

# The Black Death, 1347-1349

## *Characters*

<b>TOMA</b> and <b>LUCA</b> , Italian sailors	<b>GIAN</b> , Florentine merchant
<b>ALDO</b> , Italian ship captain	<b>BOCCA</b> (Boccaccio), Italian writer
<b>KRUS</b> , Russian merchant	<b>THIKKE</b> , German peasant
<b>MARCEL</b> , French doctor	<b>HILDE</b> , Thikke's daughter
<b>LOUIS</b> , French merchant	<b>RUUDE</b> and <b>KRULE</b> , religious extremists
<b>SYENA</b> , gypsy woman	<b>CHORUS I</b> and <b>II</b>
<b>MAGGIE</b> and <b>BABS</b> , English peasant women	

## *Scene I: Harbor area, Kaffa, the Crimea (Russia), early 1347.*

- TOMA:** I've never seen anything like it!
- LUCA:** We had better get on board before we all catch it!
- ALDO:** Why are you two running? I thought sailors in port always returned to their ship staggering . . . like donkeys walking backwards. Ha!
- TOMA:** Captain, we're both very sober. A terrible sickness has overtaken Kaffa.
- LUCA:** All over the city people are dying.
- ALDO:** Describe it to me.
- TOMA:** First come painful swellings—
- LUCA:** In the neck, under the arms, and in the groin.
- TOMA:** And then, in five days, *death*.
- ALDO:** Round up all of our men! We must leave port within an hour, not a second later!



- LUCA:** We can't possibly find all the crew in so little time! How can we manage without them?
- ALDO:** It's too bad! We're leaving regardless. We'll do what we must!
- TOMA:** Captain, you know something, don't you?
- ALDO:** Yes . . . I'm sure it's plague. We haven't seen it in Italy for four hundred years. But the old women still recite stories about it . . . it can kill by the thousands! Now, go get us a crew!

*Scene II: An hour later.*

- KRUS:** Captain, haven't you forgotten something? You're setting sail, but you haven't loaded on my furs.
- ALDO:** Keep your rotten Russian furs! We're returning to Genoa at once!
- KRUS:** But you are under a contract!
- ALDO:** Keep that, too! Get another buyer.
- KRUS:** I don't understand. Why all the haste? My delivery men will be here in two hours.
- ALDO:** Fine, you wait here for death, because I'm not! Take my advice and forget your furs. Otherwise the only good they'll do you is to wrap your corpse like fish in the market!
- KRUS:** What are you talking about? We had a deal!
- ALDO:** There's plague in Kaffa, you boulder-brain! And for this Genoese sailor, that means all deals are off . . . and so am I.

*Scene III: Marseilles, France,  
late 1347.*

- MARCEL:** Louis, how's business? Made any big deals lately?
- LOUIS:** Doctor, how can you ask such things in times like these?
- MARCEL:** Simple. If I don't, I'll go crazy. Everywhere I turn, I see only chaos and misery. Already over a third of the population has died.



- LOUIS:** Do you have any idea what is causing this?
- MARCEL:** Not really. No doctor in Marseilles has seen its like before. Not even our medical manuals have given us a clue.
- LOUIS:** There is no hope, no remedies?
- MARCEL:** Remedies? I've seen my share.
- LOUIS:** Thank goodness! I'll pay anything you ask. Just tell me and my family what to do.
- MARCEL:** I've seen some people try indulging in wild living, or dancing without stopping.
- LOUIS:** Does it work? Have those people been spared?
- MARCEL:** Others have tried special diets or certain sleeping positions.
- LOUIS:** Describe them in detail! I must know!
- MARCEL:** Some burn aromatic woods and herbs, or take potions made from gold and pearls.
- LOUIS:** I'll bring you gold and pearls, and plenty more for you as a reward. Just mix the right potion!
- MARCEL:** Louis, Louis, my friend. None of these remedies will work. They're only the delusions of the desperate. The only thing that's certain is five horrible days, and then death.
- LOUIS:** Is there anything—anything—we can do?
- MARCEL:** Yes. Flee with your family to the countryside. The death rate seems lower there than in the crowded cities. Other than that, we might as well ask this gypsy here. Her advice would be no more useful than any doctor's.
- (Enter SYENA.)*
- LOUIS:** Old woman, do you have something to protect me from the great sickness?
- SYENA:** What does the "learned doctor" prescribe?
- LOUIS:** He has been very honest with me, and says nothing really works.



- SYENA:** Are you so desperate that you would trust a gypsy? Your people despise me and accuse my people of being swindlers and liars. Why do you ask my advice now?
- LOUIS:** Because this great sickness respects no one. It's the great equalizer of all our social and racial differences.
- SYENA:** Look out on the busy harbor. What do you see?
- LOUIS:** Ships from many different places.
- SYENA:** Doctor, where did the great sickness first strike?
- MARCEL:** Let me think. Why, in ports like Marseilles.
- SYENA:** Where in the port cities?
- MARCEL:** In the harbor areas.
- SYENA:** Yes. Death rides in those crowded ships.
- MARCEL:** Of course the sailors get sick, too. You've told us nothing, old woman. Let's leave, Louis.
- SYENA:** (*calling after the men as they leave*) It's not the men in the ships that bring death. It's the rats. The rats. . . .

***Scene IV: Peasant village,  
southern England, 1348.***

- MAGGIE:** Can you believe the prices today?
- BABS:** At least *something* good has come from the plague.
- MAGGIE:** We bought a good milker and a healthy sow for less than half the usual price.
- BABS:** And did you know my man Jack just asked the lord to double his wages?
- MAGGIE:** Did he get his ears boxed for it, too?
- BABS:** No, Maggie! With so few laborers left, all the big farmers and lords are caught in a pickle!
- MAGGIE:** I get it. Pay up, or watch the crops rot. Right?



- BABS:** Yes...and about time, too. We common folk have suffered long enough. You know what else Jack said about the farms?
- MAGGIE:** No. What's that?
- BABS:** They're only going to farm the best land, and let the rest of it go.
- MAGGIE:** That should make Jack's work easier.
- BABS:** That's right. Say, how are you keeping the plague away?
- MAGGIE:** By not letting any strangers cross my doorway.
- BABS:** Sounds sensible. Me, I'm a-scrubbing and a-cleaning all day, like my sister who works up at the castle.
- MAGGIE:** Waste of time and energy.
- BABS:** Maybe so, but it keeps my mind off that horrible sickness.

*Scene V: Writers' supply shop,  
Florence, Italy, 1348.*

- GIAN:** Hey, Bocca, what do you need all that paper for?
- BOCCA:** I'm going to write many stories.
- GIAN:** What? In times like these? Half of Florence has already died of the plague.
- BOCCA:** Including my dear mother.
- GIAN:** Are you going to write about her? We've had enough sadness, don't you think?
- BOCCA:** Yes. These stories are going to make people laugh again. I'm going to poke my pen at some people who deserve to be made fun of.
- GIAN:** Like wayward clerics and pompous cuckolds?
- BOCCA:** Most certainly! I think I'll even write some stories that will make people blush.



- GIAN:** That would be a welcome sight! We've stared at the pale faces of death for too long. Tell me, how do you plan to organize these stories?
- BOCCA:** I'll have ten people, all fleeing the plague, on an outing in the countryside. To pass the time, once a day each person must tell a story, but no sad ones are allowed. The outing will last for ten days.
- GIAN:** Do you have a title yet?
- BOCCA:** Yes. "The Decameron," or "Ten Days' Entertainments."
- GIAN:** You'll have to write one hundred stories! Good luck, and thank you for the business. I've had precious little lately.
- BOCCA:** And thank you. I'll be sure to bring you a copy of my book.
- GIAN:** Wonderful! I'll certainly enjoy reading something new like this in Italian.

*Scene VI: Village in Rhineland,  
Germany, August, 1349.*

- THIKKE:** What is it, girl? Why are you out of breath?
- HILDE:** I've just come from the market . . . they're here!
- THIKKE:** Daughter, who are you talking about? You act as if it's the Second Coming, and with all the disciples to boot!
- HILDE:** The Flagellant Brethren!
- THIKKE:** What?
- HILDE:** A hundred men singing and marching.
- THIKKE:** What do they look like?
- HILDE:** They have hoods over their heads, and long white robes with a red cross on the front and back . . . and they carry these awful-looking whips.
- THIKKE:** Let's go see who these fellows are.



***Scene VII: Town square,  
a short while later.***

- RUUDE:** In the Lord's precious name, we greet you. THE GREAT PLAGUE IS COMING!
- KRULE:** As God's punishment for our sins!
- RUUDE:** To show our sorrow and shame, words of repentance are not enough. We must demonstrate our sincerity.
- HILDE:** Father! They're tearing their own flesh! They'll all bleed to death!
- THIKKE:** Their whips are studded with iron spikes! What courage! Daughter, we must listen to these men.
- RUUDE:** Our suffering is not sufficient. The bearers of the plague must be punished!
- THIKKE:** Who? Who are they?
- KRULE:** They poison your wells! They suck your blood in usury!
- RUUDE:** They killed our Lord!
- KRULE:** Round up all your Jews!
- RUUDE:** Hanging is too good for them! Impale them!
- THIKKE:** Yes! Yes! I'll get my pitchfork!
- HILDE:** Father! No! These men are cruel and evil liars! Father! Don't go with the mob! Good heavens, is this plague the end of the world?

***Epilogue***

- CHORUS:**
- I:** No, the Black Death did not end the world,  
**II:** Though Europe lost one in four,  
**I:** And those who survived it fitfully hurled  
**II:** Themselves upon feudalism's crumbling door.



- I:** And so accelerated a system's demise:  
**II:** The chains of serfdom creaked and cracked,  
**I:** Loosening the peasantry to follow their eyes  
**II:** To towns where thousands would never look back.
- I:** From the ashes of the Black Death  
**II:** A commanding culture would blaze;  
**I:** Fanned by freedom's undying breath,  
**II:** Western Europe greeted its dynamic phase.

