The River of Death: A Tale of London In Peril

Fred M. White

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I.

THE sky was as brass from the glowing East upwards, a stifling heat radiated from stone and wood and iron − a close, reeking heat that drove one back from the very mention of food. The five million odd people that go to make up London, even in the cream of the holiday season, panted and gasped and prayed for the rain that never came. For the first three weeks in August the furnace fires of the sun poured down till every building became a vapour bath with no suspicion of a breeze to temper the fierceness of it. Even the cheap press had given up sunstroke statistics. The heat seemed to have wilted up the journalists and their superlatives.

More or less the drought had lasted since April. Tales came up from the provinces of stagnant rivers and quick, fell spurts of zymotic diseases. For a long time past the London water companies had restricted their supplies. Still, there was no suggestion of alarm, nothing as yet looked like a water famine. The heat was almost unbearable but, people said, the wave must break soon, and the metropolis would breathe again.

Professor Owen Darbyshire shook his head as he looked at the brassy, star−powdered sky. He crawled homewards towards Harley Street with his hat in his hand, and his grey frock coat showing a wide expanse of white shirt below. There was a buzz of electric fans in the hall of No. 411, a murmur of them overhead. And yet the atmosphere was hot and heavy. There was one solitary light in the dining−room − a room all sombre oak and dull red walls as befitted a man of science − and a visiting card glistened on the table. Darbyshire read the card with a gesture of annoyance:

"James P Chase,
Morning Telephone."

"I'll have to see him," the Professor groaned, "I'll have to see the man if only to put him off. Is it possible these confounded pressmen have got hold of the story already?"

With just a suggestion of anxiety on his strong clean−shaven face, the professor parted the velvet curtains leading to a kind of study−laboratory, the sort of place you would expect to find in the house of a man whose speciality is the fighting of disease in bulk. Darbyshire was the one man who could grapple with an epidemic, the one man always sent for.

The constant pestering of newspaper men was no new thing. Doubtless Chase afore−said was merely plunging around after sensations − journalistic curry for the hot weather. Still, the pushing little American might have stumbled on the truth. Darbyshire took down his telephone and churned the handle.

"Are you there? Yes, give me 30795, Kensington . . . That you, Longdale? Yes, it's Darbyshire. Step round here at once, will you? Yes, I know it's hot, and I wouldn't ask you to come if it wasn't a matter of the last importance."

A small thin voice promised as desired and Darbyshire hung up his receiver. He then lighted a cigarette, and proceeded to con over some notes that he had taken from his pocket. These he elaborated in pencil in a small but marvellously clear handwriting. As he lay back in his chair he did not look much like the general whose army is absolutely surrounded, but he was. And that square, lean head held a secret that would have set London almost mad at a whisper.

Darbyshire laid the sheets down and fell into a reverie. He was roused presently by the hall bell and Dr Longdale entered. The professor brightened.

"That's right," he said. " Gad to see somebody, Longdale. I've had an awful day. Verity, if Mr. Chase comes again ask him in here."

"Mr. Chase said he would return in an hour, sir," the large butler replied. "And I'm to show, him in here? Yes, Sir."

But already Darbyshire had hustled his colleague beyond the velvet curtains. Longdale's small clear figure was quivering with excitement. His dark eyes fairly blazed behind a pair of gold−rimmed spectacles.

"Well," he gasped, "I suppose it's come at last?"

"Of course it has,' Darbyshire replied, "Sooner or later it was an absolute certainty. Day by day for a month I have watched the sky and wondered where the black hand would show. And when these things do come they

strike where you most dread them. Still, in this case, the Thames−−"

"Absolutely pregnant," Longdale exclaimed. "Roughly speaking, four−fifths of London's water supply comes from the Thames. How many towns, villages drain into the river before it reaches Sunbury or thereabouts where most of the water companies have their intake ? Why, scores of them. And for the best part of a month the Thames has been little better than a ditch stagnating under a brazen sunshine. Will our people ever learn anything, Darbyshire? Is London and its six million people always to groan under the tyranny of a monopoly? Say there's an outbreak of typhoid somewhere up the river between here and Oxford. It gets a grip before the thing is properly handled, the village system of drainage is a mere matter of percolation. In eight−and−forty hours the Thames is one floating tank of deadly poison. And, mind you, this thing is bound to happen sooner or later."

"It has happened," Darbyshire said quietly. "and in a worse form than you think. Just listen to this extract from an eastern counties provincial paper:

STRANGE AFFAIR AT ALDENBURGH

A day or two ago the barque Santa Anna came ashore at Spur, near Aldenburgh, and quickly became a total wreck. The vessel was piled high on the Spur, and, the strong tide acting upon the worn−out hull, quickly beat it to pieces. The crew of eight men presumably took to their boats, for nothing has been seen of them since. How the Santa Anna came to be wrecked on a clear, calm night remains a mystery for the present. The barque was presumedly inbound for some foreign port and laden with oranges, thousands of which have been picked up at Aldenburgh lately. The coastguards presume the barque to be a Portuguese."

'Naturally you want to know what this has to do with the Thames," Darbyshire observed. "I'm going to tell you. The Santa Anna was deliberately wrecked for a purpose which you will see later. The crew for the most part landed not far away and, for reasons of their own, sank their boat. It isn't far from Aldenburgh to London: in a short time the Portuguese were in the Metropolis. Two or three of them remained there, and five of them proceeded to tramp to Ashchurch, which is on the river, and not far from Oxford. Being short of money, their idea was to tramp across to Cardiff and get a ship there. Being equally short of our language, they get out of their way to Ashchurch. Then three of them are taken ill, and two of them die. The local practitioner sends for the medical officer of health. The latter gets frightened and sends for me. I have just got back. Look here."

Darbyshire produced a phial of cloudy fluid, some of which he proceeded to lay on the glass of a powerful microscope. Longdale fairly staggered back from the eyepiece. "Bubonic! The water reeks with the bacillus! I haven't seen it so strongly marked since we were in New Orleans together. Darbyshire, you don't mean to say that this sample came from−−"

"The Thames? But I do. Ashchurch drains directly into the river. And for some few days those sailors have been suffering from a gross form of bubonic fever. Now you see why they ran the Santa Anna ashore and deserted her. One of the crew died of plague, and the rest abandoned her. We won't go into the hideous selfishness of it; it was a case of the devil take the hindmost."

"It's an awful thing," Longdale groaned.

"Frightful," Darbyshire murmured. He was vaguely experimenting with some white precipitate on a little water taken from the phial. He placed a small electric battery on the table. "The great bulk of the London water supply comes from the Thames. Speaking from memory, only the New River and one other company draw their supply from the Lea. If the supply were cut off, places like Hoxton and Haggerstone and Battersea, in fact all the dense centres of population where disease is held in on the slenderest of threads, would suffer fearfully. And there is that deadly poison spreading and spreading hourly drawing nearer to the metropolis into which presently it will be ladled by the million gallons. People will wash in it, drink it. Mayfair will take its chance with Whitechapel."

"At any hazard the supply must be cut off!," Longdale cried.

"And deprive four−fifths of London with water altogether!" Darbyshire said grimly. "And London grilling like a furnace? No flushing of sewers, no watering of roads, not even a drop to drink. In two days London would be a reeking, seething hell − try and picture it, Longdale."

"I have, often," Longdale said gloomily. "Sooner or later it had to come. Now is your chance, Darbyshire − that process of sterilisation of yours."

Darbyshire smiled. He moved in the direction of the velvet curtains. He wanted those notes of his; he wanted to prove a startling new discovery to his colleague. The notes were there, but they seemed to have been disturbed. On the floor lay a torn sheet from a notebook with shorthand cypher; thereon Darbyshire flew to the bell and rang

it violently.

"Verity," he exclaimed, "has that infernal − I mean, has Mr Chase been here again?"

"Well, he have, sir," Verity said slowly, "he come just after Mr Longdale. So I asked him to wait, which he did, then he come out again after a bit, saying as you seemed to be busily engaged he would call again."

"Um! Did he seem to be excited, Verity?"

"Well, he did, sir; white and very shiny about the eyes, and−− "

"That will do. Go and call me a hansom, at once," Darbyshire cried, as he dashed back into the inner room. "Here's a pretty thing; that confounded American journalist, Chase − you know him − has heard all we said and has helped himself to my notes; the whole thing will be blazing in the Telephone to−morrow, and perhaps half−a−dozen papers besides. Those fellows would wreck the empire for what they call a 'scoop.'"

"Awful!" Longdale groaned. "What are you going to do?"

Derbyshire responded that he was going to convince the editor of the Telephone that no alarmist article was to appear on the morrow.

He would be back again in an hour and Longdale was to wait. The situation was not quite so hopeless as it seemed on the face of it. There was a rattle of wheels outside and Darbyshire plunged hatless into the night.

"Offices of the Telephone," he cried. "A sovereign if I'm there in twenty minutes."

The cab plunged on headlong. The driver was going to earn that sovereign or know the reason why. He drove furiously into Trafalgar Square, a motor car crossed him recklessly, and a moment later Darbyshire was shot out on to his head from the cab. He lay there with no interest in mundane things. A languid crowd gathered, a doctor in evening dress appeared.

"Concussion of the brain," he said in a cool matter of fact tone. "By Jove, it's Dr. Derbyshire. Here, police; hurry up with the ambulance; he must be removed to Charing Cross at once."

II.

WITH no spiritual indigestion troubling him, Mr. James Chase, late of the New York Chanticleer, now of the Morning Telephone, lighted a cigarette at the corner of Harley Street. The night was young and there was plenty of time for him to mature his plans. He had got what he called an "almighty scoop" in his pocket, indeed in the whole history of yellow journalism he could remember no greater. London dried up like a withered sponge and absolutely devoid of water! London with the liquid plague bursting from every subterranean pipe and fountain! The whirling headlines were revolving in Chase's close−cropped head.

He reached the offices of the Telephone at length and crawled up a dingy flight of stairs. Without knocking he passed the barrier of a door marked "strictly private." The controlling genius of the Telephone sat limp and bereft of coat and vest. His greeting of Chase was not burdened with flattering politeness. He merely asked what the blazes he wanted. Chase nodded sweetly and drew a large sheet of paper before him. After a little thought he dashed in half−a−dozen vigorous lines with a blue pencil.

"Things pretty slack lately," he remarked amicably. "So hot that even the East end can't rise to its weekly brutal murder. Still you get on to a pearl sometimes. Grady, my boy, what do you think of that for a contents bill?"

He held the white sheet aloft so that the flare of the gas should fall upon it. The tired look faded from Grady's eyes; he sat up alert and vigorous. Here was the tonic that his fretted soul craved for.

"Chapter and Verse?" he said, speaking fast as if he had run far.

"Got it all from Derbyshire," Chase replied. "I overheard a conversation between him and Doctor Longdale in his own house, Also I managed to get hold of some notes to copy."

"It wants pluck," Grady remarked, "A scare like that might ruin the Empire; if−−"

"None of that," Chase cut in. "Take it or leave it. If you haven't got the grit, Sutton of the Flashlight will jump at the chance."

He held the contents bill up to the light again and Grady nodded. He was going to do this thing deliberately, once he was sure of his ground. He remarked cynically that it sounded like a fairy story.

"Not a bit of it," Chase, said briskly. "The plague breaks out on this barque and the crew know it. There's no ceremony with sailors of that class. They just lose their vessel and strike for the nearest land. Knowing something of our quarantine laws they make themselves scarce as soon as they can. A local doctor calls the plague English cholera, too much bad fruit in very hot weather, and there you are."

Grady nodded again. The sweltering heat of the place no longer affected him. Down below the presses were already beginning to clang and boom. There was a constant clatter of feet along the passages.

"Sit down right away," Grady snapped. "Make two columns of it. I'll get some statistics out for you."

Chase peeled off his coat and got to work at once. Grady found the book he required and proceeded to compile his facts therefrom.

The further he dived into the volume the more terribly grave the situation appeared.

The upper waters of the Thames were poisoned beyond doubt. And the Thames for some time past had been little better than a stagnant ditch under a fiery sun. Let that water only find its way into the pipes under London and who could forecast the magnitude of the disaster? Nearly all London derived its supply from the Thames.

So far as Grady could see from a swift examination of Dr. Richard Siskey's valuable book, there were only two London water companies did not derive their stock from the Thames − the New River Company with its 40,000,000 gallons per diem, and the Kent Company with 20,000,000 gallons a day were the favoured ones.

But what of the other six sources of supply? Chelsea, East London, West Middlesex, Grand Junction, Southwark, and Vauxhall and Lambeth were all dependent upon the Thames. Some 250,000,000 gallons of water daily were a matter of necessity for the areas supplied by the above−named companies. Fancy that liquid poison flowing like a flood into the Fast End from Limehouse to West Ham, and from Bow to Walthamstow, and nobody dreaming of the hideous danger! Why, the Great Plague of London would be nothing to it.

And the West End would be no better off. From Sunbury to Mayfair those connected with the Grand Junction supply would suffer. So far as London proper was concerned, only those fortunate ones who were joined to the

New River mains would be exempt from peril, and, even then, what chance has a sanitary area surrounded by pestilent districts? If it were not already too late, the only chance was to cut off the contaminated water supply, and then leave four−fifths of the population of London absolutely without water under a heat that seemed to deprive one of vital power.

The further Grady read on the more he was impressed. If he could get this dread information into the hands of the people before it was too late, he felt that he would be playing the part of a benefactor. Desperate as the situation looked, the Telephone might yet save it. Professor Darbyshire had no right to hold up such a secret when he should have been taking measures to avert the threatened danger. It never occurred to Grady that Darbyshire had had this calamity before his eyes for years, and that his genius had found a way to nullify the evil.

"The figures are pretty bad," Grady muttered. "Upon my word, it makes me creepy to think about it. Got your stuff ready? Want anything?"

"Anything in the way of food, you mean?" Chase asked.

"That's it. No? So much the better; because when that copy goes upstairs not a soul leaves the premises till the paper has gone to bed."

An hour later the presses were roaring: presently huge parcels of damp sheets were vomited into the street. Under the glare of the arc lamps perspiring porters ghostly blue and spectral vans waited. The whole street was busy with the hum of high noon. And all the while, a little way beyond the radius of purple arcs, London slept . . .

London awoke presently and prepared for the day's work. There was no sign of fear or panic yet. A copy of the Telephone lay on a hundred thousand odd breakfast tables, news in tabloid form for busy men to read. As the sheets were more or less carelessly opened the eye was arrested by the scare heads on page 5. Nothing else seemed to be visible:−

THE POISONED THAMES

Millions of plague germs flowing down into London. Bacillus of bubonic plague in the river. New River and Kent Companles alone can supply pure water. Stupendous discovery by Professor Darbyshire. Death in your breakfast cup today. Shun it as you would poison. If you are not connected with either of the above companies, or if you have no private supply,

CUT OFF YOUR WATER AT THE MAIN AT ONCE!

What did it all mean? Nobody seemed to know. At eight o'clock in the morning London's pulse was calm and regular. An hour later it was writhing like some great reptile in the throes of mortal pain.

III.

BY ten o'clock the authorities had taken the matter in hand. By some mishap the one man who could have done most to help was lying unconscious at Charing Cross Hospital with no chance of his throwing any light on the subject for some days to come. Darbyshire's hurt was not dangerous, but his recovery was a matter of time.

Meanwhile Dr Longdale was the man of the hour. But he could not allay the panic that had gripped London. A deadly fear had taken possession of everybody. Longdale could hold out no hope, he could only give his conversation with Darbyshire and delare that the bubonic microbe had impregnated the Thames. Did he think seriously of the danger? The answer was not reassuring. For his part Longdale would far rather see a million of troops and a siege train battering London than hear of such a thing as this.

There was only one thing for it. It was no time for kid glove remedies. Six of the great London Water Companies had their supply cut off within an hour. It is almost impossible to sit down and realise what this means, and that under a sky like brass and the thermometer at 97 deg. in the shade.

Try and imagine it for a moment, and try and wonder why the thing has not happened before. Think of two−thirds of two millions deprived suddenly of the element which is almost as vital to existence as food. Try and realise that these two−thirds of six millions derive their water supply from an open stream that at any moment by the accident of chance might be turned into a hideous poison−cup.

Under a blazing sunshine after days of heat and dust the packed East−end was suddenly deprived of every drop of water. For an hour or two no great hardship was felt, but after that every moment added to the agony. Before long the railway termini were packed with people eager to be away from the metropolis.

By midday business was at a standstill. There was not a water cart to be seen from Kensington to the Mansion House. Every cart and tank that could be raked together had been despatched into the New River and Kent Water area with instructions to convey a supply as speedily as possible to the congested districts East and South−east of the Thames. By lunch time the City presented a strange spectacle. Well−dressed business men could be seen proceeding in cabs to the favoured area with buckets and water cans with the avowed object of taking a supply forthwith. Cabmen were commanding their own prices.

Fairly early in the morning came the announcement that mineral waters had gone up two hundred per cent. in price. By midday the supply for the time being had ceased. Men of means with an eye to the future had bought up the whole stock. The streets were crowded with people anxiously waiting developments.

For the time being the scare was kept well in hand. What men were most anxious to know, though they dared hardly whisper the question, was whether any disease had broken out as yet. It was a little after two o'clock that the Evening Flashlight settled the question. A boy came yelling down the Strand with a flapping of papers on his shoulders.

"The plague broke out," he cried; "two cases of bubonic fever at Limehouse. Dr. Longdale's analysis. Speshull."

There was a rush for the lad and his papers were gone in a twinkling of an eye. He looked down dazed at the pile of silver and coppers in the palm of his grimy hand.

Yes, there it was right enough. Two cases of bubonic plague had been located in a crowded corner of Limehouse, and Dr. Longdale had been called in to verify them. He had not the slightest hesitation in so doing. Perhaps if the readers of the Searchlight had known these two cases were renegades from the Santa Anna, the panic might have been allayed. But nobody knew.

There was terror in the mere suggestion of the plague. Doubtless, people said, these two poor fellows had drunk of the polluted flood and paid the penalty. But no fever breaks out quite so soon as that and within a few hours nine−tenths of the white−face multitude had drunk of the same stream. Man turned to friend and stranger to stranger with the same dread question in his eye. It might be the turn of any one of them next. There were those who shrugged their shoulders stolidly, others that crept in bars and restaurants and asked furtively for brandy.

The streets were still packed with people waiting for fresh information. By this time there was something like method in the conveyance of water to the affected parts. But after all the New River and Kent companies could not do everything. At the utmost they could supply no more than 60,000,000 gallons per day and now they were

suddenly called upon for water for the whole of London. Just enough to drink and keep body and soul together was all that could be expected.

In some crowded districts where great breweries and the like had been established much was accomplished by private enterprise. There were scores of artesian wells in East and South London and these were generously given over at once to the requirements of the people. Even private houses known to possess pumps were besieged and strangers of all classes were accommodated, The situation was dreadful enough but it wouldd be worse if a real panic broke out.

Presently people began to press in dense masses along the Strand and the avenues leading to Trafalgar Square where fountains by Nelson's column were spurting high and clear. There was a continuous rush in the direction of the Square where placards announced the fact that there was no suggestion of contamination here. People danced and raved about the fountain, they fought for the water, they carried it away only to lose it again in the crush, they bent down and lifted the precious fluid to their lips in the hollow of their hands.

Still, there was no sign of panic as yet, no more cases of fever reported. As night fell the streets cleared and something like a normal condition of things was restored.

IV.

IT seemed indeed as if serious disaster would now be averted. All night long a willing band of firemen and volunteers were engaged in bringing the precious fluid to the famine stricken district. But, including private and other wells, the available supply was little more than 70,000,000 gallons per day and this had to be divided amongst 6,000,000 people over an area of some thirty square miles.

And this, after all, was only a proper precaution. The New River and Kent Companies had a face supply of 50,000,000 gallons per diem, but this was an absolute maximum and far over the average demand.

Moreover, the drought had been a long one, and the reserve reservoirs had been freely called upon. In a day or two the allowance would have to be halved.

Again in the hospitals and sick households water for domestic purposes was absolutely necessary. Meanwhile scores of the main line trains had been knocked off to make way for trains of tanks bringing water from the country. The Spring Gardens officials were working with superhuman efforts.

All night long a stream of people were coming and going between Trafalgar Square and such other open supplies as were available. Morning came at length, with the promise of another sweltering day. A few people turned vaguely to Parliament to do something. Two days before the House of Commons had looked forward to prorogation on Saturday, but there was no talk of that any longer.

The streets began to be busy again. There were smartly−dressed men here and there with grimy chins and features frankly dirty. It seemed strange to see individuals with good coats and spotless linen grimed and lined with the dust of yesterday. A steady breeze was blowing so that in a little time the dust in the streets became intolerable. The air was full of a fine dry powder that penetrated lungs and throat, and produced a painful thirst. It was impossible to water the roads, so that the evil had to be endured.

There was one question on every lip, and that was whether there had been any further spread of the plague. The authorities were exceedingly happy to announce that no further cases had been reported. There was comfort in the knowledge, and London breathed a little easier. Evidently the prompt measures taken had averted all danger of a disastrous epidemic. Gradually it became known who the sufferers were. It was an awful price that London had to pay for the casting away of the Santa Anna.

But that was only the spark to the powder, after all. Extraordinary apathy and criminal carelessness were the causes of the disaster. The knowledge a century hence that London derived its water supply from an open river into which many towns conveyed its sewage will be recorded with pitiful amazement. For the present we have the plain unmitigated fact.

The yellow press made the most of it. The Red Banner pointed to corruption and apathy on the part of the ruling powers; the Red Banner also asked if it were not a fact that our bloated legislators had a private water supply of their own, and that, whilst the common people were allowanced, our law makers were sipping their coffee and tea and whiskey and water as usual?

It was the usual coarse gibe to be expected from a paper of that type, an arrow at venture. But for once the thing was true, seeing that the House of Commons has a private supply of water drawn from a well of its own. As a rule, the Banner carried very little weight, but the question got into the people's mouths and became a catchword. A man had only to pass a standpipe without a struggle in its direction, to be dubbed a member of the House of Commons, i.e., the public want did not touch him at all.

The blazing, panting day wore on. People were beginning faintly to understand what a water famine might mean. Everybody was grimy and tired; in the East and West alike dingy features could be seen. As night fell small riots broke out here and there, people were robbed of their precious fluid as they carried it along the streets. It had leaked out that sundry shops in different parts of London had wells, and these establishments were stormed and looted of their contents by thieves who took advantage of the confusion. It was only by dint of the most strenuous exertion that the police managed to keep the upper hand.

Another day or two of this and what would become of London? At nightfall it became absolutely necessary to release some millions of gallons of the condemned water for the flushing of the sewers. There was danger here, but, on the whole, the danger was less than a wide epidemic of diphtheria and fever. And there were people thirsty

and reckless enough to drink this water heedless of the consequences. With characteristic imprudence, the East End had exhausted its dole early in the day, and wild−eyed men raved through the streets yelling for more.

From time to time the police raided and broke up these dangerous commandoes. A well−known democratic agitator came with a following over Westminster Bridge and violently harangued a knot of his followers in Palace Yard. The police were caught napping for the moment. The burly red−faced demagogue looked round the swelling sea of sullen features and pointed to the light in the clock tower. He started spouting the froth of his tribe.

It was all the fault of the governing body, of course. They managed things much better on the Continent.

"If you were men," he yelled, " you'd drag them out of yonder. You'd make them come and work like the rest of us. What said the Banner to−day? Your bloated rulers are all right; they don't want for anything. At the present moment they have plenty of the water that you'd sell your souls for."

"If you'll lead the way, we'll follow," said a voice hoarsely.

The orator glanced furtively around. There was not a single police helmet to be seen, nothing but five or six hundred desperate men ready for anything.

"Then come along," he yelled. "We'll make history to−night."

He strode towards the House followed by a yelling rnob. The few police inside were tossed here and there like dry leaves in a flood; the quiet decorum of the lobby was broken up, a white−faced member fled into the chamber and declared that London was in riot and that a mob of desperadoes were here bent on wrecking the mother of parliaments.

An interminable debate on some utterly useless question was in progress, the Speaker nodded wearily under the weight of his robes and wig, the green benches were dotted with members all utterly overcome with the stifling heat. There was to be a big division about midnight, so that the smoking−room and bars and terraces were full of members.

The Speaker looked up sharply. A stinging reproof was on the tip of his tongue. He had scarcely uttered a word, before, as if by magic, the green benches were swarming with the mob. It filled the chamber, yelling and shouting. It was in vain that the Speaker tried to make his voice heard above the din.

A glass of water and a bottle stood on the table before him. One of the intruders more audacious than the rest snatched up the glass and emptied it. A mighty roar of applause followed the audacious act. As yet the mob was fairly good−humoured, though there was no knowing what their mood would be presently.

"It's that confounded Banner," one member of the government groaned to another. "They have come after our private supply. Can't one of you get to the telephone and call up Scotland Yard?"

Meanwhile the mob were inclined to be sportive. They surged forward to the table driving the Speaker back behind the chair, they overturned the table and scattered books and papers in all directions. The foreign element in the company started singing the Marsellaise in strident tones. The martial spirit of it fired the blood of the others.

"We are wasting time here," someone cried. "There are bars and dining−rooms. As we came in I heard the rattle of glasses. This way."

The crowd reeled back as if one motion controlled them all. There was still the same note of laughter in the roar and all might have been well yet, but for the advent of a small, but determined body of police. They charged fiercely into the mob, and in the twinkling of an eye farces gave way to tragedy.

In less time than it takes to tell the police were beaten back with one or two of their number badly hurt, whilst the forefront of the visitors had not come off any better. The popular chamber had become a wreck; outside in the lobby broken furniture was scattered about everywhere.

Then the tide of humanity surged into the bars and dining−rooms. A few frightened attendants and waiters still stuck to their posts. The sight of the glasses and bottles of water about seemed to madden the mob. They demanded that all the taps should be turned on, the fittings were wrenched away amidst a perfect tornado of applause, soon the floors were swimming with the element that all London was clamouring for outside.

The rooms were strewn with broken glass and china, the floors were damp and soppy with the wasted water. Here and there men were feasting on looted food. Never had anything like this been seen in any parliament before. A few courageous members vainly trying to stop the din wondered where were the police.

But they were coming. They did come presently, two hundred of them, steady, stern, and disciplined, and before them the rioters fled like chaff, before the wind. Five more minutes and the House was cleared. But the damage was great.

Outside a dense mass of people had gathered, attracted by the news of the riot. They were in no mood to take the side of law and order and it was with great difficulty that the ring−leaders of the late affray were got away safely. A thin high voice a long way off in the back of the crowd was shouting something which seemed to at once arrest attention. A sullen murmur came up to Palace Yard. The loose jeers of the mob ceased as if by magic.

"What are they saying?" an Irish member asked.

"I can't quite catch it," another member said, "but it's something about water in Trafalgar Square. I shouldn't wonder if−−

Just for an instant the roar broke out again. There was a note of fear in it this time. The babel of voices yelled one against the other. Gradually it was possible to make something out of it.

"By Jove, it's as I feared," the Irish member said. "The spring under the Trafalgar Square fountain has given out. It's a public calamity. See, they are all off. No more row to−night."

The great crowd was melting away with marvellous rapidity. Each man there wanted to verify this new disaster for himself. The mob streamed along towards the Square as if life and death hung in the balance. If fortune had lain there they could not have fought or struggled harder. In the heat and the strife many fell by the way, but they lay there unheeded.

The cool fountain no longer played. People who had come from afar with vessels for the precious fluid cast them on the ground passionately and cursed aloud. The disaster was so great, it appeared so overwhelming that the cruel mood of the mob was held in check for the time. Taking advantage, the police shepherded the mob here and there until comparative quiet was restored. Dr. Longdale, on his way home, paused to contemplate the scene.

"`Blucher or night,'" he murmured, "Darbyshire or morning, rather. I'd give my practice to have a few words with Darbyshire now. I'll just call at the Charing Cross Hospital and see how he is."

It was comparatively quiet in the Strand by this time. Four or five stalwart constables stood on the steps of the hospital as a safe−guard, for there was no lack of water there. A house−surgeon came hurrying out.

"I am very glad to see you," he said. "I was just going to send for you. Dr. Darby−"

"Good heaven, you don't mean to say he is worse!"

"On the contrary, much better; quite sensible, in fact; and he declines to think about sleep until he has seen you."

V.

IF the−sweltering heat that hung over London added in one way to the terror of the hour, it was not without a beneficent effect in another direction. Under such a sky, and with a barometer somewhere in the nineties, it was impossible for rioting to last long at a stretch.

The early hours of dawn saw London comparatively quiet again. Perhaps it was no more than the sleep of exhaustion and sullen despair, perhaps the flame might break out again with the coming of the day. Down in the East End a constant struggle was maintained, a struggle between the industrious and prudent and those who depended upon luck or the power of the strong arm.

The day came again with the promise of another round of blazing hours. At first there were no signs of lawlessness, nothing more than an eager jostling stream of people pushing impatiently towards the districts where water could be obtained. These were the folks who preferred to get their own instead of waiting for the carts or tanks to visit them.

Naturally, the Press was full of good advice. Thousands of correspondents had rushed into print with many a grotesque suggestion for getting rid of the difficulty. Amongst these ingenious inventions was one that immediately arrested popular attention. The writer pointed out that there were other things to quench thirst besides water. There were hundred of tons of fruit in London, it came up from the provinces by the trainload every day, foreign vessels brought consignments to the Thames and the Mersey. Let the Government pour all this into London and distribute it free in a systematic way.

This letter appeared in three popular papers. The thing was talked about from one end of London to the other. It was discussed in Whitechapel and eagerly debated in the West End clubs.

Instantly the whole metropolis had a wild longing for fruit. Some of the shops were cleared out directly at extraordinary prices. Grapes usually sold at a shilling or two the pound now fetched twenty times their value. A costermonger in the Strand with a barrow of oranges suddenly found himself a comparatively rich man. Towards mid−day crowds began to gather before the big fruit stores, and in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden traffic was impossible.

Prices went leaping up as if fruit had become as extinct as the dodo.

Still the stuff came pouring in in response to urgent telegrams. It looked as if the dealers were bent upon making a fortune out of the public mood. Like lightning the news of what was happening flashed over London, and gradually the approaches to Covent Garden were packed with people.

Presently curiosity was followed by a sullen resentment. Who were these men that they should be allowed to fatten on public misfortune? These things ought to have been given away if only on the ground of mere public policy. Through the crush came a waggon−load of baskets and boxes. A determined−looking mechanic stopped the horses whilst another man, amidst the yells of the crowd sprang to the top of the load and whirled a basket of apples far and wide.

"You've got too heavy a load, matey," he said grimly to the driver.

The man grinned meaningly. He was benefiting nothing by the new order of things. He took an apple and began to eat it himself. In a few minutes every speck of fruit had disappeared.

The thing was done spontaneously and in perfect order. One moment the market had been absolutely crammed with fruit of all kinds, an hour afterwards it was empty.

It was a fairly good−humoured crowd, if a little grim, as yet. But the authorities had serious faces, whilst quite half the police in streets looked shy and out of place as well they might be seeing that several thousand of them had been drafted into London from all parts of the country. Towards midday a sport was added to the amusement of the great mobs that packed the main streets. There was not the slightest reason why all London should not be at work as usual, but, by mutual consent, the daily toil had come to a standstill. It was grilling hot with a sun that made the pavement gleam and tremble in the shimmering haze and there was little to quench the thirst of the multitude. But then did not London teem from end to end with places of public entertainment where thirsts were specially catered for?

Already sections of the crowd had begun to enter them and call loudly for sundry liquids. Why should the

hotel proprietors get off scot free? Mysteriously as the sign that called up the Indian Mutiny, the signal went round to raid the public houses. There was no call to repeat it twice.

Everybody suffered alike. The bars were choked and packed with perspiring humanity yelling for liquid refreshment, the men who were wise bowed to the inevitable and served out their stock till it was exhausted and said so with cheerful faces. In the Strand the cellars of certain famous restaurants were looted and one proprietor proclaimed that Whitechapel and Shoreditch had taken from him wines to the value of £30,000. Men were standing in the Strand with strange dusty bottles in their hands, the necks of which they knocked off without ceremony to reach the precious liquid within. For the most part they were disappointed, There were murmurs of disgust and wry faces at the stored juice of the grape that a connoisseur would have raved over.

Fortunately there was little or no drunkenness. The crowd was too vast and the supply too limited for that. And practically there was no rioting where the unfortunate license holders were discreet enough to bow to the inevitable. One or two places were gutted under the eyes of the police who could do no more than keep a decent show of order and bustle about certain suspicious characters who were present for something more than curiosity.

About one o'clock in the afternoon the early edition of the evening papers began to appear. They were eagerly bought up with a view to the latest news. Presently the name of the Mirror seemed to rise spontaneously to every lip. Nobody knew whence it came or why, but there it was. With one accord everybody was calling for the Mirror. There was pregnant news within. Yet none of the papers could be seen in the streets. There was a rush to the office of the paper.

A large flag floated on the top of the building. Across the front was a white sheet with words upon it that thrilled the heart of the spectator.

"The panic is at an end. London to use its full water supply again. Dr. Darbyshire saves the situation. The mains turned on everywhere. See the Mirror."

What could it mean? In the sudden silence the roar of the Mirror printing presses could be heard. Presently the big doors in the basement burst open and hundreds of copies of the paper were pitched into the street. No payment was asked and none was expected. A white sea of rustling sheets fluttered over men's heads as far as the Strand. Up there the turncocks were busy flushing the gutters with standpipes, a row of fire engines was proceeding to wash the streets down from the mains. The whole thing was so sudden and unexpected that it seemed like a dream.

Who was this same Dr. Darbyshire who had brought this miracle about? But it was all in the Mirror for everyone to see who could read.

"Very late last night Dr. Longdale the well−known hygienic specialist was called to Charing Cross Hospital to see Dr. Darbyshire who the night before had been taken to that institution with concussion of the brain. It may not be generally known that Dr. Darbyshire discovered the bubonic plague bacillus in the Thames which led to the wholesale cutting off of the London Water Supply.

"Unfortunately the only man who might have been able to grapple with the difficulty was placed hors de combat. We know now that if nothing had happened to him there would have been no scare at all. Unfortunately the bacillus story found its way to the office of a contemporary, who did not hesitate to make capital out of the dreadful discovery. The dire result that followed on the publication of the Telephone we already know to our cost.

"To obviate that calamity Dr. Darbyshire was on his way to the Telephone office when he met with his accident. Late last night the learned gentleman had so far recovered as to ask full particulars of what had happened and also to see Dr. Longdale without delay.

"Judge of the surprise and delight of the latter to know that matters had been already remedied. It appears that for years past Dr. Darbyshire has been experimenting upon contaminated water with a view to making the same innocuous to human life. Quite recently the discovery has been perfectly and successfully tried with water impregnated with the germs of every known disease. So long as so many great towns draw their water supply from open streams liable to all kinds of contamination, Dr. Darbyshire felt sure there would be no public safety till the remedy was found.

"The remedy had been found and would have been made public directly, when there came the now historic case of the Santa Anna and the alarming outbreak of bubonic fever at Ashchurch.

"On reaching the village in question and on verifying his suspicions, Dr. Darbyshire found that the waters of the Thames were strongly impregnated with the germs of that fell disease. As a matter of fact, the sterilising

process was applied at once, and an examination of the water of the Thames a few miles lower down gave the result of absolute purity.

"This part of the story Dr. Darbyshire had no time to tell his colleague Dr. Longdale. He was only too anxious to get away and prevent the issue of a scare leader by the Telephone.

"Accident prevented this design, and when Dr. Longdale was questioned he was bound to admit that he had seen the Thames water strongly impregnated with the bubonic bacillus. After that there was no alternative but to cut off the supply from the Thames. Let us hope the severe lesson has not been in vain.

"Once these facts came to Dr. Longdale's notice, he lost no time. A special train was dispatched to Ashchurch, and returned quickly, bringing specimens of water from the Thames.

"These, after investigation, a small body of leading specialists drank without the slightest hesitation. The new process of sterilisation discovered by Dr. Darbyshire has saved the situation. Otherwise it would have been impossible to magnify the disaster."

Did ever a quiet and dignified newspaper paragraph produce such a sensational outbreak in the history of journalism? Nobody needed to be convinced of the truth of the statement − truth was on the face of it. Men shook one another by the hand, hats were cast into the air and forgotten heedless of the blazing sun; up in the Strand where fire−engines were sluicing the streets with water people stood under the beating drip of the precious fluid until they were soaked to the skin; well−dressed men laved themselves in the clear running gutters with an eagerness that the pursuit of gold never surpassed. London was saved from disaster, and Dr. Darbyshire was the hero of the hour.

The great man was sitting up in bed and modestly listening to the story that Longdale had to tell. Darbyshire was blaming himself severely.

"I ought to have told you," he said. "When I asked you to come round to me the other night I had a dramatic surprise for you. I told you all about the fever and the state of the Thames. From the condition of the germs I knew that the trouble had not gone far. Here was a chance to test my sterilisation on a big scale. I tried it with perfect success. I'll show you the whole process the first time I get back home."

"Yes, do," said Longdale grimly. "It's all right as it is, but if you meet with another accident and another such scourge comes along and we don't know −"

"I quite understand. When I had worked upon your feelings, I was going to show you the whole thing. Then I found out what that fellow Chase had got hold of, and I had to fly off post haste and see his editor. I didn't mind the paper having its `scare' so long as I came in at the finish with the assurance that there was no need for alarm.

"Hence my hurry, and hence my accident. All the same, it was a mean thing, Longdale. Some day perhaps the country will realise what a debt it owes to its men of science."

Longdale looked at the yelling joyous mob outside heedless of the sunshine and reckless in the hysteria of the moment.

"And perhaps the country will foster them a little more," he said. "Nothing but science could have prevented a calamity that would have multiplied ten−fold the horrors of the Great Plague, and destroyed, not thousands, but tens of thousands.

Darbyshire nodded thoughtfully.

"One of the things that might have been," he said.

"Might have been! We have had a lesson, but I doubt if we shall profit by it. England never seems to profit by anything. It is one of the things that may be. And there is more difference than meets the eye.