

## **The Florentine Chronicle** (Excerpted from Original)

Concerning a deadly outbreak of disease which happened in the city of Florence, where many people died.

In the year of our lord 1348 there occurred in the city and contado of Florence a great pestilence, and such was its fury and violence that in whatever household it took hold, whosoever took care of the sick, all the carers died of the same illness, and almost nobody survived beyond the fourth day, neither doctors nor medicine proving of any avail, and there appeared to be no remedy, either because those illnesses were not yet recognised, or because doctors had never previously had cause to study them properly. Such was the fear that nobody knew what to do: when it caught hold in a household, it often happened that not a single person escaped death. And it wasn't just men and women: even sentient animals such as dogs and cats, hens, oxen, donkeys and sheep, died from that same disease and with those symptoms, and almost none who displayed those symptoms, or very few indeed, effected a recovery. Those symptoms were as follows: either between the thigh and the body, in the groin region, or under the armpit, there appeared a lump, and a sudden fever, and when the victim spat, he spat blood mixed with saliva, and none of those who spat blood survived. Such was the terror this caused that seeing it take hold in a household, as soon as it started, nobody remained: everybody abandoned the dwelling in fear, and fled to another; some fled into the city and others into the countryside. No doctors were to be found, because they were dying like everybody else; those who could be found wanted exorbitant fees cash-in-hand before entering the house, and having entered, they took the patient's pulse with their heads turned away, and assayed the urine samples from afar, with aromatic herbs held to their noses. Sons abandoned fathers, husbands wives, wives husbands, one brother the other, one sister the other. The city was reduced to bearing the dead to burial; many died who at their passing had neither confession nor last sacraments, and many died unseen, and many died of hunger, for when somebody took ill to his bed, the other occupants in panic told him: 'I'm going for the doctor'; and quietly locked the door from the outside and didn't come back. The victim, abandoned by both people and nourishment, yet kept constant company by fever, wasted away. Many were those who begged their families not to abandon them; when evening came, the relatives said to the patient: 'So that you don't have to wake up the people looking after you at night, asking for things, because this is going on day and night, you yourself can reach for cakes and wine or water, here they are on the shelf above your bed, you can get the stuff when you want'. And when the patient fell asleep, they went away and did not return. If, through good fortune the victim had been strengthened by that food, the next morning alive and still strong enough to get to the window, he would have to wait half an hour before anybody came past, if this was not a busy thoroughfare, and even when the odd person passed by, and the patient had enough voice to be heard a little, if he shouted, sometimes he would be answered and sometimes not, and even if he were to be answered, there was no help to be had. For not only none or very few wished to enter a house where there were any sick people, but they didn't even want to have contact with those who issued healthy from a sick person's house, saying: 'He's jinxed, don't speak

to him', saying: 'He's got it because there's the "gavocciolo" [bubo] in his house'; and 'gavocciolo' was the name they gave to these swellings. Many died without being seen, remaining on their beds till they stank. And the neighbours, if any were left, having smelled the stench, did a whip round and sent him for burial. Houses remained open, nobody dared to touch anything, for it seemed that things remained poisoned, and whoever had anything to do with them caught the disease. . . .

The quantity of people who died during the plague outbreak of the year of our lord 1348. The bishop and the signoria in Florence having ordered a careful count of how many were dying of plague in the city of Florence, and seeing finally at the beginning of October that nobody was dying of that pestilence any more, it was discovered that putting together men and women, children and adults, from March to October, ninety-six thousand had died.

**Source:** *Marchionne di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti*, Florentine Chronicle, *late 1370s-early 1380s*.

## **The Decameron** (Excerpted from Original)

I say, then, that the years of the beatific incarnation of the Son of God had reached the tale of one thousand three hundred and forty eight, when in the illustrious city of Florence, the fairest of all the cities of Italy, there made its appearance that deadly pestilence, which, whether disseminated by the influence of the celestial bodies, or sent upon us mortals by God in His just wrath by way of retribution for our iniquities, had had its origin some years before in the East, whence, after destroying an innumerable multitude of living beings, it had propagated itself without respite from place to place, and so calamitously, had spread into the West.

In Florence, despite all that human wisdom and forethought could devise to avert it, as the cleansing of the city from many impurities by officials appointed for the purpose, the refusal of entrance to all sick folk, and the adoption of many precautions for the preservation of health; despite also humble supplications addressed to God, and often repeated both in public procession and otherwise by the devout; towards the beginning of the spring of the said year the doleful effects of the pestilence began to be horribly apparent by symptoms that shewed as if miraculous. . . .

I say, then, that such was the energy of the contagion of the said pestilence, that it was not merely propagated from man to man, but, what is much more startling, it was frequently observed, that things which had belonged to one sick or dead of the disease, if touched by some other living creature, not of the human species, were the occasion, not merely of sickening, but of an almost instantaneous death. Whereof my own eyes (as I said a little before) had cognisance, one day among others, by the following experience. The rags of a poor man who had died of the disease being strewn about the open street, two hogs came thither, and after, as is their wont, no little trifling with their snouts, took the rags between their teeth and tossed them to and fro about their chaps; whereupon, almost immediately, they gave a few turns, and fell down dead, as if by poison, upon the rags which in an evil hour they had disturbed. . . .

Some again, the most sound, perhaps, in judgment, as they were also the most harsh in temper, of all, affirmed that there was no medicine for the disease superior or equal in efficacy to flight; following which prescription a multitude of men and women, negligent of all but themselves, deserted their city, their houses, their estates, their kinsfolk, their goods, and went into voluntary exile, or migrated to the country parts, as if God in visiting men with this pestilence in requital of their iniquities would not pursue them with His wrath wherever they might be, but intended the destruction of such alone as remained within the circuit of the walls of the city; or deeming perchance, that it was now time for all to flee from it, and that its last hour was come.

It was the common practice of most of the neighbors, moved no less by fear of contamination by the putrefying bodies than by charity towards the deceased, to drag the corpses out of the houses with their own hands, aided, perhaps, by a porter, if a porter was to be had, and to lay them in front of the doors, where any one who made the round might have seen, especially in the morning, more of them than he could count; afterwards they would have biers brought up or in default, planks, whereon they

laid them. Nor was it once twice only that one and the same bier carried two or three corpses at once; but quite a considerable number of such cases occurred, one bier sufficing for husband and wife, two or three brothers, father and son, and so forth. And times without number it happened, that as two priests, bearing the cross, were on their way to perform the last office for some one, three or four biers were brought up by the porters in rear of them, so that, whereas the priests supposed that they had but one corpse to bury, they discovered that there were six or eight, or sometimes more. Nor, for all their number, were their obsequies honored by either tears or lights or crowds of mourners rather, it was come to this, that a dead man was then of no more account than a dead goat would be to-day.

**Source:** *Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron, 1351-1353.*