

CHAPTER LV

THE PLAGUE

Who has not heard of the Black Death which spread in the fourteenth century from its original home, Asia, over Europe, devastating enormous stretches of country, and even in certain parts of Sweden almost exterminating the population? From certain old-established centres in the Old World this terrible epidemic seems, time after time, fortunately at long intervals, to have found its proper soil in human bodies, or rather the conditions under which men lived in certain districts were favourable for its propagation, and it spread slowly but irresistibly over wide areas. About twenty years ago China suffered from such a plague period, and in 1894 the disease reached Hongkong, and afterwards spread westwards to India, where it remained for a series of years. Especially in 1896 and 1897 numbers of people in India were carried off by it, and during nine years the plague had seized as many as three million victims.

But with regard to the plague and other great epidemics which have their roots in Asia, a wide field is open for all kinds of speculations. Are plague and cholera necessary evils, a means in the hand of nature to check the too rapid increase of the human race upon the earth? And if the number of human beings increases in the course of time, will these epidemics and their ravages increase at the same rate? It is a triumph of science to be able to check and suppress the spread of pestilence by means of serum; but is it an advantage to the human race as a whole that a natural weeding out should take place from time to time? The plague last raged in the seventeenth century; for more