

Adapted from
HEROES OF THE PLAGUE
From
A Book of Golden Deeds
by
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When the plague, a deadly disease spread by rat fleas or perhaps just from person to person, struck London in 1665-6 the desolation was like a sort of horrible dream. Every infected house was marked with a red cross, and carefully closed against all persons, except those who were charged to drive carts through streets to collect the corpses, ringing a bell as they went. These men were generally wretched beings, the lowest and most reckless of the people, who undertook their frightful task for the sake of the plunder of the desolate houses, and wound themselves up by intoxicating drinks to endure the horrors. The bodies were thrown into large trenches, without prayer or funeral rites, and these were hastily closed up. Whole families died together, untended save by one another, with no aid from without, and the last chances of life would be lost for want of a friendly hand to give drink or food.

Such visitations as these did indeed prove whether the pastors of the afflicted flock were shepherds or hirelings.¹ Doubtless, the scourge called forth – as in Christian lands such judgements always do – many an act of true and blessed self-devotion; but these are not recorded, save where they have their reward: and the tale now to be told is of one of the small villages to which the infection spread – namely, Eyam, in Derbyshire.

This is a lovely place between Buxton and Chatsworth, perched high on a hill-side, and shut in by another higher mountain extremely beautiful, but exactly one of those that, for want of free air, always become the especial prey of infection. At that time lead works were in operation in the mountains, and the village was thickly inhabited. Great was the dismay of the villagers when the family of a tailor, who had received some patterns of cloth from London, showed symptoms of the plague in its most virulent form, sickening and dying in one day.

The rector of the parish, the Rev. William Mompesson, was still a young man, and had been married only few years. His wife, a beautiful young woman, only twenty-seven years old, was exceedingly terrified at the tidings from the village, and wept bitterly as she implored her husband to take her, and her little George and Elizabeth, who were three and four years old away to some place of safety. But Mr. Mompesson gravely showed her that it was his duty not to forsake his flock in their hour of need, and began at once to make arrangements for sending her and the children away. She saw he was right in remaining, and ceased to urge him to forsake his charge; but she insisted that, if he ought not to desert his flock, his wife ought not to leave him; and she wept and entreated so earnestly, that he at length consented that she should be with him, and that only the two little ones should be removed while yet there was time.

Their father and mother parted with the little ones as treasures that they might never see again. At the same time Mr. Mompesson wrote to London for the most approved medicines and prescriptions, and he likewise sent a letter to the Earl of Devonshire, at Chatsworth, to engage that his parishioners should exclude themselves from the whole neighbourhood, and thus confine the contagion within their own boundaries, provided the Earl would undertake that food, medicines, and other necessaries, should be placed at certain appointed spots, at regular times, upon the hills around, where the Eyamites might come, leave payment for them, and take them up, without holding any communication with the bringers, except by letters, which could be placed on a stone, and then fumigated, or passed through vinegar, before they were touched with the hand. To this the

¹ John 10:13

Earl consented, and for seven whole months the engagement was kept.

Mr. Mompesson represented to his people that, with the plague once among them, it would be so unlikely that they should not carry infection about with them, that it would be selfish cruelty to other places to try to escape amongst them, and thus spread the danger. So rocky and wild was the ground around them, that had they striven to escape, a regiment of soldiers could not have prevented them. But of their own free-will they attended to their Rector's remonstrance, and it was not known that one parishioner of Eyam passed the boundary all that time, nor was there a single case of plague in any of the villages around.

Mr. Mompesson was not the only minister in Eyam. He was assisted in his work by the former minister of the parish, a puritan widower, Thomas Stanley. Mr Stanley had been forced out of the Parish Church when the Act of Uniformity in 1662 was imposed which forced ministers to adhere exactly to the new prayerbook or leave their flock. He could not do so in conscience and so lost his position. He remained in the area, however, and ministered to those who believed as he did. Although information on his exact case is scarce, we do know that such ministers and their congregations were usually persecuted harshly being heavily fined, imprisoned and sent as slaves to the West Indies when caught holding services. Greedy informers who received part of the fine money would be on the watch for them, trying to spy out where their "conventicles", as such illegal meetings were called, were held. But now in this crisis both Mr Mompesson and Mr Stanley worked together.

The assembling of large congregations in churches had been thought to increase the infection in London, and Mr. Mompesson therefore, thought it best to hold his services out-of-doors. In the middle of the village is a dell, suddenly making a cleft in the mountain-side, only five yards wide at



the bottom, which is the pebbly bed of a wintry torrent, but is dry in the summer. On the side towards the village, the slope upwards was of soft green turf scattered with hazel, rowan, and alder bushes, and full of singing birds. On the other side, the ascent was nearly perpendicular, and composed of sharp rocks, partly adorned with bushes and ivy, and here and there rising up in fantastic peaks and archways, through which the sky could be seen from below. One of these rocks was hollow, and could be entered from above – a natural gallery, leading to an archway opening over the precipice; and this Mr. Mompesson chose for his reading-desk and pulpit. The dell was so narrow, that his voice could clearly be heard across it, and his congregation arranged themselves upon the green slope opposite, seated or kneeling upon the grass.

On Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays arose the earnest voice of prayer from that rocky glen, the people's response meeting the pastor's voice; and twice on Sundays he preached to them the words of life and hope. It was a dry hot summer and seldom did weather break in on the regularity of these services. [Since Mr Stanley's congregation would have had to meet in out of the way places for their conventicles I can't help wondering if this "dell" was, in fact, one of their places of worship before the plague. There are records of conventicles held in very similar places in other parts of the country. It is certainly possible that both ministers preached in this place during the plague.]

Day and night both the ministers and Mr. Mompesson's wife were among the sick, nursing, feeding, and tending them with all that care and skill could do; but, in spite of all their endeavours, only a

fifth part of the whole of the inhabitants lived to spend the last Sunday in Cucklet Church, as the dell is still called. Mr Stanley was often called upon to make wills for the dying and at least one of these still exists in his handwriting.

Mrs. Mompesson had persuaded her husband to have a wound made in his leg, fancying that this would lessen the danger of infection, and he yielded in order to satisfy her. His health endured perfectly, but she began to waste under her constant exertions, and her husband feared that he saw symptoms of consumption; but she was full of delight at some appearances in his wound that made her imagine that it had carried off the disease, and that his danger was over.

A few days after, she sickened with symptoms of the plague, and her frame was so weakened that she sank very quickly. She lay peacefully, saying, 'she was but looking for the good hour to come,' and calmly died, making the responses to her husband's prayers even to the last. Her he buried in the churchyard, and fenced the grave in afterwards with iron rails. There are two beautiful letters from him written on her death – one to his little children, to be kept and read when they would be old enough to understand it; the other to his patron, Sir George Saville, afterwards Lord Halifax. 'My drooping spirits,' he says, 'are much refreshed with her joys, which I assure myself are unutterable.' he wrote both these letters in the belief that he should soon follow her, speaking of himself to Sir George as 'his dying chaplain,' commending to him his 'distressed orphans,' and begging that a 'humble pious man' might be chosen to succeed him in his parsonage. 'Sir, I thank God that I am willing to shake hands in peace with all the world; and I have comfortable assurances that He will accept me for the sake of His Son; and I find God more good than ever I imagined, and wish that His goodness were not so much abused and contemned,' writes the widowed pastor.

These two letters were written on the last day of August and first of September, 1666; but on the 10th of November, Mr. Mompesson was writing to his uncle, in the lull after the storm. 'The condition of this place hath been so dreadful, that I persuade myself it exceedeth all history and example. I may truly say our town has become a Golgotha, a place of skulls; and had there not been a small remnant of us left, we had been as Sodom, and like unto Gomorrah. My ears never heard such doleful lamentations, my nose never smelt such noisome smells, and my eyes never beheld such ghastly spectacles. Here have been twenty-six families visited within my parish, out of which died 259 persons.'

However, since the 11th of October there had been no fresh cases, and he was now burning all woollen clothes lest the infection should linger in them. He himself had never been touched by the complaint, nor had his maid-servant; his man [servant] had had it but slightly. Mr Mompesson lived many more years, was offered the Deanery of Lincoln, but did not accept it, and died in 1708.

The sacrifice of William Mompesson, Thomas Stanley and the villagers of Eyam is remembered today and the villagers still dress the wells in the village every year with flower pictures in order to remember them.