



#319:  
THE BLACK  
DEATH

The Black Death was a terrifyingly contagious disease. Merely touching someone's clothing could spread the fatal disease within seconds. The Black Death arrived in Europe in the mid-14th century. The disease began with a terrible fever, which included the inability to keep food down. This was followed by a spread of black boils over the body that seeped with blood and pus, which gave the disease its dark name. This horrifying sickness spread rapidly across Europe and killed approximately 20 million people, nearly one third of the continent's population at the time.

Late in the summer of 1349, a ship carrying cargo from England arrived in Bergen, Norway. The crew started unloading the ship, but soon one of the men died and more deaths quickly followed. Bodies were sunk in the harbor. A wave of horror swept the city. The Black Death had finally arrived in Norway and it spread north and south in a matter of days. In one year, the plague struck with terrifying force in almost all districts of the country. Some sources claim that two-thirds of the population perished although it is

more likely that about 40-50% died. We will never know the exact number. Entire families died, farmland became wilderness and social chaos followed in the wake of people's fear of death. The foundation of the country's social structure was shaken.

The Black Death struck Norway mostly as a bubonic (most common form where bacteria enters the body through a bite by an infected flea or rodent) but also partly as a pneumonic plague (most serious form that is contracted through inhalation, person to person). Today, modern medicine has unveiled causes for the disease. Antibiotics and improved sanitation have greatly reduced the threat of a Black Death spreading so dramatically again.

However, during the 1300s, the disease was a mystery and the explanations for it were far from rational at the time. In Norway, frightened people imagined that the plague was personified by a scary creature in the shape of an ugly old woman named Pesta, (PEH 'stah), "The Plague". In Hedmark county, the town of Elverum tells a legend that Pesta carried a rake and a broom from farm to farm. When she arrived with the rake it meant that some in the town would survive, but when she arrived with the broom, the town was doomed.

One of the best known stories takes place in the valley of Jostedal (YUs 'teh 'dah 'lehn), where the only person spared by Pesta was a young girl. Her family forced her to seclude herself by hiding in a farm building with proper supplies so the disease could not find her. Months later, she was found by people from a neighboring valley, she tried to flee like a wild animal, but was caught and taken care of. Supposedly, her descendants became a powerful family.

Tales of touching faithfulness, not only in humans but also in animals, were recorded. Still remembered are the stories of Førnnesbrunen (FUR 'nehs 'bruh 'nen), a brown horse which carried plague victims across the mountains to Seljord (SELL 'your'd) Church for a proper Christian burial. When his master died, he worked his way through the wilderness on his own. Once when he got stuck in the hills, he neighed until people heard him and came to help. After having struggled across the mountains with the last load of bodies, the faithful horse collapsed and was buried by the church where his grave can still be seen. It is an unusual monument in memory of the disaster which struck Norway more than 500 years ago, but is still remembered by her people.

