lives of the people here who, though they have an

instinctive craving for human contacts, can't bring themselves to yield to it,

because of the mistrust that keeps them apart. For it's common knowledge that

you can't trust your neighbor; he may pass the disease to you without your

knowing it, and take advantage of a moment of inadvertence on your part to

infect you. When one has spent one's days, as Cottard has, seeing a possible

police spy in everyone, even in persons he feels drawn to, it's easy to

understand this reaction.

One can have fellow-feelings toward people who are haunted by the idea that when

they least expect it plague may lay its cold hand on their shoulders, and is,

perhaps, about to do so at the very moment when one is congratulating oneself on

being safe and sound. So far as this is possible, he is at ease under a reign of

terror. But I suspect that, just because he has been through it before them, he

can't wholly share with them the agony of this feeling of uncertainty that never

leaves them. It comes to this: like all of us who have not yet died of plague he

fully realizes that his freedom and his life may be snatched from him at any

moment.

But since he, personally, has learned what it is to live in a state of constant

fear, he finds it normal that others should come to know this state. Or perhaps

it should be put like this: fear seems to him more bearable under these

conditions than it was when he had to bear its burden alone. In this respect

he's wrong, and this makes him harder to understand than other people. Still,

after all, that's why he is worth a greater effort to understand."

Tarrou's notes end with a story illustrating the curious state of mind arrived

at no less by Cottard than by other dwellers in the plague-stricken town. The

story re-creates as nearly as may be the curiously feverish atmosphere of this

period, and that is why the narrator attaches importance to it.

One evening Cottard and Tarrou went to the Municipal Opera House, where Gluck's

Orpheus was being given. Cottard had invited Tarrou. A touring operatic company

had come to Oran in the spring for a series of performances. Marooned there by

the outbreak of plague and finding themselves in difficulties, the company and

the management of the opera house had come to an agreement under which they were

to give one performance a week until further notice. Thus for several months our

theater had been resounding every Friday evening with the melodious laments of

Orpheus and Eurydice's vain appeals. None the less, the opera continued in high

favor and played regularly to full houses.

From their seats, the most expensive, Cottard and Tarrou could look down at the

orchestra seats filled to capacity with the cream of Oran society. It was

interesting to see how careful they were, as they went to their places, to make

an elegant entrance. While the musicians were discreetly tuning up, men in

evening dress could be seen moving from one row to another, bowing gracefully to

friends under the flood of light bathing the proscenium. In the soft hum of

well-mannered conversation they regained the confidence denied them when they

walked the dark streets of the town; evening dress was a sure charm against

plague.

Throughout the first act Orpheus lamented suavely his lost Eurydice, with women

in Grecian tunics singing melodious comments on his plight, and love was hymned

in alternating strophes. The audience showed their appreciation in discreet

applause. Only a few people noticed that in his song of the second act Orpheus

introduced some tremolos not in the score and voiced an almost exaggerated

emotion when begging the lord of the Underworld to be moved by his tears. Some

rather jerky movements he indulged in gave our connoisseurs of stagecraft an

impression of clever, if slightly overdone, effects, intended to bring out the

emotion of the words he sang.

Not until the big duet between Orpheus and Eurydice in the third act, at the

precise moment when Eurydice was slipping from her lover, did a flutter of

surprise run through the house. And as though the singer had been waiting for

this cue or, more likely, because the faint sounds that came to him from the

orchestra seats confirmed what he was feeling, he chose this moment to stagger

grotesquely to the footlights, his arms and legs splayed out under his antique

robe, and fall down in the middle of the property sheepfold, always out of

place, but now, in the eyes of the spectators, significantly, appallingly so.

For at the same moment the orchestra stopped playing, the audience rose and

began to leave the auditorium, slowly and silently at first, like worshippers

leaving church when the service ends, or a death-chamber after a farewell visit

to the dead, women lifting their skirts and moving with bowed heads, men

steering the ladies by the elbow to prevent their brushing against the tip-up

seats at the ends of the rows. But gradually their movements quickened, whispers

rose to exclamations, and finally the crowd stampeded toward the exits, wedged

together in the bottlenecks, and pouring out into the street in a confused mass,

with shrill cries of dismay.

Cottard and Tarrou, who had merely risen from their seats, gazed down at what

was a dramatic picture of their life in those days: plague on the stage in the

guise of a disarticulated mummer, and in the auditorium the toys of luxury, so

futile now, forgotten fans and lace shawls derelict on the red plush seats.

DURING the first part of September Rambert had worked conscientiously at Rieux's

side. He had merely asked for a few hours' leave on the day he was due to meet

Gonzales and the two youngsters again outside the boys' school. Gonzales kept

the appointment, at noon, and while he and the journalist were talking, they saw

the two boys coming toward them, laughing. They said they'd had no luck last

time, but that was only to be expected. Anyhow, it wasn't their turn for guard

duty this week. Rambert must have patience till next week; then they'd have

another shot at it. Rambert observed that "patience" certainly was needed in

this business. Gonzales suggested they should all meet again on the following

Monday, and this time Rambert had better move in to stay with Marcel and Louis.

"We'll make a date, you and I. If I don't turn up, go straight to their place.

I'll give you the address." But Marcel, or Louis, told him that the safest thing

was to take his pal there right away, then he'd be sure of finding it. If he

wasn't too particular, there was enough grub for the four of them. That way he'd

get the hang of things. Gonzales agreed it was a good idea, and the four of them

set off toward the harbor.

Marcel and Louis lived on the outskirts of the dockyard, near the gate leading

to the cliff road. It was a small Spanish house with gaily painted shutters and

bare, dark rooms. The boys' mother, a wrinkled old Spanish woman with a smiling

face, produced a dish of which the chief ingredient was rice. Gonzales showed

surprise, as rice had been unprocurable for some time in the town. "We fix it up

at the gate," Marcel explained. Rambert ate and drank heartily, and Gonzales

informed him he was "a damned good sort." Actually the journalist was thinking

solely of the coming week.

It turned out that he had a fortnight to wait, as the periods of guard duty were

extended to two weeks, to reduce the number of shifts. During that fortnight

Rambert worked indefatigably, giving every ounce of himself, with his eyes shut,

as it were, from dawn till night. He went to bed very late and always slept like

a log. This abrupt transition from a life of idleness to one of constant work

had left him almost void of thoughts or energy. He talked little about his

impending escape. Only one incident is worth noting: after a week he confessed

to the doctor that for the first time he'd got really drunk. It was the evening

before; on leaving the bar he had an impression that his groin was swollen and

he had pains in his armpits when he moved his arms. "I'm in for it!" he thought.

And his only reaction, an absurd one, as he frankly admitted to Rieux, had been

to start running to the upper town and when he reached a small square, from

which if not the sea, a fairly big patch of open sky could be seen, to call to

his wife with a great cry, over the walls of the town. On returning home and

failing to discover any symptoms of plague on his body, he had felt far from

proud of having given way like that. Rieux, however, said he could well

understand one's being moved to act thus. "Or, anyhow, one may easily feel

inclined that way."

"Monsieur Othon was talking to me about you this morning," Rieux suddenly

remarked, when Rambert was bidding him good night. "He asked me if I knew you,

and I told him I did. Then he said: 'If he's a friend of yours advise him not to

associate with smugglers. It's bound to attract attention.' "

"Meaning what?"

"It means you'd better hurry up."

"Thanks." Rambert shook the doctor's hand.

In the doorway he suddenly swung round. Rieux noticed that, for the first time

since the outbreak of plague, he was smiling.

"Then why don't you stop my going? You could easily manage it."

Rieux shook his head with his usual deliberateness. It was none of his business,

he said. Rambert had elected for happiness, and he, Rieux, had no argument to

put up against him. Personally he felt incapable of deciding which was the right

course and which the wrong in such a case as Rambert's.

"If that's so, why tell me to hurry up?" It was Rieux who now smiled.

"Perhaps because I, too, would like to do my bit for happiness."

Next day, though they were working together most of the time, neither referred

to the subject. On the following Sunday Rambert moved into the little Spanish

house. He was given a bed in the living-room. As the brothers did not come home

for meals and he'd been told to go out as little as possible, he was always

alone but for occasional meetings with the boys' mother. She was a dried-up

little wisp of a woman, always dressed in black, busy as a bee, and she had a

nut-brown, wrinkled face and immaculately white hair. No great-talker, she

merely smiled genially when her eyes fell on Rambert.

On one of the few occasions when she spoke, it was to ask him if he wasn't

afraid of infecting his wife with plague. He replied that there might be some

risk of that, but only a very slight one; while if he stayed in the town, there

was a fair chance of their never seeing each other again.

The old woman smiled. "Is she nice?" "Very nice."

"Pretty?"

"I think so."

"Ah," she nodded, "that explains it."

Rambert reflected. No doubt that explained it, but it was impossible that that

alone explained it.

The old woman went to Mass every morning. "Don't you believe in God?" she asked

him.

On Rambert's admitting he did not, she said again that "that explained it."

"Yes," she added, "you're right. You must go back to her. Or else what would be

left you?"

Rambert spent most of the day prowling round the room, gazing vaguely at the

distempered walls, idly fingering the fans that were their only decoration, or

counting the woollen balls on the tablecloth fringe. In the evening the

youngsters came home; they hadn't much to say, except that the time hadn't come

yet. After dinner Marcel played the guitar, and they drank an anise-flavored

liqueur. Rambert seemed lost in thought.

On Wednesday Marcel announced: "It's for tomorrow night, at midnight. Be ready

on time." Of the two men sharing the sentry post with them, he explained, one

had got plague and the other, who had slept in the same room, was now under

observation. Thus for two or three days Marcel and Louis would be alone at the

post. They'd fix up the final details in the course of the night, and he could

count on them to see it through. Rambert thanked them.

"Pleased?" the old woman asked.

He said yes, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

The next day was very hot and muggy and a heat-mist veiled the sun. The total of

deaths had jumped up. But the old Spanish woman lost nothing of her serenity.

"There's so much wickedness in the world," she said. "So what can you expect?"

Like Marcel and Louis, Rambert was stripped to the waist. But, even so, sweat

was trickling down his chest and between his shoulder-blades. In the dim light

of the shuttered room their torsos glowed like highly polished mahogany. Rambert

kept prowling round like a caged animal, without speaking. Abruptly at four in

the afternoon he announced that he was going out.

"Don't forget," Marcel said. "At midnight sharp. Everything's set."

Rambert went to the doctor's apartment. Rieux's mother told him he would find

the doctor at the hospital in the upper town. As before, a crowd was circling in

front of the entrance gates. "Move on, there!" a police sergeant with bulging

eyes bawled every few minutes. And the crowd kept moving, but always in a

circle. "No use hanging round here." The sergeant's coat was soaked in sweat.

They knew it was "no use," but they stayed on, despite the devastating heat.

Rambert showed his pass to the sergeant, who told him to go to Tarrou's office.

Its door opened on the courtyard. He passed Father Paneloux, who was coming

out of the office.

Tarrou was sitting at a black wood desk, with his sleeves rolled up, mopping up

with his handkerchief a trickle of sweat in the bend of his arm. The office, a

small, white-painted room, smelt of drugs and damp cloth.

"Still here?" asked Tarrou.

"Yes. I'd like to have a word with Rieux."

"He's in the ward. Look here! Don't you think you could fix up whatever you've

come for without seeing him?"

"Why?"

"He's overdoing it. I spare him as much as I can."

Rambert gazed thoughtfully at Tarrou. He'd grown thinner, his eyes and features

were blurred with fatigue, his broad shoulders sagged. There was a knock at the

door. A male attendant, wearing a white mask, entered. He laid a little sheaf of

cards on Tarrou's desk and, his voice coming thickly through the cloth, said:

"Six," then went out. Tarrou looked at the journalist and showed him the cards,

spreading them fanwise.

"Neat little gadgets, aren't they? Well, they're deaths.

Last night's deaths." Frowning, he slipped the cards together. "The only thing

that's left us is accountancy!"

Taking his purchase on the table, Tarrou rose to his feet. "You're off quite

soon, I take it?"

"Tonight, at midnight."

Tarrou said he was glad to hear it, and Rambert had better look after himself

for a bit.

"Did you say that, sincerely?" Tarrou shrugged his shoulders.

"At my age one's got to be sincere. Lying's too much effort."

"Excuse me, Tarrou," the journalist said, "but I'd greatly like to see the

doctor." "I know. He's more human than I. All right, come along."

"It's not that." Rambert stumbled over his words and broke off. Tarrou stared at

him; then, unexpectedly, his face broke into a smile.

They walked down a narrow passage; the walls were painted pale green, and the

light was glaucous, like that in an aquarium. Before they reached the glazed

double door at the end of the passage, behind which shadowy forms could be seen

moving, Tarrou took Rambert into a small room, all the wall space of which was

occupied by cupboards. Opening one of these, he took from a sterilizer two masks

of cotton-wool enclosed in muslin, handed one to Rambert, and told him to put it

on.

The journalist asked if it was really any use. Tarrou said no, but it inspired

confidence in others.

They opened the glazed door. It led into a very large room, all the windows of

which were shut, in spite of the great heat. Electric fans buzzed near the

ceiling, churning up the stagnant, overheated air above two long rows of gray

beds. Groans shrill or stifled rose on all sides, blending in a monotonous

dirgelike refrain. Men in white moved slowly from bed to bed under the garish

light flooding in from high, barred windows.

The appalling heat in the ward made Rambert ill at ease, and he had difficulty

in recognizing Rieux, who was bending over a groaning form. The doctor was

lancing the patient's groin, while two nurses, one on each side, held his legs

apart. Presently Rieux straightened up, dropped his instruments into a tray that

an attendant held out to him, and remained without moving for some moments,

gazing down at the man, whose wound was now being dressed.

"Any news?" he asked Tarrou, who had come beside him.

"Paneloux is prepared to replace Rambert at the quarantine station. He has put

in a lot of useful work already. All that remains is to reorganize group number

three, now that Rambert's going."

Rieux nodded.

"Castel has his first lot of serum ready now," Tarrou continued. "He's in favor

of its being tried at once."

"Good," Rieux said. "That's good news." "And Rambert's come."

Rieux looked round. His eyes narrowed above the mask when he saw the journalist.

"Why have you come?" he asked. "Surely you should be elsewhere?"

Tarrou explained that it was fixed for midnight, to which Rambert added: "That's

the idea, anyhow."

Whenever any of them spoke through the mask, the muslin bulged and grew moist

over the lips. This gave a sort of unreality to the conversation; it was like a

colloquy of statues.

"I'd like to have a word with you," Rambert said. "Right. I'm just going. Wait

for me in Tarrou's office."

A minute or so later Rambert and Rieux were sitting at the back of the doctor's

car. Tarrou, who was at the wheel, looked round as he let in the gear.

"Gas is running out," he said. "We'll have to foot-slog it tomorrow." "Doctor,"

Rambert said, "I'm not going. I want to stay with you."

Tarrou made no movement; he went on driving. Rieux seemed unable to shake off

his fatigue.

"And what about her?" His voice was hardly audible.

Rambert said he'd thought it over very carefully, and his views hadn't changed,

but if he went away, he would feel ashamed of himself, and that would embarrass

his relations with the woman he loved.

Showing more animation, Rieux told him that was sheer nonsense; there was

nothing shameful in preferring happiness.

"Certainly," Rambert replied. "But it may be shameful to be happy by oneself."

Tarrou, who had not spoken so far, now remarked, without turning his head, that

if Rambert wished to take a share in other people's unhappiness, he'd have no

time left for happiness. So the choice had to be made.

"That's not it," Rambert rejoined. "Until now I always felt a stranger in this

town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I

have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is

everybody's business." When there was no reply from either of the others,

Rambert seemed to grow annoyed. "But you

know that as well as I do, damn it! Or else what are you up to in that hospital

of yours? Have you made a definite choice and turned down happiness?"

Rieux and Tarrou still said nothing, and the silence lasted until they were at

the doctor's home. Then Rambert repeated his last question in a yet more

emphatic tone.

Only then Rieux turned toward him, raising himself with an effort from the

cushion.

"Forgive me, Rambert, only, well, I simply don't know. But stay with us if you

want to." A swerve of the car made him break off. Then, looking straight in

front of him, he said: "For nothing in the world is it worth turning one's back

on what one loves. Yet that is what I'm doing, though why I do not know."

He sank back on the cushion. "That's how it is," he added wearily, "and there's

nothing to be done about it. So let's recognize the fact and draw the

conclusions."

"What conclusions?"

"Ah," Rieux said, "a man can't cure and know at the same time. So let's cure as

quickly as we can. That's the more urgent job."

At midnight Tarrou and Rieux were giving Rambert the map of the district he was

to keep under surveillance. Tarrou glanced at his watch. Looking up, he met

Rambert's gaze.

"Have you let them know?" he asked. The journalist looked away.

"I'd sent them a note", he spoke with an effort, "before coming to see you."

Toward the close of October Castel's anti-plague serum was tried for the first

time. Practically speaking, it was Rieux's last card. If it failed, the doctor

was convinced the whole town would be at the mercy of the epidemic, which would

either continue its ravages for an unpredictable period or perhaps die out

abruptly of its own accord.

The day before Castel called on Rieux, M. Othon's son had fallen ill and all the

family had to go into quarantine. Thus the mother, who had only recently come

out of it, found herself isolated once again. In deference to the official

regulations the magistrate had promptly sent for Dr. Rieux the moment he saw

symptoms of the disease in his little boy. Mother and father were standing at

the bedside when Rieux entered the room. The boy was in the phase of extreme

prostration and submitted without a whimper to the doctor's examination. When

Rieux raised his eyes he saw the magistrate's gaze intent on him, and, behind,

the mother's pale face. She was holding a handkerchief to her mouth, and her

big, dilated eyes followed each of the doctor's movements.

"He has it, I suppose?" the magistrate asked in a toneless voice. "Yes." Rieux

gazed down at the child again.

The mother's eyes widened yet more, but she still said nothing. M. Othon, too,

kept silent for a while before saying in an even lower tone:

"Well, doctor, we must do as we are told to do."

Rieux avoided looking at Mme Othon, who was still holding her handkerchief to

her mouth.

"It needn't take long," he said rather awkwardly, "if you'll let me use your

phone." The magistrate said he would take him to the telephone. But before

going, the

doctor turned toward Mme Othon.

"I regret very much indeed, but I'm afraid you'll have to get your things ready.

You know how it is."

Mme Othon seemed disconcerted. She was staring at the floor.

Then, "I understand," she murmured, slowly nodding her head. "I'll set about it

at once."

Before leaving, Rieux on a sudden impulse asked the Othons if there wasn't

anything they'd like him to do for them. The mother gazed at him in silence. And

now the magistrate averted his eyes.

"No," he said, then swallowed hard. "But, save my son."

In the early days a mere formality, quarantine had now been reorganized by Rieux

and Rambert on very strict lines.

In particular they insisted on having members of the family of a patient kept

apart. If, unawares, one of them had been infected, the risks of an extension of

the infection must not be multiplied. Rieux explained this to the magistrate,

who signified his approval of the procedure. Nevertheless, he and his wife

exchanged a glance that made it clear to Rieux how keenly they both felt the

separation thus imposed on them. Mme Othon and her little girl could be given

rooms in the quarantine hospital under Rambert's charge. For the magistrate,

however, no accommodation was available except in an isolation camp the

authorities were now installing in the municipal stadium, using tents supplied

by the highway department. When Rieux apologized for the poor accommodation, M.

Othon replied that there was one rule for all alike, and it was only proper to

abide by it.

The boy was taken to the auxiliary hospital and put in a ward of ten beds which

had formerly been a classroom. After some twenty hours Rieux became convinced

that the case was hopeless. The infection was steadily spreading, and the boy's

body putting up no resistance. Tiny, half-formed, but acutely painful buboes

were clogging the joints of the child's puny limbs. Obviously it was a losing

fight.

Under the circumstances Rieux had no qualms about testing Castel's serum on the

boy. That night, after dinner, they performed the inoculation, a lengthy

process, without getting the slightest reaction. At daybreak on the following

day they gathered round the bed to observe the effects of this test inoculation

on which so much hung.

The child had come out of his extreme prostration and was tossing about

convulsively on the bed. From four in the morning Dr. Castel and Tarrou had been

keeping watch and noting, stage by stage, the progress and remissions of the

malady. Tarrou's bulky form was slightly drooping at the head of the bed, while

at its foot, with Rieux standing beside him, Castel was seated, reading, with

every appearance of calm, an old leather-bound book. One by one, as the light

increased in the former classroom, the others arrived. Paneloux, the first to

come, leaned against the wall on the opposite side of the bed to Tarrou.

His face was drawn with grief, and the accumulated weariness of many weeks,

during which he had never spared himself, had deeply seamed his somewhat

prominent forehead. Grand came next. It was seven o'clock, and he apologized for

being out of breath; he could only stay a moment, but wanted to know if any

definite results had been observed. Without speaking, Rieux pointed to the

child. His eyes shut, his teeth clenched, his features frozen in an agonized

grimace, he was rolling his head from side to side on the bolster. When there

was just light enough to make out the half-obliterated figures of an equation

chalked on a blackboard that still hung on the wall at the far end of the room,

Rambert entered. Posting himself at the foot of the next bed, he took a package

of cigarettes from his pocket. But after his first glance at the child's face he

put it back.

From his chair Castel looked at Rieux over his spectacles. "Any news of his

father?"

"No," said Rieux. "He's in the isolation camp."

The doctor's hands were gripping the rail of the bed, his eyes fixed on the

small tortured body. Suddenly it stiffened, and seemed to give a little at the

waist, as slowly the arms and legs spread out X-wise. From the body, naked under

an army blanket, rose a smell of damp wool and stale sweat. The boy had gritted

his teeth again. Then very gradually he relaxed, bringing his arms and legs back

toward the center of the bed, still without speaking or opening his eyes, and

his breathing seemed to quicken. Rieux looked at Tarrou, who hastily lowered his

eyes.

They had already seen children die, for many months now death had shown no

favoritism, but they had never yet watched a child's agony minute by minute, as

they had now been doing since daybreak. Needless to say, the pain inflicted on

these innocent victims had always seemed to them to be what in fact it was: an

abominable thing. But hitherto they had felt its abomination in, so to speak, an

abstract way; they had never had to witness over so long a period the death-

throes of an innocent child.

And just then the boy had a sudden spasm, as if something had bitten him in the

stomach, and uttered a long, shrill wail. For moments that seemed endless he

stayed in a queer, contorted position, his body racked by convulsive tremors; it

was as if his frail frame were bending before the fierce breath of the plague,

breaking under the reiterated gusts of fever. Then the storm-wind passed, there

came a lull, and he relaxed a little; the fever seemed to recede, leaving him

gasping for breath on a dank, pestilential shore, lost in a languor that already

looked like death.

When for the third time the fiery wave broke on him, lifting him a little, the

child curled himself up and shrank away to the edge of the bed, as if in terror

of the flames advancing on him, licking his limbs. A moment later, after tossing

his head wildly to and fro, he flung off the blanket. From between the inflamed

eyelids big tears welled up and trickled down the sunken, leaden-hued cheeks.

When the spasm had passed, utterly exhausted, tensing his thin legs and arms, on

which, within forty-eight hours, the flesh had wasted to the bone, the child lay

flat, racked on the tumbled bed, in a grotesque parody of crucifixion.

Bending, Tarrou gently stroked with his big paw the small face stained with

tears and sweat. Castel had closed his book a few moments before, and his eyes

were now fixed on the child. He began to speak, but had to give a cough before

continuing, because his voice rang out so harshly.

"There wasn't any remission this morning, was there, Rieux?"

Rieux shook his head, adding, however, that the child was putting up more

resistance than one would have expected. Paneloux, who was slumped against the

wall, said in a low voice:

"So if he is to die, he will have suffered longer." Light was increasing in the

ward. The occupants of the other nine beds were tossing about and groaning, but

in tones that seemed deliberately subdued. Only one, at the far end of the ward,

was screaming, or rather uttering little exclamations at regular intervals,

which seemed to convey surprise more than pain. Indeed, one had the impression

that even for the sufferers the frantic terror of the early phase had passed,

and there was a sort of mournful resignation in their present attitude toward

the disease.

Only the child went on fighting with all his little might. Now and then Rieux

took his pulse, less because this served any purpose than as an escape from his

utter helplessness, and when he closed his eyes, he seemed to feel its tumult

mingling with the fever of his own blood. And then, at one with the tortured

child, he struggled to sustain him with all the remaining strength of his own

body.

But, linked for a few moments, the rhythms of their heartbeats soon fell apart,

the child escaped him, and again he knew his impotence. Then he released the

small, thin wrist and moved back to his place. The light on the whitewashed

walls was changing from pink to yellow. The first waves of another day of heat

were beating on the windows. They hardly heard Grand saying he would come back

as he turned to go. All were waiting. The child, his eyes still closed, seemed

to grow a little calmer. His clawlike fingers were feebly plucking at the sides

of the bed.

Then they rose, scratched at the blanket over his knees, and suddenly he doubled

up his limbs, bringing his thighs above his stomach, and remained quite still.

For the first time he opened his eyes and gazed at Rieux, who was standing

immediately in front of him. In the small face, rigid as a mask of grayish clay,

slowly the lips parted and from them rose a long, incessant scream, hardly

varying with his respiration, and filling the ward with a fierce, indignant

protest, so little childish that it seemed like a collective voice issuing from

all the sufferers there. Rieux clenched his jaws, Tarrou looked away. Rambert

went and stood beside Castel, who closed the book lying on his knees.

Paneloux gazed down at the small mouth, fouled with the sores of the plague and

pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind. He

sank on his knees, and all present found it natural to hear him say in a voice

hoarse but clearly audible across that nameless, never ending wail:

"My God, spare this child!"

But the wail continued without cease and the other sufferers began to grow

restless. The patient at the far end of the ward, whose little broken cries had

gone on without a break, now quickened their tempo so that they flowed together

in one unbroken cry, while the others' groans grew louder. A gust of sobs swept

through the room, drowning Paneloux's prayer, and Rieux, who was still tightly

gripping the rail of the bed, shut his eyes, dazed with exhaustion and disgust.

When he opened them again, Tarrou was at his side.

"I must go," Rieux said. "I can't bear to hear them any longer."

But then, suddenly, the other sufferers fell silent. And now the doctor grew

aware that the child's wail, after weakening more and more, had fluttered out

into silence. Around him the groans began again, but more faintly, like a far

echo of the fight that now was over. For it was over. Castel had moved round to

the other side of the bed and said the end had come. His mouth still gaping, but

silent now, the child was lying among the tumbled blankets, a small, shrunken

form, with the tears still wet on his cheeks.

Paneloux went up to the bed and made the sign of benediction. Then gathering up

his cassock, he walked out by the passage between the beds.

"Will you have to start it all over again?" Tarrou asked Castel. The old doctor

nodded slowly, with a twisted smile.

"Perhaps. After all, he put up a surprisingly long resistance."

Rieux was already on his way out, walking so quickly and with such a strange

look on his face that Paneloux put out an arm to check him when he was about to

pass him in the doorway.

"Come, doctor," he began.

Rieux swung round on him fiercely.

"Ah! That child, anyhow, was innocent, and you know it as well as I do!"

He strode on, brushing past Paneloux, and walked across the school playground.

Sitting on a wooden bench under the dingy, stunted trees, he wiped off the sweat

that was beginning to run into his eyes. He felt like shouting imprecations,

anything to loosen the stranglehold lashing his heart with steel. Heat was

flooding down between the branches of the fig trees. A white haze, spreading

rapidly over the blue of the morning sky, made the air yet more stifling. Rieux

lay back wearily on the bench. Gazing up at the ragged branches, the shimmering

sky, he slowly got back his breath and fought down his fatigue.

He heard a voice behind him. "Why was there that anger in your voice just now?

What we'd been seeing was as unbearable to me as it was to you."

Rieux turned toward Paneloux.

"I know. I'm sorry. But weariness is a kind of madness. And there are times when

the only feeling I have is one of mad revolt."

"I understand," Paneloux said in a low voice. "That sort of thing is revolting

because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we

cannot understand."

Rieux straightened up slowly. He gazed at Paneloux, summoning to his gaze all

the strength and fervor he could muster against his weariness. Then he shook his

head.

"No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall

refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture."

A shade of disquietude crossed the priest's face. "Ah, doctor," he said sadly,

"I've just realized what is meant by 'grace.'"

Rieux had sunk back again on the bench. His lassitude had returned and from its

depths he spoke, more gently:

"It's something I haven't got; that I know. But I'd rather not discuss that with

you. We're working side by side for something that unites us, beyond blasphemy

and prayers. And it's the only thing that matters."

Paneloux sat down beside Rieux. It was obvious that he was deeply moved. "Yes,

yes," he said, "you, too, are working for man's salvation."

Rieux tried to smile.

"Salvation's much too big a word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with

man's health; and for me his health comes first."

Paneloux seemed to hesitate. "Doctor?" he began, then fell silent. Down his

face, too, sweat was trickling. Murmuring: "Good-by for the present," he rose.

His eyes were moist. When he turned to go, Rieux, who had seemed lost in

thought, suddenly rose and took a step toward him.

"Again, please forgive me. I can promise there won't be another outburst of that

kind."

Paneloux held out his hand, saying regretfully: "And yet, I haven't convinced

you!"

"What does it matter? What I hate is death and disease, as you well know. And

whether you wish it or not, we're allies, facing them and fighting them

together." Rieux was still holding Paneloux's hand. "So you see", but he

refrained from meeting the priest's eyes, "God Himself can't part us now."

Since joining Rieux's band of workers Paneloux had spent his entire time in

hospitals and places where he came in contact with plague. He had elected for

the place among his fellow workers that he judged incumbent on him, in the

forefront of the fight. And constantly since then he had rubbed shoulders with

death. Though theoretically immunized by periodical inoculations, he was well

aware that at any moment death might claim him too, and he had given thought to

this.

Outwardly he had lost nothing of his serenity. But from the day on which he saw

a child die, something seemed to change in him. And his face bore traces of the

rising tension of his thoughts. When one day he told Rieux with a smile that he

was working on a short essay entitled "Is a Priest Justified in Consulting a

Doctor?" Rieux had gathered that something graver lay behind the question than

the priest's tone seemed to imply. On the doctor's saying he would greatly like

to have a look at the essay, Paneloux informed him that he would shortly be

preaching at a Mass for men, and his sermon would convey some at least of his

considered opinions on the question.

"I hope you'll come, doctor. The subject will interest you.".

A high wind was blowing on the day Father Paneloux preached his second sermon.

The congregation, it must be admitted, was sparser than on the first occasion,

partly because this kind of performance had lost its novelty for our townsfolk.

Indeed, considering the abnormal conditions they were up against, the very word

"novelty" had lost all meaning. Moreover, most people, assuming they had not

altogether abandoned religious observances, or did not combine them naively with

a thoroughly immoral way of living, had replaced normal religious practice by

more or less extravagant superstitions. Thus they were readier to wear

prophylactic medals of St. Roch than to go to Mass.

An illustration may be found in the remarkable interest shown in prophecies of

all descriptions. True, in the spring, when the epidemic was expected to end

abruptly at any moment, no one troubled to take another's opinion as to its

probable duration, since everyone had persuaded himself that it would have none.

But as the days went by, a fear grew up that the calamity might last

indefinitely, and then the ending of the plague became the target of all hopes.

As a result copies of predictions attributed to soothsayers or saints of the

Catholic Church circulated freely from hand to hand. The local printing firms

were quick to realize the profit to be made by pandering to this new craze and

printed large numbers of the prophecies that had been going round in manuscript.

Finding that the public appetite for this type of literature was still unsated,

they had researches made in the municipal libraries for all the mental pabulum

of the kind available in old chronicles, memoirs, and the like. And when this

source ran dry, they commissioned journalists to write up forecasts, and, in

this respect at least, the journalists proved themselves equal to their

prototypes of earlier ages.

Some of these prophetic writings were actually serialized in our newspapers and

read with as much avidity as the love-stories that had occupied these columns in

the piping times of health. Some predictions were based on far-fetched

arithmetical calculations, involving the figures of the year, the total of

deaths, and the number of months the plague had so far lasted. Others made

comparisons with the great pestilences of former times, drew parallels (which

the forecasters called "constants"), and claimed to deduce conclusions bearing

on the present calamity. But our most popular prophets were undoubtedly those

who in an apocalyptic jargon had announced sequences of events, any one of which

might be construed as applicable to the present state of affairs and was

abstruse enough to admit of almost any interpretation. Thus Nostradamus and St.

Odilia were consulted daily, and always with happy results.

Indeed, the one thing these prophecies had in common was that, ultimately, all

were reassuring. Unfortunately, though, the plague was not.

Thus superstition had usurped the place of religion in the life of our town, and

that is why the church in which Paneloux preached his sermon was only three-

quarters full. That evening, when Rieux arrived, the wind was pouring in great

gusts through the swing-doors and filling the aisles with sudden drafts. And it

was in a cold, silent church, surrounded by a congregation of men exclusively,

that Rieux watched the Father climb into the pulpit. He spoke in a gender, more

thoughtful tone than on the previous occasion, and several times was noticed to

be stumbling over his words. A yet more noteworthy change was that instead of

saying "you" he now said "we."

However, his voice grew gradually firmer as he proceeded. He started by

recalling that for many a long month plague had been in our midst, and we now

knew it better, after having seen it often seated at our tables or at the

bedsides of those we loved. We had seen it walking at our side, or waiting for

our coming at the places where we worked. Thus we were now, perhaps, better able

to comprehend what it was telling us unceasingly; a message to which, in the

first shock of the visitation, we might not have listened with due heed.

What he, Father Paneloux, had said in his first sermon still held good, such,

anyhow, was his belief. And yet, perhaps, as may befall any one of us (here he

struck his breast), his words and thoughts had lacked in charity. However this

might be, one thing was not to be gainsaid; a fact that always, under all

circumstances, we should bear in mind.

Appearances notwithstanding, all trials, however cruel, worked together for good

to the Christian. And, indeed, what a Christian should always seek in his hour

of trial was to discern that good, in what it consisted and how best he could

turn it to account.

At this stage the people near Rieux seemed to settle in against the arm-rests of

their pews and make themselves as comfortable as they could. One of the big

padded entrance doors was softly thudding in the wind, and someone got up to

secure it. As a result, Rieux's attention wandered and he did not follow well

what Paneloux now went on to say. Apparently it came to this: we might try to

explain the phenomenon of the plague, but, above all, should learn what it had

to teach us. Rieux gathered that, to the Father's thinking, there was really

nothing to explain.

His interest quickened when, in a more emphatic tone, the preacher said that

there were some things we could grasp as touching God, and others we could not.

There was no doubt as to the existence of good and evil and, as a rule, it was

easy to see the difference between them. The difficulty began when we looked

into the nature of evil, and among things evil he included human suffering. Thus

we had apparently needful pain, and apparently needless pain; we had Don Juan

cast into hell, and a child's death. For while it is right that a libertine

should be struck down, we see no reason for a child's suffering.

And, truth to tell, nothing was more important on earth than a child's

suffering, the horror it inspires in us, and the reasons we must find to account

for it. In other manifestations of life God made things easy for us and, thus

far, our religion had no merit. But in this respect He put us, so to speak, with

our backs to the wall. Indeed, we all were up against the wall that plague had

built around us, and in its lethal shadow we must work out our salvation.

He, Father Paneloux, refused to have recourse to simple devices enabling him to

scale that wall. Thus he might easily have assured them that the child's

sufferings would be compensated for by an eternity of bliss awaiting him. But

how could he give that assurance when, to tell the truth, he knew nothing about

it? For who would dare to assert that eternal happiness can compensate for a

single moment's human suffering?

He who asserted that would not be a true Christian, a follower of the Master who

knew all the pangs of suffering in his body and his soul. No, he, Father

Paneloux, would keep faith with that great symbol of all suffering, the tortured

body on the Cross; he would stand fast, his back to the wall, and face honestly

the terrible problem of a child's agony. And he would boldly say to those who

listened to his words today: "My brothers, a time of testing has come for us

all. We must believe everything or deny everything. And who among you, I ask,

would dare to deny everything?"

It crossed Rieux's mind that Father Paneloux was dallying with heresy in

speaking thus, but he had no time to follow up the thought. The preacher was

declaring vehemently that this uncompromising duty laid on the Christian was at

once his ruling virtue and his privilege. He was well aware that certain minds,

schooled to a more indulgent and conventional morality, might well be dismayed,

not to say outraged, by the seemingly excessive standard of Christian virtue

about which he was going to speak.

But religion in a time of plague could not be the religion of every day. While

God might accept and even desire that the soul should take its ease and rejoice

in happier times, in periods of extreme calamity He laid extreme demands on it.

Thus today God had vouchsafed to His creatures an ordeal such that they must

acquire and practice the greatest of all virtues: that of the All or Nothing.

Many centuries previously a profane writer had claimed to reveal a secret of the

Church by declaring that purgatory did not exist. He wished to convey that there

could be no half measures, there was only the alternative between heaven and

hell; you were either saved or damned. That, according to Paneloux, was a heresy

that could spring only from a blind, disordered soul. Nevertheless, there may

well have been periods of history when purgatory could not be hoped for; periods

when it was impossible to speak of venial sin. Every sin was deadly, and any

indifference criminal. It was all or it was nothing.

The preacher paused, and Rieux heard more clearly the whistling of the wind

outside; judging by the sounds that came in below the closed doors, it had risen

to storm pitch. Then he heard Father Paneloux's voice again. He was saying that

the total acceptance of which he had been speaking was not to be taken in the

limited sense usually given to the words; he was not thinking of mere

resignation or even of that harder virtue, humility. It involved humiliation,

but a humiliation to which the person humiliated gave full assent.

True, the agony of a child was humiliating to the heart and to the mind. But

that was why we had to come to terms with it. And that, too, was why, and here

Paneloux assured those present that it was not easy to say what he was about to

say, since it was God's will, we, too, should will it. Thus and thus only the

Christian could face the problem squarely and, scorning subterfuge, pierce to

the heart of the supreme issue, the essential choice.

And his choice would be to believe everything, so as not to be forced into

denying everything. Like those worthy women who, after learning that buboes were

the natural issues through which the body cast out infection, went to their

church and prayed: "Please, God, give him buboes," thus the Christian should

yield himself wholly to the divine will, even though it passed his

understanding. It was wrong to say: "This I understand, but that I cannot

accept"; we must go straight to the heart of that which is unacceptable,

precisely because it is thus that we are constrained to make our choice. The

sufferings of children were our bread of affliction, but without this bread our

souls would die of spiritual hunger.

The shuffling sounds which usually followed the moment when the preacher paused

were beginning to make themselves heard when, unexpectedly, he raised his voice,

making as if to put himself in his hearers' place and ask what then was the

proper course to follow. He made no doubt that the ugly word "fatalism" would be

applied to what he said. Well, he would not boggle at the word, provided he were

allowed to qualify it with the adjective "active." Needless to say, there was no

question of imitating the Abyssinian Christians of whom he had spoken

previously.

Nor should one even think of acting like those Persians who in time of plague

threw their infected garments on the Christian sanitary workers and loudly

called on Heaven to give the plague to these infidels who were trying to avert a

pestilence sent by God. But, on the other hand, it would be no less wrong to

imitate the monks at Cairo who, when plague was raging in the town, distributed

the Host with pincers at the Mass, so as to avoid contact with wet, warm mouths

in which infection might be latent.

The plague-stricken Persians and the monks were equally at fault. For the former

a child's agony did not count; with the latter, on the contrary, the natural

dread of suffering ranked highest in their conduct. In both cases the real

problem had been shirked; they had closed their ears to God's voice.

But, Paneloux continued, there were other precedents of which he would now

remind them. If the chronicles of the Black Death at Marseille were to be

trusted, only four of the eighty-one monks in the Mercy Monastery survived the

epidemic. And of these four three took to flight. Thus far the chronicler, and

it was not his task to tell us more than the bare facts. But when he read that

chronicle, Father Paneloux had found his thoughts fixed on that monk who stayed

on by himself, despite the death of his seventy-seven companions, and, above

all, despite the example of his three brothers who had fled. And, bringing down

his fist on the edge of the pulpit, Father Paneloux cried in a ringing voice:

"My brothers, each one of us must be the one who stays!" There was no question

of not taking precautions or failing to comply with the orders wisely

promulgated for the public weal in the disorders of a pestilence. Nor should we

listen to certain moralists who told us to sink on our knees and give up the

struggle. No, we should go forward, groping our way through the darkness,

stumbling perhaps at times, and try to do what good lay in our power. As for the

rest, we must hold fast, trusting in the divine goodness, even as to the deaths

of little children, and not seeking personal respite.

At this point Father Paneloux evoked the august figure of Bishop Belzunce during

the Marseille plague. He reminded his hearers how, toward the close of the

epidemic, the Bishop, having done all that it behooved him, shut himself up in

his palace, behind high walls, after laying in a stock of food and drink. With a

sudden revulsion of feeling, such as often comes in times of extreme

tribulation, the inhabitants of Marseille, who had idolized him hitherto, now

turned against him, piled up corpses round his house in order to infect it, and

even flung bodies over the walls to make sure of his death. Thus in a moment of

weakness the Bishop had proposed to isolate himself from the outside world, and,

lo and behold, corpses rained down on his head! This had a lesson for us all; we

must convince ourselves that there is no island of escape in time of plague. No,

there was no middle course. We must accept the dilemma and choose either to hate

God or to love God. And who would dare to choose to hate Him?

"My brothers", the preacher's tone showed he was nearing the conclusion of his

sermon, "the love of God is a hard love. It demands total self-surrender,

disdain of our human personality. And yet it alone can reconcile us to suffering

and the deaths of children, it alone can justify them, since we cannot

understand them, and we can only make God's will ours. That is the hard lesson I

would share with you today.

That is the faith, cruel in men's eyes, and crucial in God's, which we must ever

strive to compass. We must aspire beyond ourselves toward that high and fearful

vision. And on that lofty plane all will fall into place, all discords be

resolved, and truth flash forth from the dark cloud of seeming injustice. Thus

in some churches of the south of France plague victims have lain sleeping many a

century under the flagstones of the chancel, and priests now speak above their

tombs, and the divine message they bring to men rises from that charnel, to

which, nevertheless, children have contributed their share."

When Rieux was preparing to leave the church a violent gust swept up the nave

through the half-open doors and buffeted the faces of the departing

congregation. It brought with it a smell of rain, a tang of drenched sidewalks,

warning them of the weather they would encounter outside. An old priest and a

young deacon who were walking immediately in front of Rieux had much difficulty

in keeping their headdress from blowing away. But this did not prevent the elder

of the two from discussing the sermon they had heard.

He paid tribute to the preacher's eloquence, but the boldness of thought

Paneloux had shown gave him pause. In his opinion the sermon had displayed more

uneasiness than real power, and at Paneloux's age a priest had no business to

feel uneasy. The young deacon, his head bowed to protect his face from the wind,

replied that he saw much of the Father, had followed the evolution of his views,

and believed his forthcoming pamphlet would be bolder still; indeed it might

well be refused the imprimatur.

"You don't mean to say so! What's the main idea?" asked the old priest.

They were now in the Cathedral square and for some moments the roar of the wind

made it impossible for the younger man to speak. When there was a slight lull,

he said briefly to his companion:

"That it's illogical for a priest to call in a doctor."

Tarrou, when told by Rieux what Paneloux had said, remarked that he'd known a

priest who had lost his faith during the war, as the result of seeing a young

man's face with both eyes destroyed.

"Paneloux is right," Tarrou continued. "When an innocent youth can have his eyes

destroyed, a Christian should either lose his faith or consent to having his

eyes destroyed. Paneloux declines to lose his faith, and he will go through with

it to the end. That's what he meant to say."

It may be that this remark of Tarrou's throws some light on the regrettable

events which followed, in the course of which the priest's conduct seemed

inexplicable to his friends. The reader will judge for himself.

A few days after the sermon Paneloux had to move out of his rooms. It was a time

when many people were obliged to change their residence owing to the new

conditions created by the plague. Thus Tarrou, when his hotel was requisitioned,

had gone to live with Rieux, and now the Father had to vacate the lodgings

provided for him by his Order and stay in the house of a pious old lady who had

so far escaped the epidemic.

During the process of moving, Paneloux had been feeling more run down than ever,

mentally as well as physically. And it was this that put him in the bad books of

his hostess. One evening when she was enthusiastically vaunting the merits of

St. Odilia's prophecies, the priest betrayed a slight impatience, due probably

to fatigue. All his subsequent efforts to bring the good lady round to, anyhow,

a state of benevolent neutrality came to nothing. He had made a bad impression

and it went on rankling.

So each night on his way to his bedroom, where almost all the furniture was

dotted with crochet covers, he had to contemplate the back of his hostess seated

in her drawing-room and carry away with him a memory of the sour "Good night,

Father," she flung at him over her shoulder. It was on one such evening that he

felt, like a flood bursting the dikes, the turbulent onrush in his wrists and

temples of the fever latent in his blood for several days past.

The only available account of what followed comes from the lips of the old lady.

Next morning she rose early, as was her wont. After an hour or so, puzzled at

not seeing the Father leave his room, she brought herself, not without some

hesitation, to knock at his door. She found him still in bed after a sleepless

night. He had difficulty in breathing and looked more flushed than usual. She

had suggested most politely (as she put it) that a doctor should be called in,

but her suggestion had been brushed aside with a curtness that she described as

"quite unmannerly." So she had no alternative but to. leave the room.

Later in the morning the Father rang and asked if he could see her. He

apologized for his lack of courtesy and assured her that what he was suffering

from could not be plague, as he had none of the symptoms; it was no more than a

passing indisposition. The lady replied with dignity that her suggestion had not

been prompted by any apprehension of that sort, she took no thought for her

personal security, which was in God's hands, but that she felt a certain measure

of responsibility for the Father's welfare while he was under her roof. When he

said nothing, his hostess, wishing (according to her account) to do her duty by

him, offered to send for her doctor. Father Paneloux told her not to trouble,

adding some explanations that seemed to the old lady incoherent, not to say

nonsensical.

The only thing she gathered, and it was precisely this that appeared to her so

incomprehensible, was that the Father refused to hear of a doctor's visit

because it was against his principles. Her impression was that her guest's mind

had been unhinged by fever, and she confined herself to bringing him a cup of

tea.

Resolutely mindful of the obligations imposed on her by the situation, she

visited the invalid regularly every two hours. What struck her most about him

was his restlessness, which continued throughout the day. He would throw off the

blankets, then pull them back, and he kept running his hand over his forehead,

which was glistening with sweat. Every now and then he sat up in bed and tried

to clear his throat with a thick, grating cough, which sounded almost like

retching. At these moments he seemed to be vainly struggling to force up from

his lungs a clot of some semi-solid substance that was choking him.

After each unavailing effort, he sank back, utterly exhausted, on the pillow.

Then he would raise himself again a little and stare straight in front of him

with a fixity even more dismaying than the paroxysms which had preceded it. Even

now the old lady was reluctant to annoy her guest by calling in the doctor.

After all, it might be no more than an attack of fever, spectacular as were its

manifestations.

However, in the afternoon she made another attempt to talk to the priest, but

she could get out of him no more than a few rambling phrases. She renewed her

proposal to call in the doctor. Whereat Paneloux sat up and in a stifled voice

emphatically declined to see a doctor. Under these circumstances it seemed best

to the old lady to wait till the following morning; if the Father's condition

showed no more improvement she would ring up the number announced ten times

daily on the radio by the Ransdoc Information Bureau. Still conscious of her

obligations, she resolved to visit the invalid from time to time in the course

of the night and give him any attention he might need. But after bringing him a

decoction of herbal tea she decided to lie down for a while. Only at daybreak

did she wake up, and then she hurried to the priest's room.

Father Paneloux was lying quite still; his face had lost its deep flush of the

previous day and had now a deathly pallor, all the more impressive because the

cheeks had kept their fullness. He was gazing up at the bead fringe of a lamp

hanging above the bed. When the old lady came in he turned his head to her. As

she quaintly put it, he looked as if he'd been severely thrashed all the night

long, and more dead than alive. She was greatly struck by the apathy of his

voice when, on her asking how he was feeling, he replied that he was in a bad

way, he did not need a doctor, and all he wished was to be taken to the

hospital, so as to comply with the regulations. Panic-stricken, she hurried to

the telephone.

Rieux came at noon. After hearing what the old lady had to say he replied

briefly that Paneloux was right, but it was probably too late. The Father

welcomed him with the same air of complete indifference. Rieux examined him and

was surprised to find none of the characteristic symptoms of bubonic or

pneumonic plague, except congestion and obstruction of the lungs. But his pulse

was so weak and his general state so alarming that there was little hope of

saving him.

"You have none of the specific symptoms of the disease," Rieux told him. "But I

admit one can't be sure, and I must isolate you."

The Father smiled queerly, as if for politeness' sake, but said nothing. Rieux

left the room to telephone, then came back and looked at the priest.

"I'll stay with you," he said gently.

Paneloux showed a little more animation and a sort of warmth came back to his

eyes when he looked up at the doctor. Then, speaking with such difficulty that

it was impossible to tell if there was sadness in his voice, he said:

"Thanks. But priests can have no friends. They have given their all to God."

He asked for the crucifix that hung above the head of the bed; when given it, he

turned away to gaze at it.

At the hospital Paneloux did not utter a word. He submitted passively to the

treatment given him, but never let go of the crucifix. However, his case

continued doubtful, and Rieux could not feel sure how to diagnose it. For

several weeks, indeed, the disease had seemed to make a point of confounding

diagnoses. In the case of Paneloux, what followed was to show that this

uncertainty had no consequence.

His temperature rose. Throughout the day the cough grew louder, racking the

enfeebled body. At last, at nightfall, Father Paneloux brought up the clot of

matter that was choking him; it was red. Even at the height of his fever

Paneloux's eyes kept their blank serenity, and when, next morning, he was found

dead, his body drooping over the bedside, they betrayed nothing. Against his

name the index card recorded: "Doubtful case."

All Souls' Day that year was very different from what it had been in former

years. True, the weather was seasonable; there had been sudden change, and the

great heat had given place to mild autumnal air. As in other years a cool wind

blew all day, and big clouds raced from one horizon to the other, trailing

shadows over the houses upon which fell again, when they had passed, the pale

gold light of a November sky.

The first waterproofs made their appearance. Indeed, one was struck by the

number of glossy, rubberized garments to be seen. The reason was that our

newspapers had informed us that two hundred years previously, during the great

pestilences of southern Europe, the doctors wore oiled clothing as a safeguard

against infection. The shops had seized this opportunity of unloading their

stock of out-of-fashion waterproofs, which their purchasers fondly hoped would

guarantee immunity from germs.

But these familiar aspects of All Souls' Day could not make us forget that the

cemeteries were left unvisited. In previous years the rather sickly smell of

chrysanthemums had filled the streetcars, while long lines of women could be

seen making pilgrimage to the places where members of the family were buried, to

lay flowers on the graves. This was the day when they made amends for the

oblivion and dereliction in which their dead had slept for many a long month.

But in the plague year people no longer wished to be reminded of their dead.

Because, indeed, they were thinking all too much about them as it was. There was

no more question of revisiting them with a shade of regret and much melancholy.

They were no longer the forsaken to whom, one day in the year, you came to

justify yourself. They were intruders whom you would rather forget. This is why

the Day of the Dead this year was tacitly but willfully ignored. As Cottard

dryly remarked, Tarrou noted that the habit of irony was growing on him more and

more, each day was for us a Day of the Dead.

And, in fact, the balefires of the pestilence were blazing ever more merrily in

the crematorium. It is true that the actual number of deaths showed no increase.

But it seemed that plague had settled in for good at its most virulent, and it

took its daily toll of deaths with the punctual zeal of a good civil servant.

Theoretically, and in the view of the authorities, this was a hopeful sign. The

fact that the graph after its long rising curve had flattened out seemed to

many, Dr. Richard for example, reassuring. "The graph's good today," he would

remark, rubbing his hands. To his mind the disease had reached what he called

high-water mark. Thereafter it could but ebb. He gave the credit of this to Dr.

Castel's new serum, which, indeed, had brought off some quite unlooked-for

recoveries.

While not dissenting, the old doctor reminded him that the future remained

uncertain; history proved that epidemics have a way of recrudescing when least

expected. The authorities, who had long been desirous of giving a fillip to the

morale of the populace, but had so far been prevented by the plague from doing

so, now proposed to convene a meeting of the medical corps and ask for an

announcement on the subject. Unfortunately, just before the meeting was due to

take place, Dr. Richard, too, was carried off by the plague, then precisely at

"high-water mark."

The effect of this regrettable event, which, sensational as it was, actually

proved nothing, was to make our authorities swing back to pessimism as

inconsequently as they had previously indulged in optimism. As for Castel, he

confined himself to preparing his serums with the maximum of care. By this time

no public place or building had escaped conversion into a hospital or quarantine

camp with the exception of the Prefect's offices, which were needed for

administrative purposes and committee meetings. In a general way, however, owing

to the relative stability of the epidemic at this time, Rieux's organizations

were still able to cope with the situation. Though working constantly at high

pressure, the doctors and their helpers were not forced to contemplate still

greater efforts.

All they had to do was to carry on automatically, so to speak, their all but

superhuman task. The pneumonic type of infection, cases of which had already

been detected, was now spreading all over the town; one could almost believe

that the high winds were kindling and fanning its flames in people's chests. The

victims of pneumonic plague succumbed much more quickly, after coughing up

blood-stained sputum. This new form of the epidemic looked like being more

contagious as well as even more fatal. However, the opinions of experts had

always been divided on this matter. For greater safety all sanitary workers wore

masks of sterilized muslin. On the face of it, the disease should have extended

its ravages. But, the cases of bubonic plague showing a decrease, the death-rate

remained constant.

Meanwhile the authorities had another cause for anxiety in the difficulty of

maintaining the food-supply. Profiteers were taking a hand and purveying at

enormous prices essential foodstuffs not available in the shops. The result was

that poor families were in great straits, while the rich went short of

practically nothing. Thus, whereas plague by its impartial ministrations should

have promoted equality among our townsfolk, it now had the opposite effect and,

thanks to the habitual conflict of cupidities, exacerbated the sense of

injustice rankling in men's hearts. They were assured, of course, of the

inerrable equality of death, but nobody wanted that kind of equality.

Poor people who were feeling the pinch thought still more nostalgically of towns

and villages in the near-by countryside, where bread was cheap and life without

restrictions. Indeed, they had a natural if illogical feeling that they should

have been permitted to move out to these happier places. The feeling was

embodied in a slogan shouted in the streets and chalked up on walls: "Bread or

fresh air!" This half-ironical battle-cry was the signal for some demonstrations

that, though easily repressed, made everyone aware that an ugly mood was

developing among us.

The newspapers, needless to say, complied with the instructions given them:

optimism at all costs. If one was to believe what one read in them, our populace

was giving "a fine example of courage and composure." But in a town thrown back

upon itself, in which nothing could be kept secret, no one had illusions about

the "example" given by the public. To form a correct idea about the courage and

composure talked about by our journalists you had only to visit one of the

quarantine depots or isolation camps established by our authorities. As it so

happens, the narrator, being fully occupied elsewhere, had no occasion to visit

any of them, and must fall back on Tarrou's diary for a description of the

conditions in these places.

Tarrou gives an account of a visit he made, accompanied by Rambert, to the camp

located in the municipal stadium.

The stadium lies on the outskirts of the town, between a street along which runs

a car line and a stretch of waste land extending to the extreme edge of the

plateau on which Oran is built. It was already surrounded by high concrete walls

and all that was needed to make escape practically impossible was to post

sentries at the four entrance gates. The walls served another purpose: they

screened the unfortunates in quarantine from the view of people on the road.

Against this advantage may be set the fact that the inmates could hear all day,

though they could not see them, the passing streetcars, and recognize by the

increased volume of sound coming from the road the hours when people had knocked

off work or were going to it. And this brought home to them that the life from

which they were debarred was going on as before, within a few yards of them, and

that those high walls parted two worlds as alien to each other as two different

planets.

Tarrou and Rambert chose a Sunday afternoon for their visit to the stadium. They

were accompanied by Gonzales, the football-player, with whom Rambert had kept in

contact and who had let himself be persuaded into undertaking, in rotation with

others, the surveillance of the camp. This visit was to enable Rambert to

introduce Gonzales to the camp commandant. When they met that afternoon,

Gonzales's first remark was that this was exactly the time when, before the

plague, he used to start getting into his football togs. Now that the sports

fields had been requisitioned, all that was of the past, and Gonzales was

feeling, and showed it, at a loose end. This was one of the reasons why he had

accepted the post proposed by Rambert, but he made it a condition that he was to

be on duty during week-ends only.

The sky was overcast and, glancing up at it, Gonzales observed regretfully that

a day like this, neither too hot nor rainy, would have been perfect for a game.

And then he fell to conjuring up, as best he could, the once familiar smell of

embrocation in the dressing-rooms, the stands crowded with people, the colored

shirts of the players, showing up brightly against the tawny soil, the lemons at

intermission or bottled lemonade that titillated parched throats with a thousand

refreshing pin-pricks. Tarrou also records how on the way, as they walked the

shabby outer streets, the footballer gave kicks to all the small loose stones.

His object was to shoot them into the sewer-holes of the gutters, and whenever

he did this, he would shout: "Goal!" When he had finished his cigarette he spat

the stub in front of him and tried to catch it on his toe before it touched the

ground. Some children were playing near the stadium, and when one of them sent a

ball toward the three men, Gonzales went out of his way to return it neatly.

On entering the stadium they found the stands full of people. The field was

dotted with several hundred red tents, inside which one had glimpses of bedding

and bundles of clothes or rugs. The stands had been kept open for the use of the

internees in hot or rainy weather. But it was a rule of the camp that everyone

must be in his tent at sunset.

Shower-baths had been installed under the stands, and what used to be the

players' dressing-rooms converted into offices and infirmaries. The majority of

the inmates of the camp were sitting about on the stands. Some, however, were

strolling on the touchlines, and a few, squatting at the entrances of their

tents, were listlessly contemplating the scene around them. In the stands many

of those slumped on the wooden tiers had a look of vague expectancy.

"What do they do with themselves all day?" Tarrou asked Rambert. "Nothing."

Almost all, indeed, had empty hands and idly dangling arms. Another curious

thing about this multitude of derelicts was its silence.

"When they first came there was such a din you couldn't hear yourself speak,"

Rambert said. "But as the days went by they grew quieter and quieter."

In his notes Tarrou gives what to his mind would explain this change. He

pictures them in the early days bundled together in the tents, listening to the

buzz of flies, scratching themselves, and, whenever they found an obliging

listener, shrilly voicing their fear or indignation. But when the camp grew

overcrowded, fewer and fewer people were inclined to play the part of

sympathetic listener. So they had no choice but to hold their peace and nurse

their mistrust of everything and everyone. One had, indeed, a feeling that

suspicion was falling, dewlike, from the grayly shining sky over the brick-red

camp.

Yes, there was suspicion in the eyes of all. Obviously, they were thinking,

there must be some good reason for the isolation inflicted on them, and they had

the air of people who are puzzling over their problem and are afraid. Everyone

Tarrou set eyes on had that vacant gaze and was visibly suffering from the

complete break with all that life had meant to him. And since they could not be

thinking of their death all the time, they thought of nothing. They were on

vacation.

"But worst of all," Tarrou writes, "is that they're forgotten, and they know it.

Their friends have forgotten them because they have other things to think about,

naturally enough. And those they love have forgotten them because all their

energies are devoted to making schemes and taking steps to get them out of the

camp. And by dint of always thinking about these schemes and steps they have

ceased thinking about those whose release they're trying to secure. And that,

too, is natural enough. In fact, it comes to this: nobody is capable of really

thinking about anyone, even in the worst calamity. For really to think about

someone means thinking about that person every minute of the day, without

letting one's thoughts be diverted by anything, by meals, by a fly that settles

on one's cheek, by household duties, or by a sudden itch somewhere. But there

are always flies and itches. That's why life is difficult to live. And these

people know it only too well."

The camp manager came up; a gentleman named Othon, he said, would like to see

them. Leaving Gonzales in the office, he led the others to a corner of the

grandstand, where they saw M. Othon sitting by himself. He rose as they

approached.

The magistrate was dressed exactly as in the past and still wore a stiff collar.

The only changes Tarrou noted were that the tufts of hair over his temples were

not brushed back and that one of his shoelaces was undone. M. Othon appeared

very tired and not once did he look his visitors in the face. He said he was

glad to see them and requested them to thank Dr. Rieux for all he had done.

Some moments of silence ensued, then with an effort the magistrate spoke again:

"I hope Jacques did not suffer too much."

This was the first time Tarrou heard him utter his son's name, and he realized

that something had changed. The sun was setting and, flooding through a rift in

the clouds, the level rays raked the stands, tingeing their faces with a yellow

glow.

"No," Tarrou said. "No, I couldn't really say he suffered."

When they took their leave, the magistrate was still gazing toward the light.

They called in at the office to say good-by to Gonzales, whom they found

studying the duty roster. The footballer was laughing when he shook hands with

them.

"Anyhow, I'm back in the good old dressing-room," he chuckled. "That's something

to go on with."

Soon after, when the camp manager was seeing Tarrou and Rambert out, they heard

a crackling noise coming from the stands. A moment later the loud-speakers,

which in happier times served to announce the results of games or to introduce

the teams, informed the inmates of the camp that they were to go back to their

tents for the evening meal. Slowly everyone filed off the stands and shuffled

toward the tents. After all were under canvas two small electric trucks, of the

kind used for transporting baggage on railroad platforms, began to wend their

way between the tents. While the occupants held forth their arms, two ladles

plunged into the two big caldrons on each truck and neatly tipped their contents

into the waiting mess-kits. Then the truck moved on to the next tent.

"Very efficient," Tarrou remarked.

The camp manager beamed as he shook hands.

"Yes, isn't it? We're great believers in efficiency in this camp."

Dusk was falling. The sky had cleared and the camp was bathed in cool, soft

light. Through the hush of evening came a faint tinkle of spoons and plates.

Above the tents bats were circling, vanishing abruptly into the darkness. A

streetcar squealed on a switch outside the walls.

"Poor Monsieur Othon!" Tarrou murmured as the gate closed behind them. "One

would like to do something to help him. But how can you help a judge?"

There were other camps of much the same kind in the town, but the narrator, for

lack of firsthand information and in deference to veracity, has nothing to add

about them. This much, however, he can say; the mere existence of these camps,

the smell of crowded humanity coming from them, the baying of their loud-

speakers in the dusk, the air of mystery that clung about them, and the dread

these forbidden places inspired told seriously on our fellow citizens' morale

and added to the general nervousness and apprehension. Breaches of the peace and

minor riots became more frequent.

As November drew to a close, the mornings turned much colder. Heavy downpours

had scoured the streets and washed the sky clean of clouds. In the mornings a

weak sunlight bathed the town in a cold, sparkling sheen. The air warmed up,

however, as night approached. It was such a night that Tarrou chose for telling

something of himself to Dr. Rieux.

After a particularly tiring day, about ten o'clock Tarrou proposed to the doctor

that they should go together for the evening visit to Rieux's old asthma

patient. There was a soft glow above the housetops in the Old Town and a light

breeze fanned their faces at the street crossings. Coming from the silent

streets, they found the old man's loquacity rather irksome at first. He launched

into a long harangue to the effect that some folks were getting fed up, that it

was always the same people had all the jam, and things couldn't go on like that

indefinitely, one day there'd be, he rubbed his hands, "a fine old row." He

continued expatiating on this theme all the time the doctor was attending to

him.

They heard footsteps overhead. Noticing Tarrou's upward glance, the old woman

explained that it was the girls from next door walking on the terrace. She added

that one had a lovely view up there, and that as the terraces in this part of

the town often joined up with the next one on one side, the women could visit

their neighbors without having to go into the street.

"Why not go up and have a look?" the old man suggested. "You'll get a breath of

nice fresh air."

They found nobody on the terrace, only three empty chairs. On one side, as far

as eye could reach, was a row of terraces, the most remote of which abutted on a

dark, rugged mass that they recognized as the hill nearest the town. On the

other side, spanning some streets and the unseen harbor, their gaze came to rest

on the horizon, where sea and sky merged in a dim, vibrant grayness.

Beyond a black patch that they knew to be the cliffs a sudden glow, whose source

they could not see, sprang up at regular intervals; the lighthouse at the

entrance of the fairway was still functioning for the benefit of ships that,

passing Oran's unused harbor, went on to other ports along the coast. In a sky

swept crystal-clear by the night wind, the stars showed like silver flakes,

tarnished now and then by the yellow gleam of the revolving light. Perfumes of

spice and warm stone were wafted on the breeze.

Everything was very still.

"A pleasant spot," said Rieux as he lowered himself into a chair. "You'd think

that plague had never found its way up here."

Tarrou was gazing seawards, his back to the doctor.

"Yes," he replied after a moment's silence, "it's good to be here."

Then, settling into the chair beside Rieux, he fixed his eyes on his face. Three

times the glow spread up the sky and died away. A faint clatter of crockery rose

from a room opening on the street below. A door banged somewhere in the house.

"Rieux," Tarrou said in a quite ordinary tone, "do you realize that you've never

tried to find out anything about me, the man I am? Can I regard you as a

friend?"

"Yes, of course, we're friends; only so far we haven't had much time to show

it." "Good. That gives me confidence. Suppose we now take an hour off, for

friendship?"

Rieux smiled by way of answer. "Well, here goes!"

There was a long faint hiss some streets off, the sound of a car speeding on the

wet pavement. It died away; then some vague shouts a long way off broke the

stillness again. Then, like a dense veil slowly falling from the starry sky on

the two men, silence returned. Tarrou had moved and now was sitting on the

parapet, facing Rieux, who was slumped back in his chair. All that could be seen

of him was a dark, bulky form outlined against the glimmering sky. He had much

to tell; what follows gives it more or less in his own words.

"To make things simpler, Rieux, let me begin by saying I had plague already,

long before I came to this town and encountered it here. Which is tantamount to

saying I'm like everybody else. Only there are some people who don't know it, or

feel at ease in that condition; others know and want to get out of it.

Personally, I've always wanted to get out of it.

"When I was young I lived with the idea of my innocence; that is to say, with no

idea at all. I'm not the self-tormenting kind of person, and I made a suitable

start in life. I brought off everything I set my hand to, I moved at ease in the

field of the intellect, I got on excellently with women, and if I had occasional

qualms, they passed as lightly as they came. Then one day I started thinking.

And now?

"I should tell you I wasn't poor in my young days, as you were. My father had an

important post, he was prosecuting attorney; but to look at him, you'd never

have guessed it; he appeared, and was, a kindly, good-natured man. My mother was

a simple, rather shy woman, and I've always loved her greatly; but I'd rather

not talk about her. My father was always very kind to me, and I even think he

tried to understand me. He wasn't a model husband.

I know that now, but I can't say it shocks me particularly. Even in his

infidelities he behaved as one could count on his behaving and never gave rise

to scandal. In short, he wasn't at all original and, now he's dead, I realize

that, while no plaster saint, he was a very decent man as men go. He kept the

middle way, that's all; he was the type of man for whom one has an affection of

the mild but steady order, which is the kind that wears best.

"My father had one peculiarity; the big railway directory was his bedside book.

Not that he often took a train; almost his only journeys were to Brittany, where

he had a small country house to which we went every summer. But he was a walking

timetable; he could tell you the exact times of departure and arrival of the

Paris-Berlin expresses; how to get from Lyon to Warsaw, which trains to take and

at what hours; the precise distance between any two capital cities you might

mention.

Could you tell me offhand how to get from Briancon to Chamonix? Even a station-

master would scratch his head, I should say. Well, my father had the answer pat.

Almost every evening he enlarged his knowledge of the subject, and he prided

himself on it. This hobby of his much amused me; I would put complicated travel

problems to him and check his answers afterwards by the railway directory. They

were invariably correct. My father and I got on together excellently, thanks

largely to these railway games we played in the evenings; I was exactly the

audience he needed, attentive and appreciative. Personally I regarded this

accomplishment of his as quite as admirable in its ways as most accomplishments.

"But I'm letting my tongue run away with me and attributing too much importance

to that worthy man. Actually he played only an indirect role in the great change

of heart about which I want to tell you. The most he did to me was to touch off

a train of thoughts. When I was seventeen my father asked me to come to hear him

speak in court. There was a big case on at the assizes, and probably he thought

I'd see him to his best advantage.

Also I suspect he hoped I'd be duly impressed by the pomp and ceremony of the

law and encouraged to take up his profession. I could tell he was keen on my

going, and the prospect of seeing a side of my father's character so different

from that we saw at home appealed to me. Those were absolutely the only reasons

I had for going to the trial. What happened in a court had always seemed to me

as natural, as much in the order of things, as a military parade on the

Fourteenth of July or a school speech day. My notions on the subject were purely

abstract, and I'd never given it serious thought.

"The only picture I carried away with me of that day's proceedings was a picture

of the criminal. I have little doubt he was guilty, of what crime is no great

matter. That little man of about thirty, with sparse, sandy hair, seemed so

eager to confess everything, so genuinely horrified at what he'd done and what

was going to be done with him, that after a few minutes I had eyes for nothing

and nobody else. He looked like a yellow owl scared blind by too much light. His

tie was slightly awry, he kept biting his nails, those of one hand only, his

right.... I needn't go on, need I? You've understood, he was a living human

being.

"As for me, it came on me suddenly, in a flash of understanding; until then I'd

thought of him only under his commonplace official designation, as 'the

defendant.' And though I can't say I quite forgot my father, something seemed to

grip my vitals at that moment and riveted all my attention on the little man in

the dock. I hardly heard what was being said; I only knew that they were set on

killing that living man, and an uprush of some elemental instinct, like a wave,

had swept me to his side. And I did not really wake up until my father rose to

address the court.

"In his red gown he was another man, no longer genial or good-natured; his mouth

spewed out long, turgid phrases like an endless stream of snakes. I realized he

was clamoring for the prisoner's death, telling the jury that they owed it to

society to find him guilty; he went so far as to demand that the man should have

his head cut off. Not exactly in those words, I admit. 'He must pay the supreme

penalty,' was the formula. But the difference, really, was slight, and the

result the same.

He had the head he asked for. Only of course it wasn't he who did the actual

job. I, who saw the whole business through to its conclusion, felt a far closer,

far more terrifying intimacy with that wretched man than my father can ever have

felt. Nevertheless, it fell to him, in the course of his duties, to be present

at what's politely termed the prisoner's last moments, but what would be better

called murder in its most despicable form.

"From that day on I couldn't even see the railway directory without a shudder of

disgust. I took a horrified interest in legal proceedings, death sentences,

executions, and I realized with dismay that my father must have often witnessed

those brutal murders, on the days when, as I'd noticed without guessing what it

meant, he rose very early in the morning. I remembered he used to wind his

alarm-clock on those occasions, to make sure. I didn't dare to broach the

subject with my mother, but I watched her now more closely and saw that their

life in common had ceased to mean anything, she had abandoned hope. That helped

me to 'forgive her,' as I put it to myself at the time. Later on, I learned that

there'd been nothing to forgive; she'd been quite poor until her marriage, and

poverty had taught her resignation.

"Probably you're expecting me to tell you that I left home at once. No, I stayed

on many months, nearly a year, in fact. Then one evening my father asked for the

alarm-clock as he had to get up early. I couldn't sleep that night. Next day,

when he came home, I'd gone.

"To cut a long story short, I had a letter from my father, who had set inquiries

on foot to find me, I went to see him, and, without explaining my reasons, told

him quite calmly that I'd kill myself if he forced me to return. He wound up by

letting me have my way, he was, as I've said, a kindly man at bottom, gave me a

lecture on the silliness of wanting to 'live my life' (that was how he accounted

for my conduct and I didn't undeceive him), and plenty of good advice. I could

see he really felt it deeply and it was an effort for him to keep back his

tears. Subsequently, but quite a long time after that, I formed a habit of

visiting my mother periodically, and I always saw him on these occasions. 1

imagine these infrequent meetings satisfied my father. Personally, I hadn't the

least antipathy to him, only a little sadness of heart. When he died I had my

mother come to live with me, and she'd still be with me if she were alive.

"I've had to dwell on my start in life, since for me it really was the start of

everything. I'll get on more quickly now. I came to grips with poverty when I

was eighteen, after an easy life till then. I tried all sorts of jobs, and I

didn't do too badly. But my real interest in life was the death penalty; I

wanted to square accounts with that poor blind owl in the dock. So I became an

agitator, as they say. I didn't want to be pestiferous, that's all. To my mind

the social order around me was based on the death sentence, and by righting the

established order I'd be fighting against murder. That was my view, others had

told me so, and I still think that this belief of mine was substantially true. I

joined forces with a group of people I then liked, and indeed have never ceased

to like. I spent many years in close co-operation with them, and there's not a

country in Europe in whose struggles I haven't played a part. But that's another

story.

"Needless to say, I knew that we, too, on occasion, passed sentences of death.

But I was told that these few deaths were inevitable for the building up of a

new world in which murder would cease to be. That also was true up to a point,

and maybe I'm not capable of standing fast where that order of truths is

concerned.

Whatever the explanation, I hesitated. But then I remembered that miserable owl

in the dock and it enabled me to keep on. Until the day when I was present at an

execution, it was in Hungary, and exactly the same dazed horror that I'd

experienced as a youngster made everything reel before my eyes.

"Have you ever seen a man shot by a firing-squad? No, of course not; the

spectators are hand-picked and it's like a private party, you need an

invitation. The result is that you've gleaned your ideas about it from books and

pictures. A post, a blindfolded man, some soldiers in the offing. But the real

thing isn't a bit like that. Do you know that the firing-squad stands only a

yard and a half from the condemned man? Do you know that if the victim took two

steps forward his chest would touch the rifles?

Do you know that, at this short range, the soldiers concentrate their fire on

the region of the heart and their big bullets make a hole into which you could

thrust your fist? No, you didn't know all that; those are things that are never

spoken of. For the plague-stricken their peace of mind is more important than a

human life. Decent folks must be allowed to sleep easy o' nights, mustn't they?

Really it would be shockingly bad taste to linger on such details, that's common

knowledge. But personally I've never been able to sleep well since then. The bad

taste remained in my mouth and I've kept lingering on the details, brooding over

them.

"And thus I came to understand that I, anyhow, had had plague through all those

long years in which, paradoxically enough, I'd believed with all my soul that I

was fighting it. I learned that I had had an indirect hand in the deaths of

thousands of people; that I'd even brought about their deaths by approving of

acts and principles which could only end that way. Others did not seem

embarrassed by such thoughts, or anyhow never voiced them of their own accord.

But I was different; what I'd come to know stuck in my gorge. I was with them

and yet I was alone. When I spoke of these matters they told me not to be so

squeamish; I should remember what great issues were at stake. And they advanced

arguments, often quite impressive ones, to make me swallow what none the less I

couldn't bring myself to stomach. I replied that the most eminent of the plague-

stricken, the men who wear red robes, also have excellent arguments to justify

what they do, and once I admitted the arguments of necessity and force majeure

put forward by the less eminent, I couldn't reject those of the eminent.

To which they retorted that the surest way of playing the game of the red robes

was to leave to them the monopoly of the death penalty. My reply to this was

that if you gave in once, there was no reason for not continuing to give in. It

seems to me that history has borne me out; today there's a sort of competition

who will kill the most. They're all mad over murder and they couldn't stop

killing men even if they wanted to.

"In any case, my concern was not with arguments. It was with the poor owl; with

that foul procedure whereby dirty mouths stinking of plague told a fettered man

that he was going to die, and scientifically arranged things so that he should

die, after nights and nights of mental torture while he waited to be murdered in

cold blood. My concern was with that hole in a man's chest. And I told myself

that meanwhile, so far anyhow as I was concerned, nothing in the world would

induce me to accept any argument that justified such butcheries. Yes, I chose to

be blindly obstinate, pending the day when I could see my way more clearly.

"I'm still of the same mind. For many years I've been ashamed, mortally ashamed,

of having been, even with the best intentions, even at many removes, a murderer

in my turn. As time went on I merely learned that even those who were better

than the rest could not keep themselves nowadays from killing or letting others

kill, because such is the logic by which they live; and that we can't stir a

finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've

been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have

lost my peace. And today I am still trying to find it; still trying to

understand all those others and not to be the mortal enemy of anyone.

I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken, and

that's the only way in which we can hope for some peace or, failing that, a

decent death. This, and only this, can bring relief to men and, if not save

them, at least do them the least harm possible and even, sometimes, a little

good. So that is why I resolved to have no truck with anything which, directly

or indirectly, for good reasons or for bad, brings death to anyone or justifies

others' putting him to death.

"That, too, is why this epidemic has taught me nothing new, except that I must

fight it at your side. I know positively, yes, Rieux, I can say I know the world

inside out, as you may see, that each of us has the plague within him; no one,

no one on earth is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless

watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and

fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe.

All the rest, health, integrity, purity (if you like), is a product of the human

will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects

hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs

tremendous will-power, a never ending tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses.

Yes, Rieux, it's a wearying business, being plague-stricken. But it's still more

wearying to refuse to be it. That's why everybody in the world today looks so

tired; everyone is more or less sick of plague. But that is also why some of us,

those who want to get the plague out of their systems, feel such desperate

weariness, a weariness from which nothing remains to set us free except death.

"Pending that release, I know I have no place in the world of today; once I'd

definitely refused to kill, I doomed myself to an exile that can never end. I

leave it to others to make history. I know, too, that I'm not qualified to pass

judgment on those others. There's something lacking in my mental make-up, and

its lack prevents me from being a rational murderer. So it's a deficiency, not a

superiority. But as things are, I'm willing to be as I am; I've learned modesty.

All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are

victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the

pestilences. That may sound simple to the point of childishness; I can't judge

if it's simple, but I know it's true. You see, I'd heard such quantities of

arguments, which very nearly turned my head, and turned other people's heads

enough to make them approve of murder; and I'd come to realize that all our

troubles spring from our failure to use plain, clean-cut language. So I resolved

always to speak, and to act, quite clearly, as this was the only way of setting

myself on the right track.

That's why I say there are pestilences and there are victims; no more than that.

If, by making that statement, I, too, become a carrier of "the plague-germ, at

least I don't do it willfully. I try, in short, to be an innocent murderer. You

see, I've no great ambitions. "I grant we should add a third category: that of

the true healers. But it's a fact one doesn't come across many of them, and

anyhow it must be a hard vocation. That's why I decided to take, in every

predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done. Among them I

can at least try to discover how one attains to the third category; in other

words, to peace."

Tarrou was swinging his leg, tapping the terrace lightly with his heel, as he

concluded. After a short silence the doctor raised himself a little in his chair

and asked if Tarrou had an idea of the path to follow for attaining peace.

"Yes," he replied. "The path of sympathy."

Two ambulances were clanging in the distance. The dispersed shouts they had been

hearing off and on drew together on the outskirts of the town, near the stony

hill, and presently there was a sound like a gunshot. Then silence fell again.

Rieux counted two flashes of the revolving light. The breeze freshened and a

gust coming from the sea filled the air for a moment with the smell of brine.

And at the same time they clearly heard the low sound of waves lapping the foot

of the cliffs.

"It comes to this," Tarrou said almost casually; "what interests me is learning

how to become a saint."

"But you don't believe in God."

"Exactly! Can one be a saint without God?, that's the problem, in fact the only

problem, I'm up against today."

A sudden blaze sprang up above the place the shouts had come from and, stemming

the wind-stream, a rumor of many voices came to their ears. The blaze died down

almost at once, leaving behind it only a dull red glow. Then in a break of the

wind they distinctly heard some strident yells and the discharge of a gun,

followed by the roar of an angry crowd. Tarrou stood up and listened, but

nothing more could be heard.

"Another skirmish at the gates, I suppose." "Well, it's over now," Rieux said.

Tarrou said in a low voice that it was never over, and there would be more

victims, because that was in the order of things.

"Perhaps," the doctor answered. "But, you know, I feel more fellowship with the

defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me, I

imagine. What interests me is being a man."

"Yes, we're both after the same thing, but I'm less ambitious."

Rieux supposed Tarrou was jesting and turned to him with a smile. But, faintly

lit by the dim radiance falling from the sky, the face he saw was sad and

earnest. There was another gust of wind and Rieux felt it warm on his skin.

Tarrou gave himself a little shake.

"Do you know," he said, "what we now should do for friendship's sake?" "Anything

you like, Tarrou."

"Go for a swim. It's one of these harmless pleasures that even a saint-to-be can

indulge in, don't you agree?" Rieux smiled again, and Tarrou continued: "With

our passes, we can get out on the pier. Really, it's too damn silly living only

in and for the plague. Of course, a man should fight for the victims, but if he

ceases caring for anything outside that, what's the use of his fighting?"

"Right," Rieux said. "Let's go."

Some minutes later the car drew up at the harbor gates. The moon had risen and a

milk-white radiance, dappled with shadows, lay around them. Behind them rose the

town, tier on tier, and from it came warm, fetid breaths of air that urged them

toward the sea. After showing their passes to a guard, who inspected them

minutely, they crossed some open ground littered with casks, and headed toward

the pier. The air here reeked of stale wine and fish. Just before they reached

the pier a smell of iodine and seaweed announced the nearness of the sea and

they clearly heard the sound of waves breaking gently on the big stone blocks.

Once they were on the pier they saw the sea spread out before them, a gently

heaving expanse of deep-piled velvet, supple and sleek as a creature of the

wild. They sat down on a boulder facing the open. Slowly the waters rose and

sank, and with their tranquil breathing sudden oily glints formed and flickered

over the surface in a haze of broken lights. Before them the darkness stretched

out into infinity. Rieux could feel under his hand the gnarled, weather-worn

visage of the rocks, and a strange happiness possessed him. Turning to Tarrou,

he caught a glimpse on his friend's face of the same happiness, a happiness that

forgot nothing, not even murder.

They undressed, and Rieux dived in first. After the first shock of cold had

passed and he came back to the surface the water seemed tepid. When he had taken

a few strokes he found that the sea was warm that night with the warmth of

autumn seas that borrow from the shore the accumulated heat of the long days of

summer. The movement of his feet left a foaming wake as he swam steadily ahead,

and the water slipped along his arms to close in tightly on his legs.

A loud splash told him that Tarrou had dived. Rieux lay on his back and stayed

motionless, gazing up at the dome of sky lit by the stars and moon. He drew a

deep breath. Then he heard a sound of beaten water, louder and louder, amazingly

clear in the hollow silence of the night. Tarrou was coming up with him, he now

could hear his breathing.

Rieux turned and swam level with his friend, timing his stroke to Tarrou's. But

Tarrou was the stronger swimmer and Rieux had to put on speed to keep up with

him. For some minutes they swam side by side, with the same zest, in the same

rhythm, isolated from the world, at last free of the town and of the plague.

Rieux was the first to stop and they swam back slowly, except at one point,

where unexpectedly they found themselves caught in an ice-cold current. Their

energy whipped up by this trap the sea had sprung on them, both struck out more

vigorously.

They dressed and started back. Neither had said a word, but they were conscious

of being perfectly at one, and the memory of this night would be cherished by

them both. When they caught sight of the plague watchman, Rieux guessed that

Tarrou, like himself, was thinking that the disease had given them a respite,

and this was good, but now they must set their shoulders to the wheel again.

Yes, the plague gave short shrift indeed, and they must set their shoulders to

the wheel again. Throughout December it smoldered in the chests of our

townsfolk, fed the fires in the crematorium, and peopled the camps with human

jetsam. In short, it never ceased progressing with its characteristically jerky

but unfaltering stride. The authorities had optimistically reckoned on the

coming of winter to halt its progress, but it lasted through the first cold

spells without the least remission. So the only thing for us to do was to go on

waiting, and since after a too long waiting one gives up waiting, the whole town

lived as if it had no future.

As for Dr. Rieux, that brief hour of peace and friendship which had been granted

him was not, and could not be, repeated. Yet another hospital had been opened,

and his only converse was with his patients. However, he noticed a change at

this stage of the epidemic, now that the plague was assuming more and more the

pneumonic form; the patients seemed, after their fashion, to be seconding the

doctor. Instead of giving way to the prostration or the frenzies of the early

period, they appeared to have a clearer idea of where their interests lay and on

their own initiative asked for what might be most beneficial.

Thus they were always clamoring for something to drink and insisted on being

kept as warm as possible. And though the demands on him were as exhausting as

before, Rieux no longer had the impression of putting up a solitary fight; the

patients were co-operating. Toward the end of December he received a letter from

M. Othon, who was still in quarantine. The magistrate stated that his quarantine

period was over; unfortunately the date of his admission to camp seemed to have

been mislaid by the secretariat, and if he was still detained it was certainly

due to a mistake.

His wife, recently released from quarantine, had gone to the Prefect's office to

protest and had been rudely treated; they had told her that the office never

made mistakes. Rieux asked Rambert to look into the matter, and a few days later

M. Othon called on him. There had, in fact, been a mistake, and Rieux showed

some indignation. But M. Othon, who had grown thinner, raised a limp,

deprecating hand; weighing his words, he said that everyone could make mistakes.

And the doctor thought to himself that decidedly something had changed.

"What will you do now, Monsieur Othon?" Rieux asked. "I suppose you have a pile

of work awaiting you."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm putting in for some leave." "I quite understand.

You need a rest."

"It's not that. I want to go back to the camp."

Rieux couldn't believe his ears. "But you've only just come out of it!"

"I'm afraid I did not make myself clear. I'm told there are some voluntary

workers from government offices in that camp." The magistrate rolled his round

eyes a little and tried to smooth down a tuft of hair. "It would keep me busy,

you see. And also, I know it may sound absurd, but I'd feel less separated from

my little boy."

Rieux stared at him. Could it be that a sudden gentleness showed in those hard,

inexpressive eyes? Yes, they had grown misted, lost their steely glitter.

"Certainly," Rieux said. "Since that's your wish, I'll fix it up for you."

The doctor kept his word; and the life of the plague-ridden town resumed its

course until Christmas. Tarrou continued to bring his quiet efficiency to bear

on every problem. Rambert confided in the doctor that, with the connivance of

the two young guards, he was sending letters to his wife and now and then

receiving an answer. He suggested to Rieux that he should avail himself of this

clandestine channel, and Rieux agreed to do so. For the first time for many

months he sat down to write a letter. He found it a laborious business, as if he

were manipulating a language that he had forgotten. The letter was dispatched.

The reply was slow in coming. As for Cottard, he was prospering, making money

hand over fist in small, somewhat shady transactions. With Grand, however, it

was otherwise; the Christmas season did not seem to agree with him.

Indeed, Christmas that year had none of its old-time associations; it smacked of

hell rather than of heaven. Empty, unlighted shops, dummy chocolates or empty

boxes in the confectioners' windows, streetcars laden with listless, dispirited

passengers, all was as unlike previous Christmastides as it well could be. In

the past all the townspeople, rich and poor alike, indulged in seasonable

festivity; now only a privileged few, those with money to burn, could do so, and

they caroused in shamefast solitude in a dingy back shop or a private room. In

the churches there were more supplications than carols.

You saw a few children, too young to realize what threatened them, playing in

the frosty, cheerless streets. But no one dared to bid them welcome-in the God

of former days, bringer of gifts, and old as human sorrow, yet new as the hopes

of youth. There was no room in any heart but for a very old, gray hope, that

hope which keeps men from letting themselves drift into death and is nothing but

a dogged will to live.

Grand had failed to show up as usual on the previous evening. Feeling somewhat

anxious, Rieux called at his place early in the morning, but he wasn't at home.

His friends were asked to keep a lookout for him. At about eleven Rambert came

to the hospital with the news that he'd had a distant glimpse of Grand, who

seemed to be wandering aimlessly, "looking very queer." Unfortunately he had

lost sight of him almost at once. Tarrou and the doctor set out in the car to

hunt for Grand.

At noon Rieux stepped out of his car into the frozen air; he had just caught

sight of Grand some distance away, his face glued to a shop-window full of

crudely carved wooden toys. Tears were steadily flowing down the old fellow's

cheeks, and they wrung the doctor's heart, for he could understand them, and he

felt his own tears welling up in sympathy. A picture rose before him of that

scene of long ago, the youngster standing in front of another shop-window, like

this one dressed for Christmas, and Jeanne turning toward him in a sudden access

of emotion and saying how happy she was.

He could guess that through the mists of the past years, from the depth of his

fond despair, Jeanne's young voice was rising, echoing in Grand's ears. And he

knew, also, what the old man was thinking as his tears flowed, and he, Rieux,

thought it too: that a loveless world is a dead world, and always there comes an

hour when one is weary of prisons, of one's work, and of devotion to duty, and

all one craves for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart.

Grand saw the doctor's reflection in the window. Still weeping, he turned and,

leaning against the shop-front, watched Rieux approach.

"Oh, doctor, doctor!" He could say no more.

Rieux, too, couldn't speak; he made a vague, understanding gesture. At this

moment he suffered with Grand's sorrow, and what filled his breast was the

passionate indignation we feel when confronted by the anguish all men share.

"Yes, Grand," he murmured.

"Oh, if only I could have time to write to her! To let her know... and to let

her be happy without remorse!"

Almost roughly Rieux took Grand's arm and drew him forward. Grand did not resist

and went on muttering broken phrases.

"Too long! It's lasted too long. All the time one's wanting to let oneself go,

and then one day one has to. Oh, doctor, I know I look a quiet sort, just like

anybody else. But it's always been a terrible effort only to be, just normal.

And now, well, even that's too much for me."

He stopped dead. He was trembling violently, his eyes were fever-bright. Rieux

took his hand; it was burning hot.

"You must go home."

But Grand wrenched himself free and started running. After a few steps he halted

and stretched out his arms, swaying to and fro. Then he spun round on himself

and fell flat on the pavement, his face stained with the tears that went on

flowing. Some people who were approaching stopped abruptly and watched the scene

from a little way off, not daring to come nearer. Rieux had to carry the old man

to the car.

Grand lay in bed, gasping for breath; his lungs were congested. Rieux pondered.

The old fellow hadn't any family. What would be the point of having him

evacuated? He and Tarrou could look after him.

Grand's head was buried in the pillow, his cheeks were a greenish gray, his eyes

had gone dull, opaque. He seemed to be gazing fixedly at the scanty fire Tarrou

was kindling with the remains of an old packing-case. "I'm in a bad way," he

muttered. A queer crackling sound came from his flame-seared lungs whenever he

tried to speak. Rieux told him not to talk and promised to come back. The sick

man's lips parted in a curious smile, and a look of humorous complicity

flickered across the haggard face. "If I pull through, doctor, hats off!" A

moment later he sank into extreme prostration.

Visiting him again some hours later, they found him half sitting up in bed, and

Rieux was horrified by the rapid change that had come over his face, ravaged by

the fires of the disease consuming him. However, he seemed more lucid and almost

immediately asked them to get his manuscript from the drawer where he always

kept it. When Tarrou handed him the sheets, he pressed them to his chest without

looking at them, then held them out to the doctor, indicating by a gesture that

he was to read them. There were some fifty pages of manuscript. Glancing through

them, Rieux saw that the bulk of the writing consisted of the same sentence

written again and again with small variants, simplifications or elaborations.

Persistently the month of May, the lady on horseback, the avenues of the Bois

recurred, regrouped in different patterns. There were, besides, explanatory

notes, some exceedingly long, and lists of alternatives. But at the foot of the

last page was written in a studiously clear hand: "My dearest Jeanne, Today is

Christmas Day and..." Eight words only. Above it, in copperplate script, was the

latest version of the famous phrase. "Read it," Grand whispered. And Rieux read:

"One fine morning in May, a slim young horsewoman might have been seen riding a

glossy sorrel mare along the avenues of the Bois, among the flowers...."

"Is that it?" There was a feverish quaver in the old voice. Rieux refrained from

looking at him, and he began to toss about in the bed. "Yes, I know. I know what

you're thinking. 'Fine' isn't the word. It's?"

Rieux clasped his hand under the coverlet.

"No, doctor. It's too late, no time..." His breast heaved painfully, then

suddenly he said in a loud, shrill voice: "Burn it!"

The doctor hesitated, but Grand repeated his injunction in so violent a tone and

with such agony in his voice that Rieux walked across to the fireplace and

dropped the sheets on the dying fire. It blazed up, and there was a sudden flood

of light, a fleeting warmth, in the room. When the doctor came back to the bed,

Grand had his back turned, his face almost touching the wall. After injecting

the serum Rieux whispered to his friend that Grand wouldn't last the night, and

Tarrou volunteered to stay with him. The doctor approved.

All night Rieux was haunted by the idea of Grand's death. But next morning he

found his patient sitting up in bed, talking to Tarrou. His temperature was down

to normal and there were no symptoms other than a generalized prostration.

"Yes, doctor," Grand said. "I was overhasty. But I'll make another start. You'll

see, I can remember every word."

Rieux looked at Tarrou dubiously. "We must wait," he said.

But at noon there was no change. By nightfall Grand could be considered out of

danger. Rieux was completely baffled by this "resurrection."

Other surprises were in store for him. About the same time there was brought to

the hospital a girl whose case Rieux diagnosed as hopeless, and he had her sent

immediately to the isolation ward. She was delirious' and had all the symptoms

of pneumonic plague. Next morning, however, the temperature had fallen. As in

Grand's case the doctor assumed this was the ordinary morning fall that his

experience had taught him to regard as a bad sign. But at noon her temperature

still showed no rise and at night it went up only a few degrees.

Next morning it was down to normal. Though very exhausted, the girl was

breathing freely. Rieux remarked to Tarrou that her recovery was "against all

the rules!" But in the course of the next week four similar cases came to his

notice.

The old asthma patient was bubbling over with excitement when Rieux and Tarrou

visited him at the end of the week.

"Would you ever have believed it! They're coming out again," he said. "Who?"

"Why, the rats!"

Not one dead or living rat had been seen in the town since April. "Does that

mean it's starting all over again?" Tarrou asked Rieux. The old man was rubbing

his hands.

"You should see 'em running, doctor! It's a treat, it is!"

He himself had seen two rats slipping into the house by the street door, and

some neighbors, too, had told him they'd seen rats in their basements. In some

houses people had heard those, once familiar scratchings and rustlings behind

the woodwork. Rieux awaited with much interest the mortality figures that were

announced every Monday. They showed a decrease.

PART V

Though this sudden setback of the plague was as welcome as it was unlooked-for,

our townsfolk were in no hurry to jubilate. While intensifying their desire to

be set free, the terrible months they had lived through had taught them

prudence, and they had come to count less and less on a speedy end of the

epidemic. All the same, this new development was the talk of the town, and

people began to nurse hopes none the less heartfelt for being unavowed. All else

took a back place; that daily there were new victims counted for little beside

that staggering fact: the weekly total showed a decrease. One of the signs that

a return to the golden age of health was secretly awaited was that our fellow

citizens, careful though they were not to voice their hope, now began to talk,

in, it is true, a carefully detached tone, of the new order of life that would

set in after the plague.

All agreed that the amenities of the past couldn't be restored at once;

destruction is an easier, speedier process than reconstruction. However, it was

thought that a slight improvement in the food-supply could safely be counted on,

and this would relieve what was just now the acutest worry of every household.

But in reality behind these mild aspirations lurked wild, extravagant hopes, and

often one of us, becoming aware of this, would hastily add that, even on the

rosiest view, you couldn't expect the plague to stop from one day to another.

Actually, while the epidemic did not stop "from one day to another," it declined

more rapidly than we could reasonably have expected. With the first week of

January an unusually persistent spell of very cold weather settled in and seemed

to crystallize above the town. Yet never before had the sky been so blue; day

after day its icy radiance flooded the town with brilliant light, and in the

frost-cleansed air the epidemic seemed to lose its virulence, and in each of

three consecutive weeks a big drop in the death-roll was announced. Thus over a

relatively brief period the disease lost practically all the gains piled up over

many months.

Its setbacks with seemingly predestined victims, like Grand and Rieux's girl

patient, its bursts of activity for two or three days in some districts

synchronizing with its total disappearance from others, its new practice of

multiplying its victims on, say, a Monday, and on Wednesday letting almost all

escape, in short, its accesses of violence followed by spells of complete

inactivity, all these gave an impression that its energy was flagging, out of

exhaustion and exasperation, and it was losing, with its self-command, the

ruthless, almost mathematical efficiency that had been its trump card hitherto.

Of a sudden Castel's anti-plague injections scored frequent successes, denied it

until now. Indeed, all the treatments the doctors had tentatively employed,

without definite results, now seemed almost uniformly efficacious.

It was as if the plague had been hounded down and cornered, and its sudden

weakness lent new strength to the blunted weapons so far used against it. Only

at rare moments did the disease brace itself and make as it were a blind and

fatal leap at three or four patients whose recovery had been expected, a truly

ill-starred few, killed off when hope ran highest. Such was the case of M.

Othon, the magistrate, evacuated from the quarantine camp; Tarrou said of him

that "he'd had no luck," but one couldn't tell if he had in mind the life or the

death of M. Othon.

But, generally speaking, the epidemic was in retreat all along the line; the

official communiques, which had at first encouraged no more than shadowy, half-

hearted hopes, now confirmed the popular belief that the victory was won and the

enemy abandoning his positions. Really, however, it is doubtful if this could be

called a victory. All that could be said was that the disease seemed to be

leaving as unaccountably as it had come. Our strategy had not changed, but

whereas yesterday it had obviously failed, today it seemed triumphant. Indeed,

one's chief impression was that the epidemic had called a retreat after reaching

all its objectives; it had, so to speak, achieved its purpose.

Nevertheless, it seemed as if nothing had changed in the town. Silent as ever by

day, the streets filled up at nightfall with the usual crowds of people, now

wearing overcoats and scarves. Cafes and picture-houses did as much business as

before. But on a closer view you might notice that people looked less strained,

and they occasionally smiled. And this brought home the fact that since the

outbreak of plague no one had hitherto been seen to smile in public.

The truth was that for many months the town had been stifling under an airless

shroud, in which a rent had now been made, and every Monday when he turned on

the radio, each of us learned that the rift was widening; soon he would be able

to breathe freely. It was at best a negative solace, with no immediate impact on

men's lives. Still, had anyone been told a month earlier that a train had just

left or a boat put in, or that cars were to be allowed on the streets again, the

news would have been received with looks of incredulity; whereas in mid-January

an announcement of this kind would have caused no surprise. The change, no

doubt, was slight. Yet, however slight, it proved what a vast forward stride our

townsfolk had made in the way of hope. And indeed it could be said that once the

faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of the plague was ended.

It must, however, be admitted that our fellow citizens' reactions during that

month were diverse to the point of incoherence. More precisely, they fluctuated

between high optimism and extreme depression. Hence the odd circumstance that

several more attempts to escape took place at the very moment when the

statistics were most encouraging. This took the authorities by surprise, and,

apparently, the sentries too, since most of the "escapists" brought it off.

But, looking into it, one saw that people who tried to escape at this time were

prompted by quite understandable motives. Some of them plague had imbued with a

scepticism so thorough that it was now a second nature; they had become allergic

to hope in any form. Thus even when the plague had run its course, they went on

living by its standards. They were, in short, behind the times. In the case of

others, chiefly those who had been living until now in forced separation from

those they loved, the rising wind of hope, after all these months of durance and

depression, had fanned impatience to a blaze and swept away their self-control.

They were seized with a sort of panic at the thought that they might die so near

the goal and never see again the ones they loved, and their long privation have

no recompense.

Thus, though for weary months and months they had endured their long ordeal with

dogged perseverance, the first thrill of hope had been enough to shatter what

fear and hopelessness had failed to impair. And in the frenzy of their haste

they tried to outstrip the plague, incapable of keeping pace with it up to the

end.

Meanwhile, there were various symptoms of the growing optimism. Prices, for

instance, fell sharply. This fall was unaccountable from the purely economic

viewpoint.

Our difficulties were as great as ever, the gates were kept rigorously closed,

and the food situation was far from showing any improvement. Thus it was a

purely psychological reaction, as if the dwindling of the plague must have

repercussions in all fields. Others to profit by the spread of optimism were

those who used to live in groups and had been forced to live apart. The two

convents reopened and their communal life was resumed. The troops, too, were

regrouped in such barracks as had not been requisitioned, and settled down to

the garrison life of the past.

Minor details, but significant.

This state of subdued yet active ferment prevailed until January 25, when the

weekly total showed so striking a decline that, after consulting the medical

board, the authorities announced that the epidemic could be regarded as

definitely stemmed. True, the communique went on to say that, acting with a

prudence of which the population would certainly approve, the Prefect had

decided that the gates of the town were to remain closed for two weeks more, and

the prophylactic measures to remain in force for another month. During this

period, at the least sign of danger the standing orders would be strictly

enforced and, if necessary, prolonged thereafter for such a period as might be

deemed desirable."

All, however, concurred in regarding these phrases as mere official verbiage,

and the night of January 25 was the occasion of much festivity. To associate

himself with the popular rejoicings, the Prefect gave orders for the street

lighting to be resumed as in the past. And the townspeople paraded the

brilliantly lighted streets in boisterous groups, laughing and singing.

True, in some houses the shutters remained closed, and those within listened in

silence to the joyful shouts outside. Yet even in these houses of mourning a

feeling of deep relief prevailed; whether because at last the fear of seeing

other members of the household taken from them was calmed or because the shadow

of personal anxiety was lifted from their hearts. The families that perforce

withdrew themselves the most from the general jubilation were those who at this

hour had one of their members down with plague in hospital and, whether in a

quarantine camp or at home, waited in enforced seclusion for the epidemic to

have done with them as it had done with the others.

No doubt these families had hopes, but they hoarded them and forbade themselves

to draw on them before feeling quite sure they were justified. And this time of

waiting in silence and exile, in a limbo between joy and grief, seemed still

crueler for the gladness all around them.

But these exceptions did not diminish the satisfaction of the great majority. No

doubt the plague was not yet ended, a fact of which they were to be reminded;

still, in imagination they could already hear, weeks in advance, trains

whistling on their way to an outside world that had no limit, and steamers

hooting as they put out from the harbor across shining seas. Next day these

fancies would have passed and qualms of doubt returned. But for the moment the

whole town was on the move, quitting the dark, lugubrious confines where it had

struck its roots of stone, and setting forth at last, like a shipload of

survivors, toward a land of promise.

That night Tarrou, Rieux, Rambert, and their colleagues joined for a while the

marching crowds and they, too, felt as if they trod on air. Long after they had

turned off the main streets, even when in empty byways they walked past

shuttered houses, the joyful clamor followed them up, and because of their

fatigue somehow they could not disassociate the sorrow behind those closed

shutters from the joy filling the central streets. Thus the coming liberation

had a twofold aspect, of happiness and tears.

At one moment, when the cries of exultation in the distance were swelling to a

roar, Tarrou stopped abruptly. A small, sleek form was scampering along the

roadway: a cat, the first cat any of them had seen since the spring. It stopped

in the middle of the road, hesitated, licked a paw and quickly passed it behind

its right ear; then it started forward again and vanished into the darkness.

Tarrou smiled to himself; the little old man on the balcony, too, would be

pleased.

BUT in those days when the plague seemed to be retreating, slinking back to the

obscure lair from which it had stealthily emerged, at least one person in the

town viewed this retreat with consternation, if Tarrou's notes are to be

trusted; and that man was Cottard.

To tell the truth, these diary notes take a rather curious turn from the date on

which the death returns began to drop. The handwriting becomes much harder to

read, this may have been due to fatigue, and the diarist jumps from one topic to

another without transition. What is more, these later notes lack the objectivity

of the earlier ones; personal considerations creep in. Thus, sandwiched between

long passages dealing with the case of Cottard, we find a brief account of the

old man and the cats. Tarrou conveys to us that the plague had in no wise

lessened his appreciation of the old fellow, who continued equally to interest

him after the epidemic had run its course; unfortunately, he could not go on

interesting him, and this through no lack of good intentions on Tarrou's part.

He had done his best to see him again. Some days after that memorable 25th of

January he stationed himself at the corner of the little street. The cats were

back at their usual places, basking in the patches of sunlight. But at the

ritual hour the shutters stayed closed. And never once did Tarrou see them open

on the following days. He drew the rather odd conclusion that the old fellow was

either dead or vexed, if vexed, the reason being that he had thought that he was

right and the plague had put him in the wrong; if dead, the question was (as in

the case of the old asthmatic) had he been a saint? Tarrou hardly thought so,

but he found in the old man's case "a pointer."

"Perhaps," he wrote, "we can only reach approximations of sainthood. In which

case we must make shift with a mild, benevolent diabolism."

Interspersed with observations relating to Cottard are remarks, scattered here

and there, about Grand, he was now convalescent and had gone back to work as if

nothing had happened, and about Rieux's mother. The occasional conversations he

had with her, when living under the same roof, the old lady's attitudes, her

opinions on the plague, are all recorded in detail in the diary. Tarrou lays

stress above all on Mme Rieux's self-effacement, her way of explaining things in

the simplest possible words, her predilection for a special window at which she

always sat in the early evening, holding herself rather straight, her hands at

rest, her eyes fixed on the quiet street below, until twilight filled the room

and she showed among the gathering shadows as a motionless black form which

gradually merged into the invading darkness.

He remarks on the "lightness" with which she moved from one room to the other;

on her kindness, though no precise instances had come to his notice he discerned

its gentle glow in all she said and did; on the gift she had of knowing

everything without (apparently) taking thought; and lastly that, dim and silent

though she was, she quailed before no light, even the garish light of the

plague.

At this point Tarrou's handwriting began to fall off oddly; indeed, the

following lines were almost illegible. And, as if in confirmation of this loss

of grip upon himself, the last lines of the entry deal, for the first time in

the diary, with his personal life. "She reminds me of my mother; what I loved

most in Mother was her self-effacement, her 'dimness,' as they say, and it's she

I've always wanted to get back to. It happened eight years ago; but I can't say

she died. She only effaced herself a trifle more than usual, and when I looked

round she was no longer there."

But to return to Cottard. When the weekly totals began to show a decline, he

visited Rieux several times on various pretexts. But obviously what he really

wanted was to get from Rieux his opinion on the probable course of the epidemic.

"Do you really think it can stop like that, all of a sudden?" He was skeptical

about this, or anyhow professed to be. But the fact that he kept on asking the

question seemed to imply he was less sure than he professed to be. From the

middle of January Rieux gave him fairly optimistic answers. But these were not

to Cottard's liking, and his reactions varied on each occasion, from mere

petulance to great despondency. One day the doctor was moved to tell him that,

though the statistics were highly promising, it was too soon to say definitely

that we were out of the wood.

"In other words," Cottard said promptly, "there's no knowing. It may start again

at any moment."

"Quite so. Just as it's equally possible the improvement may speed up."

Distressing to everyone else, this state of uncertainty seemed to agree with

Cottard. Tarrou observed that he would enter into conversations with shopkeepers

in his part of the town, with the obvious desire of propagating the opinion

expressed by Rieux. Indeed, he had no trouble in doing this. After the first

exhilaration following the announcement of the plague's decline had worn off,

doubts had returned to many minds. And the sight of their anxiety reassured

Cottard. Just as at other times he yielded to discouragement. "Yes," he said

gloomily to Tarrou, "one of these days the gates will be opened. And then,

you'll see, they'll drop me like a live coal!"

Everyone was struck by his abrupt changes of mood during the first three weeks

of January. Though normally he spared no pains to make himself liked by

neighbors and acquaintances, now, for whole days, he deliberately cold-

shouldered them. On these occasions, so Tarrou gathered, he abruptly cut off

outside contacts and retired morosely into his shell. He was no more to be seen

in restaurants or at the theater or in his favorite cafes.

However, he seemed unable to resume the obscure, humdrum life he had led before

the epidemic. He stayed in his room and had his meals sent up from a near-by

restaurant. Only at nightfall did he venture forth to make some small purchases,

and on leaving the shop he would furtively roam the darker, less-frequented

streets. Once or twice Tarrou ran into him on these occasions, but failed to

elicit more than a few gruff monosyllables. Then, from one day to another, he

became sociable again, talked volubly about the plague, asking everyone for his

views on it, and mingled in the crowd with evident pleasure.

On January 25, the day of the official announcement, Cottard went to cover

again. Two days later Tarrou came across him loitering in a side-street. When

Cottard suggested he should accompany him home, Tarrou demurred; he'd had a

particularly tiring day. But Cottard wouldn't hear of a refusal. He seemed much

agitated, gesticulated freely, spoke very rapidly and in a very loud tone. He

began by asking Tarrou if he really thought the official communique meant an end

of the plague. Tarrou replied that obviously a mere official announcement

couldn't stop an epidemic, but it certainly looked as if, barring accidents, it

would shortly cease.

"Yes," Cottard said. "Barring accidents. And accidents will happen, won't they?"

Tarrou pointed out that the authorities had allowed for that possibility by

refusing

to open the gates for another fortnight.

"And very wise they were!" Cottard exclaimed in the same excited tone. "By the

way things are going, I should say they'll have to eat their words."

Tarrou agreed this might be so; still, he thought it wiser to count on the

opening of the gates and a return to normal life in the near future.

"Granted!" Cottard rejoined. "But what do you mean by 'a return to normal

life'?" Tarrou smiled. "New films at the picture-houses."

But Cottard didn't smile. Was it supposed, he asked, that the plague wouldn't

have changed anything and the life of the town would go on as before, exactly as

if nothing had happened? Tarrou thought that the plague would have changed

things and not changed them; naturally our fellow citizens' strongest desire

was, and would be, to behave as if nothing had changed and for that reason

nothing would be changed, in a sense. But, to look at it from another angle, one

can't forget everything, however great one's wish to do so; the plague was bound

to leave traces, anyhow, in people's hearts.

To this Cottard rejoined curtly that he wasn't interested in hearts; indeed,

they were the last thing he bothered about. What interested him was knowing

whether the whole administration wouldn't be changed, lock, stock, and barrel;

whether, for instance, the public services would function as before. Tarrou had

to admit he had no inside knowledge on the matter; his personal theory was that

after the upheaval caused by the epidemic, there would be some delay in getting

these services under way again. Also, it seemed likely that all sorts of new

problems would arise and necessitate at least some reorganization of the

administrative system.

Cottard nodded. "Yes, that's quite on the cards; in fact everyone will have to

make a fresh start."

They were nearing Cottard's house. He now seemed more cheerful, determined to

take a rosier view of the future. Obviously he was picturing the town entering

on a new lease of life, blotting out its past and starting again with a clean

sheet.

"So that's that," Tarrou smiled. "Quite likely things will pan out all right for

you, too, who can say? It'll be a new life for all of us, in a manner of

speaking."

They were shaking hands at the door of the apartment house where Cottard lived.

"Quite right!" Cottard was growing more and more excited. "That would be a

great idea, starting again with a clean sheet."

Suddenly from the lightless hall two men emerged. Tarrou had hardly time to hear

his companion mutter: "Now, what do those birds want?" when the men in question,

who looked like subordinate government employees in their best clothes, cut in

with an inquiry if his name was Cottard. With a stifled exclamation Cottard

swung round and dashed off into the darkness. Taken by surprise, Tarrou and the

two men gazed blankly at each other for some moments.

Then Tarrou asked them what they wanted. In noncommittal tones they informed him

that they wanted "some information," and walked away, unhurrying, in the

direction Cottard had taken.

On his return home Tarrou wrote out an account of this peculiar incident,

following it up with a "Feeling very tired tonight", which is confirmed by his

handwriting in this entry. He added that he had still much to do, but that was

no reason for not "holding himself in readiness," and he questioned if he were

ready.

As a sort of postscript, and, in fact, it is here that Tarrou's diary ends, he

noted that there is always a certain hour of the day and of the night when a

man's courage is at its lowest ebb, and it was that hour only that he feared.

When next day, a few days before the date fixed for the opening of the gates,

Dr. Rieux came home at noon, he was wondering if the telegram he was expecting

had arrived. Though his days were no less strenuous than at the height of the

epidemic, the prospect of imminent release had obliterated his fatigue. Hope had

returned and with it a new zest for life. No man can live on the stretch all the

time, with his energy and willpower strained to the breaking-point, and it is a

joy to be able to relax at last and loosen nerves and muscles that were braced

for the struggle. If the telegram, too, that he awaited brought good news, Rieux

would be able to make a fresh start. Indeed, he had a feeling that everyone in

those days was making a fresh start.

He walked past the concierge's room in the hall. The new man, old Michel's

successor, his face pressed to the window looking on the hall, gave him a smile.

As he went up the stairs, the man's face, pale with exhaustion and privation,

but smiling, hovered before his eyes.

Yes, he'd make a fresh start, once the period of "abstractions" was over, and

with any luck? He was opening the door with these thoughts in his mind when he

saw his mother coming down the hall to meet him. M. Tarrou, she told him, wasn't

well. He had risen at the usual time, but did not feel up to going out and had

returned to bed. Mme Rieux felt worried about him.

"Quite likely it's nothing serious," her son said.

Tarrou was lying on his back, his heavy head deeply indenting the pillow, the

coverlet bulging above his massive chest. His head was aching and his

temperature up. The symptoms weren't very definite, he told Rieux, but they

might well be those of plague.

After examining him Rieux said: "No, there's nothing definite as yet."

But Tarrou also suffered from a raging thirst, and in the hallway the doctor

told his mother that it might be plague.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Surely that's not possible, not now!" And after a moment

added: "Let's keep him here, Bernard."

Rieux pondered. "Strictly speaking, I've no right to do that," he said

doubtfully. "Still, the gates will be opened quite soon. If you weren't here, I

think I'd take it on myself."

"Bernard, let him stay, and let me stay too. You know, I've just had another

inoculation."

The doctor pointed out that Tarrou, too, had had inoculations, though it was

possible, tired as he was, he'd overlooked the last one or omitted to take the

necessary precautions.

Rieux was going to the surgery as he spoke, and when he returned to the bedroom

Tarrou noticed that he had a box of the big ampoules containing the serum.

"Ah, so it is that," he said.

"Not necessarily; but we mustn't run any risks."

Without replying Tarrou extended his arm and submitted to the prolonged

injections he himself had so often administered to others.

"We'll judge better this evening." Rieux looked Tarrou in the eyes. "But what

about isolating me, Rieux?"

"It's by no means certain that you have plague." Tarrou smiled with an effort.

"Well, it's the first time I've known you do the injection without ordering the

patient off to the isolation ward."

Rieux looked away.

"You'll be better here. My mother and I will look after you."

Tarrou said nothing and the doctor, who was putting away the ampoules in the

box, waited for him to speak before looking round. But still Tarrou said

nothing, and finally Rieux went up to the bed. The sick man was gazing at him

steadily, and though his face was drawn, the gray eyes were calm. Rieux smiled

down on him.

"Now try to sleep. I'll be back soon."

As he was going out he heard Tarrou calling, and turned back. Tarrou's manner

had an odd effect, as though he were at once trying to keep back what he had to

say and forcing himself to say it.

"Rieux," he said at last, "you must tell me the whole truth. I count on that."

"I promise it."

Tarrou's heavy face relaxed in a brief smile.

"Thanks. I don't want to die, and I shall put up a fight. But if I lose the

match, I want to make a good end of it."

Bending forward, Rieux pressed his shoulder.

"No. To become a saint, you need to live. So fight away!"

In the course of that day the weather, which after being very cold had grown

slightly milder, broke in a series of violent hailstorms followed by rain. At

sunset the sky cleared a little, and it was bitterly cold again. Rieux came home

in the evening. His overcoat still on, he entered his friend's bedroom. Tarrou

did not seem to have moved, but his set lips, drained white by fever, told of

the effort he he was keeping up.

"Well?" Rieux asked.

Tarrou raised his broad shoulders a little out of the bedclothes. "Well," he

said, "I'm losing the match."

The doctor bent over him. Ganglia had formed under the burning skin and there

was a rumbling in his chest, like the sound of a hidden forge. The strange thing

was that Tarrou showed symptoms of both varieties of plague at once.

Rieux straightened up and said the serum hadn't yet had time to take effect. An

uprush of fever in his throat drowned the few words that Tarrou tried to utter.

After dinner Rieux and his mother took up their posts at the sick man's bedside.

The night began with a struggle, and Rieux knew that this grim wrestling with

the angel of plague was to last until dawn. In this struggle Tarrou's robust

shoulders and chest were not his greatest assets; rather, the blood that had

spurted under Rieux's needle and, in this blood, that something more vital than

the soul, which no human skill can bring to light.

The doctor's task could be only to watch his friend's struggle. As to what he

was about to do, the stimulants to inject, the abscesses to stimulate? many

months' repeated failures had taught him to appreciate such expedients at their

true value. Indeed, the only way in which he might help was to provide

opportunities for the beneficence of chance, which too often stays dormant

unless roused to action. Luck was an ally he could not dispense with. For Rieux

was confronted by an aspect of the plague that baffled him. Yet again it was

doing all it could to confound the tactics used against it; it launched attacks

in unexpected places and retreated from those where it seemed definitely lodged.

Once more it was out to darken counsel.

Tarrou struggled without moving. Not once in the course of the night did he

counter the enemy's attacks by restless agitation; only with all his stolid

bulk, with silence, did he carry on the fight. Nor did he even try to speak,

thus intimating, after his fashion, that he could no longer let his attention

stray. Rieux could follow the vicissitudes of the struggle only in his friend's

eyes, now open and now shut; in the eyelids, now more closely welded to the

eyeball, now distended; and in his gaze fixed on some object in the room or

brought back to the doctor and his mother. And each time it met the doctor's

gaze, with a great effort Tarrou smiled.

At one moment there came a sound of hurrying footsteps in the street. They were

in flight before a distant throbbing which gradually approached until the street

was loud with the clamor of the downpour; another rain-squall was sweeping the

town, mingled presently with hailstones that clattered on the sidewalk. Window

awnings were flapping wildly. Rieux, whose attention had been diverted

momentarily by the noises of the squall, looked again across the shadows at

Tarrou's face, on which fell the light of a small bedside lamp. His mother was

knitting, raising her eyes now and then from her work to gaze at the sick man.

The doctor had done everything that could be done. When the squall had passed,

the silence in the room grew denser, filled only by the silent turmoil of the

unseen battle. His nerves overwrought by sleeplessness, the doctor fancied he

could hear, on the edge of the silence, that faint eerie sibilance which had

haunted his ears ever since the beginning of the epidemic. He made a sign to his

mother, indicating she should go to bed. She shook her head, and her eyes grew

brighter; then she examined carefully, at her needle-tips, a stitch of which she

was unsure. Rieux got up, gave the sick man a drink, and sat down again.

Footsteps rang on the pavement, nearing, then receding; people were taking

advantage of the lull to hurry home. For the first time the doctor realized that

this night, without the clang of ambulances and full of belated wayfarers, was

just like a night of the past, a plague-free night. It was as if the pestilence,

hounded away by cold, the street-lamps, and the crowd, had fled from the depths

of the town and taken shelter in this warm room and was launching its last

offensive at Tarrou's inert body. No longer did it thresh the air above the

houses with its flail. But it was whistling softly in the stagnant air of the

sickroom, and this it was that Rieux had been hearing since the long vigil

began. And now it was for him to wait and watch until that strange sound ceased

here too, and here as well the plague confessed defeat.

A little before dawn Rieux leaned toward his mother and whispered:

"You'd better have some rest now, as you'll have to relieve rne at eight. Mind

you take your drops before going to bed."

Mme Rieux rose, folded her knitting, and went to the bedside. Tarrou had had his

eyes shut for some time. Sweat had plastered his hair on his stubborn forehead.

Mme Rieux sighed, and he opened his eyes. He saw the gentle face bent over him

and, athwart the surge of fever, that steadfast smile took form again. But at

once the eyes closed. Left to himself, Rieux moved into the chair his mother had

just left. The street was silent and no sound came from the sleeping town. The

chill of daybreak was beginning to make itself felt.

The doctor dozed off, but very soon an early cart rattling down the street

awaked him. Shivering a little, he looked at Tarrou and saw that a lull had

come; he, too, was sleeping. The iron-shod wheels rumbled away into the

distance. Darkness still was pressing on the windowpanes. When the doctor came

beside the bed, Tarrou gazed at him with expressionless eyes, like a man still

on the frontier of sleep.

"You slept, didn't you?" Rieux asked. "Yes."

"Breathing better?"

"A bit. Does that mean anything?"

Rieux kept silent for some moments; then he said:

"No, Tarrou, it doesn't mean anything. You know as well as I that there's often

a remission in the morning."

"Thanks." Tarrou nodded his approval. "Always tell me the exact truth."

Rieux was sitting on the side of the bed. Beside him he could feel the sick

man's legs, stiff and hard as the limbs of an effigy on a tomb. Tarrou was

breathing with more difficulty.

"The fever'll come back, won't it, Rieux?" he gasped. "Yes. But at noon we shall

know where we stand."

Tarrou shut his eyes; he seemed to be mustering up his strength. There was a

look of utter weariness on his face. He was waiting for the fever to rise and

already it was stirring somewhat in the depths of his being. When he opened his

eyes, his gaze was misted. It brightened only when he saw Rieux bending over

him, a tumbler in his hand.

'Drink '

Tarrou drank, then slowly lowered his head on to the pillow. "It's a long

business," he murmured.

Rieux clasped his arm, but Tarrou, whose head was averted, showed no reaction.

Then suddenly, as if some inner dike had given way without warning, the fever

surged back, dyeing his cheeks and forehead. Tarrou's eyes came back to the

doctor, who, bending again, gave him a look of affectionate encouragement.

Tarrou tried to shape a smile, but it could not force its way through the set

jaws and lips welded by dry saliva. In the rigid face only the eyes lived still,

glowing with courage.

At seven Mme Rieux returned to the bedroom. The doctor went to the surgery to

ring up the hospital and arrange for a substitute. He also decided to postpone

his consultations; then lay down for some moments on the surgery couch.

Five minutes later he went back to the bedroom. Tarrou's face was turned toward

Mme Rieux, who was sitting close beside the bed, her hands folded on her lap; in

the dim light of the room she seemed no more than a darker patch of shadow.

Tarrou was gazing at her so intently that, putting a finger to her lips, Mme

Rieux rose and switched off the bedside lamp. Behind the curtains the light was

growing, and presently, when the sick man's face grew visible, Mme Rieux could

see his eyes still intent on her. Bending above the bed, she smoothed out the

bolster and, as she straightened up, laid her hand for a moment on his moist,

tangled hair. Then she heard a muffled voice, which seemed to come from very far

away, murmur: "Thank you," and that all was well now. By the time she was back

in her chair Tarrou had shut his eyes, and, despite the sealed mouth, a faint

smile seemed to hover on the wasted face.

At noon the fever reached its climax. A visceral cough racked the sick man's

body and he now was spitting blood. The ganglia had ceased swelling, but they

were still there, like lumps of iron embedded in the joints. Rieux decided that

lancing them was impracticable. Now and then, in the intervals between bouts of

fever and coughing fits, Tarrou still gazed at his friends. But soon his eyes

opened less and less often and the glow that shone out from the ravaged face in

the brief moments of recognition grew steadily fainter. The storm, lashing his

body into convulsive movement, lit it up with ever rarer flashes, and in the

heart of the tempest he was slowly drifting, derelict.

And now Rieux had before him only a masklike face, inert, from which the smile

had gone forever. This human form, his friend's, lacerated by the spear-thrusts

of the plague, consumed by searing, superhuman fires, buffeted by all the raging

winds of heaven, was foundering under his eyes in the dark flood of the

pestilence, and he could do nothing to avert the wreck. He could only stand,

unavailing, on the shore, empty-handed and sick at heart, unarmed and helpless

yet again under the onset of calamity. And thus, when the end came, the tears

that blinded Rieux's eyes were tears of impotence; and he did not see Tarrou

roll over, face to the wall, and die with a short, hollow groan as if somewhere

within him an essential chord had snapped.

The next night was not one of struggle but of silence. In the tranquil death-

chamber, beside the dead body now in everyday clothing, here, too, Rieux felt it

brooding, that elemental peace which, when he was sitting many nights before on

the terrace high above the plague, had followed the brief foray at the gates.

Then, already, it had brought to his mind the silence brooding over the beds in

which he had let men die.

There as here it was the same solemn pause, the lull that follows battle; it was

the silence of defeat. But the silence now enveloping his dead friend, so dense,

so much akin to the nocturnal silence of the streets and of the town set free at

last, made Rieux cruelly aware that this defeat was final, the last disastrous

battle that ends a war and makes peace itself an ill beyond all remedy. The

doctor could not tell if Tarrou had found peace, now that all was over, but for

himself he had a feeling that no peace was possible to him henceforth, any more

than there can be an armistice for a mother bereaved of her son or for a man who

buries his friend.

The night was cold again, with frosty stars sparkling in a clear, wintry sky.

And in the dimly lit room they felt the cold pressing itself to the windowpanes

and heard the long, silvery suspiration of a polar night. Mme Rieux sat near the

bed in her usual attitude, her right side lit up by the bedside lamp. In the

center of the room, outside the little zone of light, Rieux sat, waiting. Now

and then thoughts of his wife waylaid him, but he brushed them aside each time.

When the night began, the heels of passers-by had rung briskly in the frozen

air.

"Have you attended to everything?" Mme Rieux had asked. "Yes, I've telephoned."

Then they had resumed their silent vigil. From time to time Mme Rieux stole a

glance at her son, and whenever he caught her doing this, he smiled. Out in the

street the usual night-time sounds bridged the long silences. A good many cars

were on the road again, though officially this was not yet permitted; they sped

past with a long hiss of tires on the pavement, receded, and returned. Voices,

distant calls silence again, a clatter of horse hoofs, the squeal of streetcars

rounding a curve, vague murmurs, then once more the quiet breathing of the

night.

"Bernard?" "Yes?"

"Not too tired?" "No."

At that moment he knew what his mother was thinking, and that she loved him. But

he knew, too, that to love someone means relatively little; or, rather, that

love is never strong enough to find the words befitting it. Thus he and his

mother would always love each other silently. And one day she, or he, would die,

without ever, all their lives long, having gone farther than this by way of

making their affection known. Thus, too, he had lived at Tarrou's side, and

Tarrou had died this evening without their friendship's having had time to enter

fully into the life of either. Tarrou had "lost the match," as he put it. But

what had he, Rieux, won? No more than the experience of having known plague and

remembering it, of having known friendship and remembering it, of knowing

affection and being destined one day to remember it. So all a man could win in

the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories. But Tarrou,

perhaps, would have called that winning the match.

Another car passed, and Mme Rieux stirred slightly. Rieux smiled toward her. She

assured him she wasn't tired and immediately added:

"You must go and have a good long rest in the mountains, over there." "Yes,

Mother."

Certainly he'd take a rest "over there." It, too, would be a pretext for memory.

But if that was what it meant, winning the match, how hard it must be to live

only with what one knows and what one remembers, cut off from what one hopes

for! It was thus, most probably, that Tarrou had lived, and he realized the

bleak sterility of a life without illusions. There can be no peace without hope,

and Tarrou, denying as he did the right to condemn anyone whomsoever, though he

knew well that no one can help condemning and it befalls even the victim

sometimes to turn executioner, Tarrou had lived a life riddled with

contradictions and had never known hope's solace.

Did that explain his aspiration toward saintliness, his quest of peace by

service in the cause of others? Actually Rieux had no idea of the answer to that

question, and it mattered little. The only picture of Tarrou he would always

have would be the picture of a man who firmly gripped the steering-wheel of his

car when driving, or else the picture of that stalwart body, now lying

motionless. Knowing meant that: a living warmth, and a picture of death.

That, no doubt, explains Dr. Rieux's composure on receiving next morning the

news of his wife's death. He was in the surgery. His mother came in, almost

running, and handed him a telegram; then went back to the hall to give the

telegraph-boy a tip. When

she returned, her son was holding the telegram open in his hand. She looked at

him, but his eyes were resolutely fixed on the window; it was flooded with the

effulgence of the morning sun rising above the harbor.

"Bernard," she said gently.

The doctor turned and looked at her almost as if she were a stranger. "The

telegram?"

"Yes," he said, "that's it. A week ago."

Mme Rieux turned her face toward the window. Rieux kept silent for a while. Then

he told his mother not to cry, he'd been expecting it, but it was hard all the

same. And he knew, in saying this, that this suffering was nothing new. For many

months, and for the last two days, it was the selfsame suffering going on and

on.

AT last, at daybreak on a fine February morning, the ceremonial opening of the

gates took place, acclaimed by the populace, the newspapers, the radio, and

official communiques. It only remains for the narrator to give what account he

can of the rejoicings that followed, though he himself was one of those debarred

from sharing in them wholeheartedly.

Elaborate day and night fetes were organized, and at the same time smoke began

to rise from locomotives in the station, and ships were already heading for our

harbour, reminders in their divers ways that this was the long-awaited day of

reuniting, and the end of tears for all who had been parted.

We can easily picture, at this stage, the consequences of that feeling of

separation which had so long rankled in the hearts of so many of our townsfolk.

Trains coming in were as crowded as those that left the town in the course of

the day. Every passenger had reserved his seat long in advance and had been on

tenterhooks during the past fortnight lest at the last moment the authorities

should go back on their decision. Some of these incoming travelers were still

somewhat nervous; though as a rule they knew the lot of those nearest and

dearest to them, they were still in the dark about others and the town itself,

of which their imagination painted a grim and terrifying picture. But this

applies only to people who had not been eating their hearts out during the long

months of exile, and not to parted lovers.

The lovers, indeed, were wholly wrapped up in their fixed idea, and for them one

thing only had changed.

Whereas during those months of separation time had never gone quickly enough for

their liking and they were always wanting to speed its flight, now that they

were in sight of the town they would have liked to slow it down and hold each

moment in suspense, once the brakes went on and the train was entering the

station. For the sensation, confused perhaps, but none the less poignant for

that, of all those days and weeks and months of life lost to their love made

them vaguely feel they were entitled to some compensation; this present hour of

joy should run at half the speed of those long hours of waiting.

And the people who awaited them at home or on the platform, among the latter

Rambert, whose wife, warned in good time, had got busy at once and was coming by

the first train, were likewise fretting with impatience and quivering with

anxiety. For even Rambert felt a nervous tremor at the thought that soon he

would have to confront a love and a devotion that the plague months had slowly

refined to a pale abstraction, with the flesh-and-blood woman who had given rise

to them.

If only he could put the clock back and be once more the man who, at the

outbreak of the epidemic, had had only one thought and one desire: to escape and

return to the woman he loved! But that, he knew, was out of the question now; he

had changed too greatly. The plague had forced on him a detachment which, try as

he might, he couldn't think away, and which like a formless fear haunted his

mind. Almost he thought the plague had ended too abruptly, he hadn't had time to

pull himself together. Happiness was bearing down on him full speed, the event

outrunning expectation. Rambert understood that all would be restored to him in

a flash, and joy break on him like a flame with which there is no dallying.

Everyone indeed, more or less consciously, felt as he did, and it is of all

those people on the platform that we wish to speak. Each was returning to his

personal life, yet the sense of comradeship persisted and they were exchanging

smiles and cheerful glances among themselves. But the moment they saw the smoke

of the approaching engine, the feeling of exile vanished before an uprush of

overpowering, bewildering joy. And when the train stopped, all those

interminable-seeming separations which often had begun on this same platform

came to an end in one ecstatic moment, when arms closed with hungry

possessiveness on bodies whose living shape they had forgotten.

As for Rambert, he hadn't time to see that form running toward him; already she

had flung herself upon his breast. And with his arms locked around her, pressing

to his shoulder the head of which he saw only the familiar hair, he let his

tears flow freely, unknowing if they rose from present joy or from sorrow too

long repressed; aware only that they would prevent his making sure if the face

buried in the hollow of his shoulder were the face of which he had dreamed so

often or, instead, a stranger's face. For the moment he wished to behave like

all those others around him who believed, or made believe, that plague can come

and go without changing anything in men's hearts.

Nestling to one another, they went to their homes, blind to the outside world

and seemingly triumphant over the plague, forgetting every sadness and the

plight of those who had come by the same train and found no one awaiting them,

and were bracing themselves to hear in their homes a confirmation of the fear

that the long silence had already implanted in their hearts.

For these last, who had now for company only their new-born grief, for those who

at this moment were dedicating themselves to a lifelong memory of bereavement,

for these unhappy people matters were very different, the pangs of separation

had touched their climax. For the mothers, husbands, wives, and lovers who had

lost all joy, now that the loved one lay under a layer of quicklime in a death-

pit or was a mere handful of indistinctive ashes in a gray mound, the plague had

not yet ended.

But who gave a thought to these lonely mourners? Routing the cold flaws that had

been threshing the air since early-morning, the sun was pouring on the town a

steady flood of tranquil light. In the forts on the hills, under the sky of

pure, unwavering blue, guns were thundering without a break. And everyone was

out and about to celebrate those crowded moments when the time of ordeal ended

and the time of forgetting had not yet begun.

In streets and squares people were dancing. Within twenty-four hours the motor

traffic had doubled and the ever more numerous cars were held up at every turn

by merry-making crowds. Every church bell was in full peal throughout the

afternoon, and the bells filled the blue and gold sky with their reverberations.

Indeed, in all the churches thanksgiving services were being held. But at the

same time the places of entertainment were packed, and the cafes, caring nothing

for the morrow, were producing their last bottles of liquor. A noisy concourse

surged round every bar, including loving couples who fondled each other without

a thought for appearances. All were laughing or shouting. The reserves of

emotion pent up during those many months when for everybody the flame of life

burned low were being recklessly squandered to celebrate this, the red-letter

day of their survival. Tomorrow real life would begin again, with its

restrictions.

But for the moment people in very different walks of life were rubbing

shoulders, fraternizing. The leveling-out that death's imminence had failed in

practice to accomplish was realized at last, for a few gay hours, in the rapture

of escape.

But this rather tawdry exuberance was only one aspect of the town that day; not

a few of those filling the streets at sundown, among them Rambert and his wife,

hid under an air of calm satisfaction subtler forms of happiness. Many couples,

indeed, and many families, looked like people out for a casual stroll, no more

than that; in reality most of them were making sentimental pilgrimages to places

where they had gone to school with suffering. The newcomers were being shown the

striking or obscurer tokens of the plague, relics of its passage. In some cases

the survivor merely played the part of guide, the eyewitness who has "been

through it," and talked freely of the danger without mentioning his fear.

These were the milder forms of pleasure, little more than recreation. In other

cases, however, there was more emotion to these walks about the town, as when a

man, pointing to some place charged for him with sad yet tender associations,

would say to the girl or woman beside him: "This is where, one evening just like

this, I longed for you so desperately, and you weren't there!" These passionate

pilgrims could readily be distinguished; they formed oases of whispers, aloof,

self-centered, in the turbulence of the crowd. Far more effectively than the

bands playing in the squares they vouched for the vast joy of liberation.

These ecstatic couples, locked together, hardly speaking, proclaimed in the

midst of the tumult of rejoicing, with the proud egoism and injustice of happy

people, that the plague was over, the reign of terror ended. Calmly they denied,

in the teeth of the evidence, that we had ever known a crazy world in which men

were killed off like flies, or that precise savagery, that calculated frenzy of

the plague, which instilled an odious freedom as to all that was not the here

and now; or those charnel-house stenches which stupefied whom they did not kill.

In short, they denied that we had ever been that hag-ridden populace a part of

which was daily fed into a furnace and went up in oily fumes, while the rest, in

shackled impotence, waited their turn.

That, anyhow, was what seemed evident to Rieux when towards the close of the

afternoon, on his way to the outskirts of the town, he walked alone in an uproar

of bells, guns, bands, and deafening shouts. There was no question of his taking

a day off; sick men have no holidays. Through the cool, clear light bathing the

town rose the familiar smells of roasting meat and anise-flavored liquor. All

around him happy faces were turned toward the shining sky, men and women with

flushed cheeks embraced one another with low, tense cries of desire. Yes, the

plague had ended with the terror, and those passionately straining arms told

what it had meant: exile and deprivation in the profoundest meaning of the

words.

For the first time Rieux found that he could give a name to the family likeness

that for several months he had detected in the faces in the streets. He had only

to look around him now. At the end of the plague, with its misery and

privations, these men and women had come to wear the aspect of the part they had

been playing for so long, the part of emigrants whose faces first, and now their

clothes, told of long banishment from a distant homeland. Once plague had shut

the gates of the town, they had settled down to a life of separation, debarred

from the living warmth that gives forgetfulness of all.

In different degrees, in every part of the town, men and women had been yearning

for a reunion, not of the same kind for all, but for all alike ruled out. Most

of them had longed intensely for an absent one, for the warmth of a body, for

love, or merely for a life that habit had endeared. Some, often without knowing

it, suffered from being deprived of the company of friends and from their

inability to get in touch with them through the usual channels of friendship,

letters, trains, and boats. Others, fewer these, Tarrou may have been one of

them, had desired reunion with something they couldn't have defined, but which

seemed to them the only desirable thing on earth. For want of a better name,

they sometimes called it peace.

Rieux walked on. As he progressed, the crowds grew thicker, the din multiplied,

and he had a feeling that his destination was receding as he advanced. Gradually

he found himself drawn into the seething, clamorous mass and understanding more

and more the cry that went up from it, a cry that, for some part at least, was

his. Yes, they had suffered together, in body no less than in soul, from a cruel

leisure, exile without redress, thirst that was never slaked. Among the heaps of

corpses, the clanging bells of ambulances, the warnings of what goes by the name

of fate, among unremitting waves of fear and agonized revolt, the horror that

such things could be, always a great voice had been ringing in the ears of these

forlorn, panicked people, a voice calling them back to the land of their desire,

a homeland.

It lay outside the walls of the stifled, strangled town, in the fragrant

brushwood of the hills, in the waves of the sea, under free skies, and in the

custody of love. And it was to this, their lost home, toward happiness, they

longed to return, turning their backs disgustedly on all else.

As to what that exile and that longing for reunion meant, Rieux had no idea. But

as he walked ahead, jostled on all sides, accosted now and then, and gradually

made his way into less crowded streets, he was thinking it has no importance

whether such things have or have not a meaning; all we need consider is the

answer given to men's hope.

Henceforth he knew the answer, and he perceived it better now he was in the

outskirts of the town, in almost empty streets. Those who, clinging to their

little own, had set their hearts solely on returning to the home of their love

had sometimes their reward, though some of them were still walking the streets

alone, without the one they had awaited. Then, again, those were happy who had

not suffered a twofold separation, like some of us who, in the days before the

epidemic, had failed to build their love on a solid basis at the outset, and had

spent years blindly groping for the pact, so slow and hard to come by, that in

the long run binds together ill-assorted lovers. Such people had had, like Rieux

himself, the rashness of counting overmuch on time; and now they were parted

forever. But others, like Rambert, to whom the doctor had said early that

morning: "Courage! It's up to you now to prove you're right", had, without

faltering, welcomed back the loved one who they thought was lost to them. And

for some time, anyhow, they would be happy.

They knew now that if there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes

attain, it is human love. But for those others who aspired beyond and above the

human individual toward something they could not even imagine, there had been no

answer. Tarrou might seem to have won through to that hardly-come-by peace of

which he used to speak; but he had found it only in death, too late to turn it

to account. If others, however, Rieux could see them in the doorways of houses,

passionately embracing and gazing hungrily at one another in the failing sunset

glow, had got what they wanted, this was because they had asked for the one

thing that depended on them solely. And as he turned the corner of the street

where Grand and Cottard lived, Rieux was thinking it was only right that those

whose desires are limited to man and his humble yet formidable love should

enter, if only now and then, into their reward.

THIS chronicle is drawing to an end, and this seems to be the moment for Dr.

Bernard Rieux to confess that he is the narrator. But before describing the

closing scenes, he would wish anyhow to justify his undertaking and to set it

down that he expressly made a point of adopting the tone of an impartial

observer. His profession put him in touch with a great many of our townspeople

while plague was raging, and he had opportunities of hearing their various

opinions. Thus he was well placed for giving a true account of all he saw and

heard. But in so doing he has tried to keep within the limits that seemed

desirable. For instance, in a general way he has confined himself to describing

only such things as he was enabled to see for himself, and has refrained from

attributing to his fellow sufferers thoughts that, when all is said and done,

they were not bound to have.

And as for documents, he has used only such as chance, or mischance, put in his

way.

Summoned to give evidence regarding what was a sort of crime, he has exercised

the restraint that behooves a conscientious witness. All the same, following the

dictates of his heart, he has deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to

share with his fellow citizens the only certitudes they had in common, love,

exile, and suffering. Thus he can truly say there was not one of their anxieties

in which he did not share, no predicament of theirs that was not his.

To be an honest witness, it was for him to confine himself mainly to what people

did or said and what could be gleaned from documents. Regarding his personal

troubles and his long suspense, his duty was to hold his peace. When now and

then he refers to such matters, it is only for the light they may throw on his

fellow citizens and in order to give a picture, as well defined as possible, of

what most of the time they felt confusedly. Actually, this self-imposed

reticence cost him little effort. Whenever tempted to add his personal note to

the myriad voices of the plague-stricken, he was deterred by the thought that

not one of his sufferings but was common to all the others and that in a world

where sorrow is so often lonely, this was an advantage. Thus, decidedly, it was

up to him to speak for all.

But there was at least one of our townsfolk for whom Dr. Rieux could not speak,

the man of whom Tarrou said one day to Rieux: "His only real crime is that of

having in his heart approved of something that killed off men, women, and

children. I can understand the rest, but for that I am obliged to pardon him."

It is fitting that this chronicle should end with some reference to that man,

who had an ignorant, that is to say lonely, heart.

On turning out of the main thoroughfares where the rejoicings were in full

swing, and entering the street where Grand and Cottard lived, Dr. Rieux was held

up by a police cordon. Nothing could have surprised him more. This quiet part of

the town seemed all the quieter for the sounds of festivity in the distance, and

the doctor pictured it as deserted as it was tranquil.

"Sorry, doctor," a policeman said, "but I can't let you through. There's a crazy

fellow with a gun, shooting at everybody. But you'd better stay; we may need

you."

Just then Rieux saw Grand coming toward him. Grand, too, had no idea what was

happening and the police had stopped him, too. He had been told that the shots

came from the house where he lived. They could see, some way down the street,

the front of the house, bathed in cool evening light. Farther down the street

was another line of policemen like the one that had prevented Rieux and Grand

from advancing, and behind the line some of the local residents could be seen

crossing and recrossing the street hastily.

The street immediately in front of the house was quite empty and in the middle

of the hollow square lay a hat and a piece of dirty cloth. Looking more

carefully, they saw more policemen, revolver in hand, sheltering in doorways

facing the house. All the shutters in Grand's house were closed, except one on

the third floor that seemed to be hanging loose on one hinge only. Not a sound

could be heard in the street but for occasional snatches of music coming from

the center of the town.

Suddenly two revolver-shots rang out; they came from one of the buildings

opposite and some splinters flew off the dismantled shutter. Then silence came

again. Seen from a distance, after the tumult of the day, the whole business

seemed to Rieux fantastically unreal, like something in a dream.

"That's Cottard's window," Grand suddenly exclaimed. "I can't make it out. I

thought he'd disappeared."

"Why are they shooting?" Rieux asked the policeman.

"Oh, just to keep him busy. We're waiting for a car to come with the stuff

that's needed. He fires at anyone who tries to get in by the front door. He got

one of our men just now."

"But why did he fire?"

"Ask me another! Some folks were having fun in the street, and he let off at

them. They couldn't make it out at first. When he fired again, they started

yelling, one man was wounded, and the rest took to their heels. Some fellow out

of his head, I should say."

The minutes seemed interminable in the silence that had returned. Then they

noticed a dog, the first dog Rieux had seen for many months, emerging on the

other side of the street, a draggled-looking spaniel that its owners had,

presumably, kept in hiding. It ambled along the wall, stopped in the doorway,

sat down, and began to dig at its fleas. Some of the policemen whistled for it

to come away.

It raised its head, then walked out into the road and was sniffing at the hat

when a revolver barked from the third-floor window. The dog did a somersault

like a tossed pancake, lashed the air with its legs, and floundered on to its

side, its body writhing in long convulsions. As if by way of reprisal five or

six shots from the opposite house knocked more splinters off the shutter. Then

silence fell again. The sun had moved a little and the shadow-line was nearing

Cottard's window. There was a low squeal of brakes in the street, behind the

doctor.

"Here they are," the policeman said.

A number of police officers jumped out of the car and unloaded coils of rope, a

ladder, and two big oblong packages wrapped in oilcloth. Then they turned into a

street behind the row of houses facing Grand's. A minute or so later there were

signs of movement, though little could be seen, in the doorways of the houses.

Then came a short spell of waiting. The dog had ceased moving; it now was lying

in a small, dark, glistening pool.

Suddenly from the window of one of the houses that the police officers had

entered from behind there came a burst of machine-gun fire. They were still

aiming at the shutter, which literally shredded itself away, disclosing a dark

gap into which neither Grand nor Rieux could see from where they stood. When the

first machine-gun stopped firing, another opened up from a different angle, in a

house a little farther up the street. The shots were evidently directed into the

window space, and a fragment of the brickwork clattered down upon the pavement.

At the same moment three police officers charged across the road and disappeared

into the doorway. The machine-gun ceased fire. Then came another wait. Two

muffled detonations sounded inside the house, followed by a confused hubbub

growing steadily louder until they saw a small man in his shirt-sleeves,

screaming at the top of his voice, being carried more than dragged out by the

doorway.

As if at an expected signal all the shutters in the street flew open and excited

faces lined the windows, while people streamed out of the houses and jostled the

lines of police. Rieux had a brief glimpse of the small man, on his feet now, in

the middle of the road, his arms pinioned behind him by two police officers. He

was still screaming. A policeman went up and dealt him two hard blows with his

fists, quite calmly, with a sort of conscientious thoroughness.

"It's Cottard!" Grand's voice was shrill with excitement. "He's gone mad!"

Cottard had fallen backwards, and the policeman launched a vigorous kick into

the crumpled mass sprawling on the ground. Then a small, surging group began to

move toward the doctor and his old friend.

"Stand clear!" the policeman bawled.

Rieux looked away when the group, Cottard and his captors, passed him.

The dusk was thickening into night when Grand and the doctor made a move at

last. The Cottard incident seemed to have shaken the neighborhood out of its

normal lethargy and even these remote streets were becoming crowded with noisy

merry-makers. On his doorstep Grand bade the doctor good night; he was going to

put in an evening's work, he said. Just as he was starting up the stairs he

added that he'd written to Jeanne and was feeling much happier. Also he'd made a

fresh start with his phrase. "I've cut out all the adjectives."

And, with a twinkle in his eye, he took his hat off, bringing it low in a

courtly sweep. But Rieux was thinking of Cottard, and the dull thud of fists

belaboring the wretched man's face haunted him as he went to visit his old

asthma patient. Perhaps it was more painful to think of a guilty man than of a

dead man.

It was quite dark by the time he reached his patient's house. In the bedroom the

distant clamor of a populace rejoicing in its new-won freedom could be faintly

heard, and the old fellow was as usual transposing peas from one pan to another.

"They're quite right to amuse themselves," he said. "It takes all sorts to make

a world, as they say. And your colleague, doctor, how's he getting on?"

"He's dead." Rieux was listening to his patient's rumbling chest. "Ah, really?"

The old fellow sounded embarrassed.

"Of plague," Rieux added.

"Yes," the old man said after a moment's silence, "it's always the best who go.

That's how life is. But he was a man who knew what he wanted."

"Why do you say that?" The doctor was putting back his stethoscope.

"Oh, for no particular reason. Only, well, he never talked just for talking's

sake. I'd rather cottoned to him. But there you are! All those folks are saying:

'It was plague. We've had the plague here.' You'd almost think they expected to

be given medals for it. But what does that mean, 'plague'? Just life, no more

than that."

"Do your inhalations regularly."

"Don't worry about me, doctor! There's lots of life in me yet, and I'll see 'em

all into their graves. I know how to live."

A burst of joyful shouts in the distance seemed an echo of his boast. Halfway

across the room the doctor halted.

"Would you mind if I go up on the terrace?"

"Of course not. You'd like to have a look at 'em, that it? But they're just the

same as ever, really." When Rieux was leaving the room, a new thought crossed

his mind. "I say, doctor. Is it a fact they're going to put up a memorial to the

people who died of plague?"

"So the papers say. A monument, or just a tablet."

"I could have sworn it! And there'll be speeches." He chuckled throatily. "I can

almost hear them saying: 'Our dear departed...' And then they'll go off and have

a good snack."

Rieux was already halfway up the stairs. Cold, fathomless depths of sky

glimmered overhead, and near the hilltops stars shone hard as flint. It was much

like the night when he and Tarrou had come to the terrace to forget the plague.

Only, tonight the sea was breaking on the cliffs more loudly and the air was

calm and limpid, free of the tang of brine the autumn wind had brought. The

noises of the town were still beating like waves at the foot of the long line of

terraces, but tonight they told not of revolt, but of deliverance. In the

distance a reddish glow hung above the big central streets and squares. In this

night of new-born freedom desires knew no limits, and it was their clamor that

reached Rieux's ears.

From the dark harbor soared the first rocket of the firework display organized

by the municipality, and the town acclaimed it with a long-drawn sigh of

delight. Cottard.

Tarrou, the men and the woman Rieux had loved and lost, all alike, dead or

guilty, were forgotten. Yes, the old fellow had been right; these people were

"just the same as ever." But this was at once their strength and their

innocence, and it was on this level, beyond all grief, that Rieux could feel

himself at one with them.

And it was in the midst of shouts rolling against the terrace wall in massive

waves that waxed in volume and duration, while cataracts of colored fire fell

thicker through the darkness, that Dr. Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle,

so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear

witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the

injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we

learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than

to despise.

None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final

victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what

assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror

and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who,

while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their

utmost to be healers.

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux

remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds

did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never

dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in

furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks,

and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the

enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die

in a happy city.

The End