

Excerpt from Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year, being Observations or Memorials of the most remarkable occurrences, as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation [of the plague] in 1665. Written by a CITIZEN who continued all the while in London.* 1722.

‘How do you live, then, and how are you kept from the dreadful calamity that is now upon us all?’

‘Why, sir,’ says he, ‘I am a waterman, and there’s my boat,’ says he, ‘and the boat serves me for a house. I work in it in the day, and I sleep in it in the night; and what I get I lay down upon that stone,’ says he, showing me a broad stone on the other side of the street, a good way from his house; ‘and then,’ says he, ‘I halloo, and call to them till I make them hear; and they come and fetch it.’

‘Well, friend,’ says I, ‘but how can you get any money as a waterman? Does any body go by water these times?’ ‘Yes, sir,’ says he, ‘in the way I am employed there does. Do you see there,’ says he, ‘five ships lie at anchor’ (pointing down the river a good way below the town), ‘and do you see,’ says he, ‘eight or ten ships lie at the chain there, and at anchor yonder?’ (pointing above the town). ‘All those ships have families on board, of their merchants and owners, and such-like, who have locked themselves up and live on board, close shut in, for fear of the infection; and I tend on them to fetch things for them, carry letters, and do what is absolutely necessary, that they may not be obliged to come on shore; and every night I fasten my boat on board one of the ship’s boats, and there I sleep by myself, and, blessed be God, I am preserved hitherto.’

‘Well,’ said I, ‘friend, but will they let you come on board after you have been on shore here, when this is such a terrible place, and so infected as it is?’

‘Why, as to that,’ said he, ‘I very seldom go up the ship-side, but deliver what I bring to their boat, or lie by the side, and they hoist it on board. If I did, I think they are in no danger from me, for I never go into any house on shore, or touch anybody, no, not of my own family; but I fetch provisions for them.’

‘Nay,’ says I, ‘but that may be worse, for you must have those provisions of somebody or other; and since all this part of the town is so infected, it is dangerous so much as to speak with anybody, for the village,’ said I, ‘is, as it were, the beginning of London, though it be at some distance from it.’

‘That is true,’ added he; ‘but you do not understand me right; I do not buy provisions for them here. I row up to Greenwich and buy fresh meat there, and sometimes I row down the river to Woolwich and buy there; then I go to single farm-houses on the Kentish side, where I am known, and buy fowls and eggs and butter, and bring to the ships, as they direct me, sometimes one, sometimes the other. I seldom come on shore here, and I came now only to call on my wife and hear how my family do, and give them a little money, which I received last night.’

‘Poor man!’ said I; ‘and how much hast thou gotten for them?’

‘I have gotten four shillings,’ said he, ‘which is a great sum, as things go now with poor men.’