

ON BEING ILL

By 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 from 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, lyrics to toothache. 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, negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens,

colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk 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 smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. But of all this 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 civilised 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; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth. Short of these, this monster, the body, this miracle, its 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 concocts a thousand legends and romances about them for which it has neither 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 drops out. Probably it will be something laughable. For who of English birth can take liberties with the language? To us it is a sacred thing and therefore doomed to die, unless the Americans, whose genius is so much happier in the making of new words than in the disposition of the old, will come to our help and set the springs aflow. Yet 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 favour of a temperature of 104; 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 moths' 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. '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 grown remote; the sounds of festival become romantic like a merry-go-round heard across far 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 and

fair, like the shore seen from a ship far 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, weighted as they already are with sorrow, were to take on them that burden too, adding in imagination other 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 book or trinket 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 volumes of sordid suffering, and the vast effort of sympathy which those barracks of pain and discipline, those dried 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 street, 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, or 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., dressed in silks and feathers, painted and powdered (which takes time too) as if for a banquet of kings and queens, who 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 follies have had their day; civilisation points to a different goal; if the cities of the Middle West are to blaze with electric light, Mr. 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 groan, of human beings so tied together by common needs and fears that a twitch at one wrist jerks another, where however strange your experience other people have had it too, where however far you travel in 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 pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilise, 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, for example, at the sky.

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 weather or fine, daub windows gold, and, filling in the branches, complete the pathos of dishevelled 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 waggons from North to South, 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. The fact seems to call for comment and indeed for censure. Some one should write to *The Times* about it. 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 ardour. Divinely beautiful it is also divinely heartless. Immeasurable resources are used for some purpose 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, that we have forgotten how it stands, still and steady, throughout an entire afternoon in the earth. It preserves a demeanour 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 symbolise 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 in their indifference that they are comforting. That snowfield of the mind, where man has not trodden, is visited by the cloud, kissed by the falling petal, as, in another sphere, it is the great artists, the Miltons, the Popes, who console, not by their thought of us, but by their forgetfulness.

Meanwhile, with the heroism of the ant or the bee, however indifferent the sky 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 and slippery 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 still in 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 co-operative imagination of mankind must have drawn some firm outline. But no. One opens *The Morning Post* and reads the Bishop of Lichfield on Heaven—a vague discourse, weak, watery, inconclusive. One watches the church-goers file in to those gallant temples where, on the bleakest day, in the wettest fields, lamps will be burning, bells will be ringing, and however the autumn leaves may shuffle and the winds sigh outside, hopes and desires will be changed to beliefs and certainties within. 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; the little company of believers lags and drags and prys; the mother is worn; the father 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 Heaven making needs no motor cars; it 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 on 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 been consumed by that tyrannical 'I', 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 William or Amelia, to remain William or Amelia for ever. 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 coloured fish in green waters :

and oft at eve
Visits the herds 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 Bruyères. 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 inchmeal just now. But the snake is vital' and who shall explain the delight of that? or open Rimbaud and read

O saisons, ô châteaux
Quelle âme est sans défauts?

and who shall rationalise 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, a colour, here a stress, there 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 neither words can express nor the reason explain. Incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow. In health meaning has encroached upon sound. 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 travelled 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 the sound of *Antony and Cleopatra* than we do.

Rashness is one of the properties of illness—outlaws, that we are—and it is rashness that we chiefly need in reading Shakespeare. It is not that we should doff the intelligence in reading him, but that fully conscious and aware his fame intimidates us, and all the books of all the critics dull in us that thunder clap of conviction that nothing stands between us and him, which, if an illusion, is still so helpful an illusion, so prodigious a pleasure, so keen a stimulus in reading the great. Shakespeare is getting flyblown; a paternal government might well forbid writing about him, as they put his monument at Stratford beyond the reach of scribbling pencils. With all this buzz of criticism about, one may hazard one's conjectures privately, makes one's notes in the margin; but knowing that someone has said it before, or said it better, the zest is gone. Illness in its kingly sublimity sweeps all that aside, leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself, and what with his overweening power, our overweening arrogance, the barriers go down, the knots run smooth, the brain rings and resounds with *Lear* or *Macbeth*, and even Coleridge himself squeaks like a distant mouse. Of all the plays and even of the sonnets this is true; it is *Hamlet* that is the exception. *Hamlet* one reads once only in one's life, between the ages of twenty and twenty-five. Then one is Hamlet, one is youth; as, to make a clean breast of it, Hamlet is Shakespeare, is youth. And how can one explain what one is? One can but be it. Thus forced always to look back or sidelong at his own past the critic sees something moving and vanishing in *Hamlet*, as in a glass one sees the reflection of oneself, and it is this which, while it gives an everlasting variety to the play, forbids us to feel, as with *Lear* or *Macbeth*, that the centre is solid and holds firm whatever our successive readings lay upon it.

But enough of Shakespeare—let us turn to Augustus Hare. There are people who say that even illness does not warrant these transitions; that the author of *The Story of Two Noble Lives* is not the peer of Boswell; and if we assert that short of the best in literature we like the worst—it is mediocrity that is hateful—will have none of that either. So be it. The law is on the side of the normal. But for those who suffer a slight rise of temperature the names of Hare and Waterford and Canning will always ray out beams of benignant lustre. Not, it is true, for the first hundred pages or so. There, as so often in these fat volumes, we flounder, and threaten to sink in a plethora of aunts and uncles. We have to remind ourselves that there is such a thing as atmosphere; that the masters themselves often keep us waiting intolerably while they prepare our minds for whatever it may be—the surprise, or the lack of surprise. So Hare, too, takes his time; the charm steals upon us imperceptibly; by degrees we become almost one of the family, yet not quite for our sense of the oddity of it all remains, and share the family dismay when Lord Stuart leaves the room—there was a ball going forward—and is next heard of in Iceland. Parties, he said, bored him—such were English aristocrats before marriage with intellect had adulterated the fine singularity of their minds. Parties bore them; they are off to Iceland. Then Beckford's mania for castle building attacked him; and he must lift a French *château* across the channel, and erect pinnacles and towers to serve as servants' bedrooms at vast expense, upon the borders of a crumbling cliff, too, so that the housemaids saw their brooms swimming down the Solent, and Lady Stuart was much distressed, but made the best of it and began, like the high-born lady that she was, planting evergreens in the face of ruin; while the daughters, Charlotte and Louisa, grew up in their incomparable loveliness, with pencils in their hands, for ever sketching,

dancing, flirting, in a cloud of gauze. They are not very distinct it is true. For life then was not the life of Charlotte and Louisa. It was the life of families, of groups. It was a web, a net, spreading wide and enmeshing every sort of cousin and dependant, and old retainer. Aunts—Aunt Caledon, Aunt Mexborough—grandmothers—Granny Stuart, Granny Hardwicke—cluster in a kind of chorus, and rejoice and sorrow and eat Christmas dinner together, and grow very old and remain very upright, and sit in hooded chairs cutting flowers, it seems, out of coloured paper. Charlotte married Canning and went to India; Louisa married Lord Waterford and went to Ireland. Then the letters cross vast spaces in slow sailing ships and everything becomes still more protracted and verbose, and there seems no end to the space and the leisure of those early nineteenth century days, and faiths are lost and the life of Hedley Vicars revives them; aunts catch cold but recover; cousins marry; there is the Irish famine and the Indian Mutiny, and both sisters remain, to their great, but silent grief, for in those days there were things that women hid like pearls in their breasts, without children to come after them. Louisa, dumped down in Ireland with Lord Waterford at the hunt all day, was often very lonely; but she stuck to her post, visited the poor, spoke words of comfort ('I am sorry indeed to hear of Anthony Thompson's loss of mind, or rather of memory; if, however, he can understand sufficiently to trust solely in our Saviour, he has enough') and sketched and sketched. Thousands of notebooks were filled with pen and ink drawings of an evening, and then the carpenter stretched sheets for her and she designed frescoes for schoolrooms, had live sheep into her bedroom, draped gamekeepers in blankets, painted Holy Families in abundance, until the great Watts exclaimed that here was Titian's peer and Raphael's master! At that Lady Waterford laughed (she had a generous, benignant sense

of humour); and said that she was nothing but a sketcher; had scarcely had a lesson in her life—witness her angel's wings, scandalously unfinished. Moreover, there was her father's house for ever falling into the sea; she must shore it up; must entertain her friends; must fill her days with all sorts of charities, till her Lord came home from hunting, and then, at midnight often, she would sketch him with his knightly face half hidden in a bowl of soup, sitting with her notebook under a lamp beside him. Off he would ride again, stately as a crusader, to hunt the fox, and she would wave to him and think, each time, what if this should be the last? And so it was one morning. His horse stumbled. He was killed. She knew it before they told her, and never could Sir John Leslie forget, when he ran downstairs the day they buried him, the beauty of the great lady standing by the window to see the hearse depart, nor, when he came back again, how the curtain, heavy, Mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony.