# More Virulent than Disease

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## Interlude

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I write tonight from my room in the monastery of San Juan de Pena in an attempt to record the last few years of my life. I feel as though a shroud has finally been lifted from my soul, my spirit slowly and gently reclaimed every day. It has been a very long, arduous convalescence. But let me start from the beginning.

The brigadier, whom I owe my life, delivered my discharge application personally to the Captain-General which produced the desired effect. The remaining men in the infirmary were transferred to larger garrisons, and I underwent a medical examination to obtain my final discharge as unfit for service. As I expected, I was afflicted with acute malarial cachexia, which is incompatible with military service. I set out for Havana where I obtained my back pay, passport, and awaited the steamer to return to the Peninsula.

I discovered that there in Havana Father's draft had come through but was being held up by those greedy functionaries. To think they reason that by stealing from Spain they are hurting no one, when in truth they are hurting everyone! Eight or nine installments of pay were due to me, too, on account of this rampant embezzlement. My economic difficulties were serious. I ran the risk of having to pass several months in Havana collecting what was owed to me, just when my health required as quick a return as possible. I finally succeeded in collecting my dues—not, however, without leaving in the clutches of the greedy administrator between forty and fifty percent of their amount. Without counting Father's money, I collected 600 pesos, with which I erased some small debts and acquired what I needed for the voyage home. Oh, our inveterate administration abuses, and how dearly poor Spain has paid for them, always impoverished, always bleeding, and always forgiving and forgetting!

Aboard *Espana* my health slowly improved. Many soldiers were ill like me, but less well cared for. They travelled third class, herded together in quarters and subjected to a diet not adequate for healing or nourishment. It gave me satisfaction to attend to them, procuring for them the medicines they needed, and encouraging their hopes. After all, they were almost home! The hope of seeing their native land and the joy of returning to their families are the two supreme spiritual tonics. It broke my heart to see so many



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lose the battle before witnessing the joy awaiting them. At dawn I watched as their remains were tossed into the sea, into their watery graves for eternity.

After resting for a few days in the capital, I had at last the unspeakable joy of returning to Zaragoza and embracing my parents and my brother and sisters. They found me yellow and emaciated with an unhealthy appearance that distressed them greatly. I refrained from telling them that my appearance was much improved from only a few months prior. What would they have said previously?

I became much stronger in my native land with nourishing food and the unreplaceable care of my mother. But even now I do not expect to recover my former vigour or succeed in getting rid entirely of the malarial anemia. From time to time the fever returns, but now quinine is more efficacious.

When I began to show signs of improvement, it was time for me to think about my future again. Father confessed that my weakened health would not permit the physical effort required for medical services with an urban clientele. And with his words, I discovered, quite painfully, that through my ill-fated voyage overseas, I lost both my health and my career. If I wanted to marry, I would be considered an unsuitable husband.

But I do still cherish lofty ambitions. I continue to struggle with an excessively shy and retiring disposition, but I aspire to be something—to emerge triumphantly from the plane of mediocrity and to collaborate—if my powers permit—in the great work of scientific investigation. I am resolute in this patriotic desire, though all my contemporaries consider it pure insanity if not presumptuous pretentiousness.

But let me not get too ahead of myself, there are hazy pictures and even actual gaps in the cinematograph of memory, corresponding to the periods when the attention, like photography on a dull day, had not enough energy to impress the film of the brain. Such was my prolonged recovery at the baths of Panticosa. Let me attempt to recollect them now and events leading up to it.

I was sitting with my dear friend Don Francisco Ledesma playing a strenuous game of chess when I was suddenly attacked by a pulmonary hemorrhage. I was deeply absorbed in the consideration of a move, and not wanting to alarm my friend, I continued until conclusion. Hastily eating supper that evening with my family and speaking very little, I removed myself from the table and retired to bed immediately. In a short time, I was seized by another formidable hemorrhage. The blood was red and foaming, ascending with a rush from my lung to my mouth, threatening to choke me. I called to Father, who was visibly alarmed, and he prescribed for me the treatment usual in cases such as mine. The pallor, and progressive emaciation which he noticed in me for some months, combined with the effects of malaria—which are never completely eradicated—led him to make a most serious diagnosis, which he attempted to conceal from me naturally. But a physician rarely deludes himself of his own condition. After what I experienced in Cuba, how could I ignore the textbook signs of its pathology? I possessed a high fever, a hemorrhagic seizure, the dyspnea, the persistent cough, the perspiration, the emaciation—all the features of my illness coincided point for point

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with my consumptive soldiers: Tuberculosis. Oh, what agony to be a physician and a patient at the same time!

My physical ailments, however, were far less pressing than the depression that washed over me, of which I have only begun to recover. I plunged into a state of despair—into depths of which I have never known, even in my darkest desperation of the war. If I am truly honest with myself, which is the goal of maintaining this journal, I will admit that my thoughts drifted to suicide, and all that madness boiled down to one thought that was impossible to eradicate from the forefronts of my mind. It was the distressing idea of death. It clung to my overwrought sensibilities with the obstinacy of a bull to its matador. I considered my career at an end, my destiny fulfilled, my idea of contributing to the common heritage of Spanish culture a pure chimera. It was this idea of the irremediable uselessness of my existence that plunged me into the deepest anguish. One afternoon, seized with a fit of gloomy melancholy, I scaled a lofty crest, breathless, my lungs protesting, and rested alongside a stone. I conceived the plan of letting myself die with my face to the stars, with no other witnesses than the eagles or any other shroud than the approaching snow of autumn. What madness!

During these dark times, I concluded bitterly, and ludicrously, that the wild romanticism, the likes of which spurned my ill-fated voyage, the works of Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Lord Byron and others—had poisoned my mind. In desperation, I became a misanthrope and got to the point of despising the most holy and venerable things. The excessive optimism of my youth, which I believe now to have spared me in Cuba, was lost somewhere too, buried within the Quixotic nature of my former self. Perhaps religion could have saved me—that is if I were not so well-versed in philosophy.

Father placed me into a healing program to breathe the fine air on the summit of the famous Monte Pano. I was put on a regime in which I was to drink from the famously healing nitrogenous waters. Curiously, the more serious my depression became, the more my mind was removed from my medical maladies, and in effect, my illness became less serious to my mind. After some time, I ignored the advice of my doctors, my system of healing being that I do everything contrary to their recommendations.

Despite my expectations, my condition improved. After some weeks the bringing up of blood ceased; my fever diminished, and my lungs and my muscles, which were subjected to barbaric tests, functioned better and better. It was demonstrated to me, most poignantly, that one does not die when one thinks to do so. It is when least expected that the horse which was once considered contemptible and weak can turn out more spirited than the rider.

The turning point in my condition, I believe, was the courage, and affability of the other consumptives. It is well known that bravery is contagious. None of those tuberculosis patients, most of them young like myself, had any idea of their disease. They referred to it as, “stomach trouble,” or “catarrhs.” Some said that they came to the baths not from any need, but purely out of their gratitude for their famous powers of healing. These words of confidence, or rather delusion, sounded bitterly ironical. When to look at them, one could see that the livid circles beneath their sunken eyes or their

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feverish cheeks were a sign of anything but stomach trouble. Even those confined to bed seemed mostly satisfied, cherishing a belief that they soon would be cured. It is true that they are not physicians!

There was one young lady from Cervera, in particular, with her quiet courage that ultimately made me feel ashamed of my misanthropic behavior. It appears women have a power of resistance to the disease which we men lack. I believe that it is instinct which gives them incredible strength. The poor lass, believing nothing was wrong with her, talked excitedly of her upcoming wedding; her fiancé and the children she would have, her new home. I grieve to write that she died a month prior to her anticipated event.

From her courage, I determined not to be ill. My brain decreed that all was unjustified apprehension, autocratically imposing itself over my lungs. The meticulous details of the regimen were over for me. I halted the prescriptions of the works of hygiene and the pharmacopeia. I refused to drink of the nitrogenous waters. I just desired to have a normal life. Of course, my lungs protested, my heart beat faster than it should, but I was contented to let them do as they liked!

My sister, Paula has come to my aid, and has been my ideal nurse here. She has installed us within this monastery of San Juan de la Pena, and I have had all the indications of a real convalescence. The peace and picturesqueness of this place, a nutritious diet of meat and milk, daily rambles through the forest, and interesting excursions to the neighboring village of Santa Cruz del Denos has finally brought me to the point that I should live a life of physical strength and mental tranquility.

I have come to find that the sun, the open air, silence and art are great physicians. Sun and the open air invigorate the body, functioning as tonics, whilst silence and art still the vibrations of sorrow. These great physicians free us from our own virulent ideas, sometimes more dangerous than disease itself. They guide our sensibilities towards the world around us, the fount of the purest and most refreshing pleasures. My drawings and photography especially, have helped. They have been the source of inspiration for my walks about this beautiful mountain, obliging me to take continual exercise, and to satiate my daily cravings for artistic expression. It is along these ramblings that restored my current state of existence, with its anxieties and struggles too.

It is here where I have realized that there is a career open to me still. I shall strive to wear the venerable gown of the schoolmaster and contribute to Spanish culture with nothing more than the patriotic desire to pursue scientific inquiry. A life of study in a quiet corner sounds most agreeable indeed.

My convalescence; painstaking, arduous, and contemptible that it has been, has managed to bring about a most important realization. Perhaps my time has not yet come.

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