

ILLNESS — AN UNEXPLOITED MINE

VIRGINIA WOOLF

CONSIDERING how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us in the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm-chair and confuse his "Rinse the mouth — rinse the mouth" with the greeting of the Deity stooping on the floor of Heaven to welcome us, — when we think of this and infinitely more as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to Typhoid; odes to Pneumonia, Appendicitis, and Cancer; lyrics to Tooth-ache. But no; with a few exceptions, — De Quincey attempted something of the sort in *The Opium Eater*; there must be a volume or two about disease scattered through the pages of Proust, — literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null and negligible and non-existent.

On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colors or discolors; turns us to wax in the warmth of June, hardens us to tallow in the muck of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane — smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe: the body

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smashes to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. But of a man's daily drama of the body there is no record. People write always about the doings of the mind, the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans, how it has civilized the universe. They show it ignoring the body in the philosopher's turret; or kicking the body, like an old leather football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquest or discovery. Those great wars which it wages by itself, with the mind a slave to it in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer, — of ten thousand lion tamers, — for these lions are within us not without; and a robust philosophy; and a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth. Short of these, this monster, this miracle, of the body and pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise with rapid beats of the wings into the raptures of transcendentalism.

More practically speaking, the public would say that a novel devoted to influenza lacked plot; they would complain that there was no love in it, wrongly however, for illness often takes on the disguise of love, and plays the same odd tricks, investing certain faces with divinity, setting us to wait hour after hour with pricked ears for the creaking of a stair, and wreathing the faces of the absent (plain enough in health, Heaven knows) with a new significance, while the mind sports with them, and concocts legends and romances about them for which it has not time nor liberty in health.

Finally, among the drawbacks of illness as matter for literature there is the poverty of the language. English which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver and the headache. It has all grown one way. The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor, and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready-made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the inhabitants of Babel did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end will emerge, and it will be something laughable. For who of English

birth can take liberties with the language? It is a sacred thing to us and therefore doomed to die, unless the Americans, whose genius is so much happier in the making of new words than in the artful disposition of the old, will come to our help, and set the springs aflow again.

But it is not only a new language that we need, — primitive, subtle, sensual, obscene, — but a new hierarchy of the passions; love must be deposed in favor of a temperature of 104 degrees; jealousy give place to the pangs of sciatica; sleeplessness play the part of villain, and the hero become a white liquid with a sweet taste, that mighty prince with the moth's eyes and the feathered feet, one of whose names is Chloral.

But to return to the invalid. "I am in bed with influenza," he says, and actually complains that he gets no sympathy at all. "I am in bed with influenza," but what does that convey of the great experience; how the world has changed its shape; the tools of business have grown remote; the sounds of festival romantic become like a merry-go-round across the fields; and friends have changed, some putting on a strange beauty, others deformed to the squatness of toads while the whole landscape of life lies remote, fair, silent, like the shore seen from a ship out at sea; and he is now exalted on a peak and needs no help from man or God, and now grovels supine on the floor glad of a kick from a housemaid. The experience cannot be imparted and, as is always the way with these dumb things, his own suffering serves but to wake memories in his friends' minds of their influenzas, their aches and pains which went unwept last February, and now cry out, desperately, clamorously, for the divine relief of sympathy.

But sympathy we cannot have. Wisest Fate says no. If her children, whose lot is hard enough already, were to take on them that burden too, adding in imagination others' pains to their own, buildings would cease to rise, roads would peter out into grassy tracks, there would be an end of music and of painting; one great sigh alone would rise to Heaven, and the only attitudes for men and women would be those of horror and despair. As it is, there is always some little distraction, — an organ grinder at the corner of the Hospital, a shop with a book or a picture to decoy one past the prison or the workhouse, some absurdity of cat or dog to prevent one from turning the old beggar's hieroglyphic of misery into

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volumes of sordid suffering, and the vast effort of sympathy which those barracks of pain and discipline, those tired symbols of sorrow, ask us to exert on their behalf is uneasily shuffled off for another time.

Sympathy nowadays is dispensed chiefly by the laggards and failures, women for the most part (in whom the obsolete exists so strangely side by side with anarchy and newness) who, having dropped out of the race, have time to spend upon fantastic and unprofitable excursions; C. L. for example who, sitting by the stale sickroom fire, builds up with touches at once sober and imaginative the nursery fender, the loaf, the lamp, barrel organs in the West, and all the simple old wives' tales of pinafores and escapades; A. R. the rash, the magnanimous, who if you fancied a giant tortoise to solace you, and a theorbo to cheer you, would ransack the markets of London and procure them somehow, wrapped in paper, before the end of the day; the frivolous K. T. who, dressed in silks and feathers, painted and powdered (which takes time too) as if for a banquet of Kings and Queens, spends her whole brightness in the gloom of the sick room, and makes the medicine bottles ring and the flames shoot up with her gossip and her mimicry.

But such folk have had their day; civilization points to a different goal. The cities of the Middle West are to blaze with electric light, the insull "must keep twenty or thirty engagements every day of his working months," — and then what place is there for the tortoise and the theorbo?

There is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional), a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals. About sympathy for example; we can do without it. That illusion of a world so shaped that it echoes every laugh, every tear, of human beings so tied together by common needs and fears that a twitch of one wrist jerks another, where however strange your experience other people have had it too, where however far you penetrate into your own mind someone has been there before you, — is all an illusion. We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin forest, tangled, pathless, in each; a snow field where even the print of birds' feet is unknown. Here we

go alone, and like it better so. Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. But in health the genial pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed, — to communicate, to civilize, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work by day together and by night to sport.

In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for, or sunk deep among pillows in one chair we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested, and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up, — to look at the sky, for example.

The first impression of that extraordinary spectacle is strangely overcoming. Ordinarily to look at the sky for any length of time is impossible. Pedestrians would be impeded and disconcerted by a public sky gazer. What snatches we get of it are mutilated by chimneys and churches, serve as a background for man, signify wet or fine weather, daub windows gold, and, filling in the branches, complete the pathos of disheveled autumnal plane trees in London squares. Now, become as the leaf or the daisy, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different from this that really it is a little shocking. This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it! This incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and wagons across the sky, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away, this endless activity with the waste of Heaven-knows-how-many million horse power of energy has been left to work its will year in year out, and we have not known it. The fact seems to call for comment and indeed for censure. Use should be made of it. One should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house.

But watch a little longer, and another emotion drowns the stirrings of civic ardor. Divinely beautiful it is also divinely heartless. Immeasurable resources are used for some purpose

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which has nothing to do with human pleasure or human profit. If we were all laid prone, frozen, stiff, still the sky would be experimenting with its blues and golds. Perhaps, then, looking down at something very small and close and familiar we shall find sympathy. Let us examine the rose. We have seen it so often flowering in bowls, connected it so often with beauty in its prime, or June, or youth, that we have forgotten how it stands still and steady throughout an entire afternoon in the earth. It preserves a demeanor of perfect dignity and self-possession. The suffusion of its petals is of inimitable rightness. Now perhaps one deliberately falls; now all the flowers, the voluptuous purple, the creamy, in whose waxen flesh a spoon has left a swirl of cherry juice, gladioli, dahlias, lilies, sacerdotal, ecclesiastical, flowers with prim cardboard collars tinged apricot and amber, all gently incline their heads to the breeze, — all, with the exception of the heavy sunflower, who proudly acknowledges the sun at midday, and perhaps at midnight rebuffs the moon. There they stand; and it is of these, the stillest, the most self-sufficient of all things that human beings have made companions; these that symbolize their passions, decorate their festivals, and lie (as if they knew sorrow) upon the pillows of the dead. Wonderful to relate, poets have found religion in nature; people live in the country to learn virtue from plants. It is their indifference that they are comforting. That snowfield of the mind, where man has not been, rejoices in the cloud itself perhaps, in the upright rose, as, in another sphere, it is the great artists, the Miltons, the Popes, who console, not by thinking of us, but by forgetting us entirely.

Meanwhile, with the heroism of the ant or the bee, however indifferent the sky may be or disdainful the flowers, the army of the upright marches to battle. Mrs. Jones catches her train. Mr. Smith mends his motor. The cows are driven home to be milked. Men thatch the roof. The dogs bark. The rooks rising in a net fall in a net upon the elm trees. The wave of life flings itself out indefatigably. It is only the recumbent who know what, after all. Nature is at no pains to conceal that she in the end will conquer; the heat will leave the world; stiff with frost we shall cease to drag our feet about the fields; ice will lie thick upon factory and engine; the sun will go out. Even so, when the whole earth is sheeted with ice, some undulation, some irregularity of surface will mark the

boundary of an ancient garden, and there, thrusting its head up undaunted in the starlight the rose will flower, the crocus will burn.

But with the hook of life within us still we must wriggle. We cannot stiffen peaceably into glassy mounds. Even the recumbent spring up at the mere imagination of frost about the toes and stretch out to avail themselves of the universal hope, — Heaven, immortality. Surely, since men have been wishing all these ages they will have wished something into existence; there will be some green isle for the mind to rest on even if the foot cannot plant itself there. The cooperative imagination of mankind will have drawn some firm outline. But no such thing. One opens the "Morning Post" and reads the Bishop of Lichfield on Heaven, — a vague discourse, weak, watery, inconclusive. One watches the churchgoers file to church, those gallant temples where, on the bleakest day in the wettest fields, lamps will be burning, bells punctually ringing, and however the autumn leaves may shuffle and the winds sigh, hopes and desires will be changed to beliefs and certainties. Do they look serene? Are their eyes filled with the light of their sublime conviction? Would one of them dare leap straight into Heaven off Beachy Head?

None but a simpleton would ask such questions; they lag and drag and pry and gossip; the mother is worn, the children fidget, the father is tired. The Bishops are tired too. Frequently we read in the same paper how the Diocese has presented its Bishop with a motor car, how at the presentation some leading citizen has remarked, with obvious truth, that the Bishop has more need of motor cars than any of his flock. But this making Heaven available needs time and concentration. It needs the imagination of a poet. Left to ourselves we can but trifle with it, — imagine Pepys in Heaven, adumbrate little interviews with celebrated people on tufts of thyme, soon fall into gossip about such of our friends as have stayed in Hell, or, worse still, revert again to earth and choose, since there is no harm in choosing, to live over and over, now as man, now as woman, as sea captain, court lady, Emperor, farmer's wife, in splendid cities and remote moors, in Teheran and Tunbridge Wells, at the time of Pericles or Arthur, Charlemagne or George the Fourth, — to live and live till we have lived out those embryo lives which attend about us in early youth and fade

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in the shadow of that tyrannical "It" who has conquered so far as this world is concerned but shall not, if wishing can alter it, usurp Heaven too, and condemn us who have played our parts here as Mr. Jones or Mrs. Smith to remain Mr. Jones and Mrs. Smith forever. Left to ourselves we speculate thus carnally. We need the poets to imagine for us. The duty of Heaven-making should be attached to the office of Poet Laureate.

Indeed, it is to the poets that we turn. Illness makes us disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts. We cannot command all our faculties and keep our reason and our judgment and our memory at attention while chapter swings on top of chapter, and, as one settles into place, we must be on the watch for the coming of the next, until the whole structure, — arches, towers, battlements, — stands firm on its foundations. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is not the book for influenza, nor *The Golden Bowl*, nor *Madame Bovary*. On the other hand, with responsibility shelved and reason in abeyance, — for who is going to exact criticism from an invalid or sound sense from the bed-ridden? — other tastes assert themselves; sudden, fitful, intense. We rifle the poets of their flowers. We break off a line or two and let them open in the depths of the mind, spread their bright wings, swim like colored fish in green waters:

". . . and oft at eve
Visits the birds along the twilight meadows
Wandering in thick flocks along the mountains,
Shepherded by the slow, unwilling wind —"

Or there is a whole three volume novel to be mused over and spread out in a verse of Hardy's, or a sentence of La Bruyère's. We dip in Lamb's Letters (some prose writers are to be read as poets) and find, "I am a sanguinary murderer of time, and would kill him inch-meal just now. But the snake is vital," and who shall explain the delight of that? or open Rimbaud and read

"O saisons, o châteaux
Quelle âme est sans défauts?"

and who shall rationalize the charm? In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other, — a sound,

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a color, a stress, a pause which the poet, knowing words to be
meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his page to
evoke, when collected, a state of mind which is not in one word or
in one sentence, nor can the reason explain it. Incomprehensibility
has an enormous power over us, more legitimately perhaps than
the upright will allow. In health, meaning has encroached upon
our mind. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness,
with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by
Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words
give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with
light and shadow, and then if at last we grasp the meaning it is all
the richer for having traveled slowly up with all the bloom upon
its wings. Foreigners to whom the tongue is strange have us at a
disadvantage. The Chinese must know better what *Antony and
Cleopatra* sounds like than we do.



From a woodcut by J. J. Lankes

FORUM DEFINITION CONTEST

THE FORUM in an editorial announcement
launched a Definition Contest. "The
first word to be defined: definitions
in the FORUM office by April first, and those
submitted will be published in the June number."
This is an era of definition; the FORUM,
keynote, must lay stress on clear thinking,
requires automatically a definition of terms.
Dozen words in daily use, practically indistinguishable,
cerning which there is entirely too much help
to establish clearer thinking through definition?
You may remember Humpty Dumpty: "When I
use a word it means just what I mean, and
neither more nor less." All right, then, what
is the exact meaning of

SUCCESS

Any one, — man, woman, or child, citizen,
competes in this contest. The only definitions
are short ones, so definitions exceeding 100
probably go straight into the waste paper basket,
epigrammatic, eliminating "wise-cracks".

All definitions submitted must be typewritten,
be returned to the sender, even though
Have your name and address on your manuscript.
payment will be made at the rate of five dollars
selected for publication. Probably ten or fifteen
maximum number of definitions printed of each.

Definitions of "Success" must be in the
night of May 1, 1926. If received later they
for competition or publication in the July number.
facilitate the work of the committee if you
soon as possible. All definitions should be addressed to
Definition Editor, THE FORUM, 247 Park Avenue