

THE PLAGUE

Adapted from the novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus

Characters:

Narrator I, Narrator II

Dr. Rieux, the doctor caring for plague patients

Tarrou, Dr. Rieux's friend who organizes volunteer efforts to clear bodies and bring food to quarantined individuals

Dr. Castel – an elderly physician working on a serum antidote for the plague

Rambert, a journalist who feels who is unfairly trapped by the quarantine

Mayor of the city of Oran

Woman

Narrator I: "The Plague" is a famous allegorical novel by Albert Camus, who is known for his existential works. The book was published in 1947. Part One describes the initial phase when pestilence first came to the town of Oran in French Algiers:

Dr. Rieux: Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, 'doing business.' The economy is everything, they say. Then, one day recently, 8,000 dead rats were collected, and a wave of something like panic swept the town.

Dr. Castel: 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.

Dr. Rieux: We tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey 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 people who pass away.

Mayor: We shouldn't rush to judgment. Perhaps this isn't really the plague. We should wait and see what happens.

Dr. Castel: When the rate of new cases and new deaths escalates as we are seeing, a policy of wait-and-see is, to say the least, unwise. Judging by the rapidity with which the disease is spreading, it may well, unless we act, kill off half the town before two months are out.

Mayor: It's a mistake to paint too gloomy a picture. I personally know some people who have survived this illness. Perhaps it is not as serious as we think.

Dr. Castel: People are continuing to die in ever-increasing numbers. It's not a question of painting too black a picture. It's a question of taking sensible precautions to save lives.

Mayor (to himself): I knew quite well that it was plague and, needless to say, I also knew that, were this to be officially admitted, my colleagues and I would be compelled to take very drastic

steps which would damage commerce. This was, of course, the explanation of our reluctance to face the facts.

Narrator II: The next day Dr. Rieux observed that small official notices had been put up about the town, although in places where they would not attract much attention. They seemed primarily designed not to alarm the public and allow people to go about their lives as usual.

Part 2

Narrator I: In Part Two, as quarantine is imposed, the plague begins to find a foothold in Oran. One of the most striking consequences of the closing of the gates was the sudden deprivation befalling people who were completely unprepared for it. All these people found themselves hopelessly cut off, prevented from seeing or even communicating with those they loved.

Rambert: I need to see you, Dr. Rieux.

Dr. Rieux: Why? Are you sick? Who are you?

Rambert: No, I'm not sick, but I will be if I stay in this accursed city. I'm a journalist, sent by my newspaper to cover the epidemic, but now I'm trapped here by the quarantine. I have a loving wife at home. I don't belong here. I need to get out. You're an important person. Help me.

Dr. Rieux: What you are experiencing is what we are all experiencing. The ache of separation from those one loves suddenly has become a feeling in which all share alike and — together with fear — it is the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lies ahead.

Rambert: But I don't deserve to be here. This is not my home.

Dr. Rieux: No one deserves to be here. But this is our home now.

Tarrou: Everyone in the city came to know the incorrigible sorrow of all prisoners and exiles, Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future, we were much like those whom human "justice," such as it is, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars.

Dr. Rieux: Many continued hoping that the epidemic would soon die out and they and their families would be spared. Thus they felt under no obligation to make any change in their habits, as yet. Plague was an unwelcome visitant, bound to take its leave one day as unexpectedly as it had come. At first, people tried to hide from the plague, telling themselves it only happened to others, or it only happened to the Arab migrants, or to the poor.

Dr. Castel: But as it spread, our citizens began to despair.

Woman: The authorities told us the epidemic would be over in six months. But it is already four months, and there is no end in sight. After all, there was no reason why the epidemic shouldn't last more than six months; why not a year, or even longer?

Dr. Castel: At such moments, the collapse of the people's 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.

Tarrou: There was a terrible 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. We had a drastic sense of deprivation and a complete ignorance of what the future held.

Narrator II: The agonizing death of the mayor's young son is witnessed by Dr. Rieux and his friend Tarrou. Dr. Rieux tries to explain what motivates him as a physician.

Dr. Rieux: What's true of all the evils in the world is true of the plague as well. Yes, it can help people to rise above themselves. All the same, when you see all the misery it brings, you'd need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to welcome the plague for the lessons it teaches.

Tarrou: To my dying day, I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.

Dr. Rieux: I agree. My only thought is to try to relieve human suffering.

Tarrou: But your victories will never be lasting.

Dr. Rieux: I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle. Many people are going about our town proclaiming there is nothing to be done and we should bow to the inevitable. But I believe a fight must be put up and there must be no bowing down.

Tarrou: What taught you all this?

Dr. Rieux: Suffering.

Tarrou (smiling): I think you might be some kind of hero, my friend.

Dr. Rieux: 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 fighting a plague is — common decency. It's not that difficult. Plague is here, and we've got to make a stand.

Tarrou: What do you mean by common decency?

Dr. Rieux: I don't know what it means for other people. But in my case I know that it merely consists of doing my job.

Part 3

Narrator I: In Part Three, the plague digs in and outstrips the town's resources. The town's leaders equivocate and minimize.

Tarrou: The critical moment came just before the outbreak touched the high-water mark, and the doctors had good reason for feeling anxious. There was then a real shortage of doctors, medicines, hospital beds, and masks as well as people to do the rough work of removing dead bodies and burying them.

Narrator II: The town leaders were desperate for things to return to normal, and pushed Dr. Castel for a cure.

Mayor: The town will disintegrate economically if the quarantine is not lifted. Dr. Castel, are you close to a cure?

Dr. Castel: My work is guided by science, not by economics.

Mayor: That's all very well, but when will you find the cure?

Dr. Rieux: It would help if we had more doctors, more nurses, more masks.

Dr. Castel: I cannot promise a cure, I am just working on a serum to relieve the worst symptoms and improve patients' chance of survival.

Mayor: Maybe when the weather turns cold, it will kill the virus.

Mayor: Maybe God will perform a miracle. A miracle would be very good for us politically.

Narrator I: The strain on Dr. Rieux and his colleagues was tremendous. When he diagnosed a case of the plague, he had to telephone for the removal of the patient to the hospital. Then came tears and pleadings by family members, who knew they could not visit their loved one and might never see them again. Crazy scenes took place in those fever-hot, nerve-ridden sickrooms, and each one wore on Dr. Rieux's soul. He felt exhausted.

Woman (shrieking): You can't evacuate my husband! He will die in that hell-hole hospital of yours without my ever seeing him again. You have no heart!

Dr. Rieux: You're wrong, madam. I have just enough heart to get me through my twenty-four hour day, in which I hourly watch people dying who were meant to live. I have just enough heart to start anew each morning. As things are now, I have just enough heart for that.

Tarrou: My friend, how do you keep going?

Dr. Rieux: For the moment, all I know is this: there are sick people and they need curing. What's wanted now is to make them well. I defend them as best I can, that's all.

Tarrou (spontaneously): Let's go for a swim. It's one of these harmless pleasures that even a saint-to-be can indulge in, right? Of course, a person should fight for the victims, but if they cease caring for anything outside that, what's the use of fighting?

Dr. Rieux: You're right. Let's go.

Part 4

Narrator I: Part Four describes how the plague forces the citizens of Oran to pull together.

Tarrou: No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and emotions shared by all.

Dr. Castel: The one way of making people hang together is to give 'em a spell of the plague.

Rambert: Dr. Rieux, I need to see you.

Dr. Rieux: Are you ill?

Rambert: No, I've found a smuggler to help me escape. I'm supposed to leave tonight, but I want you to know I'm going to stay.

Dr. Rieux: What? Don't you want to be reunited with your wife?

Rambert: 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.

Dr. Rieux (gently): There is nothing shameful in preferring happiness.

Rambert: That is true. But it may be shameful to be happy by oneself.

Tarrou: I've realized something, Rieux: we all have plague.

Dr. Rieux: What do you mean, Tarrou? Are you sick?

Tarrou: No. Yes. I don't know. There is external plague – from that, thank God, so far I've been spared. But there is also internal plague, our evil demons, for which the only inoculation is a vigilance that must never falter. 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.

Dr. Rieux: I suppose we must just continue go forward, groping our way through the darkness, stumbling perhaps at times, and try to do what good lies in our power. We must hold fast.

Part 5

Narrator I: Part Five describes the vanquishing of the plague.

Tarrou: Once the faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of the plague was ended.

Woman: The plague has ended! The plague has ended! We are free!

Dr. Rieux: I have tried my best to be an honest witness and to share with my fellow citizens the only certitudes we had in common – love, exile, and suffering.

Narrator II: And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the time, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have known: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good.

Dr. Rieux: We knew that the tale we had to tell could not be one of final victory. It could be only the record of what had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.