

II

IF anyone was never stirred with the desire to go to Lourdes, that man was myself. To begin with, I have no liking for crowds streaming in processions, bawling hymns, and I agree with St John of the Cross in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*: "I strongly approve of the man," he writes, "who goes on pilgrimage outside the set times, in order to escape joining up with the pilgrim crowd. When throngs swarm in, I recommend him to have nothing to do with them. He always runs the risk of returning from them more distraught than when he started."

Next, I am not anxious to see miracles. I know quite well that the Virgin can perform them at Lourdes or anywhere else. My faith does not rest on my own reason nor upon any degree of the certainty of my own sense-perceptions; it depends upon an inner sense of assurance derived from inward evidences; with all deference to the pundits of psychiatry and the knowing pedagogues, who cannot explain anything and label the phenomena of the supernatural life of which they are ignorant as autosuggestion or derangement, mysticism

is a fearlessly exact science; I have been able to verify a certain number of its results, and that is all I ask for in order to believe: it is enough for me.

And now, while awaiting the arrival of the great international pilgrimages, here am I, for the second time, owing to circumstances distantly connected with one another and almost altogether involuntary, already installed for some weeks past in this town. This morning it is raining, as it does rain in this country—that is to say, in buckets; and, as I sit near the cottage window where I am living at the top of the rise on the road to Pau, I look at the panorama of Lourdes through my window-pane streaming with tears of rain.

The background is closely curtailed and compressed together by the mountains, between which rise bunches of white steam, while higher up race along dark smoky clouds and sooty tufts roll away, as if from factory chimneys. The top of one of these heights appears to be smoking, whilst the peak of another is clear of clouds and seems extinct; here and there, scarves of grey wadding girdle the pass of the lowest hills and straggle loosely downwards; as for the summits whitened with perpetual snow, they are now utterly lost in fog; the Great Gers and Little Gers, the two nearest mountains, look, through the reeking mist, like immense pyramids of clinkers, huge cinder-heaps.

Oh, the sadness of this sky streaked across with fine threads of rain! At the bottom of yonder range of hills, just before me, the Gave, a torrent rushing on day and night, boils and bubbles over chunks of rock, and, before expanding farther on into a peaceful river,

girdles with foam a building surmounted by a pointed belfry and surrounded with a lean garden planted with firs and poplars. You might take the building for a reformatory, loopholed as are its stiff straight walls, right at the top, with most diminutive garret windows; it is the Convent of the Poor Clares. To the left a bridge bestrides the river and joins the new town of Lourdes, the houses of which I can see, with the old town dominated by an ancient keep which looks as if it were made for stage-scenery, with side-wings of painted canvas; anyone might take it for an imitation. Lastly, to the right are the Esplanade and its trees leading to the Rosary¹ and to the double rising terrace overhung by the Basilica, the outline of which stands out, all white, against the slope of the Espelugues, on which, amidst clearings encircled with greenery, to mark the Stations of Calvary, arise huge crosses.

And behind the Esplanade and its lawns, below the balustraded terraces, two gasometers, one coated with a kind of water-green ripolin, the other painted with the yellow ochre of a public convenience, bulge forth, horrible to see; these sheet-iron pies cover, in one case, a panorama of Jerusalem; in the other, a panorama of Lourdes.

All this is not very captivating from an artistic point of view, and the cathedral, perched aloft in the air on a narrow ledge of rock, is no better. Flimsy and scrimpy, without any ornamentation of worth, it calls forth

¹ "The Rosary" with a capital initial is used throughout for "the Church of the Rosary" at Lourdes.

wretched memories of the cork models of churches used for window-dressing in certain trades; it takes its cue from the aesthetics of cork-merchants: the least of village chapels erected in the Middle Ages, compared with such contraband Gothic, looks like a masterpiece of delicacy and strength; the best feature, despite its coldness and bareness, would be the double stone-built terrace which leads from the level of the Esplanade up to the great doors, if it were not spoilt at the culminating point by the frightful roof of the Rosary, bulging out beneath the base of the Basilica—a roof shaped on the colossal mould of a Savoy cake, flanked with three domed boiler-covers, made of zinc.

Seen sideways from where I am, this rotunda, with its double sloping terrace undulating downwards from the roof to the ground, looks like an enormous crab extending its long pincers towards the old town. And below the terrace, under the Basilica and along by the Rosary, fronting the bed of the Gave, runs a broad walk before the piscinas and the Grotto, and then stops, abruptly barred by a hill on the face of which is marked a zigzag in the form of an M. It climbs, a footpath bordered with trees, behind the Basilica and leads to the house belonging to the Fathers of the Grotto and to the episcopal residence built a little way from the top.

All this looks lank and lean, sorry and stunted, for the broad spaciousness of the mountains is too close and crushing for it; but the ready-made scenery vanishes when we see the fiery hollow in the rock beneath the Basilica itself, a flaming cave burning under its side: there lies the interest of Lourdes.

The Grotto! Take away the futile statue set up in the embrasure in which the Virgin appeared, and you begin to soar freely. You think of the heap of prayers you undertook before leaving Paris, and you offer them to her one by one as well as you can; everyone has to beg for the cure or conversion of friends or relations, and everyone unpacks in Her presence the poor parcel of bodily suffering or moral misery he has brought with him. There is a great silence; all are kneeling and lost in recollection; now that the Grotto is again accessible we hasten to obtain from the Madonna such favours as we want. We have her to ourselves just for a few hours more. Tomorrow the pilgrimages, which have arrived during the night, will fill the Grotto to overflowing and there will be no possibility of getting into it, or even of becoming recollected on the seats ranged before her, for there will be the ceaseless noise of the hymns and sermons.

So will it be with the unseen spring, the water of which flows through the twelve brass taps from a fountain made to the left of it. We shall have to form queues if we want to fill a can or empty a glass.

Already people are hurrying to drink there; they are handing tin mugs to and fro; some of them toss them off at a draught, others swallow only half, and pour the rest over their hands, and rub their faces and bathe their ears and eyes with it. Women gather up their dresses and tuck them between their knees so as not to wet them, and they scold the children who splash themselves by shaking bottles which are too full; everyone takes precautions as if the town were about to be besieged.

While awaiting the predicted mass-attack of the crowds, the charm of Lourdes, now intimate and familiar, without hustle and hubbub, works; you relish the agreeableness of a town induced by its love of gain to lay itself out to please, and feel a fraternal friendliness towards all whose thoughts are in tune with your own, and who, like yourself, are lying in wait for the Virgin's blessings. At last you get to know, without trying to find out, why one man walks in this direction and why that woman is there, and you become interested in their cure or in the result of their plans. There is something of the comradeship of a bivouac in such a gathering of people encamped in a country town; for you cannot take a few steps anywhere without meeting one another. You pass each other on the Esplanade, find yourselves side by side in the Basilica and its Crypt, or rub elbows in the Rosary of the Grotto, and you almost want to bow to each other without knowing one another.

In truth no one stays at home, and everybody lives out of doors, whether it rains or not. From morning till nightfall you follow the same track time after time, seeing nothing but the faces you have seen again and again, except the plaster statues of our Lady, with their eyes turned heavenwards, robed in white and wearing blue sashes; not a single shop is without its medals and candles and rosaries and scapulars and pamphlets full of miracles; both old and new Lourdes are crammed with them; even the hotels have them on sale; and that goes on in street after street for miles, starting from old Lourdes with the poor woman who hawks little rosaries with steel chains and crosses and huge characteristic

Lourdes rosaries of chocolate-coloured wood made at Bétharram, sold at threepence apiece, and harshly tinted chromos of Bernadette kneeling taper in hand at the Virgin's feet, and Lilliputian statues and medals like dolls' money minted by the gross from odds and ends of brass: and all these things grow better and bigger and larger as you get nearer the new town; the statues swarm increasingly and end by becoming, not less ugly, but enormous. The chromos broaden out, disguising Soubirous' daughter as a lady's maid; the medals' stamp is enlarged and their metal changed; gold and silver appear, and, when you come to the avenue of the Grotto, there is a regular outburst of gewgaws *de luxe!* No longer do the rosaries hang up in bunches outside, but they recline in glass cases on beds of rose-tinted velvet padding; the beads are now made of lapis lazuli, coral and amethysts, gold or silver-mounted, and stationers' knickknacks, pencil-cases, penholders, paperweights of various Pyrenean marbles mingle with them, reinforced by Paris-made wares and jewellery from the Palais Royal, hallowed by the attachment of a cross or a medal.

And then begins a frantic competition; you are hooked in at every step by the shops all over the town; and you go to and fro and turn this way and that amidst the tumult, but always end up, whatever road you take, at the Grotto. This Grotto, of irregular shape, fairly high at the threshold, not quite so high farther in and very low on one side, is decorated with all sorts of *ex-votos*, with blackened crutches fastened with wire to the arch above and dancing up and down at the

least breath of wind, with a portable altar for episcopal Masses, and with a little wheeled hand-cart—a dust cart for the refuse of the votive candles.

To the left, near the fountain, is a square stone building used as a watchman's lodge and sacristy, and farther on is a shop where they sell devotional wares (*la bondieuserie*) and wax candles. To the right, almost right under the almond-shaped hole in which the Virgin appeared as in a frame, is a pulpit, here a fixture, which is filled during the pilgrimages by the missionaries or priests who aim, like catapults, the prayers of the faithful at the vaults of heaven to force them to pour down, as through the burst gates of a dam, torrents of grace.

Baked with burning tapers, carpeted like the bottom of a fireplace with soot perpetually warm and wet, the Grotto of Massabielle, with its ever-burning brazier, is strangely worth studying.

Near the entrance of the grille is a crown of brass candle-stands, provided with great flat plates, bristling with points on which the wax-candles are impaled and burn. At the bottom of the Grotto, level with the ground, all along the rock, stretch three black iron strips in rows; they are pierced with rings, in which are set candle-boxes; the lower and the larger ones are, in reality, not so much rings as funnels, which they vaguely resemble; they are specially used to embrace enormous wax candles costing over sixty francs each and lasting for weeks; then come triangular stands let into the stone, and spikes are stuck in, here and there, near hollows covered with nets, in which people put letters, collected in too human a fashion, for our Lady.

And all these candles sputter and burn each other away, varying according to their height and price; the smallest tapers sink down molten about a wick which bulges out into a mushroom, changing from cherry-red to black; larger ones waste away more slowly in streamlets of rice-water, which gradually congeal into white pools of fat; others become striated and rugose, and, with their worm-eaten furrows and bony protuberances, resemble the corrugated bark of elm trees; others, again, seem to sprout upwards above their wicks and burn away like night-lights in the bottom of a glass covered with lacework round the edges and festooned with ramifications like lace-edged devotional pictures. Some, too, are faded and very old, dotted, like noses, with pimples and hooks, dishonest tapers, deceiving the buyer and robbing God, tapers in which the stearine stem is enveloped in a layer of wax that weeps yellow tears while its centre melts into a vitreous wash surrounding the broiled peduncles of plain candles.

Here we find a sort of antipodes of Pentecost: the fiery tongues rise heavenwards and do not descend from on high; but they invoke the Holy Ghost in the very form of his own choice; they play the part of liturgical supplications, imploring our Lord in the very language used by his prototypes; and if one recalls the proper of the season of Pentecost, in which water is associated with fire, one grasps the mysterious alliance of the two elements of fire and water at Lourdes.

These fire-blossoms are cultivated by an old gardener living on the premises, who gets browned as he goes to and fro before the glowing hearth of the Grotto—a real

gardener in a blue apron with pockets, smooth-shaven, with his gardener's tools, pruning-knife, rake, shovel, and a wheelbarrow as big as a little cart.

From morning to night, without haste, he tidies up for the Virgin, scraping the stalactites from the candle-holders and their spiked frames and stands, stirring up the ground saturated with a dressing of tallow and with a fine powder of snow, in which fiery flowers appear to grow of themselves and to spring from the pollen of sparks carried away in the smoke by puffs of wind; and he snuffs the cotton pistils of these flowers, cleans their stalks, picks off the white worms of their droppings, unearths their dying trunks, and throws them to be consumed in one of the basins where they finally perish in flaming stumps, for here everything is burnt up honestly, quite to the contrary of what happens in other churches, in which the candle-women blow out the half-burnt tapers to sell them again.

Then he takes a fistful of little tapers, like a bunch of asparagus, and lights them all together at one stroke and thrusts them into one of the rings of the row at the back as soon as the great wax candle in the iron mug is dead. The wax-lights swarm in increasing numbers. There are whole cartfuls waiting for their turn to be unloaded, and he sorts out these white rods, separates them from one another or gathers them into bundles, sticks together those with broken stumps by warming them, watches the lighting without a moment's rest, and transplants this or that taper which is hanging fire and languishing to a better situation, less sheltered from the fresh air: and still the work ever begins anew, for as fast as tapers go out, others arise.

This trousered Vestal is also a Danaid in breeches, for the Grotto is a bottomless well of fire; from the provinces, from abroad, and from all parts of the world, every morning orders flow in, and the question is, how to finish up the day's supplies without being overwhelmed with the fresh arrivals of tomorrow; and whatever is done the heaps grow into piles; here you might set up a wax-candle factory just as you might start a wood-yard anywhere else. All the people sell wax-lights, or rather sham wax candles, for they retail as wax "from the bee," despite all liturgical regulations, nothing but rolls of old tallow treated with sulphuric acid to refine and harden them.

But such subterfuges as these, inevitably due to the constantly increasing allurements of the sales, disappear in the dazzling light of the brazier which devours both paraffin and wax with indifference, and, looking at these hedges of fiery prayers, calls to mind the symbolism of the wax-candle as set forth by Peter Esquilinus and St Ambrose.

The wax-light is made of three things: wax—for the most spotless flesh of Christ; the wick inserted therein—for his most pure soul hidden beneath the covering of his body; and fire—for the emblem of his divinity.

Thus the candle is a figure of Christ; and hence it is brought to the Virgin that she may herself offer the Father his own Son to intercede for us; but it must be owned that worship, under the form of *dulia*, as practiced in most churches, is absurd. We offer candles, quite properly, to certain saints as private gifts for themselves; and thus we honour them with a personal

offering to the point of getting prayers addressed to them by your Lord instead of getting them to address the prayers to our Lord, which is nonsense.

Unless we accept the mediocre symbolism of St Charles Borromeo, who took the candle to be an emblem of the three theological virtues, and compared its light to Faith, its form to Hope, and its heat to Charity.

In that, however, we should light them before a statue of one of the denizens of heaven to obtain his help in getting our Lord to increase in us the working of those virtues which rise, so hindered by the leg of our sins, with such tardiness and trouble.

At Lourdes, however, another and a more lively and far-reaching symbolism is imperative—the symbolism of the communion of souls, which is so transparently signified by the mingling of their lights. Indeed, if one thinks of it, the spectacle of these thousands of burning candles is wonderful!

What wild rendings of heart and what trembling hopes they reveal! How many infirmities, sicknesses, domestic distresses, desperate supplications, conversions, and maddening terrors do they stand for! This Grotto is the shelter and refuge of all racked with the anxieties of this world, the refuge to which all the crushed in life fly for protection and where they are stranded in the end; it is the last resort of the condemned, and of afflictions that nothing can alleviate: all the suffering of the world is condensed into this narrow space.

See how the candles weep the tears of mothers in despair, and perchance give an exact counterpart of

the sorrows that consume them; some weep hurriedly, pouring down hot tears; others are more restrained, shedding slower drops; and all are faithful to the charge entrusted to them; all, before final extinction, writhe increasingly while their flames shoot up in a last cry to the Virgin!

Clearly, some are more eloquent than others in pleading with God; and there is no doubt that the humblest are the most persuasive; the pretentious columns of stearin, bought on the spot or sent by the wealthy, in virtue of the pomp they proclaim, have less chance, despite the greater length of their supplication, of favourable acceptance, and certainly the divine pity inclines towards the poor little tapers lighted in bundles, which mingle their yearnings and their lights together, and combine, as they do in church, in one common supplication. They are a true likeness of the poor and destitute who help one another, whilst the aristocratic candles live alone and apart.

Then it is that the lowly toil of the fireman at the Grotto is exalted and becomes sublime.

This man, thinking only of the cleaning of his spiked frames and stands, unconsciously forwards the magnificent work of the communion of souls. He gathers the prayers together and sets them up before our Lady in sheaves of fire; he turns the ordinary conditions of life upside down mingling one class with another; he brings them back to the teachings of the Gospels; he seconds, by amalgamating the roots of the big candles with the rootlets of the little ones which are ending in a molten flow, the entreaties of the rich by uniting them

with those of the poor before the Lord, thus forcing the Virgin's hand in a way by increasing the too light weight of their prayers, saving the weaker ones with the help of the stronger.

Here we find Society turned upside down, the world inside out: the poor are the givers of alms to the rich.

The candle, which is looked upon by the unbeliever as one of the most puerile forms of superstition is one of the most extraordinary of agencies used by those whose feelings it embodies and for whose wishes it serves as a vehicle. Souls seem, indeed, to impregnate it with their own aura, and I imagine a transference of feeling to inanimate and inert things, on the analogy of Colonel de Rochas's experiments; I fancy—apart from any question of hypnotism in this case—that by the sole power of faith these stearin candles may be possibly injected with effluences, and thus retain somewhat of the feeling of those who offer them, and that they really pray.

We may also be allowed to suppose that the element of Fire at Lourdes is but the servant of the other element—*i.e.*, Water. Many cures take place at the spring or within the piscinas: people begin with the Grotto and end with the Spring. Lourdes may perhaps be summed up in these words: What you beseech with Fire, you obtain with Water.

III

THE time for the great international pilgrimages has come; the town is assailed from every quarter and goes giddy with excitement. Pilgrims from Lorraine, from Champagne, from Provence, from Normandy, and from the Rouergue and Berri are here. An army of Belgians, landed yesterday, invades the Esplanade and lines the streets; this morning we are expecting the trains from Brittany along with a fresh squadron of Belgians and Dutchmen.

Lourdes is already full to bursting within its indestructible belt of mountains. It has stopped raining; a sort of violet powder falls from the sky with an implacable purity on the mountain range, which begins to show up in outline. The Great and the Little Gers are gilding with the sunlight their cindery carapace of boulders, and a few clinging stretches of pasture bedaub their sides with dashes of green. Something is slowly ascending a furrow hollowed out in one of their slopes: it looks like a white worm creeping upwards; it is the funicular railway, climbing sometimes in open daylight, sometimes through dark tunnels, to the top.

The sun seems to be winnowing abroad well-being and sifting joy over the valley, through which resounds a hunting horn used to rouse attention by the ragman whose cart appears now on the road in the distance.

I go down to be present at the arrival of the faithful from Finisterre and Morbihan; the streets of the old town and the bridge are overflowing; you have to elbow your way through; the lazy flock of Bretons goes round and round on its own track, just marking time where it is, and is driven back by its priests, who harry it as if they were sheepdogs; but the shops full of pious trinkets hypnotise the women, and they have to be dragged away by the arm or pushed in the back to get them to move on. Half awake and bewildered, they gaze as if they were coming out of a dream, dragging along with them huge baskets and cans, and most of them walk arm-in-arm, scarcely speaking, with minds benumbed, ruminating, like cattle, on what none can tell. The fact is that they are utterly knocked up by the long nights in the train, and feel quite adrift. In any case, they impart a dash of colour to the monotonous greys and blacks of the crowd drawn from other provinces. The men have stuck to their velvet ribboned hats, their vests and waistcoats of royal blue or episcopal violet, laced with canary-yellow embroideries and dotted with buttons like little brass bells; but only from the waist upwards have they retained the tints and fashions of their native soil; underneath, they are just like anyone else, of a squalid ugliness which clashes with the apparent newness up above. A zouave's belt, blue as the blue of a washerwoman, defines the respective zones of

the curious vest and of the annoying breeches, picked up amongst the ready-for-cash reach-me-downs of a seaport town. Some of them have flaps, but like the more recent ones, they are woven of pea-soup-tinted or slaty wools; a few even have turned to a heavy brown hue through getting soiled and shiny from constant wear; in the whole pilgrimage only one man shows himself in full costume with galligaskins and leggings coloured cinnamon—an old fellow, broad and tall and upright, with long white hair, a rosy complexion, and withered eyes shrinking back into dark, deep, shrivelled hollows.

And almost all these sailors have set features, skins like old boxwood, and clear cold blue pupils like those of the black sheep of Finisterre.

The women are stout and bony, with skins like onion-peel, salted with spray, eyes of lapis lazuli or sea-green; and the young girls, with their bird-like heads and hard skulls, are bound up in petticoats with bell-shaped flounces purpled in acid hues of rose and loud colours of aniline violets. These, too, are from anywhere from the waist downwards, and become true Breton women from thence upwards as far as the back of their necks; some are accoutred with goffered collars fluted in little tucks of the period of Louis XIII, and their bodies braided with half-moons and crab-claws of velvet; one or two from the depths of Finisterre are like Dutchwomen, with their orange valanced gowns and the spangled embroideries of their headgear; and all are recognisable in the crowd by their queer and many-shaped bonnets; indeed, they affect the strangest forms,

from that of a flower pot set upside down on their chignons, from starched helmets and stunted mitres, to butterflies' wings and lady-slippers' flap-eared pockets.

In this pack from Armorica which worms its way through the streets and over the bridge, cripples and maimed people, deformed children with stunted limbs, old men with huge pear-shaped goitres, old women hobbling on T-shaped crutches, blind folk with pupils like the white of an egg, are surrounded and supervised by the Sisters of the Holy Ghost, whose habit is apparently made of unbleached canvas, with just a touch of black at the tip of their hoods, and tinges with a fleeting smile of whiteness the sombre darkness of clothes and dresses. The priests, with the features of farmers or fishermen, get impatient at being unable to hasten the progress of their flock, but their efforts at remonstrance are in vain; the women are mirthful, and one of them stops in the middle of the bridge on the footway to have her boots cleaned, and has a dispute with the bootblack, who asks her to pay a penny; for she says she only owes him a halfpenny because her feet are small.

At last the procession reaches a bronze statue of St Michael waltzing round in an ungainly fashion upon the prostrate body of something like a lawyer disguised as a devil, and passes by the Calvary standing at the beginning of the Esplanade—an offering by this same Brittany to our Lady of Lourdes. The priest at the head of the cortege halts and turns back, and the herd follows his example; he raises his arm and the hymn begins, while the procession goes on:

"We come once more from far Armor,
Where earth is hard and hearts are brave.
Proud of the Faith, nought else we crave.
We come once more from far Armor."¹

And all turn their steps towards the Grotto, cleaving asunder the multitudes of pilgrims from all quarters who are distinguished from one another by their badges, for here everyone wears a ribbon or a rosette, everyone is decorated! The Belgians have, in their buttonholes, little tiny cockades—black, yellow, and red, the colours of their national flag; the men of Burgundy have the same colours with a metal cross on it; the Normans a red flannel cross; the Bretons a Sacred Heart, also made of red flannel; the people of the Berri a white daisy on a background of ashy blue; and how many more are there!

Driven hither and thither by the eddies of the crowd, tugged forward and thrust back into queues by the Sisters of the Holy Ghost and the clergy, the Bretons, nevertheless, reach the Grotto, but it is quite full. All along the river people are swarming, and the space between the grille of the Grotto and the parapet by the Gave is very restricted. The stretcher-bearers, whose business it is to keep order, stand opposite one another and stretch ropes to secure a free road for the conveyances and chairs bringing the sick from the hospital. At this time the Basilica, the crypt upon which it is built, and the Rosary are crammed to overflowing;

¹ "Armor," from "ar" = on, and "mor" = sca, means the seaside, *i.e.* Armorica, roughly the peninsula of Brittany.

groups are standing at the doors, thrown wide-open, and hear the Mass a distance; and now the Espelugues hill, up which runs the Way of the Cross, comes to life, and, like a slowly revolving spiral, breaks forth into hymns.

It appears to be on the move with those who are climbing the zigzag paths on its slopes: this is a pilgrimage from Quercy, winding, with a banner ahead of it, and shouting, with voices like the banging of sheets of corrugated iron, a hymn in which one catches such sounds as "De Dious la rouzado" and "pitchoun."¹

I know these fellows: they might be called the coal-heavers of Lourdes; they are all black—clothes, caps, and coats; not even a spot of white linen about their necks; and their very features seem to be thrown into relief with dabs of charcoal. Yesterday they were prowling and scowling in strings of pious jabberers through the streets of the town; and the shopkeepers, knowing they would buy nothing, were jeering as they listened to their jargon as they hung around their wares.

And while these sombre Southerners wend their way, vociferating, up the zigzag paths on the hillside, others have succeeded by hook or by crook in massing together the Bretons near the Grotto, and they are now listening to the sermon of one of their rectors perched up in the pulpit. They are standing uncovered and all attention, and, while running through the rosary, they all fasten their blissful gaze upon the white and blue statue of our Lady. They are hustled and hustled, and their huge feet are stamped upon to open a way through

¹ *La rosée de Dieu* and *petit* in French.

their ranks for the bedridden sick, but no one protests or stops praying; they are no longer the sleepy louts of a few hours ago, but good and humble people, full of the simple and strong piety of their race, invoking the Virgin whom they have come so far to venerate. After the rosary, very quietly, led by the Sisters, they file off, two by two, into the Grotto, and kiss the rock, entering the grille by one gate and leaving it by the other, and then they will go, in single file, to drink of the spring.

I betake myself to the piscinas. Confined within railings and closed by ropes across the entrance, the space before the three dwarf muddled Gothic buildings, stuck in at the bottom of the rock beneath the side of the Basilica, only a few paces from the Grotto, is filled with the conveyances of the sick; and stretcher-bearers in *bérets*, with leather braces, which are the free passes and sesames of Lourdes, raise the pillow of a sick man to let him drink from a tin mug, and very devoted they are to the unfortunates, whom they draw from the hospital to the piscinas, acting as beasts of burden.

A priest who looks like a jailbird, with five days' growth of beard, from some out-of-the-way hole in the depths of the provinces, flings himself upon his knees, with his arms outstretched in the form of a cross, right in front of everyone. He says the rosary in a loud voice, invokes the Virgin with great cries, and implores her to heal the patients who are being bathed; and his kindled soul lights up his features, and, little by little, works upon the onlookers till they are inflamed. How well he prays, poor country curate that he is! With what a voice, and with what eyes!—eyes of both fire and water, firebrands flashing into tears!

And still the ambulances come in, full of wan paralytics with relaxed lips, inspecting one wonders what on the ground; of the dropsied, with heads thrown back as if in aversion from the haunting panic of stomachs swollen like the bulge of an oil-bottle; of consumptives, sunken and sad, whose glazed eyes wander round; and of the heart-diseased, choking and lifting their necks into the air in their efforts to breathe more freely.

And the ambulances are drawn close together, and now comes the charabanc of the serious cases lying out at full length on mattresses placed on litters: livid men and women with distorted features, pinched noses, mouths like two lines of ashes, and poached eyes in a ring of lilac amidst something white.

The stretcher-bearers hasten to take down the litters carefully and put them near the doors of the piscinas, which are closed with curtains.

In the presence of these pictures of sorrow which are passing by, the kneeling priest whips up the crowd and excites its feelings with the pitiful cries of his broken voice:

“Lord, save our sick!”

And the furious thunder of the *Aves* starts again:

“Mary, we love thee.”

And the rumbling of the *Aves* redoubles—and the doorways of the piscinas open. People lean forward eagerly to make out the faces of those who are being carried out; they are expecting a cure, and they find bedridden creatures still living to suffer; alas! for these our supplications of this morning have been in vain. Well, let us look inside and see if, in default of any

complete cure, there may not be some alleviation or amelioration. I cross the ambulance-yard and draw aside the bath-room curtain.

The first time I entered into these rooms I met with a surprise; after Zola's narrative, I thought that they must be very large, for he always filled his canvasses as if he were a scene-painter; I supposed there were at least three airy and commodious apartments, with great baths sunk in them, around which the bathers and the sick would be carrying on their exercises with ease. There is nothing of the kind: the rooms are just about the size of cheap cabins for bathers. In place of a door there was a curtain; then three walls: the one at the bottom provided with glazing which gave no light, and on it was painted a figure of the Virgin, and beneath it was a small statue of Our Lady of Lourdes; the two others are plain and unadorned partitions; lastly, in the middle there is sunk a shallow stone bath, into which you descend by a few steps, and the furniture consists of a single chair. It is in this dim chamber that the Virgin, turned into a bath-attendant, works; it is in this damp den, and with this putrid water, that she operates.

And you are seized with distress; you almost tremble, withdrawing suddenly within yourself, when you reflect that she keeps unseen in this narrow room, that you are perhaps brushing against her, and that in a moment, if she will, she may prove her presence by a cure!

You feel you ought to have Bernadette's white soul to dare to stay so close to her unabashed. You feel your-

self so small, and, indeed, rather ashamed of walking about there as a curious inquirer; but, after all, you doubtless have your uses, since you have come to pray for the sick, and are speaking to her, not of yourself, but of them.

And you look for her in a mechanical way, and all you see is her poor effigy painted on a windowpane or modelled in plaster. You look into the water, which might reflect her smile if it had not lost the power of reflecting any sort of likeness after being muddied with the bathing of many wounds; it is opaque and dead; and nevertheless it is alive, and, ever since the apparitions, ready to obey the orders of Prophet and Psalmist who bade it, long before her Son was born, celebrate his praises; and it does so by proclaiming his miracles now that it has been chosen by his Mother as a vehicle of healing.

This morning the narrow corridor, leading to the antechamber for disrobing and to the bathers' rooms, is blocked up with occupied stretchers at the time of my arrival. An old gentleman, with a head like an egg, bald on top and hairy down below, is rushing about in a cyclist's get-up. He gives orders with an offhand swagger, lectures the bathers, writes down the number of baths in a pocket-book with an important air, and acts the part of the big fly on the wheel in a style to make one laugh, were it not for the sadness of the sight before one's eyes.

Now they are doing their utmost to undress a sick man whose back is one great sore; a horrible corpse-like smell of pus takes you by the throat; the man is

torn in twain and groans with his mouth wide open, exposing his teeth. For modesty's sake, they fasten a waist-cloth round him; a belt is slipped under his loins, and, with all the adroitness they can muster, the four bath-attendants let him down into the piscina. On coming into contact with the chilly water, all his skin seems to ripple over his body in waves; he suffocates, with his head thrown back upon his shoulders; they pull him out, and, without wiping him dry, put on his clothes and carry him off.

All this time one has done one's best to pray; but how can anyone get beyond labial prayer, how think of what one is saying? The patient has half swooned away and does not know where he is, and the sick attendants are engrossed in their hard and trying work; and I, while I beg for the cure of this poor man, am distracted by the sight before me; so the only thing to reckon upon as of any real use must be the more unhampered supplications outside, which I can hear going on with vehemence as soon as the curtain is drawn up.

And it falls again upon a new litter which is being brought in. From it emerges a being who is bent double, whose face is haggard with suffering and leaves me utterly upset. Oh, the pity of it! His wrappings are taken off and his flannel waistcoat; he is a skeleton streaming with perspiration. They let him down gently into the water; he clenches it in his fists and his throat rattles. He is taken out and put back on his stretcher, still wet—and now comes another.

What a look is his! Two gas-jets lighted in the eye-sockets of a death's head, and yet raised in hope or cast

down in fear. They strip him of his shirt; it is flecked, here and there, with spots of gum and of fresh blood, and stiffened elsewhere with marks of dry humour which make it look like a sticking plaster. And the man displays great pomegranate like hollows in his sides.

As soon as he is in the water, he pants hoarsely, with his eyes staring out of his head, and wads of lint which had not been removed float about. They take him out, and, after dipping them in the piscina, they plaster his linen dressings on him somehow or other; and a young priest, lying on a mattress, fully dressed, comes next. He is dying of some kind of heart-disease in its last stage. They unbutton his cassock and take off his shirt, and, on the order of the gentleman who registers the baths in his pocketbook, only a few lotions are applied to his chest.

The bearers return once more. Fearful screams break out—the cries of a child begging not to be put into the bath!

I go into the other bath-room: the same sights meet my eyes. The sick are lying on stretches while the water is still moving and lapping against the walls of the bathing place. From time to time whiffs of iodoform impregnate the atmosphere infected by the bitter breath and the wounds of the diseased; everywhere scraps of lint and wads stained with matter and blood, are trailing about.

The water has turned into a hideous broth, a sort of grey slops with bubbles in it, and red bladders and whitish blisters swim round in this molten gin into which they keep on plunging people.

Here is the perpetual miracle of Lourdes; the Sick are flung into contaminated excipients without waiting for the digestion of what they have eaten; women are plunged in up to the neck just when the most rudimentary common sense forbids any woman to take a bath—often, in such cases, turning the water into a pool of purple—and no congestion ensues; nor are they affected by the shock of the chill icy water, nor by being left unwiped. Antiseptic dressings, made so much of in surgery, are here simply replaced by compresses of Lourdes water, and sores are none the worse for it. Never were such slights inflicted upon hygiene and never was medical science so flouted. Yet here neither occurs infection, nor is any disease aggravated, even if it be not cured; and such exemption also extends to the hospital, in which the bedridden hardly ever die, although they have been worn out by the fatigue of the journey and arrive in an almost dying condition. Indeed, deaths are very rare in this institution at Lourdes. Taking an average of four days and a thousand cases, which in other hospitals would give a mortality of twenty at least, we find here—and that for the last twenty years—the fatalities, in the same conditions, number one or two.

If you have no belief in divine intervention, how can you explain such an assured impunity as is only to be found at Lourdes, and as long as you remain within the zone protected by the Virgin?