At Valladolid.

THE girl who opened the door to me said that the doctor was in bed and led me down a long twisting corridor articulated by doors that coloured its shadows with thin bars of light and puffs of garlic. I found great satisfaction in the near sense of her, for she was like a little pigeon: her plumpness was so obviously coursing with quick blood that it seemed not at all solid but likely to flutter, as though tucked snug to her she wore feathered wings. When she paused at the last door to let me enter she stretched up her little golden neck to have a good look at me through the dusk. If I had been a man I would have turned away from all else to make love to her and capture some of her vitality. As it was I was distressed by her close, gleaming texture and the serenity with which her long waist grew like a stem from her round hips and flowered into her bosom: she reminded me that I was in an abnormal condition, that a woman need not be tortured by intense perception. I walked past her and sat down on a sofa beside the window while she turned on the electric light. I was too ill to face the brightness and drooped my head forwards on my shoulder: I remembered that I had seen a dying setter do so at the beam of a lanthorn, and I found satisfaction in the unity of living creatures betokened by sensation.

I raised my head to wonder why the girl was still standing at the door and found her face changed: the space between cheekbone and jaw had become hollow and full of shadow and her eyes were oily with excitement. She had seen the patch of blood that splashed my white dress under my left breast. "Oh . . . . I'm not much hurt," I muttered apologetically, smiling at her. But she flung up her little brown hands and ran from the room, slightly hostile to me as is a puppy to its distempered fellow, but most hugely enjoying the disaster. It was curious that although my point of view was utterly altered by pain and desperation I could still understand normal people. Loss of blood was making me sick, so I lay down on the sofa. The girl had run into the next room and was crying out the story of my wound in the guttural voice of the North that was an allusion to passionate rural things: so might two shepherds cry across some stream a tale of sudden death and ravished villages. She was checked, I think, for my hearing was blurred by greater sickness and a sudden access of my grief. I shivered with jealousy and hunger, and depression weakened me as if a thin greenish fluid was flushing the blood from my veins. I was terrified when I heard the man to whom she had spoken moving heavily about the room and coughing up words as though an idea was sticking in his mind as a fishbone sticks in the throat, for I felt that he would not come to me till he had passed out of some preoccupation. I put my hand to my wound. Where the blood had dried on my dress the muslin was as stiff as cardboard and this change of texture seemed to me a horrifying symbol of the transformation that this wound might by more bleeding wreak on my whole body. I wept, not so much from love of life as because I was too tired to perform this difficult alchemy of the flesh. Then I heard the voice in the next room chant a sentence very definitely, as though thereby a long argument was closed. A minute later the door opened and the man came in. I knew he stood between me and the light, for I felt his shadow on my eyelids, but I did not raise my head: partly because I was ashamed of my tears and partly because his dull step suggested that he walked under a misfortune.

He breathed heavily over me like a big dog. "I shot myself ten days ago," I said in my heavy Spanish. "I was cleaning a revolver. They took the bullet out. I have been travelling ever since. They told me not to. They were right, it seems. The wound has broken." When his shadow lifted I turned my face to the wall and tried to cry silently to keep myself from being disturbed by his massive movements as he thickly called to the girl to bid her bring water and set out from a cupboard clattering things with the sweet wistful smell of a chemist's shop. Then I felt his fingers at the throat of my dress, and wondered at his hirsute hands: for though his hair grew thick as an ape's it was very fine and silky. A cold wet rag dripped down me and was plugged into my hot wound. The shock shattered me and I cried out in English: "Oh, you don't know what a tragedy it is that I have come to you! I suppose you knew I lied. I wasn't cleaning a revolver. I meant to kill myself. I had reason. It wasn't that I wanted to cut myself out of life so that people might notice the gap and be appalled by the violence of its making. Even at the last resort I'm never sufficiently interested in other people to care about making scenes. It was that death was an urgent need, a necessary escape from terrible pain. The night before I'd had an awful time. I took sixty grains of veronal. The fatal dose is fifteen. My mother and sisters were in the dining-room and I didn't want them to call the doctor and his stomach-pump till it was too late, so I went into the drawing-room. But I couldn't die in that little hutch: I went out. It was a sapphire evening and the lanes were full of lovers sleepy with happiness. Before night I should be sleepy like them. Before dawn I should be happy like them. I walked on for a long time waiting till drowsiness should stuff my eyes and I should creep into some front garden to die. The night got black. I came to a vast place that rose to the stars like a giant cruet. I sat on a flight of steps that soared to a minaret and heard hundreds of people singing 'The Village Blacksmith' twelve times over. Instead of dying I sat till eleven o'clock listening to a Choir concert at the Alexandra Palace. And I had to trudge seven miles home, for as I'd expected to die I hadn't taken enough money for the motor bus. Why didn't I die? I wonder. When we lived in Manchester we had a big black cat. It caught a skin disease and we wanted to kill it. We couldn't. We gave it laudanum, morphia. Prussic acid turned its whiskers a little grey. But die it wouldn't. We took it to a patch of livid water in a bowl of clay on some waste ground at Cheetham and tried to drown it. Its claws flashed from the dark stew and pierced the mucous surface of the shore. Until we left Manchester a year later we saw his long polluted body creeping from ash-heap to ash-heap, tolling the bell at his neck that used so blithely to warn birds of his coming: raw with ill circumstance but alive. They say I'm like a black cat. Perhaps there is a feline type in which consciousness is a most persistent disease. Life has planted itself in all our nerves: we can't root it up. And it was an agony! Oh, that was a heartbreaking disappointment over the veronal. But there was still the revolver, as I said to myself on the way home from the Alexandra Park. But the difficulties in the way of suicide for a humane child of the twentieth century! Where was I to do it? At home? I couldn't distress my mother by suddenly presenting my corpse to her. At a hotel? It would spoil its custom and depress the chambermaids. In the street? Death has its decencies as much as love and birth. So I did a crueller thing. I went to the flat of a man who loves me so much that he will forgive me everything. He was so glad to see me, my heart bled. I had another grief then. But I was so hurt I had to clamber unto death. He left me in his study for a minute. Then there was the difficulty of how to do it. A bullet through the head, I had meant it to be. But that makes a mess and in England the coroner's jury is obliged to view the body. I shot at my heart. I failed, for no other reason that I can see than that I am like a black cat. There was a dreadful business of stitching and

probing. And those who loved me gathered round me as I lay on the brink of death and dragged me back, tearing my flesh with the sharp teeth of their love. My mother sat by my bed and cried from the collarbone, sobs that scald the throat. My sisters moved reproachfully about the room, saying to me with their deep-set eyes, 'So you meant to leave us, after we have gone so loyally with you through all these years of poverty and tragedy.' And sometimes the man who loved me, in whose house I had done this thing, came and looked at me. And from his heavy, patient sweetness I saw that I had committed the sin that had been committed against me: seduction. For though my lover had left my body chaste he had seduced my soul: he mingled himself with me till he was more myself than I am and then left me. Well, wasn't that what I was doing when I shot myself? One never escapes from the body of one's mother. Wouldn't my death be a brutal destruction of my mother's substance? My sisters and I had made an interesting life out of our uneasy circumstances. Had I the right to run away and leave them short-handed and to discolour our masterpiece by violent memories? And I was the heart of the man who loved me and if I died no mere blood would flow in him. God may do these villainies, I cannot. . . . So you see my refuge is cut off from me. I can't kill myself now any more than I could set fire to an orphanage. I know as I have never known anything before that my suicide would be a damnable sin. Virtue imprisons me in life. But pain easily unlooses the leash of virtue and I spend every night in tears. I tire out my body all day so that I fall asleep as soon as I get into bed. But my grief tears a hole in the night, a horrid time at dawn when I lie and bite my wrists and sweat with pain. It is as though suffering had become a new and exhausting function of the body. Often I am ready to commit any sin for the sake of rest. But now I can't! To-day when my wound breaks I come to you instead of doing the obvious thing and going to the Cathedral to kneel in the shadow of a pillar till the blood dripped to my knees and I fell forward on the stone. You see, I've lost my courage! It bled out of me that night I realised I'd failed again. I'd tried twice before so it was a heavy disappointment: and in itself it's a terrible thing. One has to climb slowly down to death and one thinks all the time. I am too weak to go through that again. I must go on living though life sticks in my body as a knife in a heart. What shall I do? What shall I do?'' I turned my face towards the electric light so that the glare might distract some of the perceptions that were abandoning themselves to the business of suffering and saw very slowly, for my eyes had become foolish at focussing after I had wept every day for seven months, that the doctor's face did not bear the superior and slightly disgusted air of one listening to a language which he does not understand. I felt the shame of nakedness. I turned away from him shivering. If my senses had not been shattered by grief I should have known long before that I was stripping myself before eyes that could see for, as he rebandaged me, his fingers moved on my flesh a little stiffly with dislike in the supple glow of professional skill. The horrible thing that had happened to me was constantly procuring me as a victim to the most unlikely humiliations. But I was now so exhausted that the event, though it kept its painful content, did not long retain its sharp edges and its separateness and went to swell the general mass of my misery, so I could look without any special anguish at the man to whom I had exposed myself. He was not English, for no Englishman could have sustained without some loss of dignity his degree of dirtiness: yet certainly the misfortune under which he moved so heavily was that he was not a Spaniard but was depressed by Northern birth. From the tallow-like substance of his flesh and the flat Mongolian moulding of the jawbone and nose I suspected him to be Russian: and when I asked him how he understood English a sentence about going from the University of Moscow to a dispensary at Leeds rambled uncordially through a vast, opaque beard.

He fixed the bandage with a safety-pin and went to the table, turning on me a mountainous back marked with crumples like boulders and rough creases like becks in summer: every part of him was badly made and even his breath tumbled clumsily from his nostrils. I extended to him the tenderness one gives to a hippopotamus or a boneshaker or any other grotesque and a certain sympathy, for when I moved among the Spanish women with their long backs curved like scimitars I felt my Northern physical rigidity to be a deformity. But I perceived from the droop of his head on his chest that he was thinking of me with hostility. I was a little surprised though I had noticed that now I was as sinister among the happy as a burning house in Brook Street. People often took a dislike to me at first sight, but doctors are commonly used to finding their patients distorted by suffering. It might be that he was consumed by the anger that burns in many men when they see a woman experiencing any emotion with intensity. Then suddenly I detested him. If he had despised me I would have felt exhilarated, as I did when the crowd in the Plaza de Toros whistled contempt at the hurt bull, by contact with humanity that did not instinctively identify itself with the defeated. But he was analysing my emotion. We hate the Jews because of their habit of evaluation, because they sheath the glance of delight before a beautiful fabric and begin to estimate its origin and cost with terrible rightness: if the legend of ritual murder were true it would hardly add to the racial disgrace of successful picture-dealing. Yet I perceived, after dwelling for some weeks among beautiful brown people who yielded themselves to emotion without prudence as lovers should give themselves to love, that our Northern habit of evaluating emotion is infinitely uglier. It means that the mind stands erect when it should cast itself down before higher things; like some lean Cookers, far wandered to a foreign land from her Wesleyan chapel, who refuses to kneel to the Host on Corpus Christi day. It means that the passions which, springing from the body, should some day know the peace of death are infected with the dreadful permanence of things experienced by the mind: as though a poppy should be taken from an Andalusian cornfield and compelled to burn blood-red for ever in the sunless corridors of a museum instead of returning in dust to the earth. My sorrow should have died with me. Through this man's understanding it would percolate down the ages: his realisation of my pain would fall like a shadow on the next man he met and reverberate from voice to voice till it depressed the children of children not yet born. I wanted to get away from him: I asked him his fee and put down the pesetas on the table while he creaked to the door. Its opening discovered the girl who had shown me in crouching on her delicate little haunches with her eye to the eyehole: she uncoiled herself, vibrating with silent laughter at being discovered. In two years' time, when she had learned to enjoy the fire of the soul as much as the sunshine on the water she would be one of the most glorious animals on earth: and her ways would be the seemly, natural ways of an animal. Under such a disaster as mine she would dissolve like snow in sunlight: a few tears would shine on the dust or, if she had the quality of violence, a bright bloodstain. She had no detestable Northern tenacity. She would not live on like some old woman smitten with a horrible disease of age whose will refuses to let her body decently acknowledge its defeat. I understood why the doctor hated me and what an unnatural offence was my persistence in miserable living. Detesting each other from common vice of thinking subtly about violent things, we bowed to each other: and I went out into the happy streets where Spaniard cried to Spaniard as comfortable animals howl from cage to cage.

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