

José Fernández Bremón

«Health Scare»

Introduction and Translation
by Daryl Hague

Born in Gerona, Spain, in 1830, José Fernández Bremón was an accomplished writer. In addition to working for a variety of newspapers and magazines, he published poems, plays, and short stories. These works revealed his sharp wit and a gift for satire. Most interesting for present purposes, he wrote several stories that qualify as early science fiction, including “M. Dansant, médico aerópata” (“Monsieur Dansant, Aeropathic Doctor”), “Un crimen científico” (“A Scientific Crime”), and “El terror sanitario.”

In 1905, Fernández Bremón published “El terror sanitario,” which I have translated as “Health Scare,” in an annual newspaper known as *El almanaque de la Ilustración* [*The Almanac of the Enlightenment*]. Given how relentlessly the story critiques Modernist faith in science, this choice of venue is fascinating.

The story develops as a series of vignettes. Many are laugh-out-loud hilarious, a few gravely serious, but all of them combine to paint a picture of faith in science run amok. This faith is based on an exaggerated approach to the germ theory of disease, which had enjoyed barely fifty years or so of wide acceptance before the publication of “El terror sanitario.”

“El terror sanitario” introduces readers to a dystopian future in which the Spanish government de-

clares an unusual war on disease. After determining that microbes create all sickness, the government adopts a two-pronged approach to protecting public health: (1) imposing all possible measures to ensure a sterile environment; and (2) killing anyone who commits the crime of becoming sick. The story ends as the country’s president touts what he considers a great success: the government eliminates yellow fever by incinerating a Chinese man.

The incident with the Chinese man reflects late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fears about Asian immigrants invading Europe, a fear articulated in 1895 by Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II as the “yellow peril.” Examples of European literary works that both support and critique this fear abound, so Fernández Bremón’s oblique reference to it fits well with the cultural milieu of his time.

Even as “El terror sanitario” addresses such contemporary issues as the “yellow peril,” the story is also remarkably prophetic, anticipating both the horrors of the Shoah and Western cultural values of the twenty-first century. As to the Shoah, the Spanish government forces sick people to wear a small yellow flag, just as the Nazis would require Jews to wear yellow stars. Furthermore, in the interests of cleanliness and efficiency, the Spanish government uses enormous ovens in which to incinerate the sick. With respect to twenty-first-century cultural values, “El terror sanitario” is particularly prescient about Western obsessions with human



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health. Consider the modern proliferation of nutritional supplements, personal trainers, and fitness programs, all promising perfect bodies and the happiness that supposedly accompanies perfect health.

Happiness is the ostensible goal behind the government's health policy in "El terror sanitario." That policy aggressively limits human intimacy. In one humorous vignette, an engaged couple shares a kiss while separated by a window. In another, a priest is allowed to hear confessions only via a sanitary wireless telegraph. These and the many other vignettes in "El terror sanitario" invite readers to contemplate the link between human intimacy and happiness. Indeed, the story's true health scare seems to be the possibility that people will deliberately reject intimacy and therefore the opportunity for genuine well-being.

In my translation, I have not sought to domesticate Fernández Bremón's story. For that reason, I have tried to retain his rhetorical patterns, particularly his sentence length. Spain's main legislative body appears as the "Congress of Deputies" rather than "Parliament" or "Congress," as the latter terms would transfer the story's action either to the United Kingdom or the United States. Even though the story is speculative, it is most definitely a Spanish story that takes place in Spain, and I wanted English-speaking readers to have the opportunity to experience that difference. ●



Traducción de Daryl Hague

José Fernández Bremón
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The health revolution had been accomplished to shouts of “Death to the sick!” and “Down with all cures!” Several things had precipitated this explosive change: first, the discovery of *salutina*, a disinfectant so powerful that it had driven all flies, mice, and cats from Spain; second, the public certainty that every disease resulted from malevolent microbes that could easily break out and enter the human body, especially given that the pores provided as many openings as a sieve; third, the fear of death, as natural in human beings as their acceptance of other people’s deaths; fourth, and last of all, the grandiose justification that the human race could be regenerated only by preserving the healthy and destroying the sick. Every town established a quarantine hospital and the law prohibited all diseases, although migraine headaches for women and simple colds for men were still allowed. The law also made an exception for baldness and warts, these being recognized as elements of personal ornamentation and therefore pertaining to the fine arts.

I

EXCERPT FROM A MINISTRY NEWSPAPER

Yesterday in the Congress of Deputies, the leader of the opposition party learned a terrible lesson that demonstrated just how unpopular his ideas are. Murmurs and insults could be heard throughout his speech, particularly when he made the following statement: “I don’t reject the need for rational health practices, such as wise and reasonable efforts to avoid preventable disease, keep our cities sanitary, and ensure that our homes and bodies are clean, but I detest the fear you use to terrorize the fainthearted. I refer to the public-health tyranny you promote in the name of your fantasies, ... of your mistakes about sanitation. Centuries will pass by, yet you will never know the exact cause of all disease. If you sanitize the air,

germs will fall from the clouds, or breed in the sun’s rays, or introduce themselves—like traitors—into the food you eat, or sprout from the ground wherever you step, or even be born from your favorite vices. You will develop theories that will be destroyed by other theories, forever pursuing a phantom, and the only thing you will achieve is to make existence bitter, to make the world grieve, ... by frightening our people with the bogeyman of cleanliness...”

He was unable to conclude his speech: the crowd’s whistles drowned out his voice and he fled, abandoned by his own supporters, running through a line of raised fists... that fell upon his back more than once.

Then the president arose, angry and terrible. “I will purge this nation of disease no matter the cost!” he shouted to thunderous applause, a sound like the roar of the ancient darkness. “If my own son gets sick, I will throw him out of the house! If a representative from the majority suddenly loses weight, he will be kicked out of the party! Our medical schools will teach pathology because we have to understand disease in order to seek it out. But the schools will teach nothing of medical treatment, for we will not cure anyone. Doctors must renounce that role. They are agents of the health police, nothing more. We are not tyrants. Individuals are free to get sick, but the State defends itself by eliminating every manifestation of disease. With the combination of *salutina*, which is now available to everyone; our great ovens; and the sanitation dictatorship, anyone who gets sick is a criminal, an enemy. Using the cell system, I’ll order houses isolated from houses and individuals from their families, and with the requirement that everyone wear gloves, I’ll isolate fingers from fingers. From this day forward, hospital funds will be used to exterminate the sick.”

An enthusiastic but hygienic ovation followed. Rather than moving too close to the president, congressional deputies formed a wide circle so as to avoid contaminating him.



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II

“Sir,” said a guard as he detained a man who was walking by, limping, “your proof-of-good-health card.”

“I left it at home.”

“Of course. Stick this little yellow flag on your hat and go on.”

“Home?”

“No, to the quarantine hospital.”

“But I’m not sick.”

“That’s what they all say. Move!”

“Can’t you see that I have a bad leg?”

“What I see is that you’re beginning to confess your health problems. Now move!”

“At least let me say hello to my friend over there.”

“All right, but no shaking hands. If you do, I’ll arrest him too.”

But there was no need. The friend, having seen the little yellow flag in his friend’s hat, moved out of sight, taking advantage of the cover afforded by a passing group of local firemen.

“Is there a fire?” the arrested man asked the guard.

“Not yet, but there’s going to be.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I heard them give the order. Two or three people who were reading at the National Library came down with pneumonia, so the government has ordered the firemen to burn the building to the ground. Now that’s enough talk. Off to the quarantine hospital!”

III

At public dances there are no cloakrooms; instead, there are decontamination rooms for men and women. Slow dancing is prohibited. The man and the woman must remain four meters apart, aerial and fan dancing being the only officially approved dances. A line of doctors stands watch over the dancers to protect the nation’s health.

In the coffee shops, every cup contains enough anti-toxins to prevent customers from getting sick.

At elegant New Year’s Eve parties, men hold onto women with steel tongs to avoid infection, and special rackets are used to launch small hygiene books and other healthy toys into the air.

The belief in disinfectants is so entrenched that no one blows their own brains out without first sterilizing the bullet.

IV

“Doctor,” says an ex-patient to his ex-physician, “how is our public health?”

“Couldn’t be better. There’s not a single sick person in all of Madrid: We’ve burned 11,000 people alive this month. Yesterday, I sent ten of my friends to the flames.”

“They must suffer terribly.”

“To the contrary. The oven is set at 1500 degrees. Inside there’s a slide—a Russian mountain—and at the top of it there’s a cushioned platform on which we lay the patient. The platform tips over and the sick person feels a pleasant tickling sensation, then falls into the flames and instantly transforms from solid to gas without feeling anything.”

“But come now, just between us, don’t you think such measures are excessive?”

“Not at all. Back in the old days when we used to operate on people, we had to wash up first so that the wounds wouldn’t get infected. What do you deduce from that?”

“Nothing pleasant.”

“That the most healthy man in the world is also poisonous.”

“No!”

“Yes. You, me, our families, we’re all worse than scorpions. Basic hygiene and daily baths aren’t enough. To avoid causing harm, even the healthiest man should be soaking for five hours a day.”



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V

The deputy mayor enters the church and asks the sacristan imperiously: "Where is the parish priest?"

"I have no idea, Sir."

"Fine. He's been avoiding me. Have you obeyed my orders? Has the holy water been boiled to ensure that it's safe? Are you going to answer me? Haven't the confessionals been removed yet? What about the new laws?"

"But, Sir, how will our people go to confession?"

"The law is clear: From now on, people can confess only by wireless telegraph."

VI

An engaged couple is talking alone.

"Do you love me, Lili?"

"Don't I let you hold my hand without disinfecting you first? Doesn't that prove something? Have you washed thoroughly, husband of mine?"

"Surely you don't think I would have exposed your life to any risk. Do you, my love?"

"Only three days before our wedding..."

"What a great day it will be! We'll go from the church to the civil registry, then to the municipal laboratory. The law requires that couples be completely decontaminated when they get married. I am almost your husband, and I have the right to give you a kiss on the forehead."

"Never. My father has studied human lips under a microscope, and he has told me about the horrors that reside there."

"Get behind that window."

"But why? I already am."

"Stick your forehead against it."

"Done."

The future groom went around to the opposite side of the window and kissed the glass.

VII

The streets are usually deserted because people are always trying to avoid each other, but the other day saw some excitement. In fact, there was a riot: A crowd tried stoning a stranger to shouts of "The man with jaundice must die!", "He has yellow fever, not jaundice!", and "To the quarantine hospital!" The authorities stopped the man from being lynched. Taken to the Russian mountain, he managed to explain with some difficulty that he was a foreigner. He was made to understand that he was subject to the laws of the land, and once he had accepted that fact, he was placed on the platform that would turn over and send him falling to a destination he knew nothing about. When he said "I'm a Chinese citizen," his yellow color was explained. Nevertheless, the signal had already been given, and no one could stop the platform from rotating toward the fire that vaporized the sick. We can only hope that the divine Fu has gathered up his ashes!

When the president was informed about this incident, he asked: "Didn't the doctors examine him?"

"Because we've simplified administrative tasks, we've put an end to all kinds of procedures."

"Right, right, simplicity above all else. But did he have yellow fever?"

"No, Sir."

"Not even jaundice?"

"He was a healthy Chinese man."

"Well, that makes sense... for him. But at least we've put an end to the yellow threat for now."