
The most important piece in the present volume, is a dramatic poem entitled, “The City of the Plague”, by which is meant London, during the great sickness of 1666. Most of our readers are probably familiar with De Foe’s history of that great calamity - a work in which fabulous incidents and circumstances are combined with authentic narratives, with an art and a verisimilitude which no other writer has ever been able to communicate to fiction. A great part of Mr Wilson’s materials, and indeed most of the ground colour of his poem, are derived from this source; and there is not much complication or invention in the particular incidents he has imagined for bringing them into connexion. Though the nature of the subject, and the uniformity of sadness to which it inevitably led, rendered it eminently unfit for actual representation, and not very suitable for a dramatic form, we think there are many dramatic beauties in the poem before us, and a very great number of passages that are both pathetic and poetical in a very high degree. We shall make no apology, therefore, for presenting our readers with a pretty full account of it, and with such specimens of the execution as may enable them to judge of its merits.

The scene opens with the conversation of Frankfort and Wilmot, two young naval officers, on the banks of the Thames, a few miles below the city. They had heard of the pestilence on their making the coast some days before; and one of them is pressing on with overwhelming fears and forebodings, to satisfy himself as to the fate of a beloved mother and brother, whom he had left in the devoted city at his last sailing, and not heard of since; the other belongs to a different part of the kingdom, and accompanies his friend from mere love and affection. The lonely and desolate appearances of the once gay and populous region through which they are advancing, oppress the despairing son with new terrors, while his friend endeavours to comfort him, by reminding him that it is then the sabbath evening, and consequently devoted to rest. He answers, in a fine vein of poetry -

“O unrejoicing Sabbath! not of yore
Did thy sweet evenings die along the Thames
Thus silently! Now every sail is furl’d
The oar hath dropt from out the rower’s hand,
And on thou flow’st in lifeless majesty,
River of a desert lately filled with joy!
O’er all that mighty wilderness of stone
The air is clear and cloudless as at sea
Above the gliding ship. All fires are dead,
And not one single wreath of smoke ascends
Above the stillness of the towers and spires.
How idly hangs that arch magnificent
Across the idle river! Not a speck
Is seen to move along it. There it hangs,
Still as a rainbow ire the pathless sky.” p. 6.

In the same spirit of fanciful foreboding, he views all the objects that successively present themselves; and at last observes -
“Here, on this very spot where now we rest,
Upon the morning I last sail’d from England,
My mother put her arms around my neck,
And in a solemn voice, unchok’d by tears,
Said, “Son! a last farewell!” That solemn voice,
Amid the ocean’s roaring solitude,
Oft past across my soul, and I have heard it
Steal in sad music from the sunny calm.
Upon our homeward voyage, when we spake
The ship that told us of the Plague, I knew
That the trumpet’s voice would send into our souls
Some dismal tidings; for I saw her sails
Black in the distance, flinging off with scorn
A shower of radiance from the blessed sun.” p. 9.

While they are pausing in these melancholy contemplations, they are accosted by
an old man flying from the city with a little infant, the sole survivor of a late happy
family, who holds a long conversation with them, in a tone rather too elevated and
poetical for the occasion. There is considerable force and effect, however, in the
following passage.

“Know ye what you will meet with in the city?
Together will ye walk, through long, long streets,
All standing silent as a midnight church.
You will hear nothing but the brown red grass
Rustling beneath your feet; the very beating
Of your own hearts will awe you; the small voice
Of that vain bauble, idly counting time,
Will speak a solemn language in the desert.
Look up to heaven, and there the sultry clouds,
Still threatening thunder, lower with grim delight,
As if the Spirit of the plague dwelt there,
Darkening the city with the shadows of death.” p. 14.

He then proceeds to describe the horrors of the scene, and, in particular, the nightly
interment of the dead, in cart and waggon loads, in the vast pits that were opened in
different parts of the city.

“Would you look in? Grey hairs and golden tresses,
Wan shrivell’d cheeks that have not smil’d for years;
And many a rosy visage smiling still;
Bodies in the noisome weeds of beggary wrapt,
With age decrepit, and wasted to the bone;
And youthful frames, august and beautiful,
In spite of mortal pangs;—there lie they all
Embrac’d in ghastliness! But look not long,
For haply, ‘mid the faces glimmering there,
The well-known cheek of some beloved friend
Will meet thy gaze, or some small snow-white hand,
Bright with the ring that holds her lover’s hair.” p. 15.

He then warns them again against entering the devoted place; but, finding them resolved, commends them to the prayers of “the radiant angel,” whom he assures them they will meet, conveying peace and consolation through the despairing streets.

The Second Scene is of a more questionable character. It represents a crazy impostor, dealing out his astrological prognostications to a wild and distracted multitude, in one of the squares of the city. There is a good deal of striking and agonizing detail in the statements that are made by the pale inquirers, and many traits of a savage and powerful eloquence in the dread and mystical responses that are returned by the oracle. In the midst of his prophesying, and just after Frankfort and Wilmot have mingled in the audience, he is smitten with the plague, and the assembly flies from the contagion.

“Disperse
All ye who prize your lives! - Soon will the air
Be foul with his dead body.”

The Third Scene introduces us to Magdalene the gentle heroine of the piece. This innocent maid, bred from her infancy among the lakes and hills of Westmoreland, where she had been betrothed to Frankfort, had come to London in his absence with her father and mother, at the period when the pestilence began its ravages. Both parents had fallen among its earliest victims; and the poor orphan had been left with one female friend among the dead and the dying. In this awful situation, she felt herself roused to extraordinary exertions; and, regardless of her own danger, had passed several months in tending the dying and the friendless, praying by the desperate, and rendering all offices of saintly humanity to the miserable sufferers of the devoted city. She is here presented praying by night in one of the deserted churches.

“Oh! let me walk the waves of this wild world
Through faith unsinking; stretch thy saving hand
To a lone castaway upon the sea,
Who hopes no resting-place except in heaven.
And oh! this holy calm, - this peace profound,-
That sky so glorious in infinitude, -
That countless fast of softly burning stars,
And all that floating universe of light,
Lift up my spirit far above the grave,
And tell me that my pray’rs are heard in Heaven.” p. 38.

A ruffian who had entered the same place for purposes of sacrilege and violence, is touched by her sweet voice and saint-like demeanour; --confesses with horror the tremendous profligacy in which he and his associates had been living since the plague had rendered them desperate; and is sent away heart-struck and penitent.

The Fourth Scene is rather an unsuccessful attempt to represent one of those seemingly unnatural orgies, those frantic displays of wild and daring revelry, to which the desperation of the time naturally gave rise, and which are so strikingly depicted in
the work of De Foe. Mr Wilson has set out a long table in a silent and deserted street, and placed around it a party of licentious young men and women carousing. He has made them drink toasts and memories, sing songs in praise of the plague, and even utter scoffs and impieties against a reverend priest who comes to reprove their excesses; but he has not in any one instance caught the true tone of profligacy, or even of convivial gaiety. It seems as if he had not the heart to represent human creatures as thoroughly, reprobate or unamiable. Accordingly, they all give signs of penitence and good feeling. Even the prostitutes are gentle-hearted, delicate and interesting beings; and the master of those unseemly revels, turns out to be graced with almost every virtue under heaven. However creditable it may be to his philanthropy, this faintheartedness in conceiving profligacy, is a great defect to an author who deals in effect. With what bold lines and strong colouring would Scott have drawn such a scene as this! - what shuddering and horror would Crabbe have excited by means of it! - what mingled laughter and pity and terror would it have breathed in the hands of Shakespeare!