

XIV

The Black Sickness, its Folie

The sycamore and cherry wood of the harp were slumped in a corner, sleeping. There was a dull patina where Rey's chest and forearm had sat in contact with the wood; that part shone less brightly in the candlelight, as though the harp had sweated with the effort of extracting all the splendour from the score which lay scattered on the table. There were also two violas propped over it, in an unaccustomed position which emphasised the fragility of their bridges; nearby, a bundle of bows shaggy with broken hairs, abandoned among the glasses and the bottles which had helped the governor to forget. Don Adrian had not wished to cancel the concert that night, though there was reason to. For as long as he had been in Altagracia he had never stopped asking for news of the war from anybody and everybody who disembarked from Europe, and two days earlier, after months and more months of half truths and vague accounts, the news he feared had arrived.

Rey and the musicians left one by one, emptying the room of instruments. They saluted him from a distance, as though out of respect for a grief that they did not share.

Slumped like an instrument in an armchair, don Adrian wanted to take ship that very evening for Spain but instead here he was, a useless soldier, chewing over the defeat which had followed the agony. Somewhere, a peace had been signed, and that concert had been for the death of their country's greatness, buried in some place with an odd name, like Vestaglia, or something like that. Between the jigs and the reels, in the end they had had their way, the bastard Dutch and their allies, and in a squeaking of pen-nibs and a splutter of sealing-wax had disappeared the glory of Spain, its riches a dream of ghosts, and its power worn out like the barking of an old toothless dog who pretends to be dangerous in order not to have to bite. Futile to say that nothing would change, that no other nation had an empire as great and rich as that of Spain: from his great distance don Adrian felt never again. And that 'never again' tolled in his head with bells cast by the victors from the bronze of cannons made with the copper of San Jeronimo, and their tolling said that he too had lost, that they had all lost something, even if they did not know it.

At the beginning of the dry season, when the heat came over the mountains and spread through the Villaroel basin, when Arrieta had already made innumerable scratches on the walls of his cell, other signs, more subtle ones, made themselves known.

The trail of the contagion hid itself under the most diverse forms in order that it might not be recognised and that it might spread its mandate to the point where, even though it was discovered, there would be nothing left to do but dig graves.

In such a climate, who would ever worry about a headache, a touch of nausea, an occasional fit of retching? No-one, in fact. Only the most hardened hypochondriacs were equipped to cultivate the suspicion lovingly, but these the disease did not touch, as secrets do not touch gossips, demonstrating an astounding capacity for selection.

The strategy adopted by the epidemic of the black sickness – for such it was – on its first appearance was so cunning as to throw even the most attentive mind off the track, for indeed it attacked those of white race for preference, and reserved only secondary efforts for the others. The result was that they were not able – let alone disposed – to believe in a pestilence with such keen sight and such unerring aim.

In the beginning, therefore, the blame was placed on the dry weather, but when eventually it rained and the retching and the fevers showed no signs of departing, the finger of guilt was pointed at a shipload of rice just arrived from the Philippines. After the rice too had been destroyed and the fevers were gaining ever more ground, then finally it occurred to some that it could be a plague, perhaps not serious, but a plague; and as indios and blacks and those of mixed race were almost immune, quite apart from the sickness the city was plagued by the certainty that their inferiors had, with their magic, corrupted the seed of Spain.

The infection had begun at Atacama, a port and therefore by definition a crossroads for miasmas of all kinds, but it passed unobserved until two dock workers collapsed, measuring their length on the pier, vomiting their guts from every pore. When carried back to their respective houses the dock workers recovered quickly; they ate with appetite, and then they began to turn yellow and could no longer keep anything down, not least the names of Jesus, of His Father and of His Holy Mother which were brought up mixed with other, less exalted company and with thick clots of blood.

Then it became clear that no less than the black sickness itself had taken up residence in Atacama, and as usual the first recourse was to irrationality, with pilgrimages to the cathedral which did more harm than good, spreading more germs about on the way, sowing the infection where it had not been before and where, above all, it should never had entered – in the house of God. For the bishop De Tovar it went without saying that the disease was caused by divine wrath, unleashed in this form by the sins of men. It was a form from which he kept himself apart by means of a handkerchief soaked in an unguent so strong that it made him a little drowsy, but which on the whole worked. He never put this handkerchief down, even in the rarefied air of the pulpit. Don Adrian, on the other hand, thought that the infection was nothing other than the defeat of Spain which had crossed the ocean and, unable to sow the Indies too with men slain on the battlefield, took its quota in another way, which took the form of this contagion. He kept this opinion to himself and took care not to let it be known to his colleagues for fear that they would believe him already sick. Instead he communicated his idea of consulting a doctor, an expert in such matters, and having rejected all those operating in Villaroel on the grounds of their widely recognised incompetence, Soto recalled that in a report from several months previously there had been mention of a doctor who had stopped an epidemic, on the coast.

Valeriano Vasconcellos, distinguished luminary from Salinas, arrived in Villaroel perched upon a mule named Gesuina who could not have been less than twenty years old. Three quarters of the total weight carried by this mule consisted of wooden boxes, blackened by the concoctions in the jars inside. The rest consisted of the luminary himself, shrunk by science in order that the mule Gesuina could carry correspondingly more medicines, including the inevitable glazed jar of leeches.

His emaciated visage, concealed behind a beard which fell to his belt, reassured nobody and it was only because he was now here that Don Adrian received him and was subjected to a dissertation containing more incomprehensible terms than comprehensible ones. Vasconcellos and his beard, thick enough to contain an apothecary's shop – an impression only reinforced by the multicoloured stripes and burn marks which adorned it – was lodged in a room in the fort, not far from the port. There he strewed the room with his vials, his unguents, two enormous books and several leeches which had escaped from their jar. He worked day and night, silently visiting the sick, tossing them about like pancakes, comparing saliva and mucus, stirring the ink-black fluid produced by their stomachs in search of the tiny animal which, according to his tomes, must be hidden in all this waste. What he would have done, had he found it, cannot be known, but in his research Vasconcellos was conscientious in the wholesale application of leeches which, he said, with the strength of their suction, were capable of extracting even the said terrible tiny animal. He even dissected the little blood-swollen creatures in turn in search of the cause of the malady. When Doña Maria visited him she was much struck by the methods and the wisdom of Vasconcellos, but a sixth sense advised her to leave quickly before her internal organs demanded that she have a nap right there and risk infection.

The discernible results which Vasconcellos obtained were all written down in the parish death register, one by one, name and surname, in order of departure. The distinguished luminary remained in Atacama until the death toll reached twenty-seven, at which point, having vomited early one morning, he harnessed Gesuina before midday and bade farewell to the governor, putting into his hand a piece of paper containing instructions as to what, according to his infallible opinion, should be done to stop the infection. Don Adrian was left holding this piece of paper and thinking longingly of reducing Vasconcellos's already miserably skinny body to pulp with a horsewhip. He recovered, however, and called the only two decent doctors in the city, gave them copies of the piece of paper and ordered them to get on with it. Wrinkling their noses and openly criticising their distinguished colleague's instructions, the two set out to do precisely what they would have done of their own free will, comfortable in the certainty that they would not be blamed for the ensuing deaths. They went on bleeding the sick of pints of blood to purge them, multiplying by a hundred the number of leeches on their yellowed bodies, weakening them still further, so that they died in their dozens. The cemeteries overflowed. And the earth, which had really no need of it, swallowed up the corpses which fertilised it beyond all measure, so much so that though they were excommunicated for it men competed for that land with ever larger sums of money, while the rest was left to its fallow fate.

When Liborio, infected by the pilgrims and one of the few indios to die of the plague, gave up his soul to God, the bishop De Tovar gathered all the humility left in him, diluted it with his pride, downed it in one and, with a bitter taste in his mouth, went to the governor. As he waited to be received he was seized a couple of times with the urge to leave, but he dressed up his terrible fear of dying with altruistic sentiments about his flock and he remained outside the door, waiting like a common supplicant.

'God be with you, Father' Don Adrian greeted him.

His office was crowded with long faces, gathered to decide what was to be done. Mistaking the conventional greeting for submissiveness, Father Mauro was filled once

more with the will to be obeyed – God forgive him – and he demanded, rather than asking, with his handkerchief to his nose;

‘I have come to insist that you take all necessary precautions to stop this pestilence carrying away the entire city. My servant Liborio died yesterday and father Ignazio is unwell. You must do something!’

‘You must not worry, Father, we are taking care of the situation’ answered Don Adrian. ‘Do stay, and observe for yourself.’

He directed the bishop to a seat by the desk where Soto held the minutes of the meeting: Mudarra and Robledo remained standing.

‘So, as we were saying: we must isolate the city, close the gates.’

‘Exactly so,’ said the bishop, looking at the others’ expressionless faces.

‘The first thing to do,’ continued Don Adrian, who had cast an eye swiftly over Vasconcellos’s document, ‘is to nominate from among the members of the Cabildo a committee of public health charged with carrying out these instructions and co-ordinating the relief effort. We must have strict controls at the entrances and exits of the city, particularly down at the port, we must establish a quarantine and choose a suitable place for a hospital. Then we have to arrange to burn all the clothes of the sick, isolate the gravediggers, prohibit prostitution, close the brothels...Señor Soto, are you writing this down?’

‘Yes, yes, prohibit prostitution and close the brothels, yes.... done.’

‘Is that all?’ asked Robledo.

‘What, are you weary of your presence among us?’ Don Adrian asked him. ‘Would you prefer to risk death?’

‘No, Excellency, merely that perhaps it is not that serious...’

‘It’s not that serious now, but if we wait things could get worse and then we will have no time. Robledo, I beg your pardon, but what are you trying to say?’

‘Nothing, Excellency. I was only saying that perhaps all these precautions are a little excessive.’

‘If you had seen four men in your garrison die you wouldn’t be saying that,’ interrupted Mudarra.

Don Adrian pretended not to notice and went on:

‘Senor Soto, take these suggestions to the Cabildo and have them draw up a public announcement to be put up as soon as possible, so that all the citizenry can be informed. The town crier can read it in the streets.

‘Exactly, right, get a copy to me too and I can read it in church and distribute it to the parishes,’ offered De Tovar, relieved.

The meeting of the Cabildo lasted half an hour, no more. They were all so much in agreement that it proved unnecessary to keep minutes and even less to put it to the vote. From his chair in the back row Carallenos did not need to strain his oratory:

‘If we close the city every time somebody dies – well really!! (Laughter). A few deaths hardly mean the end of the world... (More laughter) We cannot let these precautions be taken: if we close the port we will lose a huge part of our trade (Hear, hear!)... and the damage will not last only as long as the closure, but at least as long again, because no ship will want to put in at Atacama, even when the danger is past. I say we do nothing!’

This opinion was greeted with thundering applause, as it was, word for word, theirs also. Only don Limpieza attempted to contest it, because he could not allow himself to die before his ennoblement, thinking that if by chance it was the governor who died, who the devil would sign his papers?

Soto returned to the mansion with the proclamation.

‘What is this, a joke?’ said don Adrian. ‘There is nothing written here; have you brought the right piece of paper?’

‘Yes, Excellency.’

‘Then explain what this means!’ he roared furiously. ‘How dare you mock me? A blank sheet? You come to me with a BLANK SHEET?’

In the next room Robledo waited for the inevitable shouts to enter and make his case. His matrimonial project was proceeding slowly and he needed to achieve the impossible, to make Don Adrian change his mind, in order to take a big step towards the altar where Tarolilla and all the rest awaited him. He came into don Adrian’s office with his mind racing.

‘Is there a problem, Excellency?’ he asked, trying not to show that he knew full well.

‘Problem? I’d say there’s a problem! The Cabildo is full of lunatics or madmen!’ and he waved the white page furiously under his nose. ‘Here are their precautions! It seems that they think exactly as you do...’

Robledo felt a chilly hand run down his spine, vertebra by vertebra.

‘Excellency, I hope you do not think that I...’

‘Come, Robledo, don’t take offence, there is no need.’

Don Adrian sat down heavily in his seat, glaring at that blank sheet as though he was expecting– by force of his anger alone – to see the right precautions appear there, perhaps written in invisible ink. He could almost admire those men who let nothing stop them, not even in the face of their own death.

‘For instance, Excellency, the repercussions on taxes would be tremendous: no trade, no taxes’ Soto interjected, to break the silence. And since nobody spoke, he carried this thought to its conclusion: ‘and no taxes means problems first with San Esteban and then with Lima.’

‘You’re right,’ said don Adrian. ‘But if the result were no more colony, everybody dead, then who would pay the taxes?’

‘Come come! What an idea; no more colony, indeed! I mean in reality, how many dead have we?’ asked Robledo. ‘Forty, fifty? So what? Even if there were a hundred, what would that be, set against the certainty of bringing the entire province to its knees?’

‘Is our job here not also to protect the population, or am I wrong?’ asked don Adrian.

‘No, Excellency, you are not wrong,’ Soto replied, ‘But from our enemies, only from our enemies, and with respect, you are not God, to be able to avert a pestilence...’

‘All right, I cannot avert it but I can make it not come closer.’

‘Well all right then!’ Robledo lost his temper. ‘Close the city, blockade the port, do as you wish, but I will have nothing to do with it.’

‘What will you? You will...what?’ Don Adrian leapt to his feet.

'I will have nothing to do with it, Excellency,' said Robledo, looking him straight in the eye – 'and this means that I will send a report to San Esteban officially stating my disagreement with this decision which I hold to be premature and inopportune.'

'I'll send you to San Esteban to say it in person, in chains, if that's what you want!'

'Excellency, let us keep calm,' said Soto. 'Let us look at the facts. These first infections are not necessarily the harbingers of a plague. It has happened several times before, I have seen several similar events: a few deaths, a lot of fear and then everything melts away into nothing. What you fear has never happened. In the interests of all, I think it would be better not to rush to do things which we might regret later: when the order is given, it will take more time to see the first ship dock again at Atacama than the province can afford, and we won't even find crews willing to load the copper.'

'And what are they making out of copper in Spain, now! However, it will be as you say, but you still cannot be certain that nothing will happen.'

'No, but I have enough experience to be confident that we have reason to feel safe.'

'I agree with señor Soto,' Robledo supported him.

'You are disassociating yourselves from me and you agree with the others, is that it?'

'In this case, yes, Excellency.'

Don Adrian began to pace the room, looking at the faces succeeding each other in the frame containing the serious face of the viceroy: don Lardizabal, Carallenos, the bishop, Jepara, Robledo, Soto, Arrieta, Arismendi, Blanco, father Ignacio; not one smiled at him. He shut his eyes and said quickly:

'Very well, for the moment we will suspend the precautions. But at least let us limit access to the city for those coming from the port.'

'Do not worry, it will be done today!' said Robledo, springing to attention.

'Soto, put in the proclamation that to enter the city they will need a pass signed by Mudarra. Then have him called, I will give him the instructions. You can go now.'

Soto and Robledo did not need to be told twice. They left the room before he could think better of it.

Carallenos was stretched out in a hammock, enjoying the breeze. He could not work; he was tormented by the thought of what the governor would decide. When he saw Robledo standing over him he began to fidget, in danger of falling out of the hammock:

'So, what have you to tell me?'

Robledo's face was fixed in a wide and silent grin.

Carallenos' eyes almost popped out of their sockets, waiting for him to speak; then he understood and said only 'Noo?!' and leapt to untangle himself from the position he was in, as though bitten by a tarantula.

'Noo??!!!' he repeated.

'Yes,' said Robledo simply, helping him to his feet.

'Come here, you devil of a lieutenant! Here, into my arms!'

He hugged him tight and then he let him go, remembering that he must not go overboard: Don Lardizabal was working on it.

Antiocho Cabral wobbled at the news that the closure of the city had been suspended, and he saw himself already bent double and vomiting his guts up, greeting the world as a humble landowner. He immediately called for Gregorio and gave him his orders for the arrival en masse of the Cabral y Torres family at the Frio: and what the devil! The first thing was to save Sebastian, in other words the hope that sooner or later somebody would sign the decree, if not for him, then for one of his descendants. Incredibly, doña Ariadna was in agreement with her husband on this point and lost no time in preparations, gathering round the house whatever came to hand, thinking only of being far, far from Villaroel as soon as possible, in safety. Don Limpieza was in the library choosing a few books to take with him into the country when he was struck by a wonderful idea there where he stood, on the steps, three feet up with one leg in the air: and if he invited don Adrian to come to the Frio with him? He would save him from the risk of infection and he, perhaps, out of gratitude, would sign, still at the Frio, in a galaxy of fireworks which would open a thousand volcanoes in the pampas... Fantastic! Yes, yes, he must go immediately and tell him!

He slipped away to the stables and, keeping his horse to the grass so that nobody would hear the sounds of hoofbeats, the moment he was outside the main gate, with a savage AAAAHHHHH! he dashed off through the streets of the city, looking as though he wished to take wing into the air, another Bellerophon, so much did his legs thump the sides of the poor animal. The fever in him would not stop for anything and he spurned aside the guard who wanted to bar his way, at the entrance.

‘I must see the governor at once, it is extremely urgent! Get out of my way!’

He was already at the top of the stairs, with two guards clattering after him, when he crashed right into don Adrian. As soon as he realised who it was Cabral prostrated himself on the ground with apologies and expressions of regret for his own carelessness, even trying to adjust the folds of his coat, crumpled by the encounter. Don Adrian pushed his hand away:

‘Who are you looking for?’

‘You, Excellency. I came to offer you the shelter of my estate, in the country, where you can wait for the end of the plague in peace and...’

‘I am staying HERE, is it understood?’ Don Adrian yelled at him furiously. ‘This is my post, unless you too wish me out from under your feet, so that you can conduct your little intrigues in peace!’

Don Limpieza, seeing the lightning and not wishing to stick around for the thunder, retraced his steps with his tail between his legs. He was escorted to the gate by the guards, thinking about what he could do to restore his image to its former pristine candour, racking his brains in useless cogitation.

The black sickness was enjoying its stay in Villaroel. It had everything it needed to prosper: a lot to eat, a lot of ignorance, a hot, damp climate and no precautions. Trade continued as usual, except that now to load a ship they needed twice as much time and twice as many men who, worn down from sickness, also loaded on board a cargo of germs to be distributed at will. Business went as usual, neither well nor badly, and Carallenos’s clique prospered shut up in the warehouses, where quantities of spices and iron controls on the entrances foiled the attempts of the black sickness to put in an appearance there too. After two weeks Soto began to understand that in order to convince Don Adrian he had said a great many extremely stupid, unsound things.

The dead stood in line to be buried and the living to get out of the city quickly, taking with them the sick who already bore their sentences on their faces and in their stomachs, written clear, and signed to boot, by don Adrian Pulido Pareja, the cowardly governor who had always said no when he could have said yes and had said yes when he absolutely should have said no: that was how don Adrian himself saw it, keeping count on the abacus of his guilt of the lives cut short by his weakness.

The bishop De Tovar officiated at between five and six funerals a day, preventing the relatives of the deceased from kissing his ring with the excuse that they had to shift the benches to make space for the next relatives: he had abandoned the handkerchief soaked with unguent and kept the jar itself under his nose, putting it down on the altar only for the elevation. He had rubbed unguent into all his clothes including his vestments, which he now had to put on by himself: after Liborio, father Ignazio had left him also. He had departed vomiting every scrap he had eaten in his earthly existence in a long agony which had drained him, so that he had arrived pure and thin before his Maker.

Exhausted after a long day of Lux Aeternas the bishop went directly to the governor's residence because all those good and holy words of prevention which he had said in his presence were still only words, and his flock were dying like flies. He found him sitting and playing with an object which gleamed in places where his hands and a cloth let the sun at it. The bishop stopped in front of him with his legs planted firmly, enormous, and went straight for the jugular:

'So, weren't you to close the city, have strict controls on the entrances and exits, establish a quarantine and a good place for a hospital? I have seen nothing but the dead: everything is as it was before. What are you waiting for?'

Don Adrian looked at him and, recognising him, rose without ceasing to burnish what on closer examination revealed itself to be the cross of Santiago, his knight's decoration.

'Father, I can do nothing more. What would be the point? We isolated the city, but it was not enough.'

He bent his head and reapplied himself to his obsessive polishing, following the design of the jewel meticulously, using his finger as a blade in the most difficult crevices. He looked up abruptly:

'I was wrong. I let them persuade me and now it is too late. I am sorry.'

Father Mauro smoothed his bushy moustache with a finger once, then twice, then left without farewells, deciding that what he needed was a change of scene, in every sense. Only a few weeks earlier he had received an invitation to participate in a regional synod at San Esteban and after this conversation he became ever more convinced that it would be extremely healthy to cut the umbilical in favour of breezy island air, leaving his flock to get along without its shepherd.

What don Adrian did after that meeting with the bishop was to run his health into the ground day after day in a crazy coming and going between the city and the port, between the port and the fortress, between the fortress and the cemeteries, always running, never stopping, refusing to listen to those, such as Mudarra, who begged him to rest, not to expose himself so to the risk of infection. But nothing, he went on running, helping the carts which carried the dead, sending to the missions for other priests to fill the gaps and celebrate the funerals, cursing the merchants who were demanding fortunes for the unguent used by the bishop himself, requisitioning batches

of quinine and ordering its general distribution, buying more with his own money when the money ran out, and generally throwing himself without cease into the attempt to put right what he could, to save a few, to put at least one Plus against the pile of Minuses crowding his brain. But the Minuses fell like hail, all around.

From the beginning of the pestilence the concerts had been cancelled and it was enough to see Rey before him with a face masked with grief to understand that something had happened to him. The black sickness had taken his wife but had spared his children, who had more reason to be at risk than their mother, as they were half white. He could not look Rey in the eyes as he told him, and he sent him away without kindness, bleeding darkly from his own guilt which had harmed a friend. But he was present at the funeral, listening behind a pillar by the door to the sacred songs sung in the language of the indios which made him think of angels, come for Ultima, to take here where the pain of the last was worth as much as that of the first, and perhaps more.

In this mad frenzy don Adrian went home only to sleep, a little, and he did not notice anything until it was too late. For days Felipe had been secretly vomiting black blood, but he said nothing in order not to join the number of the sick, leaving the governor alone. The morning that nobody came in to wake him don Adrian opened the shutters and then asked for Felipe. The head chamberlain shrugged sadly.

‘What does this mean? Speak!’ demanded Don Adrian.

‘Excellency, I am sorry, I do not know if the boy will make it...’

‘Make what?’

The butler was amazed at Don Adrian’s pig-headedness, or at his innocence, but then the governor understood from the traffic to and from the boy’s bedroom, he understood and he left, jumping on Estrella as he did every day, thanking God for making horses immune to the black sickness. Other sick people whom he did not know were waiting for his care, for a word, and it cost nothing to give it to them – not even a fraction of what it would cost him to produce it for Felipe. After two days the head butler shook him gently awake in the middle of the night, holding the candle close to his face to wake him from his light sleep:

‘Excellency, come, Felipe – Felipe is asking for you...’

Don Adrian got up straight away, his eyes shining with a fatigue which was all still there where his running about had stored it – in his swelling heart. Felipe’s room was under the roof, transformed now into an oven by the candles burning there. He saw him lying flat, covered only with a bloodstained sheet. He was small and pale; as soon as Felipe saw don Adrian he attempted to sit up, but his elbows slid from under him and his pitiful body fell back without a sound.

‘Don’t, Felipe, stay where you are, rest...’

Don Adrian asked everybody to leave and closed the door.

‘Excellency, I’ll be... I’ll be all right... Have they ironed your shirts?’ whispered the boy.

‘Yes, don’t worry.’

‘If I die how will you manage?’

‘I don’t know and I don’t care, because you’re not going to die, at least not now.’

Don Adrian tried to smile but he could not cauterize his pain in time, and it burned like a knife across the muscles of his face.

‘Will you take my hand, Excellency?’

Don Adrian sought his hand among the sheets and when he found it, cold and dry, the pain he felt concentrated itself all in his own hand, which blazed up to warm Felipe's. They stayed thus until the boy's expression contorted as he retched, and retched again; he spat into a basin and fell back on the bed, saying:

'Who knows how much my mother will cry when she hears. My mama...' and he began to cry, incapable of desperation, like a tap carelessly turned off, one drop after another. 'You'll tell her, won't you? In person, so that she can't make a scene in front of you...'

'You can tell her: you can tell her that you were ill and that you got better.'

'I'd like to sleep a bit now, I'm so tired...' Felipe murmured, and his dry fingers squeezed the governor's large, strong hand with all their strength, until Don Adrian felt the grip slacken and fall back among the sheets.

Felipe's eyes stared blankly at him and immediately he saw the sweetness of that childlike face begin to disappear; he wanted to pray and he did, stammering out the words of a Pater Noster, forgetting passages, and before he finished the bed held only the corpse of another who had not reached manhood because of him. He closed his eyelids and opened the door, calling, calling. Climbing the stairs to Felipe's room, those servants who had not run away passed the ghost of their master biting his hands in agony, his gums and his teeth red with blood, aiming kicks at everything in his path, thumping the walls which showed the red marks like a home-made Via Crucis.

At the fort the sickness, compressed as though in a gully, flared up violently, fed by the winds of forced promiscuity prevailing among those who, unable to climb up to the city nor to find a ship to take them away, vegetated there waiting for the last rites, victims of the governor's trap. Don Adrian went down there in order not to spare himself. Erryque had used an entire wall in the corridor as a page on which to express his pain, not before a reproof:

'Why tut le monde puede go y venire? Too bocou muertos comsa'

'Get rid of this crap, right now!' shouted Don Adrian the moment he came to the end of that message flung unerringly from the Tower of Babel to pierce his guilt.

Arrieta had died shortly before, drowned in his own bile.

'Are you happy, Adrian?' came the voice of Jepará from the next cell, 'But I won't die, oh no! I am strong, and maybe I'll come to your funeral, what do you think? Free and rich!'

Don Adrian ignored him. When too much death fills the eyes, the eyes flee far away to rid themselves of all the pain: his own eyes flew all the way to the Frio, to caress her, to be sure that she was safe, she at least. He opened them again to see Arrieta's body passing by him, carried away by two guards: one of the accountant's arms hung outside the sheet which served him for a shroud, and the hand was dragging a ring over the flagstones of the corridor, clack, clack, clack.

From his exile in the pampas, Antioco Cabral sent messengers on a fortnightly basis to find out about the governor's health, which was always satisfactory. His men, since they were there anyway, made the rounds of their acquaintance and friends, whoever had stayed in Villaroel, and so it was that they discovered that Baldomero Gil

had given up reading forever and had departed, thin as the Christ on the Cross, eaten away from within, his face so hollow that he no longer seemed himself. Don Limpieza regretted not having been able to greet his friend one more time; before the coffin was closed he would like have nailed to inside of the lid, at eye level, a copy of his *Covetous Cacique*, so that he would have all the time in the world to read it and reread it. Cabral's messengers were also entrusted with the task of delivering to don Adrian letters containing repeated invitations to move out to the Frio; they all returned with a polite but firm refusal written across the bottom. But old Antioco remained undaunted, and every two weeks, unshaken, he would copy the text onto a new piece of paper. In the end his insistence was rewarded, in a way; at the bottom of the letter, after the usual no, one fine day arrived a request for the services of a certain girl who worked at the Frio, justifying this by the death of the servant Felipe.

'What girl is he talking about?' said Cabral, dropping the letter, terrified by the prospect of making a mistake. 'There must be ten here at least – which one can he want?'

It was Sebastian who put him right: 'He wants Agueda.'

'Agueda? And why specifically Agueda? She, to be his maid, to be his housekeeper?' said Cabral. 'But she's not up to it!'

'Why not?' said Sebastian in surprise. 'Mama has never complained...'

'But for Heaven's sake, the governor is not your mother!'

'Listen Father, if he wants Agueda we can hardly send him somebody else, right?'

'You're the one who says it's her he wants!'

'Well will you listen to me, for once!'

Doña Ariadna joined in the discussion and came down on the side of her son, and Antioco Cabral was persuaded willy, but mostly nilly, to sacrifice the girl to the prospective family ennoblement. Thus Agueda was put on a cart and sent to Villaroel, washed and brushed like a filly for market, reeling under the stream of advice from Don Limpieza who, if he could have, would have gone to wait upon the governor himself.

The girl arrived at her destination exhausted from the journey. Don Adrian was not there to meet her; he had taken refuge on the veranda and was looking down from this vantage point, unseen, waiting to compare her with his memory without having to pretend, to be kind or unfriendly, indifferent or solicitous. When he saw her, standing on the patio with her things in a brightly coloured bag, she was more beautiful than he remembered. He stuck his nose out of the veranda to see better and withdrew it instantly; Agueda was looking at the house to give her confidence in this new world, and her gaze passed over the veranda, without seeing him.

Don Adrian left before the head chamberlain had finished reciting to Agueda all her instructions with regard to the governor, written by himself and given to the chamberlain to give them a more official provenance in the girl's eyes.

All day Don Adrian walked the streets of his impatience waiting only for the moment of return to be alone with the girl, to breathe in her scent. He returned home earlier than usual and even had a bath, an infrequent occurrence and one which turned the household upside down in search of the necessaries whose whereabouts were known only to the faithful departed Felipe. Finally the bath-tub was unearthed, along with all the other paraphernalia, and Don Adrian leapt into it and washed away the miasmas and the filth, the bad breath and the fever. The girl was not given the task of

supervising the bath, since it seemed to the governor to be premature to impose such a shock on the new arrival, bare and brazen, without giving her the time to get her bearings and to get to know him first with his clothes on. Agueda was called, however, to prepare Don Adrian for bed, to undress him as Felipe had done for nearly two years. The head chamberlain brought her up to the door of the governor's room. Before letting her in don Adrian heard clearly from behind the door the chamberlain repeating one more time the details of what she had to do and, twice, that which she must not:

'Understood? This is very important, he is always so tired that you mustn't upset him, do what I told you and you'll see that it will all be fine. Smile and always call him Excellency when you answer. Go on, now.'

Don Adrian fled on tiptoe to sit on the bed, and no sooner had he taken up a position worthy of his rank than the door opened. Agueda had been given a maid's uniform to wear which suited her not at all: a long pale tunic to the ankles and her hair tied in a plait knotted on top of her head. Her face on the improvised stage at the Frio, the dawn, her eyes between the ladle and the horizon; all seemed very far away and she barely recognisable. This was not how he wanted her, a tamed beauty which had lost its power, caged in normality.

'Come here. How was your journey, long?'

'Yes, Excellency.'

'How is your master?'

'Well, Excellency.'

'I hope they have made you comfortable. Are you happy with your quarters?'

'Yes, Excellency.'

'Come, come, girl! Your tongue was not so quiet at the Frio, do you remember?'

'Yes, Excellency. Surely you do not mean to punish me for that time, do you? I was only looking after my master's belongings...now you are my master.'

'No, no, not your master! You will stay here until I find another servant, don't worry.'

'Excellency, please, I really don't want to go back to that house full of lunatics.'

Don Adrian continued to lie to the girl and particularly to himself:

'We'll see, we'll see. It depends on how you behave yourself.'

'Thank you Excellency! Now I undress you, right?'

Don Adrian relaxed. Agueda's hands, harder and more calloused than Felipe's, gave him none of the sensations he had hoped for. Her smell was strange, neither good nor bad, like that of an unknown animal. In the following days and weeks Agueda constituted the only reason which made him want to go home, and he went to bed very early in order to look forward to the moment when the girl would take care of him, filling with thoughts of herself all the little sleep which Don Adrian's thoughts allowed him. Thoughts made of vomit. He was at the end of his strength, ready for the plague to snap him up in a single mouthful, and, when the first signs of his weakening began to gain ground, he was too tired to notice. Even if the black sickness disappeared, it would leave him that weight on his conscience in its entirety.

Another sign of returning normality presented itself in the form of a note which he received from doña Maria:

'Given your noteworthy resistance to infection, which greatly gladdens me, I would like to have a small quantity of your vomit in order to study its content and with its aid develop a concoction of benefit to the sick.'

He had not even finished reading when he was well and truly seized with the urge to vomit and he fell prone on to the bed, without turning over, risking suffocation, so little did it matter to him now. Agueda heard him spitting, breathing hard between one retch and the next and she came into the room, slowly approaching the bed because she did not know whether to be of assistance or to make herself scarce. For a moment she gazed at him, frightened and dirty, and ran to the kitchen. When don Adrian felt the presence of a cool hand on his brow and his gaze managed to rise along her arm, over her shoulder, into her hair and up to her face, he realised that there was, in fact, something which mattered to him.

After barely four months the black sickness, fat and satisfied, left as it had arrived. It packed its bags, removed the mourning ribbons which it had made to flower on the doors of the city and ran to attach them somewhere else, far away. For an everlasting memento it left uncounted biers, much sadness and the new serenity of the survivors, crueller for the dead than death itself.