CANCER?

A STUDY IN NERVES

BERTIE BERNARD, Sociétaire of the Salon des Beaux Arts, and officer of the Légion d'Honneur, looked at the world from the window of his favourite cafe. In front, behold the hideous façade of the Gare Montparnasse and the clattering devastation of the Place de Rennes! It was a chill summer morning; a thin rain fell constantly. Great columns of ice came into the restaurant on men's backs; waiters with napkins knotted round their necks sprinkled the sandy boards with water, laid the tables for lunch, bore great basins piled with slabs of sugar here and there; in short, began the day. Behind a small bar, perched, the lady cashier performed mysterious evolutions with a book of green tickets and counterfoils; a small blind puppy nestled into the crook of her elbow.

There was a greyness in everything. Without the good sun's kiss, or the glare of the lights and the kaleidoscope of the demi-monde, Paris is a sad city. Nowhere, I think, are the distances so great, the communications so bad. Nowhere do the pavements tempt so, and tire so.

Nor, as it happened, was Bernard full of that internal sunlight which transforms the world. For four months he had worked like a demon. Six pictures—'twas his right—hung on the walls of the Salon, excellent in a wilderness of mediocrity or worse—nay, nothing is worse! but one cannot live on a reputation alone, and the American Slump had hit the painters hard.

His was a solitary life at the best of times, and, when one works, that life offers indeed the best of times. But when work is over, when one has worked so hard that there is no longer energy to play—a gloomy world for the solitary!

So here he sat in the Cafe de Versailles and droned through the inanities of the Overseas (as distinguished from the Half-Seas-Over) *Daily Wail.* His eye caught a sudden paragraph: "Death of a Well-known Baronet." "He had been complaining," said the paper "of his throat for some time, but had not thought it worth while to consult a doctor. On Saturday last he saw Sir Herpes Zoster, who took so serious a view of the matter that he advised an immediate operation. Unhappily, pneumonia supervened, and death ensued early on Tuesday morning. . . ."

Cancer! read Bernard between the lines. At the word a whole cohort of ancient thoughts, armed and angry, swept up the glacis that defended his brain, and entering put the defenders to the sword.

Cancer! The one great memory of his boyhood; his mother's illness. They had shown him—idiots—the dreadful tumour that was—uselessly, of course—to be cut away from the breast that, eight years before, had been his life. The bedside, the cold cleanliness of things, the false-smiling faces that failed to hide their fear, his mother's drawn face and staring eyes, the hideous disease itself—all this stood out in his mind, clear-cut and vivid as it had been yesterday; a violence done to his childhood.

Then, his face already blanched, rose in his memory certain episodes of youth. Once in Switzerland, sleeping out on the mountains, a stone had bruised his side as he lay on it, and two days after, having forgotten the origin of the blue-brown stain, he had thought it cancer, and been laughed at by a medical friend in the hotel. But again the thought, "Is it hereditary?" leapt at him. Nobody knows—that is the trouble! Nobody knows anything at all about the cause of cancer. There are no precautions, no prognoses, no diathesis except (as some said) the negative one of incompatibility with tubercle.

Bernard would have liked a little tubercle. There's Luxor, Davos, Australia—but for cancer? Cancer is everywhere. Cancer takes no account of conditions.

Now Bernard was a brave man. For sheer devilment he had gone over and taken a hand in the Cuban mix-up. He had shot tigers on foot in Burmah, and was indeed so afraid of fear that he had always refused to take the least care of his health. Better die facing death! One must die. It is no good running away. One may as well live a man's life. So he fished for salmon without waders, and found by immunity that the doctors know as little about rheumatism as about anything else.

But on this morning at the Cafe de Versailles things went ill with his thoughts. All that he had ever read about cancer; all the people he had ever heard of who had died of it ; all the false wicked bombast of the newspapers (once a week on an average) that an “eminent Scientist”—whatever a “scientist” may be—had discovered a perfect cure—puppy's livers, roseleaves, tomato-juice, strange serums, anything and everything. All Ignorance! Ignorance!! Ignorance!!!

He dropped the paper with listless anger, rapped on the marble, threw down his franc, and rose. And as he caught the sharp air of the street a little cough took his throat. “God! God!” he cried, “I have it at last!” And the precise parallelism between his symptoms and those of the dead baronet hit him, as it were a giant with a club.

He, too, had been troubled for a long while. He, too, had not thought it worth while to consult a doctor.

Then the healthy reaction surged up in him. “You're a hysterical fool, my lad, and I'll teach you a lesson. You shall go and see a doctor, and be laughed at, and pay ten francs for your cowardice!”

Up sprang the assailing thought. “On Saturday he saw Sir Herpes Zoster, who took so serious a view of the matter that . . .”

“I daren’t! I daren’t!” he cried inwardly, with bitter anguish. Bowed and old, his face wrinkled and blue-grey with fear, he faltered and turned back. He sat down on a little cane chair outside the cafe, and drove his nails into the palms of his hands.

Abject indecision had him by the throat. He would do this, he would do that. He would go to Italy, to New York, to ride horseback through Spain, to shoot in Morocco, to—half a hundred schemes. . . .

Each impulse was inhibited. He half rose from his chair again and again, and always fell back as the terrible reply beat him down. For New York he must have a new trunk, and the idea of going into a shop and buying one seemed as insanely impossible as if he had needed a live dodo. For Spain, the terrors of the Custom House on the frontier smote him back. Trifle after trifle, fierce and menacing, beat upon him, and the cry of his sane self: “Don't be a fool, it's only nerves, get away anywhere; eat, sleep, amuse yourself and you'll be all right in a day or so!” grew feebler and feebler as the dominant demon swung his fell spear, “Go away? you've got cancer—cancer—cancer—you can’t go away from cancer!” He knew, too, that did he but once decide to do anything, the cloud would clear. But decide he could not.

If only a good hearty stupid Briton had come along and taken him out of himself for a moment!

But he was a solitary; and the early morning is not the time for meeting such few acquaintances as he possessed. He might have called on one or two friends, but he dared not. Laden with his terrible secret, he could not confront them.

At last he rose, still purposeless, driven by physical disquietude. The muscles, irritated by the anguish of the nerves, became uneasy, sent jerky, meaningless messages to the brain. He walked and walked, feebly and foolishly, everywhere and yet nowhere—the muscles of his back ached.

Cancer of the kidney! he thought, and was swept into a whirlpool of fear. He had once been supposed to have weak kidneys. “The seat of a previous lesion” was a likely spot. He put his hand to his neck to adjust his collar. There was a small “blackhead” half formed. Cancer!

He remembered how the previous evening—no! last week, last year—what did it matter?—one of his friends had told of a man in South America who had died of a cancer on the neck, caused, he thought, but the irritation of his collar. Bernard wrenched at his collar to tear it off. “Useless! too late!” cried one interior voice. “Nothing is known of the cause,” whispered the consoler, common-sense. Then, louder: “My dear good ass, every man wears a collar; only one man in twenty-one dies of cancer, and probably not one in twenty-one of those have cancer of the neck.” Louder, for the physical violence of his wrench had sent his blood faster, pulled him together a little.

In the new-found courage he began again to contemplate a change, for it was only too clear that his nerves were wrong. But the enemy had an answer to this: “One of the most painful features of the disease is the dreadful anxiety——” he remembered from some old medical book.

It had begun to rain more heavily; he was wet. The physical discomfort braced him; he looked up.

He was in the Rond-Point des Champs-Elysees, not a hundred yards from his doctor's house.

In a flash his mind was made up. He strode at six miles an hour to the physician, an old friend, one Dr. Maigrelette, and was shown into the consulting room. If the doctor had happened to see him as he entered, he would not have had to wait, as was the case.

Waiting, he could not tolerate the alleged amusing journals. He looked for the poison that was eating out his soul. Soon he happened on the Lancet, and found to his taste an authoritative article on “Cancer of the Ileum,” urging speedy operation before—so he gathered—the appearance of any symptoms whatever. “Unfortunately,” wrote the great surgeon, “cancer is a painless disease for many months.”

God! God! *He, too, had no pain!* He did not know where the ileum might be; he never even knew that he had an ileum. And what an awakening! He had got cancer of it. For many, many months he had had no pain!

His perception of the absurd was utterly snowed under.

With clenched teeth, the sweat rolling from his brow, he rushed from the house.

What followed he never really knew. The agony of the mind had gone a step too far, and dropped below the human into a dull animal consciousness of fear. He was being hunted for his life. The instinct of flight became dominant. He found himself feverishly packing his bag; he found himself at the Gare de Lyon, with no very clear conception of how he came there.

Hunger brought him to. Luckily the restaurant of the station—one of the best in Paris—was full of the cheeriest memories. Time and again he had left the station for Italy, Switzerland, Algiers, always with high hope, good courage, pleasurable anticipation.

Almost himself again for the moment, he feasted superbly on a Caneton Rouennais au Sang, with a bottle of the ripe red Burgundy.

A peace stole over him. “I have had a bad attack of nerves;” he thought, “I will go away and rest. Worry and overwork, that's what it is. Where's the laziest place on earth? Venice.”

And to Venice he went, almost gaily, in a wagon-lit.

Gaily? At the back of his consciousness was a dull sphere of some forgotten pain, some agony in abeyance.

The exhaustion of the day and the last benediction of the good wine together drove him down the slopes of sleep into the Valley of deepest Anaesthesia. Almost trance.

II

The dull viewless journey up the Rhone Valley, with its everlasting hint of great things beyond, did Bernard good. More than a touch of mountain freshness in the air, nay! the very loathsomeness of the Swiss—that nation with the Frenchman’s meanness without his insouciance, the German's boorishness without his profundity, the Italian's rascality without his picturesqueness, all these things reminded him of his happy youth spent among the glaciers. At lunch he ordered a bottle of Swiss champagne, drank that infamous concoction with a certain relish piercing through the physical disgust at its nauseousness, as remembering the joy of the opened bottle on some peak yet unclimbed by the particular ridge he had chosen. Life seemed very different now-a-days. He would hardly have taken the trouble to climb Mount Everest, had a Jinnee borne him to its foot upon a magic carpet. Fame, love, wealth, friendship—these things seemed valueless. He knew now what he wanted—rest—rest. Death would have pleased him. He thought of the Buddhist Nibbana, and almost determined to become an Arahat, or at least a Bhikkhu, the stage preliminary.

So the long day went by; at its end, Venice, a vulgar approach, a dead level of shapeless houses with insignificant church spires scarce visible.

Then the sudden wonder of the gondola, gliding between the tall jagged subtly coloured palaces, the surprise of the moon, glittering down some unexpected alley. And again the sleep of utmost fatigue, only accentuated by the violent stimulus of the wonderful city, its undeniable romance, its air of dream, of enchantment.

In the morning he rose early. The Grand Canal was stirring, lively, with the pale gold of sunrise kindling it. He hailed a gondola, and until lunch-time drifted about in the narrow waterways, seeking to discover by some subtle mental process the secret which he imagined, as one is compelled to imagine, that each tall house contains.

Yet, lost as he was in the dream, there was ever present in the background of his mental picture, the waking life. What he conceived as the waking life was but that formless mass of horror, the disease whose fear was yet upon him.

In short, he was drugged with Venice, as with an opiate. There would come a reckoning. Life itself was poisoned. The mask matters little; the face behind the mask is all. And for Bernard, behind the mask of Venice, glittered the eyes of Cancer—Cancer—Cancer!

But as health came back, he consciously fought the demon.

One may as well die of cancer as anything else, he would think. He insisted on the word; he said it aloud, watching his voice to detect the tremor of fear. He would contemplate death itself—the worst (after all!) that would come, and discovered death to be but a baseless illusion. He made a dilemma for death. If consciousness ceases, he argued, there is no death, for one is not conscious of it, and nothing exists for the individual of which he is not conscious. If consciousness does not cease—why, that is life!

And so on, making a brave show of the feeble weapon of intellect, as one sees a frightened insect try to appear terrible. Or as a guardsman struts with moustache and busby.

But this same bold analysis was, as he soon saw, but another shape of fear. It was courage, true! but courage implies fear. There was but one cure, absorption in work. So, as he rested the capacity for work returned. He began, first sketches, then fair-sized picture of the ever-changing, ever-identical beauty of Venice. He spent an altogether joyous morning buying materials for his art.

He met a charming child of Venice in black shawl, with Madonna's face and Venus's body; he painted her into all his foregrounds. In the evening, sitting together in the cafe of the Rialto Inn, he sketched her. He projected a large and sacred picture, full of the sensual strength of Rubens. His tired soul took her virgin vigour into itself; he became like a boy; he idealized, adored his mistress. He would learn a little Italian, so that they might talk together easily, no longer in broken French-Italian.

So one morning he strolled down to the old Dandolo Palace, glorious with memories of Georges Sand and de Musset, and consulted the jolly bearded blonde beautiful hall porter about lessons in Italian.

The porter gave him an address. Would he had added, “Venice is the most relaxing city in the five continents. A week will cure you, a fortnight kill you!”

So our friend was soon knocking at the door of the Signora who taught English.

She was a faded widow, her dyed blonde hair eked out with an improbable fringe, roughed and wrinkled, intensely respectable, Scotch, Presbyterian, sentimental, scented. The room was musty and ill-sized, an imported lodging-house from Ramsgate! The decorations in keeping. Undusted furniture, portraits of “Victoria the Good," and of the lady's "poor dear husband,” a Bible, English and Italian novels and grammars. All frivolities, all dullnesses, all inessentials. The very piano had the air of an accident. Poor tired woman! Long since all hope, all purpose, is lost for you, he thought. And “Am I otherwise?” Vital scepticism tinged his disgust with the teacher as, mastering his repulsion, he arranged for a series of lessons.

It was on the third day of these lessons that he saw Germanica Visconti. She was a few minutes early at the teacher's, and intruded on his hour. Paler than death, and clad in deepest mourning, she had yet beauty rare and rich, a charm irresistible. The great sense of beauty that had made him the famous painter that he was allured him.

Voilà une belle idée—he scented intrigue. All night he dreamt of her, gliding as a gondola glides into the room. (For so do all Venetian women glide.)

The next day he began—the cunning fellow!—with a little apology. Had he overstayed his hour? She was rather a pretty girl (no Don Juan would openly say that; it was a clever subterfuge).

The old-young widow rose easily to the bait. The Visconti had just lost her father. Poor man, he had suffered terribly for two years. Smokers’ cancer, they called it. You can operate twice, but the third time he must die. Oh, yes! it is very, very common in Venice.

The pipe in his pocket burnt him like a red-hot coal. The whole horror came flooding back, tenfold stronger for its week of abeyance. Good God! he had come to the very place of all places where he was sure to get it. Yet he was master of himself enough to sit out the lesson, to bow gracefully to Germanica as she came up the stairs. Thence he went shaking into Florian's, and thought filth of all the world.

The city, ever a positive impression, unlike most other cities, which one can ignore, hurt him. Very common here, he mused—and his throat, really a little irritated by the slackness and the sirocco, became dominant and menacing. He put his hand to his larynx, imagined a tumour. The word “induration” afflicted him, throbbed in his brain. He could not bear society: he got rid of his model, cruelly and crudely. Nothing but his stubborn courage saved him from throwing his pipe into the canal. By bravado, he smoked double his usual allowance. His throat naturally got worse, and his distress correspondingly increased.

He simply could not stand Venice any longer. Two days of speechless agony, and he went suddenly back to Paris, the dust of the journey aggravating his sore throat, and its misery dragging him ever lower into the abyss of despair. His indecision increased, invaded the smallest details of life. He walked miles, unable to find a restaurant to suit his whim. He would reach the door, perhaps enter, suddenly remember that the coffee was never good there, go out again, walk, walk, walk, repeat the folly again and again, until perhaps he would go to bed foodless. His sore throat (always a depressing influence on all of us) grew worse, and his soul sagged in sympathy.

He could not work, he could not read, he could do nothing. He went out to play Pelota at Neuilly one afternoon, and his very natural failure to play decently increased his misery. I am no more good, he thought, I am getting old. Thirty-six, he mused, and a sob came to his throat—the very age when cancer most begins to claim its prey.

He engaged a model, and discovered that he could no longer draw. He tried everything, and gave up after an ineffectual hour.

His throat grew worse: it pained him really very badly. The follicles of his tongue, too, inflamed sympathetically, and the horrid vision of a bottled cancerous tongue that he had once seen at the College of Surgeons stood luminous in his mind—an arched monstrous tongue of a hideous brown colour, with the ulcer just visible in the dorsum. It looked too big to be a human tongue at all, he had thought. Would his own tongue be bottled in a year from now?

He was afraid to go to a doctor; he could hear the diagnosis; the careful preparation to break it gently to him, the furtive eye that would assure itself of the presence of some necessary stimulant; the——

His thought shot on prophetic to the operation. Would he sink under it? He hoped so. “Early and successful operations afford a respite of from three to five years,” he had read. Think of the waiting through those years for its recurrence! Think of Carrière—he, too, dead of throat-cancer—who had said after operation, “If it comes back I’ll shoot myself”—Carrière—his colleague—his friend.

He had once had an operation, a minor affair. He could picture everything—“extirpate the entire triangle,” the surgeon would say—and do. He did not know what would be left of himself. Would he be able to speak, to swallow, during those horrible three, four, five years while he waited (in Hell!) for “recurrence”?

Liability to recurrence! he sneered angrily; they know it means always, the dogs!

He thought of the title of a book he had seen advertised, “How Surgery blocks the way to the cure of cancer,” and foamed against the folly of the surgeon, than against the blatant quackery of the alternatives. He hated mankind. He hated God, who had made such a world. Why not have ——? and discovered that it is not as easy as it sounds to devise a genuine undeniable improvement upon the universe.

He fought against the notion that his throat was cancerous, did it good with a simple gargle, made it worse again by smoking; finally the shocking anxiety of the terror that he dared not reveal operated to make him really ill.

Only his magnificent constitution had saved him from being very ill indeed long before this.

As it was, the genuine physical suffering took his mind to some extent off his supposed disease, and in a fit of annoyance he determined to put an end of the matter one way or the other.

He got into a fiacre, and drove off—idiot!—to the great Cancer Specialist, Dr. Pommery.

III

It was the very worst thing he—or any one—could have done. Dr. Pommery was famous as having—regardless of expense—grafted the skin of a pig's belly on to the face and hands of a negress, who was thereby enabled to marry a crazy Vicomte, whose parents objected to black blood in the family. True, she had died. He, too, had discovered the bacillus of cancer, the only flaw in his experiments being that the said bacillus was to be found in all known organic substances except sterilized agar-agar. He had prepared a curative serum which killed cancer patients before the disease got half a chance, and he had received the record fee of £5,000 sterling for killing the actress wife of an English Duke—or so the Duke's friends laughed over his Grace's cigars and ’47 port in his Grace's smoking-room.

He welcomed Bernard with a kindling eye. “Dear me!” (in his kindest professional manner) “Don't worry! don't worry, my dear young friend! I think we shall be able to help the little trouble. At the same

time, I must ask you to realize that it is somewhat serious, not at all a matter to neglect. In fact, I ought to tell you—you are a man, and should be well able to bear a little shock—that—that——"

Bernard had heard him with set face, afraid no more but of showing the white feather. Now as he caught the expression of the great specialist's eyes, the long strain broke. He burst into a torrent of glad tears, caught the doctor's hands in his, and wrung them hard. "I know!" he cried. "It's cancer—cancer! Thank God! Thank God!

His fear was over.

He sobered himself, arranged to go the next day to Dr. Pommery's private hospital for the treatment, and went off. His throat was better already. Almost joyfully, he went about his affairs. He bade good-bye to his one good friend at lunch, not wishing to sadden her by telling her the truth. He found a sombre pleasure in keeping the secret. "The next she hears of me, I shall be dead. She will remember this lunch, think kindly of me that I would not spoil her pleasure." Then—"Poor girl, how will she live when I am gone?"

Bernard had a small regular income; he had no relations; he would leave it to her. So off he went to the Rive Droite to make his will.

The lawyer was an old friend, was grievously shocked at his story, made the usual attempts to minimize the affair, told a long story of how he too had been condemned to death by a doctor—"Twenty years ago, Herbert, and—well, I feel sure I shall die, you know, if I have to wait another forty years for it."

Bernard laughed duly, and was cheered; yet the lawyer's sympathy jarred. He detected a professionalism, an insincerity, in the good cheer. He was quite wrong; his friend did think him scared, and was honestly trying to give him courage. He asked him to come back to tea. Bernard accepted.

Now who should chance to drop in but Maigrelette, that same old medical friend of Bernard's, from whose consulting-room he had fled in terror a month before! They were four at tea, Jobbs the lawyer and his wife, Maigrelette and the dying man.

At the proper moment Bernard began his sad story; it was necessary to say farewell.

Maigrelette heard him with patient impatience. To his look, that asked for sympathy, he said but one explosive word, "Pommery!" It sounded like an oath!

"Come here!" he said, catching Bernard by the shoulder and dragging him to the window. He thrust a spoon, snatched from the tea-table, into his mouth. "Say R!"

"R-R-R-R-R," said Bernard obediently, wondering whether to choke or vomit.

"You d——d ass!" thundered Maigrelette, shaking him to and fro till his teeth chattered, "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Jobbs—what you've got is a very mild go of tonsillitis, and a very bad go of funk. What you're going to do is to go away with my brother Jack to-morrow morning for a month. He'll teach you what speed means. No nonsense, now! Hold up!"

But Bernard went limp, fainted.

While he lay unconscious, "You can tear up that will, Jobbs," said Maigrelette, "but it's a bad nervous case, as bad as I want to see. I don't think we'll trust him to go home alone, do you know!"

Bernard came to. The doctor took him back to his studio, packed his bag for him, carried him off to dinner. "Jack," he said to his brother, in a swift aside, "take the big Panhard, and L for leather all the way to Madrid! Let him out of your sight, day or night, for the next week, and I won't answer for it! After that, if he stops brooding—well, I'll have a look at him myself before you relax." Jack nodded comprehension, and after the cigars had been converted into ash and contentment, he went off with Bernard pounding through the night in a great journey to the south. Bernard, exhausted, dozed uneasily in the tonneau, the wind driving out of his brain the phantoms of its disorder. All day they raced through the haze and heat; fed like giants here and there. The patient grew visibly sleek, his face got blood, his eyes brightness, the furtive inwardness of them sucked out by the good sun, the wild fresh air.

They stopped their headlong course at a small town in the Pyrenees. Bernard was honestly sleepy, as a tired man is, not as an exhausted man. As for Jack, he thought he could never get enough sleep. He had held the wheel nearly all day.

They dined, smoked, took a tentative walk cut short by the eagerness of the air and their own great fatigue. Bernard threw himself upon his bed, and slept instantly. Jack, with a glad sigh, "Safe till the morning!" imitated him.

So abode the utter stillness of the night upon them; so the dawn arose. A shaft of sunlight came through the mountain cleft, and fell obliquely upon Bernard's face. He half woke, wondered. His memory played him false. Where was he? The strange room baffled him. And suddenly his face whitened. “I have got cancer,” he thought. And again: “It is I that have got cancer. It is I.” The emphasis of egoity rose to a perfect shriek of nerve, dominated all other chords in the brain, once and for all.

He rose calm and smiling, like a little child, went on tiptoe to the window, kissed his hand to the sun, whose orb now rose clear of the mountain and looked full upon him. “What a ripping score off old Jack!” he said in a soft voice, laughing, and after a minute's search in his dressing-case, drew his razor with one firm sweep across his throat.

As he turned and fell, the bright blood sprang, a slim swift jet, and fell bubbling upon the face of the sleeper.

ALEISTER CROWLEY.