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THE THREE CITIES

LOURDES

BY

EMILE ZOLA

Volume 4.

TRANSLATED BY ERNEST A. VIZETELLY

THE FOURTH DAY

I

THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH

AT the Hospital of Our Lady of Dolours, that morning, Marie remained seated on her bed, propped up by pillows. Having spent the whole night at the Grotto, she had refused to let them take her back there. And, as Madame de Jonquiere approached her, to raise one of the pillows which was slipping from its place, she asked: "What day is it, madame?"

"Monday, my dear child."

"Ah! true. One so soon loses count of time. And, besides, I am so happy! It is to-day that the Blessed Virgin will cure me!"

She smiled divinely, with the air of a day-dreamer, her eyes gazing into vacancy, her thoughts so far away, so absorbed in her one fixed idea, that she beheld nothing save the certainty of her hope. Round about her, the Sainte-Honorine Ward was now quite deserted, all the patients, excepting Madame Vetu, who lay at the last extremity in the next bed, having already started for the Grotto. But Marie did not even notice her neighbour; she was delighted with the sudden stillness which had fallen. One of the windows overlooking the courtyard had been opened, and the glorious morning sunshine entered in one broad beam, whose golden dust was dancing over her bed and streaming upon her pale hands. It was indeed pleasant to find this room, so dismal at nighttime with its many beds of sickness, its unhealthy atmosphere, and its nightmare groans, thus suddenly filled with sunlight, purified by the morning air, and wrapped in such delicious silence! "Why don't you try to sleep a little?" maternally inquired Madame de Jonquiere. "You must be quite worn out by your vigil."

Marie, who felt so light and cheerful that she no longer experienced any pain, seemed surprised.

"But I am not at all tired, and I don't feel a bit sleepy. Go to sleep? Oh! no, that would be too sad. I should no longer know that I was going to be cured!"

At this the superintendent laughed. "Then why didn't you let them take you to the Grotto?" she asked. "You won't know what to do with yourself all alone here."

"I am not alone, madame, I am with her," replied Marie; and thereupon, her vision returning to her, she clasped her hands in ecstasy. "Last night, you know, I saw her bend her head towards me and smile. I quite understood her, I could hear her voice, although she never opened her lips. When the Blessed Sacrament passes at four o'clock I shall be cured."

Madame de Jonquiere tried to calm her, feeling rather anxious at the species of somnambulism in which she beheld her. However, the sick girl went on: "No, no, I am no worse, I am waiting. Only, you must surely see, madame, that there is no need for me to go to the Grotto this morning, since the appointment which she gave me is for four o'clock." And then the girl added in a lower tone: "Pierre will come for me at half-past three. At four o'clock I shall be cured."

The sunbeam slowly made its way up her bare arms, which were now almost transparent, so wasted had they become through illness; whilst her glorious fair hair, which had fallen over her shoulders, seemed like the very effulgence of the great luminary enveloping her. The trill of a bird came in from the courtyard, and quite enlivened the tremulous silence of the ward. Some child who could not be seen must also have been playing close by, for now and again a soft laugh could be heard ascending in the warm air which was so delightfully calm.

"Well," said Madame de Jonquiere by way of conclusion, "don't sleep then, as you don't wish to. But keep quite quiet, and it will rest you all the same."

Meantime Madame Vetu was expiring in the adjoining bed. They had not dared to take her to the Grotto, for fear they should see her die on the way. For some little time she had lain there with her eyes closed; and Sister Hyacinthe, who was watching, had beckoned to Madame Desagneaux in order to acquaint her with the bad opinion she had formed of the case. Both of them were now leaning over the dying woman, observing her with increasing anxiety. The mask upon her face had turned more yellow than ever, and now looked like a coating of mud; her eyes too had become more sunken, her lips seemed to have grown thinner, and the death rattle had begun, a slow, pestilential wheezing, polluted by the cancer which was finishing its destructive work. All at once she raised her eyelids, and was seized with fear on beholding those two faces bent over her own. Could her death be near, that they should thus be gazing at her? Immense sadness showed itself in her eyes, a despairing regret of life. It was not a vehement revolt, for she no longer had the strength to struggle; but what a frightful fate it was to have left her shop, her surroundings, and her husband, merely to come and die so far away; to have braved the abominable torture of such a journey, to have prayed both day and night, and then, instead of having her prayer granted, to die when others recovered!

However, she could do no more than murmur "Oh! how I suffer; oh! how I suffer. Do something, anything, to relieve this pain, I beseech you."

Little Madame Desagneaux, with her pretty milk-white face showing amidst her mass of fair, frizzy hair, was quite upset. She was not used to deathbed scenes, she would have given half her heart, as she expressed it, to see that poor woman recover. And she rose up and began to question Sister Hyacinthe, who was also in tears but already resigned, knowing as she did that salvation was assured when one died well. Could nothing really be done, however? Could not something be tried to ease the dying

woman? Abbe Judaine had come and administered the last sacrament to her a couple of hours earlier that very morning. She now only had Heaven to look to; it was her only hope, for she had long since given up expecting aid from the skill of man.

"No, no! we must do something," exclaimed Madame Desagneaux. And thereupon she went and fetched Madame de Jonquiere from beside Marie's bed. "Look how this poor creature is suffering, madame!" she exclaimed. "Sister Hyacinthe says that she can only last a few hours longer. But we cannot leave her moaning like this. There are things which give relief. Why not call that young doctor who is here?"

"Of course we will," replied the superintendent. "We will send for him at once."

They seldom thought of the doctor in the wards. It only occurred to the ladies to send for him when a case was at its very worst, when one of their patients was howling with pain. Sister Hyacinthe, who herself felt surprised at not having thought of Ferrand, whom she believed to be in an adjoining room, inquired if she should fetch him.

"Certainly," was the reply. "Bring him as quickly as possible."

When the Sister had gone off, Madame de Jonquiere made Madame Desagneaux help her in slightly raising the dying woman's head, thinking that this might relieve her. The two ladies happened to be alone there that morning, all the other lady-hospitallers having gone to their devotions or their private affairs. However, from the end of the large deserted ward, where, amidst the warm quiver of the sunlight such sweet tranquillity prevailed, there still came at intervals the light laughter of the unseen child.

"Can it be Sophie who is making such a noise?" suddenly asked the lady-superintendent, whose nerves were somewhat upset by all the worry of the death which she foresaw. Then quickly walking to the end of the ward, she found that it was indeed Sophie Couteau—the young girl so miraculously healed the previous year—who, seated on the floor behind a bed, had been amusing herself, despite her fourteen years, in making a doll out of a few rags. She was now talking to it, so happy, so absorbed in her play, that she laughed quite heartily. "Hold yourself up, mademoiselle," said she. "Dance the polka, that I may see how you can do it! One! two! dance, turn, kiss the one you like best!"

Madame de Jonquiere, however, was now coming up. "Little girl," she said, "we have one of our patients here in great pain, and not expected to recover. You must not laugh so loud."

"Ah! madame, I didn't know," replied Sophie, rising up, and becoming quite serious, although still holding the doll in her hand. "Is she going to die, madame?"

"I fear so, my poor child."

Thereupon Sophie became quite silent. She followed the superintendent, and seated herself on an adjoining bed; whence, without the slightest sign of fear, but with her large eyes burning with curiosity, she began to watch Madame Vetu's death agony. In her nervous state, Madame Desagneaux was growing impatient at the delay in the doctor's arrival; whilst Marie, still enraptured, and resplendent in the sunlight, seemed unconscious of what was taking place about her, wrapt as she was in delightful expectancy of the miracle.

Not having found Ferrand in the small apartment near the linen-room which he usually occupied, Sister Hyacinthe was now searching for him all over the building. During the past two days the young doctor had become more bewildered than ever in that extraordinary hospital, where his assistance was only sought for the relief of death pangs. The small medicine-chest which he had brought with him proved quite useless; for there could be no thought of trying any course of treatment, as the sick were not there to be doctored, but simply to be cured by the lightning stroke of a miracle. And so he mainly confined himself to administering a few opium pills, in order to deaden the severer sufferings. He had been fairly amazed when accompanying Doctor Bonamy on a round through the wards. It had resolved itself into a mere stroll, the doctor, who had only come out of curiosity, taking no interest in the patients, whom he neither questioned nor examined. He solely concerned himself with the pretended cases of cure, stopping opposite those women whom he recognised from having seen them at his office where the miracles were verified. One of them had suffered from three complaints, only one of which the Blessed Virgin had so far deigned to cure; but great hopes were entertained respecting the other two. Sometimes, when a wretched woman, who the day before had claimed to be cured, was questioned with reference to her health, she would reply that her pains had returned to her. However, this never disturbed the doctor's serenity; ever conciliatory, the good man declared that Heaven would surely complete what Heaven had begun. Whenever there was an improvement in health, he would ask if it were not something to be thankful for. And, indeed, his constant saying was: "There's an improvement

already; be patient!" What he most dreaded were the importunities of the lady-superintendents, who all wished to detain him to show him sundry extraordinary cases. Each prided herself on having the most serious illnesses, the most frightful, exceptional cases in her ward; so that she was eager to have them medically authenticated, in order that she might share in the triumph should cure supervene. One caught the doctor by the arm and assured him that she felt confident she had a leper in her charge; another entreated him to come and look at a young girl whose back, she said, was covered with fish's scales; whilst a third, whispering in his ear, gave him some terrible details about a married lady of the best society. He hastened away, however, refusing to see even one of them, or else simply promising to come back later on when he was not so busy. As he himself said, if he listened to all those ladies, the day would pass in useless consultations. However, he at last suddenly stopped opposite one of the miraculously cured inmates, and, beckoning Ferrand to his side, exclaimed: "Ah! now here is an interesting cure!" and Ferrand, utterly bewildered, had to listen to him whilst he described all the features of the illness, which had totally disappeared at the first immersion in the piscina.

At last Sister Hyacinthe, still wandering about, encountered Abbe Judaine, who informed her that the young doctor had just been summoned to the Family Ward. It was the fourth time he had gone thither to attend to Brother Isidore, whose sufferings were as acute as ever, and whom he could only fill with opium. In his agony, the Brother merely asked to be soothed a little, in order that he might gather together sufficient strength to return to the Grotto in the afternoon, as he had not been able to do so in the morning. However, his pains increased, and at last he swooned away.

When the Sister entered the ward she found the doctor seated at the missionary's bedside. "Monsieur Ferrand," she said, "come up-stairs with me to the Sainte-Honorine Ward at once. We have a patient there at the point of death."

He smiled at her; indeed, he never beheld her without feeling brighter and comforted. "I will come with you, Sister," he replied. "But you'll wait a minute, won't you? I must try to restore this poor man."

She waited patiently and made herself useful. The Family Ward, situated on the ground-floor, was also full of sunshine and fresh air which entered through three large windows opening on to a narrow strip of garden. In addition to Brother Isidore, only Monsieur Sabathier had remained in bed that morning, with the view of obtaining a little rest; whilst Madame Sabathier, taking advantage of the opportunity, had gone to purchase a few medals and pictures, which she intended for presents. Comfortably seated on his bed, his back supported by some pillows, the ex-professor was rolling the beads of a chaplet between his fingers. He was no longer praying, however, but merely continuing the operation in a mechanical manner, his eyes, meantime, fixed upon his neighbour, whose attack he was following with painful interest.

"Ah! Sister," said he to Sister Hyacinthe, who had drawn near, "that poor Brother fills me with admiration. Yesterday I doubted the Blessed Virgin for a moment, seeing that she did not deign to hear me, though I have been coming here for seven years past; but the example set me by that poor martyr, so resigned amidst his torments, has quite shamed me for my want of faith. You can have no idea how grievously he suffers, and you should see him at the Grotto, with his eyes glowing with divine hope! It is really sublime! I only know of one picture at the Louvre—a picture by some unknown Italian master—in which there is the head of a monk beatified by a similar faith."

The man of intellect, the ex-university-professor, reared on literature and art, was reappearing in this poor old fellow, whose life had been blasted, and who had desired to become a free patient, one of the poor of the earth, in order to move the pity of Heaven. He again began thinking of his own case, and with tenacious hopefulness, which the futility of seven journeys to Lourdes had failed to destroy, he added: "Well, I still have this afternoon, since we sha'n't leave till to-morrow. The water is certainly very cold, but I shall let them dip me a last time; and all the morning I have been praying and asking pardon for my revolt of yesterday. When the Blessed Virgin chooses to cure one of her children, it only takes her a second to do so; is that not so, Sister? May her will be done, and blessed be her name!"

Passing the beads of the chaplet more slowly between his fingers, he again began saying his "Aves" and "Paters," whilst his eyelids drooped on his flabby face, to which a childish expression had been returning during the many years that he had been virtually cut off from the world.

Meantime Ferrand had signalled to Brother Isidore's sister, Marthe, to come to him. She had been standing at the foot of the bed with her arms hanging down beside her, showing the tearless resignation of a poor, narrow-minded girl whilst she watched that dying man whom she worshipped. She was no more than a faithful dog; she had accompanied her brother and spent her scanty savings, without being of any use save to watch him suffer. Accordingly, when the doctor told her to take the invalid in her arms and raise him up a little, she felt quite happy at being of some service at last. Her heavy, freckled, mournful face actually grew bright.

"Hold him," said the doctor, "whilst I try to give him this."

When she had raised him, Ferrand, with the aid of a small spoon, succeeded in introducing a few drops of liquid between his set teeth. Almost immediately the sick man opened his eyes and heaved a deep sigh. He was calmer already; the opium was taking effect and dulling the pain which he felt burning his right side, as though a red-hot iron were being applied to it. However, he remained so weak that, when he wished to speak, it became necessary to place one's ear close to his mouth in order to catch what he said. With a slight sign he had begged Ferrand to bend over him. "You are the doctor, monsieur, are you not?" he faltered. "Give me sufficient strength that I may go once more to the Grotto, this afternoon. I am certain that, if I am able to go, the Blessed Virgin will cure me."

"Why, of course you shall go," replied the young man. "Don't you feel ever so much better?"

"Oh! ever so much better—no! I know very well what my condition is, because I saw many of our Brothers die, out there in Senegal. When the liver is attacked and the abscess has worked its way outside, it means the end. Sweating, fever, and delirium follow. But the Blessed Virgin will touch the sore with her little finger and it will be healed. Oh! I implore you all, take me to the Grotto, even if I should be unconscious!"

Sister Hyacinthe had also approached, and leant over him. "Be easy, dear Brother," said she. "You shall go to the Grotto after /dejeuner/, and we will all pray for you."

At length, in despair at these delays and extremely anxious about Madame Vetu, she was able to get Ferrand away. Still, the Brother's state filled her with pity; and, as they ascended the stairs, she questioned the doctor, asking him if there were really no more hope. The other made a gesture expressive of absolute hopelessness. It was madness to come to Lourdes when one was in such a condition. However, he hastened to add, with a smile: "I beg your pardon, Sister. You know that I am unfortunate enough not to be a believer."

But she smiled in her turn, like an indulgent friend who tolerates the shortcomings of those she loves. "Oh! that doesn't matter," she replied. "I know you; you're all the same a good fellow. Besides, we see so many people, we go amongst such pagans that it would be difficult to shock us."

Up above, in the Sainte-Honorine Ward, they found Madame Vetu still moaning, a prey to most intolerable suffering. Madame de Jonquiere and Madame Desagneaux had remained beside the bed, their faces turning pale, their hearts distracted by that death-cry, which never ceased. And when they consulted Ferrand in a whisper, he merely replied, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, that she was a lost woman, that it was only a question of hours, perhaps merely of minutes. All he could do was to stupefy her also, in order to ease the atrocious death agony which he foresaw. She was watching him, still conscious, and also very obedient, never refusing the medicine offered her. Like the others, she now had but one ardent desire—to go back to the Grotto—and she gave expression to it in the stammering accents of a child who fears that its prayer may not be granted: "To the Grotto—will you? To the Grotto!"

"You shall be taken there by-and-by, I promise you," said Sister Hyacinthe. "But you must be good. Try to sleep a little to gain some strength."

The sick woman appeared to sink into a doze, and Madame de Jonquiere then thought that she might take Madame Desagneaux with her to the other end of the ward to count the linen, a troublesome business, in which they became quite bewildered, as some of the articles were missing. Meantime Sophie, seated on the bed opposite Madame Vetu, had not stirred. She had laid her doll on her lap, and was waiting for the lady's death, since they had told her that she was about to die. Sister Hyacinthe, moreover, had remained beside the dying woman, and, unwilling to waste her time, had taken a needle and cotton to mend some patient's bodice which had a hole in the sleeve.

"You'll stay a little while with us, won't you?" she asked Ferrand.

The latter, who was still watching Madame Vetu, replied: "Yes, yes. She may go off at any moment. I fear hemorrhage." Then, catching sight of Marie on the neighbouring bed, he added in a lower voice: "How is she? Has she experienced any relief?"

"No, not yet. Ah, dear child! we all pray for her very sincerely. She is so young, so sweet, and so sorely afflicted. Just look at her now! Isn't she pretty? One might think her a saint amid all this sunshine, with her large, ecstatic eyes, and her golden hair shining like an aureola!"

Ferrand watched Marie for a moment with interest. Her absent air, her indifference to all about her, the ardent faith, the internal joy which so completely absorbed her, surprised him. "She will recover,"

he murmured, as though giving utterance to a prognostic. "She will recover."

Then he rejoined Sister Hyacinthe, who had seated herself in the embrasure of the lofty window, which stood wide open, admitting the warm air of the courtyard. The sun was now creeping round, and only a narrow golden ray fell upon her white coif and wimple. Ferrand stood opposite to her, leaning against the window bar and watching her while she sewed. "Do you know, Sister," said he, "this journey to Lourdes, which I undertook to oblige a friend, will be one of the few delights of my life."

She did not understand him, but innocently asked: "Why so?"

"Because I have found you again, because I am here with you, assisting you in your admirable work. And if you only knew how grateful I am to you, what sincere affection and reverence I feel for you!"

She raised her head to look him straight in the face, and began jesting without the least constraint. She was really delicious, with her pure lily-white complexion, her small laughing mouth, and adorable blue eyes which ever smiled. And you could realise that she had grown up in all innocence and devotion, slender and supple, with all the appearance of a girl hardly in her teens.

"What! You are so fond of me as all that!" she exclaimed. "Why?"

"Why I'm fond of you? Because you are the best, the most consoling, the most sisterly of beings. You are the sweetest memory in my life, the memory I evoke whenever I need to be encouraged and sustained. Do you no longer remember the month we spent together, in my poor room, when I was so ill and you so affectionately nursed me?"

"Of course, of course I remember it! Why, I never had so good a patient as you. You took all I offered you; and when I tucked you in, after changing your linen, you remained as still as a little child."

So speaking, she continued looking at him, smiling ingenuously the while. He was very handsome and robust, in the very prime of youth, with a rather pronounced nose, superb eyes, and red lips showing under his black moustache. But she seemed to be simply pleased at seeing him there before her moved almost to tears.

"Ah! Sister, I should have died if it hadn't been for you," he said. "It was through having you that I was cured."

Then, as they gazed at one another, with tender gaiety of heart, the memory of that adorable month recurred to them. They no longer heard Madame Vetu's death moans, nor beheld the ward littered with beds, and, with all its disorder, resembling some infirmary improvised after a public catastrophe. They once more found themselves in a small attic at the top of a dingy house in old Paris, where air and light only reached them through a tiny window opening on to a sea of roofs. And how charming it was to be alone there together—he who had been prostrated by fever, she who had appeared there like a good angel, who had quietly come from her convent like a comrade who fears nothing! It was thus that she nursed women, children, and men, as chance ordained, feeling perfectly happy so long as she had something to do, some sufferer to relieve. She never displayed any consciousness of her sex; and he, on his side, never seemed to have suspected that she might be a woman, except it were for the extreme softness of her hands, the caressing accents of her voice, the beneficent gentleness of her manner; and yet all the tender love of a mother, all the affection of a sister, radiated from her person. During three weeks, as she had said, she had nursed him like a child, helping him in and out of bed, and rendering him every necessary attention, without the slightest embarrassment or repugnance, the holy purity born of suffering and charity shielding them both the while. They were indeed far removed from the frailties of life. And when he became convalescent, what a happy existence began, how joyously they laughed, like two old friends! She still watched over him, scolding him and gently slapping his arms when he persisted in keeping them uncovered. He would watch her standing at the basin, washing him a shirt in order to save him the trifling expense of employing a laundress. No one ever came up there; they were quite alone, thousands of miles away from the world, delighted with this solitude, in which their youth displayed such fraternal gaiety.

"Do you remember, Sister, the morning when I was first able to walk about?" asked Ferrand. "You helped me to get up, and supported me whilst I awkwardly stumbled about, no longer knowing how to use my legs. We did laugh so."

"Yes, yes, you were saved, and I was very pleased."

"And the day when you brought me some cherries—I can see it all again: myself reclining on my pillows, and you seated at the edge of the bed, with the cherries lying between us in a large piece of white paper. I refused to touch them unless you ate some with me. And then we took them in turn, one at a time, until the paper was emptied; and they were very nice."

"Yes, yes, very nice. It was the same with the currant syrup: you would only drink it when I took some also."

Thereupon they laughed yet louder; these recollections quite delighted them. But a painful sigh from Madame Vetu brought them back to the present. Ferrand leant over and cast a glance at the sick woman, who had not stirred. The ward was still full of a quivering peacefulness, which was only broken by the clear voice of Madame Desagneaux counting the linen. Stifling with emotion, the young man resumed in a lower tone: "Ah! Sister, were I to live a hundred years, to know every joy, every pleasure, I should never love another woman as I love you!"

Then Sister Hyacinthe, without, however, showing any confusion, bowed her head and resumed her sewing. An almost imperceptible blush tinged her lily-white skin with pink.

"I also love you well, Monsieur Ferrand," she said, "but you must not make me vain. I only did for you what I do for so many others. It is my business, you see. And there was really only one pleasant thing about it all, that the Almighty cured you."

They were now again interrupted. La Grivotte and Elise Rouquet had returned from the Grotto before the others. La Grivotte at once squatted down on her mattress on the floor, at the foot of Madame Vetu's bed, and, taking a piece of bread from her pocket, proceeded to devour it. Ferrand, since the day before, had felt some interest in this consumptive patient, who was traversing such a curious phase of agitation, a prey to an inordinate appetite and a feverish need of motion. For the moment, however, Elise Rouquet's case interested him still more; for it had now become evident that the lupus, the sore which was eating away her face, was showing signs of cure. She had continued bathing her face at the miraculous fountain, and had just come from the Verification Office, where Doctor Bonamy had triumphed. Ferrand, quite surprised, went and examined the sore, which, although still far from healed, was already paler in colour and slightly desiccated, displaying all the symptoms of gradual cure. And the case seemed to him so curious, that he resolved to make some notes upon it for one of his old masters at the medical college, who was studying the nervous origin of certain skin diseases due to faulty nutrition.

"Have you felt any pricking sensation?" he asked.

"Not at all, monsieur," she replied. "I bathe my face and tell my beads with my whole soul, and that is all."

La Grivotte, who was vain and jealous, and ever since the day before had been going in triumph among the crowds, thereupon called to the doctor. "I say, monsieur, I am cured, cured, cured completely!"

He waved his hand to her in a friendly way, but refused to examine her. "I know, my girl. There is nothing more the matter with you."

Just then Sister Hyacinthe called to him. She had put her sewing down on seeing Madame Vetu raise herself in a frightful fit of nausea. In spite of her haste, however, she was too late with the basin; the sick woman had brought up another discharge of black matter, similar to soot; but, this time, some blood was mixed with it, little specks of violet-coloured blood. It was the hemorrhage coming, the near end which Ferrand had been dreading.

"Send for the superintendent," he said in a low voice, seating himself at the bedside.

Sister Hyacinthe ran for Madame de Jonquiere. The linen having been counted, she found her deep in conversation with her daughter Raymonde, at some distance from Madame Desagneaux, who was washing her hands.

Raymonde had just escaped for a few minutes from the refectory, where she was on duty. This was the roughest of her labours. The long narrow room, with its double row of greasy tables, its sickening smell of food and misery, quite disgusted her. And taking advantage of the half-hour still remaining before the return of the patients, she had hurried up-stairs, where, out of breath, with a rosy face and shining eyes, she had thrown her arms around her mother's neck.

"Ah! mamma," she cried, "what happiness! It's settled!"

Amazed, her head buzzing, busy with the superintendence of her ward, Madame de Jonquiere did not understand. "What's settled, my child?" she asked.

Then Raymonde lowered her voice, and, with a faint blush, replied: "My marriage!"

It was now the mother's turn to rejoice. Lively satisfaction appeared upon her face, the fat face of a

ripe, handsome, and still agreeable woman. She at once beheld in her mind's eye their little lodging in the Rue Vaneau, where, since her husband's death, she had reared her daughter with great difficulty upon the few thousand francs he had left her. This marriage, however, meant a return to life, to society, the good old times come back once more.

"Ah! my child, how happy you make me!" she exclaimed.

But a feeling of uneasiness suddenly restrained her. God was her witness that for three years past she had been coming to Lourdes through pure motives of charity, for the one great joy of nursing His beloved invalids. Perhaps, had she closely examined her conscience, she might, behind her devotion, have found some trace of her fondness for authority, which rendered her present managerial duties extremely pleasant to her. However, the hope of finding a husband for her daughter among the suitable young men who swarmed at the Grotto was certainly her last thought. It was a thought which came to her, of course, but merely as something that was possible, though she never mentioned it. However, her happiness, wrung an avowal from her:

"Ah! my child, your success doesn't surprise me. I prayed to the Blessed Virgin for it this morning."

Then she wished to be quite sure, and asked for further information. Raymonde had not yet told her of her long walk leaning on Gerard's arm the day before, for she did not wish to speak of such things until she was triumphant, certain of having at last secured a husband. And now it was indeed settled, as she had exclaimed so gaily: that very morning she had again seen the young man at the Grotto, and he had formally become engaged to her. M. Berthaud would undoubtedly ask for her hand on his cousin's behalf before they took their departure from Lourdes.

"Well," declared Madame de Jonquiere, who was now convinced, smiling, and delighted at heart, "I hope you will be happy, since you are so sensible and do not need my aid to bring your affairs to a successful issue. Kiss me."

It was at this moment that Sister Hyacinthe arrived to announce Madame Vetu's imminent death. Raymonde at once ran off. And Madame Desagneaux, who was wiping her hands, began to complain of the lady-assistants, who had all disappeared precisely on the morning when they were most wanted. "For instance," said she, "there's Madame Volmar. I should like to know where she can have got to. She has not been seen, even for an hour, ever since our arrival."

"Pray leave Madame Volmar alone!" replied Madame de Jonquiere with some asperity. "I have already told you that she is ill."

They both hastened to Madame Vetu. Ferrand stood there waiting; and Sister Hyacinthe having asked him if there were indeed nothing to be done, he shook his head. The dying woman, relieved by her first emesis, now lay inert, with closed eyes. But, a second time, the frightful nausea returned to her, and she brought up another discharge of black matter mingled with violet-coloured blood. Then she had another short interval of calm, during which she noticed La Grivotte, who was greedily devouring her hunk of bread on the mattress on the floor.

"She is cured, isn't she?" the poor woman asked, feeling that she herself was dying.

La Grivotte heard her, and exclaimed triumphantly: "Oh, yes, madame, cured, cured, cured completely!"

For a moment Madame Vetu seemed overcome by a miserable feeling of grief, the revolt of one who will not succumb while others continue to live. But almost immediately she became resigned, and they heard her add very faintly, "It is the young ones who ought to remain."

Then her eyes, which remained wide open, looked round, as though bidding farewell to all those persons, whom she seemed surprised to see about her. She attempted to smile as she encountered the eager gaze of curiosity which little Sophie Couteau still fixed upon her: the charming child had come to kiss her that very morning, in her bed. Elise Rouquet, who troubled herself about nobody, was meantime holding her hand-glass, absorbed in the contemplation of her face, which seemed to her to be growing beautiful, now that the sore was healing. But what especially charmed the dying woman was the sight of Marie, so lovely in her ecstasy. She watched her for a long time, constantly attracted towards her, as towards a vision of light and joy. Perhaps she fancied that she already beheld one of the saints of Paradise amid the glory of the sun.

Suddenly, however, the fits of vomiting returned, and now she solely brought up blood, vitiated blood, the colour of claret. The rush was so great that it bespattered the sheet, and ran all over the bed. In vain did Madame de Jonquiere and Madame Desagneaux bring cloths; they were both very pale and

scarce able to remain standing. Ferrand, knowing how powerless he was, had withdrawn to the window, to the very spot where he had so lately experienced such delicious emotion; and with an instinctive movement, of which she was surely unconscious, Sister Hyacinthe had likewise returned to that happy window, as though to be near him.

"Really, can you do nothing?" she inquired.

"No, nothing! She will go off like that, in the same way as a lamp that has burnt out."

Madame Vetu, who was now utterly exhausted, with a thin red stream still flowing from her mouth, looked fixedly at Madame de Jonquiere whilst faintly moving her lips. The lady-superintendent thereupon bent over her and heard these slowly uttered words:

"About my husband, madame—the shop is in the Rue Mouffetard—oh! it's quite a tiny one, not far from the Gobelins.—He's a clockmaker, he is; he couldn't come with me, of course, having to attend to the business; and he will be very much put out when he finds I don't come back.—Yes, I cleaned the jewelry and did the errands—" Then her voice grew fainter, her words disjointed by the death rattle, which began. "Therefore, madame, I beg you will write to him, because I haven't done so, and now here's the end.—Tell him my body had better remain here at Lourdes, on account of the expense.—And he must marry again; it's necessary for one in trade—his cousin—tell him his cousin—"

The rest became a confused murmur. Her weakness was too great, her breath was halting. Yet her eyes continued open and full of life, amid her pale, yellow, waxy mask. And those eyes seemed to fix themselves despairingly on the past, on all that which soon would be no more: the little clockmaker's shop hidden away in a populous neighbourhood; the gentle humdrum existence, with a toiling husband who was ever bending over his watches; the great pleasures of Sunday, such as watching children fly their kites upon the fortifications. And at last these staring eyes gazed vainly into the frightful night which was gathering.

A last time did Madame de Jonquiere lean over her, seeing that her lips were again moving. There came but a faint breath, a voice from far away, which distantly murmured in an accent of intense grief: "She did not cure me."

And then Madame Vetu expired, very gently.

As though this were all that she had been waiting for, little Sophie Couteau jumped from the bed quite satisfied, and went off to play with her doll again at the far end of the ward. Neither La Grivotte, who was finishing her bread, nor Elise Rouquet, busy with her mirror, noticed the catastrophe. However, amidst the cold breath which seemingly swept by, while Madame de Jonquiere and Madame Desagneaux—the latter of whom was unaccustomed to the sight of death—were whispering together in agitation, Marie emerged from the expectant rapture in which the continuous, unspoken prayer of her whole being had plunged her so long. And when she understood what had happened, a feeling of sisterly compassion—the compassion of a suffering companion, on her side certain of cure—brought tears to her eyes.

"Ah! the poor woman!" she murmured; "to think that she has died so far from home, in such loneliness, at the hour when others are being born anew!"

Ferrand, who, in spite of professional indifference, had also been stirred by the scene, stepped forward to verify the death; and it was on a sign from him that Sister Hyacinthe turned up the sheet, and threw it over the dead woman's face, for there could be no question of removing the corpse at that moment. The patients were now returning from the Grotto in bands, and the ward, hitherto so calm, so full of sunshine, was again filling with the tumult of wretchedness and pain—deep coughing and feeble shuffling, mingled with a noisome smell—a pitiful display, in fact, of well-nigh every human infirmity.

II

THE SERVICE AT THE GROTTTO

ON that day, Monday, the crowd at the Grotto, was enormous. It was the last day that the national pilgrimage would spend at Lourdes, and Father Fourcade, in his morning address, had said that it would be necessary to make a supreme effort of fervour and faith to obtain from Heaven all that it might be willing to grant in the way of grace and prodigious cure. So, from two o'clock in the afternoon, twenty thousand pilgrims were assembled there, feverish, and agitated by the most ardent hopes. From minute to minute the throng continued increasing, to such a point, indeed, that Baron Suire became alarmed, and came out of the Grotto to say to Berthaud: "My friend, we shall be overwhelmed, that's

certain. Double your squads, bring your men closer together."

The Hospitality of Our Lady of Salvation was alone entrusted with the task of keeping order, for there were neither guardians nor policemen, of any sort present; and it was for this reason that the President of the Association was so alarmed. However, Berthaud, under grave circumstances, was a leader whose words commanded attention, and who was endowed with energy that could be relied on.

"Be easy," said he; "I will be answerable for everything. I shall not move from here until the four-o'clock procession has passed by."

Nevertheless, he signalled to Gerard to approach.

"Give your men the strictest instructions," he said to him. "Only those persons who have cards should be allowed to pass. And place your men nearer each other; tell them to hold the cord tight."

Yonder, beneath the ivy which draped the rock, the Grotto opened, with the eternal flaring of its candles. From a distance it looked rather squat and misshapen, a very narrow and modest aperture for the breath of the Infinite which issued from it, turning all faces pale and bowing every head. The statue of the Virgin had become a mere white spot, which seemed to move amid the quiver of the atmosphere, heated by the small yellow flames. To see everything it was necessary to raise oneself; for the silver altar, the harmonium divested of its housing, the heap of bouquets flung there, and the votive offerings streaking the smoky walls were scarcely distinguishable from behind the railing. And the day was lovely; never yet had a purer sky expanded above the immense crowd; the softness of the breeze in particular seemed delicious after the storm of the night, which had brought down the over-oppressive heat of the two first days.

Gerard had to fight his way with his elbows in order to repeat the orders to his men. The crowd had already begun pushing. "Two more men here!" he called. "Come, four together, if necessary, and hold the rope well!"

The general impulse was instinctive and invincible; the twenty thousand persons assembled there were drawn towards the Grotto by an irresistible attraction, in which burning curiosity mingled with the thirst for mystery. All eyes converged, every mouth, hand, and body was borne towards the pale glitter of the candles and the white moving speck of the marble Virgin. And, in order that the large space reserved to the sick, in front of the railings, might not be invaded by the swelling mob, it had been necessary to inclose it with a stout rope which the bearers at intervals of two or three yards grasped with both hands. Their orders were to let nobody pass excepting the sick provided with hospital cards and the few persons to whom special authorisations had been granted. They limited themselves, therefore, to raising the cords and then letting them fall behind the chosen ones, without heeding the supplications of the others. In fact they even showed themselves somewhat rough, taking a certain pleasure in exercising the authority with which they were invested for a day. In truth, however, they were very much pushed about, and had to support each other and resist with all the strength of their loins to avoid being swept away.

While the benches before the Grotto and the vast reserved space were filling with sick people, handcarts, and stretchers, the crowd, the immense crowd, swayed about on the outskirts. Starting from the Place du Rosaire, it extended to the bottom of the promenade along the Gave, where the pavement throughout its entire length was black with people, so dense a human sea that all circulation was prevented. On the parapet was an interminable line of women—most of them seated, but some few standing so as to see the better—and almost all carrying silk parasols, which, with holiday-like gaiety, shimmered in the sunlight. The managers had wished to keep a path open in order that the sick might be brought along; but it was ever being invaded and obstructed, so that the carts and stretchers remained on the road, submerged and lost until a bearer freed them. Nevertheless, the great tramping was that of a docile flock, an innocent, lamb-like crowd; and it was only the involuntary pushing, the blind rolling towards the light of the candles that had to be contended against. No accident had ever happened there, notwithstanding the excitement, which gradually increased and threw the people into the unruly delirium of faith.

However, Baron Suire again forced his way through the throng. "Berthaud! Berthaud!" he called, "see that the /defile/ is conducted less rapidly. There are women and children stifling."

This time Berthaud gave a sign of impatience. "Ah! hang it, I can't be everywhere! Close the gate for a moment if it's necessary."

It was a question of the march through the Grotto which went on throughout the afternoon. The faithful were permitted to enter by the door on the left, and made their exit by that on the right.

"Close the gate!" exclaimed the Baron. "But that would be worse; they would all get crushed against it!"

As it happened Gerard was there, thoughtlessly talking for an instant with Raymonde, who was standing on the other side of the cord, holding a bowl of milk which she was about to carry to a paralysed old woman; and Berthaud ordered the young fellow to post two men at the entrance gate of the iron railing, with instructions only to allow the pilgrims to enter by tens. When Gerard had executed this order, and returned, he found Berthaud laughing and joking with Raymonde. She went off on her errand, however, and the two men stood watching her while she made the paralysed woman drink.

"She is charming, and it's settled, eh?" said Berthaud. "You are going to marry her, aren't you?"

"I shall ask her mother to-night. I rely upon you to accompany me."

"Why, certainly. You know what I told you. Nothing could be more sensible. The uncle will find you a berth before six months are over."

A push of the crowd separated them, and Berthaud went off to make sure whether the march through the Grotto was now being accomplished in a methodical manner, without any crushing. For hours the same unbroken tide rolled in—women, men, and children from all parts of the world, all who chose, all who passed that way. As a result, the crowd was singularly mixed: there were beggars in rags beside neat /bourgeois/, peasants of either sex, well dressed ladies, servants with bare hair, young girls with bare feet, and others with pomatumed hair and foreheads bound with ribbons. Admission was free; the mystery was open to all, to unbelievers as well as to the faithful, to those who were solely influenced by curiosity as well as to those who entered with their hearts faint with love. And it was a sight to see them, all almost equally affected by the tepid odour of the wax, half stifling in the heavy tabernacle air which gathered beneath the rocky vault, and lowering their eyes for fear of slipping on the gratings. Many stood there bewildered, not even bowing, examining the things around with the covert uneasiness of indifferent folks astray amidst the redoubtable mysteries of a sanctuary. But the devout crossed themselves, threw letters, deposited candles and bouquets, kissed the rock below the Virgin's statue, or else rubbed their chaplets, medals, and other small objects of piety against it, as the contact sufficed to bless them. And the /defile/ continued, continued without end during days and months as it had done for years; and it seemed as if the whole world, all the miseries and sufferings of humanity, came in turn and passed in the same hypnotic, contagious kind of round, through that rocky nook, ever in search of happiness.

When Berthaud had satisfied himself that everything was working well, he walked about like a mere spectator, superintending his men. Only one matter remained to trouble him: the procession of the Blessed Sacrament, during which such frenzy burst forth that accidents were always to be feared.

This last day seemed likely to be a very fervent one, for he already felt a tremor of exalted faith rising among the crowd. The treatment needed for miraculous care was drawing to an end; there had been the fever of the journey, the besetting influence of the same endlessly repeated hymns, and the stubborn continuation of the same religious exercises; and ever and ever the conversation had been turned on miracles, and the mind fixed on the divine illumination of the Grotto. Many, not having slept for three nights, had reached a state of hallucination, and walked about in a rageful dream. No repose was granted them, the continual prayers were like whips lashing their souls. The appeals to the Blessed Virgin never ceased; priest followed priest in the pulpit, proclaiming the universal dolour and directing the despairing supplications of the throng, during the whole time that the sick remained with hands clasped and eyes raised to heaven before the pale, smiling, marble statue.

At that moment the white stone pulpit against the rock on the right of the Grotto was occupied by a priest from Toulouse, whom Berthaud knew, and to whom he listened for a moment with an air of approval. He was a stout man with an unctuous diction, famous for his rhetorical successes. However, all eloquence here consisted in displaying the strength of one's lungs in a violent delivery of the phrase or cry which the whole crowd had to repeat; for the addresses were nothing more than so much vociferation interspersed with "Ayes" and "Paters."

The priest, who had just finished the Rosary, strove to increase his stature by stretching his short legs, whilst shouting the first appeal of the litanies which he improvised, and led in his own way, according to the inspiration which possessed him.

"Mary, we love thee!" he called.

And thereupon the crowd repeated in a lower, confused, and broken tone:
"Mary, we love thee!"

From that moment there was no stopping. The voice of the priest rang out at full swing, and the

voices of the crowd responded in a dolorous murmur:

"Mary, thou art our only hope!"

"Mary, thou art our only hope!"

"Pure Virgin, make us purer, among the pure!"

"Pure Virgin, make us purer, among the pure!"

"Powerful Virgin, save our sick!"

"Powerful Virgin, save our sick!"

Often, when the priest's imagination failed him, or he wished to thrust a cry home with greater force, he would repeat it thrice; while the docile crowd would do the same, quivering under the enervating effect of the persistent lamentation, which increased the fever.

The litanies continued, and Berthaud went back towards the Grotto. Those who defiled through it beheld an extraordinary sight when they turned and faced the sick. The whole of the large space between the cords was occupied by the thousand or twelve hundred patients whom the national pilgrimage had brought with it; and beneath the vast, spotless sky on that radiant day there was the most heart-rending jumble of sufferers that one could behold. The three hospitals of Lourdes had emptied their chambers of horror. To begin with, those who were still able to remain seated had been piled upon the benches. Many of them, however, were propped up with cushions, whilst others kept shoulder to shoulder, the strong ones supporting the weak. Then, in front of the benches, before the Grotto itself, were the more grievously afflicted sufferers lying at full length; the flagstones disappearing from view beneath this woeful assemblage, which was like a large, stagnant pool of horror. There was an indescribable block of vehicles, stretchers, and mattresses. Some of the invalids in little boxes not unlike coffins had raised themselves up and showed above the others, but the majority lay almost on a level with the ground. There were some lying fully dressed on the check-patterned ticks of mattresses; whilst others had been brought with their bedding, so that only their heads and pale hands were seen outside the sheets. Few of these pallets were clean. Some pillows of dazzling whiteness, which by a last feeling of coquetry had been trimmed with embroidery, alone shone out among all the filthy wretchedness of all the rest—a fearful collection of rags, worn-out blankets, and linen splashed with stains. And all were pushed, squeezed, piled up by chance as they came, women, men, children, and priests, people in nightgowns beside people who were fully attired being jumbled together in the blinding light of day.

And all forms of disease were there, the whole frightful procession which, twice a day, left the hospitals to wend its way through horrified Lourdes. There were the heads eaten away by eczema, the foreheads crowned with roseola, and the noses and mouths which elephantiasis had transformed into shapeless snouts. Next, the dropsical ones, swollen out like leathern bottles; the rheumatic ones with twisted hands and swollen feet, like bags stuffed full of rags; and a sufferer from hydrocephalus, whose huge and weighty skull fell backwards. Then the consumptive ones, with livid skins, trembling with fever, exhausted by dysentery, wasted to skeletons. Then the deformities, the contractions, the twisted trunks, the twisted arms, the necks all awry; all the poor broken, pounded creatures, motionless in their tragic, marionette-like postures. Then the poor rachitic girls displaying their waxen complexions and slender necks eaten into by sores; the yellow-faced, besotted-looking women in the painful stupor which falls on unfortunate creatures devoured by cancer; and the others who turned pale, and dared not move, fearing as they did the shock of the tumours whose weighty pain was stifling them. On the benches sat bewildered deaf women, who heard nothing, but sang on all the same, and blind ones with heads erect, who remained for hours turned toward the statue of the Virgin which they could not see. And there was also the woman stricken with imbecility, whose nose was eaten away, and who laughed with a terrifying laugh, displaying the black, empty cavern of her mouth; and then the epileptic woman, whom a recent attack had left as pale as death, with froth still at the corners of her lips.

But sickness and suffering were no longer of consequence, since they were all there, seated or stretched with their eyes upon the Grotto. The poor, fleshless, earthy-looking faces became transfigured, and began to glow with hope. Anchylosed hands were joined, heavy eyelids found the strength to rise, exhausted voices revived as the priest shouted the appeals. At first there was nothing but indistinct stuttering, similar to slight puffs of air rising, here and there above the multitude. Then the cry ascended and spread through the crowd itself from one to the other end of the immense square.

"Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us!" cried the priest in his thundering voice.

And the sick and the pilgrims repeated louder and louder: "Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us!"

Then the flow of the litany set in, and continued with increasing speed:

"Most pure Mother, most chaste Mother, thy children are at thy feet!"

"Most pure Mother, most chaste Mother, thy children are at thy feet!"

"Queen of the Angels, say but a word, and our sick shall be healed!"

"Queen of the Angels, say but a word, and our sick shall be healed!"

In the second row of sufferers, near the pulpit, was M. Sabathier, who had asked to be brought there early, wishing to choose his place like an old /habitué/ who knew the cosy corners. Moreover, it seemed to him that it was of paramount importance that he should be as near as possible, under the very eyes of the Virgin, as though she required to see her faithful in order not to forget them. However, for the seven years that he had been coming there he had nursed this one hope of being some day noticed by her, of touching her, and of obtaining his cure, if not by selection, at least by seniority. This merely needed patience on his part without the firmness of his faith being in the least shaken by his way of thinking. Only, like a poor, resigned man just a little weary of being always put off, he sometimes allowed himself diversions. For instance, he had obtained permission to keep his wife near him, seated on a camp-stool, and he liked to talk to her, and acquaint her with his reflections.

"Raise me a little, my dear," said he. "I am slipping. I am very uncomfortable."

Attired in trousers and a coarse woollen jacket, he was sitting upon his mattress, with his back leaning against a tilted chair.

"Are you better?" asked his wife, when she had raised him.

"Yes, yes," he answered; and then began to take an interest in Brother Isidore, whom they had succeeded in bringing in spite of everything, and who was lying upon a neighbouring mattress, with a sheet drawn up to his chin, and nothing protruding but his wasted hands, which lay clasped upon the blanket.

"Ah! the poor man," said M. Sabathier. "It's very imprudent, but the Blessed Virgin is so powerful when she chooses!"

He took up his chaplet again, but once more broke off from his devotions on perceiving Madame Maze, who had just glided into the reserved space—so slender and unobtrusive that she had doubtless slipped under the ropes without being noticed. She had seated herself at the end of a bench and, very quiet and motionless, did not occupy more room there than a child. And her long face, with its weary features, the face of a woman of two-and-thirty faded before her time, wore an expression of unlimited sadness, infinite abandonment.

"And so," resumed M. Sabathier in a low voice, again addressing his wife after attracting her attention by a slight movement of the chin, "it's for the conversion of her husband that this lady prays. You came across her this morning in a shop, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes," replied Madame Sabathier. "And, besides, I had some talk about her with another lady who knows her. Her husband is a commercial-traveller. He leaves her for six months at a time, and goes about with other people. Oh! he's a very gay fellow, it seems, very nice, and he doesn't let her want for money; only she adores him, she cannot accustom herself to his neglect, and comes to pray the Blessed Virgin to give him back to her. At this moment, it appears, he is close by, at Luchon, with two ladies—two sisters."

M. Sabathier signed to his wife to stop. He was now looking at the Grotto, again becoming a man of intellect, a professor whom questions of art had formerly impassioned. "You see, my dear," he said, "they have spoiled the Grotto by endeavouring to make it too beautiful. I am certain it looked much better in its original wildness. It has lost its characteristic features—and what a frightful shop they have stuck there, on the left!"

However, he now experienced sudden remorse for his thoughtlessness. Whilst he was chatting away, might not the Blessed Virgin be noticing one of his neighbours, more fervent, more sedate than himself? Feeling anxious on the point, he reverted to his customary modesty and patience, and with dull, expressionless eyes again began waiting for the good pleasure of Heaven.

Moreover, the sound of a fresh voice helped to bring him back to this annihilation, in which nothing was left of the cultured reasoner that he had formerly been. It was another preacher who had just entered the pulpit, a Capuchin this time, whose guttural call, persistently repeated, sent a tremor through the crowd.

"Holy Virgin of virgins, be blessed!"

"Holy Virgin of virgins, be blessed!"

"Holy Virgin of virgins, turn not thy face from thy children!"

"Holy Virgin of virgins, turn not thy face from thy children!"

"Holy Virgin of virgins, breathe upon our sores, and our sores shall heal!"

"Holy Virgin of virgins, breathe upon our sores, and our sores shall heal!"

At the end of the first bench, skirting the central path, which was becoming crowded, the Vigneron family had succeeded in finding room for themselves. They were all there: little Gustave, seated in a sinking posture, with his crutch between his legs; his mother, beside him, following the prayers like a punctilious /bourgeoise/; his aunt, Madame Chaise, on the other side, so inconvenienced by the crowd that she was stifling; and M. Vigneron, who remained silent and, for a moment, had been examining Madame Chaise attentively.

"What is the matter with you, my dear?" he inquired. "Do you feel unwell?"

She was breathing with difficulty. "Well, I don't know," she answered; "but I can't feel my limbs, and my breath fails me."

At that very moment the thought had occurred to him that all the agitation, fever, and scramble of a pilgrimage could not be very good for heart-disease. Of course he did not desire anybody's death, he had never asked the Blessed Virgin for any such thing. If his prayer for advancement had already been granted through the sudden death of his chief, it must certainly be because Heaven had already ordained the latter's death. And, in the same way, if Madame Chaise should die first, leaving her fortune to Gustave, he would only have to bow before the will of God, which generally requires that the aged should go off before the young. Nevertheless, his hope unconsciously became so keen that he could not help exchanging a glance with his wife, to whom had come the same involuntary thought.

"Gustave, draw back," he exclaimed; "you are inconveniencing your aunt." And then, as Raymonde passed, he asked; "Do you happen to have a glass of water, mademoiselle? One of our relatives here is losing consciousness."

But Madame Chaise refused the offer with a gesture. She was getting better, recovering her breath with an effort. "No, I want nothing, thank you," she gasped. "There, I'm better—still, I really thought this time that I should stifle!"

Her fright left her trembling, with haggard eyes in her pale face. She again joined her hands, and begged the Blessed Virgin to save her from other attacks and cure her; while the Vignerons, man and wife, honest folk both of them, reverted to the covert prayer for happiness that they had come to offer up at Lourdes: a pleasant old age, deservedly gained by twenty years of honesty, with a respectable fortune which in later years they would go and enjoy in the country, cultivating flowers. On the other hand, little Gustave, who had seen and noted everything with his bright eyes and intelligence sharpened by suffering, was not praying, but smiling at space, with his vague enigmatical smile. What could be the use of his praying? He knew that the Blessed Virgin would not cure him, and that he would die.

However, M. Vigneron could not remain long without busying himself about his neighbours. Madame Dieulafay, who had come late, had been deposited in the crowded central pathway; and he marvelled at the luxury about the young woman, that sort of coffin quilted with white silk, in which she was lying, attired in a pink dressing-gown trimmed with Valenciennes lace. The husband in a frock-coat, and the sister in a black gown of simple but marvellous elegance, were standing by; while Abbe Judaine, kneeling near the sufferer, finished offering up a fervent prayer.

When the priest had risen, M. Vigneron made him a little room on the bench beside him; and he then took the liberty of questioning him. "Well, Monsieur le Cure, does that poor young woman feel a little better?"

Abbe Judaine made a gesture of infinite sadness.

"Alas! no. I was full of so much hope! It was I who persuaded the family to come. Two years ago the Blessed Virgin showed me such extraordinary grace by curing my poor lost eyes, that I hoped to obtain another favour from her. However, I will not despair. We still have until to-morrow."

M. Vigneron again looked towards Madame Dieulafay and examined her face, still of a perfect oval

and with admirable eyes; but it was expressionless, with ashen hue, similar to a mask of death, amidst the lace. "It's really very sad," he murmured.

"And if you had seen her last summer!" resumed the priest. "They have their country seat at Saligny, my parish, and I often dined with them. I cannot help feeling sad when I look at her elder sister, Madame Jousseur, that lady in black who stands there, for she bears a strong resemblance to her; and the poor sufferer was even prettier, one of the beauties of Paris. And now compare them together—observe that brilliancy, that sovereign grace, beside that poor, pitiful creature—it oppresses one's heart—ah! what a frightful lesson!"

He became silent for an instant. Sainly man that he was naturally, altogether devoid of passions, with no keen intelligence to disturb him in his faith, he displayed a naive admiration for beauty, wealth, and power, which he had never envied. Nevertheless, he ventured to express a doubt, a scruple, which troubled his usual serenity. "For my part, I should have liked her to come here with more simplicity, without all that surrounding of luxury, because the Blessed Virgin prefers the humble— But I understand very well that there are certain social exigencies. And, then, her husband and sister love her so! Remember that he has forsaken his business and she her pleasures in order to come here with her; and so overcome are they at the idea of losing her that their eyes are never dry, they always have that bewildered look which you can notice. So they must be excused for trying to procure her the comfort of looking beautiful until the last hour."

M. Vignerou nodded his head approvingly. Ah! it was certainly not the wealthy who had the most luck at the Grotto! Servants, country folk, poor beggars, were cured, while ladies returned home with their ailments unrelieved, notwithstanding their gifts and the big candles they had burnt. And, in spite of himself, Vignerou then looked at Madame Chaise, who, having recovered from her attack, was now reposing with a comfortable air.

But a tremor passed through the crowd and Abbe Judaine spoke again: "Here is Father Massias coming towards the pulpit. He is a saint; listen to him."

They knew him, and were aware that he could not make his appearance without every soul being stirred by sudden hope, for it was reported that the miracles were often brought to pass by his great fervour. His voice, full of tenderness and strength, was said to be appreciated by the Virgin.

All heads were therefore uplifted and the emotion yet further increased when Father Fourcade was seen coming to the foot of the pulpit, leaning on the shoulder of his well-beloved brother, the preferred of all; and he stayed there, so that he also might hear him. His gouty foot had been paining him more acutely since the morning, so that it required great courage on his part to remain thus standing and smiling. The increasing exaltation of the crowd made him happy, however; he foresaw prodigies and dazzling cures which would redound to the glory of Mary and Jesus.

Having ascended the pulpit, Father Massias did not at once speak. He seemed, very tall, thin, and pale, with an ascetic face, elongated the more by his discoloured beard. His eyes sparkled, and his large eloquent mouth protruded passionately.

"Lord, save us, for we perish!" he suddenly cried; and in a fever, which increased minute by minute, the transported crowd repeated: "Lord, save us, for we perish!"

Then he opened his arms and again launched forth his flaming cry, as if he had torn it from his glowing heart: "Lord, if it be Thy will, Thou canst heal me!"

"Lord, if it be Thy will, Thou canst heal me!"

"Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof, but only say the word, and I shall be healed!"

"Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof, but only say the word, and I shall be healed!"

Marthe, Brother Isidore's sister, had now begun to talk in a whisper to Madame Sabathier, near whom she had at last seated herself. They had formed an acquaintance at the hospital; and, drawn together by so much suffering, the servant had familiarly confided to the /bourgeoise/ how anxious she felt about her brother; for she could plainly see that he had very little breath left in him. The Blessed Virgin must be quick indeed if she desired to save him. It was already a miracle that they had been able to bring him alive as far as the Grotto.

In her resignation, poor, simple creature that she was, she did not weep; but her heart was so swollen that her infrequent words came faintly from her lips. Then a flood of past memories suddenly returned

to her; and with her utterance thickened by prolonged silence, she began to relieve her heart: "We were fourteen at home, at Saint Jacut, near Vannes. He, big as he was, has always been delicate, and that was why he remained with our priest, who ended by placing him among the Christian Brothers. The elder ones took over the property, and, for my part, I preferred going out to service. Yes, it was a lady who took me with her to Paris, five years ago already. Ah! what a lot of trouble there is in life! Everyone has so much trouble!"

"You are quite right, my girl," replied Madame Sabathier, looking the while at her husband, who was devoutly repeating each of Father Massias's appeals.

"And then," continued Marthe, "there I learned last month that Isidore, who had returned from a hot climate where he had been on a mission, had brought a bad sickness back with him. And, when I ran to see him, he told me he should die if he did not leave for Lourdes, but that he couldn't make the journey, because he had nobody to accompany him. Then, as I had eighty francs saved up, I gave up my place, and we set out together. You see, madame, if I am so fond of him, it's because he used to bring me gooseberries from the parsonage, whereas all the others beat me."

She relapsed into silence for a moment, her countenance swollen by grief, and her poor eyes so scorched by watching that no tears could come from them. Then she began to stutter disjointed words: "Look at him, madame. It fills one with pity. Ah! my God, his poor cheeks, his poor chin, his poor face —"

It was, in fact, a lamentable spectacle. Madame Sabathier's heart was quite upset when she observed Brother Isidore so yellow, cadaverous, steeped in a cold sweat of agony. Above the sheet he still only showed his clasped hands and his face encircled with long scanty hair; but if those wax-like hands seemed lifeless, if there was not a feature of that long-suffering face that stirred, its eyes were still alive, inextinguishable eyes of love, whose flame sufficed to illumine the whole of his expiring visage—the visage of a Christ upon the cross. And never had the contrast been so clearly marked between his low forehead and unintelligent, loutish, peasant air, and the divine splendour which came from his poor human mask, ravaged and sanctified by suffering, sublime at this last hour in the passionate radiance of his faith. His flesh had melted, as it were; he was no longer a breath, nothing but a look, a light.

Since he had been set down there his eyes had not strayed from the statue of the Virgin. Nothing else existed around him. He did not see the enormous multitude, he did not even hear the wild cries of the priests, the incessant cries which shook this quivering crowd. His eyes alone remained to him, his eyes burning with infinite tenderness, and they were fixed upon the Virgin, never more to turn from her. They drank her in, even unto death; they made a last effort of will to disappear, die out in her. For an instant, however, his mouth half opened and his drawn visage relaxed as an expression of celestial beatitude came over it. Then nothing more stirred, his eyes remained wide open, still obstinately fixed upon the white statue.

A few seconds elapsed. Marthe had felt a cold breath, chilling the roots of her hair. "I say, madame, look!" she stammered.

Madame Sabathier, who felt anxious, pretended that she did not understand. "What is it, my girl?"

"My brother! look! He no longer moves. He opened his mouth, and has not stirred since." Then they both shuddered, feeling certain he was dead. He had, indeed, just passed away, without a rattle, without a breath, as if life had escaped in his glance, through his large, loving eyes, ravenous with passion. He had expired gazing upon the Virgin, and nothing could have been so sweet; and he still continued to gaze upon her with his dead eyes, as though with ineffable delight.

"Try to close his eyes," murmured Madame Sabathier. "We shall soon know then."

Marthe had already risen, and, leaning forward, so as not to be observed, she endeavoured to close the eyes with a trembling finger. But each time they reopened, and again looked at the Virgin with invincible obstinacy. He was dead, and Marthe had to leave his eyes wide open, steeped in unbounded ecstasy.

"Ah! it's finished, it's quite finished, madame!" she stuttered.

Two tears then burst from her heavy eyelids and ran down her cheeks; while Madame Sabathier caught hold of her hand to keep her quiet. There had been whisperings, and uneasiness was already spreading. But what course could be adopted? It was impossible to carry off the corpse amidst such a mob, during the prayers, without incurring the risk of creating a disastrous effect. The best plan would be to leave it there, pending a favourable moment. The poor fellow scandalised no one, he did not seem any more dead now than he had seemed ten minutes previously, and everybody would think that his flaming eyes were still alive, ardently appealing to the divine compassion of the Blessed Virgin.

Only a few persons among those around knew the truth. M. Sabathier, quite scared, had made a questioning sign to his wife, and on being answered by a prolonged affirmative nod, he had returned to his prayers without any rebellion, though he could not help turning pale at the thought of the mysterious almighty power which sent death when life was asked for. The Vignerons, who were very much interested, leaned forward, and whispered as though in presence of some street accident, one of those petty incidents which in Paris the father sometimes related on returning home from the Ministry, and which sufficed to occupy them all, throughout the evening. Madame Jousseur, for her part, had simply turned round and whispered a word or two in M. Dieulafay's ear, and then they had both reverted to the heart-rending contemplation of their own dear invalid; whilst Abbe Judaine, informed by M. Vigneron, knelt down, and in a low, agitated voice recited the prayers for the dead. Was he not a Saint, that missionary who had returned from a deadly climate, with a mortal wound in his side, to die there, beneath the smiling gaze of the Blessed Virgin? And Madame Maze, who also knew what had happened, suddenly felt a taste for death, and resolved that she would implore Heaven to suppress her also, in unobtrusive fashion, if it would not listen to her prayer and give her back her husband.

But the cry of Father Massias rose into a still higher key, burst forth with a strength of terrible despair, with a rending like that of a sob: "Jesus, son of David, I am perishing, save me!"

And the crowd sobbed after him in unison "Jesus, son of David, I am perishing, save me!"

Then, in quick succession, and in higher and higher keys, the appeals went on proclaiming the intolerable misery of the world:

"Jesus, son of David, take pity on Thy sick children!"

"Jesus, son of David, take pity on Thy sick children!"

"Jesus, son of David, come, heal them, that they may live!"

"Jesus, son of David, come, heal them, that they may live!"

It was delirium. At the foot of the pulpit Father Fourcade, succumbing to the extraordinary passion which overflowed from all hearts, had likewise raised his arms, and was shouting the appeals in his thundering voice as though to compel the intervention of Heaven. And the exaltation was still increasing beneath this blast of desire, whose powerful breath bowed every head in turn, spreading even to the young women who, in a spirit of mere curiosity, sat watching the scene from the parapet of the Gave; for these also turned pale under their sunshades.

Miserable humanity was clamouring from the depths of its abyss of suffering, and the clamour swept along, sending a shudder down every spine, for one and all were plunged in agony, refusing to die, longing to compel God to grant them eternal life. Ah! life, life! that was what all those unfortunates, who had come so far, amid so many obstacles, wanted—that was the one boon they asked for in their wild desire to live it over again, to live it always! O Lord, whatever our misery, whatever the torment of our life may be, cure us, grant that we may begin to live again and suffer once more what we have suffered already. However unhappy we may be, to be is what we wish. It is not heaven that we ask Thee for, it is earth; and grant that we may leave it at the latest possible moment, never leave it, indeed, if such be Thy good pleasure. And even when we no longer implore a physical cure, but a moral favour, it is still happiness that we ask Thee for; happiness, the thirst for which alone consumes us. O Lord, grant that we may be happy and healthy; let us live, ay, let us live forever!

This wild cry, the cry of man's furious desire for life, came in broken accents, mingled with tears, from every breast.

"O Lord, son of David, heal our sick!"

"O Lord, son of David, heal our sick!"

Berthaud had twice been obliged to dash forward to prevent the cords from giving way under the unconscious pressure of the crowd. Baron Suire, in despair, kept on making signs, begging someone to come to his assistance; for the Grotto was now invaded, and the march past had become the mere trampling of a flock rushing to its passion. In vain did Gerard again leave Raymonde and post himself at the entrance gate of the iron railing, so as to carry out the orders, which were to admit the pilgrims by tens. He was hustled and swept aside, while with feverish excitement everybody rushed in, passing like a torrent between the flaring candles, throwing bouquets and letters to the Virgin, and kissing the rock, which the pressure of millions of inflamed lips had polished. It was faith run wild, the great power that nothing henceforth could stop.

And now, whilst Gerard stood there, hemmed in against the iron railing, he heard two countrywomen,

whom the advance was bearing onward, raise loud exclamations at sight of the sufferers lying on the stretchers before them. One of them was so greatly impressed by the pallid face of Brother Isidore, whose large dilated eyes were still fixed on the statue of the Virgin, that she crossed herself, and, overcome by devout admiration, murmured: "Oh! look at that one; see how he is praying with his whole heart, and how he gazes on Our Lady of Lourdes!"

The other peasant woman thereupon replied "Oh! she will certainly cure him, he is so beautiful!"

Indeed, as the dead man lay there, his eyes still fixedly staring whilst he continued his prayer of love and faith, his appearance touched every heart. No one in that endless, streaming throng could behold him without feeling edified.

III

MARIE'S CURE

IT was good Abbe Judaine who was to carry the Blessed Sacrament in the four-o'clock procession. Since the Blessed Virgin had cured him of a disease of the eyes, a miracle with which the Catholic press still resounded, he had become one of the glories of Lourdes, was given the first place, and honoured with all sorts of attentions.

At half-past three he rose, wishing to leave the Grotto, but the extraordinary concourse of people quite frightened him, and he feared he would be late if he did not succeed in getting out of it. Fortunately help came to him in the person of Berthaud. "Monsieur le Cure," exclaimed the superintendent of the bearers, "don't attempt to pass out by way of the Rosary; you would never arrive in time. The best course is to ascend by the winding paths—and come! follow me; I will go before you."

By means of his elbows, he thereupon parted the dense throng and opened a path for the priest, who overwhelmed him with thanks. "You are too kind. It's my fault; I had forgotten myself. But, good heavens! how shall we manage to pass with the procession presently?"

This procession was Berthaud's remaining anxiety. Even on ordinary days it provoked wild excitement, which forced him to take special measures; and what would now happen, as it wended its way through this dense multitude of thirty thousand persons, consumed by such a fever of faith, already on the verge of divine frenzy? Accordingly, in a sensible way, he took advantage of this opportunity to give Abbe Judaine the best advice.

"Ah! Monsieur le Cure, pray impress upon your colleagues of the clergy that they must not leave any space between their ranks; they should come on slowly, one close behind the other. And, above all, the banners should be firmly grasped, so that they may not be overthrown. As for yourself, Monsieur le Cure, see that the canopy-bearers are strong, tighten the cloth around the monstrance, and don't be afraid to carry it in both hands with all your strength."

A little frightened by this advice, the priest went on expressing his thanks. "Of course, of course; you are very good," said he. "Ah! monsieur, how much I am indebted to you for having helped me to escape from all those people!"

Then, free at last, he hastened towards the Basilica by the narrow serpentine path which climbs the hill; while his companion again plunged into the mob, to return to his post of inspection.

At that same moment Pierre, who was bringing Marie to the Grotto in her little cart, encountered on the other side, that of the Place du Rosaire, the impenetrable wall formed by the crowd. The servant at the hotel had awakened him at three o'clock, so that he might go and fetch the young girl at the hospital. There seemed to be no hurry; they apparently had plenty of time to reach the Grotto before the procession. However, that immense throng, that resisting, living wall, through which he did not know how to break, began to cause him some uneasiness. He would never succeed in passing with the little car if the people did not evince some obligingness. "Come, ladies, come!" he appealed. "I beg of you! You see, it's for a patient!"

The ladies, hypnotised as they were by the spectacle of the Grotto sparkling in the distance, and standing on tiptoe so as to lose nothing of the sight, did not move, however. Besides, the clamour of the litanies was so loud at this moment that they did not even hear the young priest's entreaties.

Then Pierre began again: "Pray stand on one side, gentlemen; allow me to pass. A little room for a sick person. Come, please, listen to what I am saying!"

But the men, beside themselves, in a blind, deaf rapture, would stir no more than the women.

Marie, however, smiled serenely, as if ignorant of the impediments, and convinced that nothing in the world could prevent her from going to her cure. However, when Pierre had found an aperture, and begun to work his way through the moving mass, the situation became more serious. From all parts the swelling human waves beat against the frail chariot, and at times threatened to submerge it. At each step it became necessary to stop, wait, and again entreat the people. Pierre had never before felt such an anxious sensation in a crowd. True, it was not a threatening mob, it was as innocent as a flock of sheep; but he found a troubling thrill in its midst, a peculiar atmosphere that upset him. And, in spite of his affection for the humble, the ugliness of the features around him, the common, sweating faces, the evil breath, and the old clothes, smelling of poverty, made him suffer even to nausea.

"Now, ladies, now, gentlemen, it's for a patient," he repeated. "A little room, I beg of you!"

Buffeted about in this vast ocean, the little vehicle continued to advance by fits and starts, taking long minutes to get over a few yards of ground. At one moment you might have thought it swamped, for no sign of it could be detected. Then, however, it reappeared near the piscinas. Tender sympathy had at length been awakened for this sick girl, so wasted by suffering, but still so beautiful. When people had been compelled to give way before the priest's stubborn pushing, they turned round, but did not dare to get angry, for pity penetrated them at sight of that thin, suffering face, shining out amidst a halo of fair hair. Words of compassion and admiration were heard on all sides: "Ah, the poor child!"—"Was it not cruel to be infirm at her age?"—"Might the Blessed Virgin be merciful to her!" Others, however, expressed surprise, struck as they were by the ecstasy in which they saw her, with her clear eyes open to the spheres beyond, where she had placed her hope. She beheld Heaven, she would assuredly be cured. And thus the little car left, as it were, a feeling of wonder and fraternal charity behind it, as it made its way with so much difficulty through that human ocean.

Pierre, however, was in despair and at the end of his strength, when some of the stretcher-bearers came to his aid by forming a path for the passage of the procession—a path which Berthaud had ordered them to keep clear by means of cords, which they were to hold at intervals of a couple of yards. From that moment the young priest was able to drag Marie along in a fairly easy manner, and at last place her within the reserved space, where he halted, facing the Grotto on the left side. You could no longer move in this reserved space, where the crowd seemed to increase every minute. And, quite exhausted by the painful journey he had just accomplished, Pierre reflected what a prodigious concourse of people there was; it had seemed to him as if he were in the midst of an ocean, whose waves he had heard heaving around him without a pause.

Since leaving the hospital Marie had not opened her lips. He now realised, however, that she wished to speak to him, and accordingly bent over her. "And my father," she inquired, "is he here? Hasn't he returned from his excursion?"

Pierre had to answer that M. de Guersaint had not returned, and that he had doubtless been delayed against his will. And thereupon she merely added with a smile: "Ah I poor father, won't he be pleased when he finds me cured!"

Pierre looked at her with tender admiration. He did not remember having ever seen her looking so adorable since the slow wasting of sickness had begun. Her hair, which alone disease had respected, clothed her in gold. Her thin, delicate face had assumed a dreamy expression, her eyes wandering away to the haunting thought of her sufferings, her features motionless, as if she had fallen asleep in a fixed thought until the expected shock of happiness should waken her. She was absent from herself, ready, however, to return to consciousness whenever God might will it. And, indeed, this delicious infantile creature, this little girl of three-and-twenty, still a child as when an accident had struck her, delaying her growth, preventing her from becoming a woman, was at last ready to receive the visit of the angel, the miraculous shock which would draw her out of her torpor and set her upright once more. Her morning ecstasy continued; she had clasped her hands, and a leap of her whole being had ravished her from earth as soon as she had perceived the image of the Blessed Virgin yonder. And now she prayed and offered herself divinely.

It was an hour of great mental trouble for Pierre. He felt that the drama of his priestly life was about to be enacted, and that if he did not recover faith in this crisis, it would never return to him. And he was without bad thoughts, without resistance, hoping with fervour, he also, that they might both be healed! Oh! that he might be convinced by her cure, that he might believe like her, that they might be saved together! He wished to pray, ardently, as she herself did. But in spite of himself he was preoccupied by the crowd, that limitless crowd, among which he found it so difficult to drown himself, disappear, become nothing more than a leaf in the forest, lost amidst the rustle of all the leaves. He could not prevent himself from analysing and judging it. He knew that for four days past it had been undergoing all the training of suggestion; there had been the fever of the long journey, the excitement

of the new landscapes, the days spent before the splendour of the Grotto, the sleepless nights, and all the exasperating suffering, ravenous for illusion. Then, again, there had been the all-besetting prayers, those hymns, those litanies, which agitated it without a pause. Another priest had followed Father Massias in the pulpit, a little thin, dark Abbe, whom Pierre heard hurling appeals to the Virgin and Jesus in a lashing voice which resounded like a whip. Father Massias and Father Fourcade had remained at the foot of the pulpit, and were now directing the cries of the crowd, whose lamentations rose in louder and louder tones beneath the limpid sunlight. The general exaltation had yet increased; it was the hour when the violence done to Heaven at last produced the miracles.

All at once a paralytic rose up and walked towards the Grotto, holding his crutch in the air; and this crutch, waving like a flag above the swaying heads, wrung loud applause from the faithful. They were all on the look-out for prodigies, they awaited them with the certainty that they would take place, innumerable and wonderful. Some eyes seemed to behold them, and feverish voices pointed them out. Another woman had been cured! Another! Yet another! A deaf person had heard, a mute had spoken, a consumptive had revived! What, a consumptive? Certainly, that was a daily occurrence! Surprise was no longer possible; you might have certified that an amputated leg was growing again without astonishing anyone. Miracle-working became the actual state of nature, the usual thing, quite commonplace, such was its abundance. The most incredible stories seemed quite simple to those overheated imaginations, given what they expected from the Blessed Virgin. And you should have heard the tales that went about, the quiet affirmations, the expressions of absolute certainty which were exchanged whenever a delirious patient cried out that she was cured. Another! Yet another! However, a piteous voice would at times exclaim: "Ah! she's cured; that one; she's lucky, she is!"

Already, at the Verification Office, Pierre had suffered from this credulity of the folk among whom he lived. But here it surpassed everything he could have imagined; and he was exasperated by the extravagant things he heard people say in such a placid fashion, with the open smiles of children. Accordingly he tried to absorb himself in his thoughts and listen to nothing. "O God!" he prayed, "grant that my reason may be annihilated, that I may no longer desire to understand, that I may accept the unreal and impossible." For a moment he thought the spirit of inquiry dead within him, and allowed the cry of supplication to carry him away: "Lord, heal our sick! Lord, heal our sick!" He repeated this appeal with all his charity, clasped his hands, and gazed fixedly at the statue of the Virgin, until he became quite giddy, and imagined that the figure moved. Why should he not return to a state of childhood like the others, since happiness lay in ignorance and falsehood? Contagion would surely end by acting; he would become nothing more than a grain of sand among innumerable other grains, one of the humblest among the humble ones under the millstone, who trouble not about the power that crushes them. But just at that second, when he hoped that he had killed the old man in him, that he had annihilated himself along with his will and intelligence, the stubborn work of thought, incessant and invincible, began afresh in the depths of his brain. Little by little, notwithstanding his efforts to the contrary, he returned to his inquiries, doubted, and sought the truth. What was the unknown force thrown off by this crowd, the vital fluid powerful enough to work the few cures that really occurred? There was here a phenomenon that no physiologist had yet studied. Ought one to believe that a multitude became a single being, as it were, able to increase the power of auto-suggestion tenfold upon itself? Might one admit that, under certain circumstances of extreme exaltation, a multitude became an agent of sovereign will compelling the obedience of matter? That would have explained how sudden cure fell at times upon the most sincerely excited of the throng. The breaths of all of them united in one breath, and the power that acted was a power of consolation, hope, and life.

This thought, the outcome of his human charity, filled Pierre with emotion. For another moment he was able to regain possession of himself, and prayed for the cure of all, deeply touched by the belief that he himself might in some degree contribute towards the cure of Marie. But all at once, without knowing what transition of ideas led to it, a recollection returned to him of the medical consultation which he had insisted upon prior to the young girl's departure for Lourdes. The scene rose before him with extraordinary clearness and precision; he saw the room with its grey, blue-flowered wall-paper, and he heard the three doctors discuss and decide. The two who had given certificates diagnosing paralysis of the marrow spoke discreetly, slowly, like esteemed, well-known, perfectly honourable practitioners; but Pierre still heard the warm, vivacious voice of his cousin Beauclair, the third doctor, a young man of vast and daring intelligence, who was treated coldly by his colleagues as being of an adventurous turn of mind. And at this supreme moment Pierre was surprised to find in his memory things which he did not know were there; but it was only an instance of that singular phenomenon by which it sometimes happens that words scarce listened to, words but imperfectly heard, words stored away in the brain almost in spite of self, will awaken, burst forth, and impose themselves on the mind after they have long been forgotten. And thus it now seemed to him that the very approach of the miracle was bringing him a vision of the conditions under which—according to Beauclair's predictions—the miracle would be accomplished.

In vain did Pierre endeavour to drive away this recollection by praying with an increase of fervour. The scene again appeared to him, and the old words rang out, filling his ears like a trumpet-blast. He was now again in the dining-room, where Beauclair and he had shut themselves up after the departure of the two others, and Beauclair recapitulated the history of the malady: the fall from a horse at the age of fourteen; the dislocation and displacement of the organ, with doubtless a slight laceration of the ligaments, whence the weight which the sufferer had felt, and the weakness of the legs leading to paralysis. Then, a slow healing of the disorder, everything returning to its place of itself, but without the pain ceasing. In fact this big, nervous child, whose mind had been so grievously impressed by her accident, was unable to forget it; her attention remained fixed on the part where she suffered, and she could not divert it, so that, even after cure, her sufferings had continued—a neuropathic state, a consecutive nervous exhaustion, doubtless aggravated by accidents due to faulty nutrition as yet imperfectly understood. And further, Beauclair easily explained the contrary and erroneous diagnosis of the numerous doctors who had attended her, and who, as she would not submit to examination, had groped in the dark, some believing in a tumour, and the others, the more numerous, convinced of some lesion of the marrow. He alone, after inquiring into the girl's parentage, had just begun to suspect a simple state of auto-suggestion, in which she had obstinately remained ever since the first violent shock of pain; and among the reasons which he gave for this belief were the contraction of her visual field, the fixity of her eyes, the absorbed, inattentive expression of her face, and above all the nature of the pain she felt, which, leaving the organ, had borne to the left, where it continued in the form of a crushing, intolerable weight, which sometimes rose to the breast in frightful fits of stifling. A sudden determination to throw off the false notion she had formed of her complaint, the will to rise, breathe freely, and suffer no more, could alone place her on her feet again, cured, transfigured, beneath the lash of some intense emotion.

A last time did Pierre endeavour to see and hear no more, for he felt that the irreparable ruin of all belief in the miraculous was in him. And, in spite of his efforts, in spite of the ardour with which he began to cry, "Jesus, son of David, heal our sick!" he still saw, he still heard Beauclair telling him, in his calm, smiling manner how the miracle would take place, like a lightning flash, at the moment of extreme emotion, under the decisive circumstance which would complete the loosening of the muscles. The patient would rise and walk in a wild transport of joy, her legs would all at once be light again, relieved of the weight which had so long made them like lead, as though this weight had melted, fallen to the ground. But above all, the weight which bore upon the lower part of the trunk, which rose, ravaged the breast, and strangled the throat, would this time depart in a prodigious soaring flight, a tempest blast bearing all the evil away with it. And was it not thus that, in the Middle Ages, possessed women had by the mouth cast up the Devil, by whom their flesh had so long been tortured? And Beauclair had added that Marie would at last become a woman, that in that moment of supreme joy she would cease to be a child, that although seemingly worn out by her prolonged dream of suffering, she would all at once be restored to resplendent health, with beaming face, and eyes full of life.

Pierre looked at her, and his trouble increased still more on seeing her so wretched in her little cart, so distractedly imploring health, her whole being soaring towards Our Lady of Lourdes, who gave life. Ah! might she be saved, at the cost even of his own damnation! But she was too ill; science lied like faith; he could not believe that this child, whose limbs had been dead for so many years, would indeed return to life. And, in the bewildered doubt into which he again relapsed, his bleeding heart clamoured yet more loudly, ever and ever repeating with the delirious crowd: "Lord, son of David, heal our sick!—Lord, son of David, heal our sick!"

At that moment a tumult arose agitating one and all. People shuddered, faces were turned and raised. It was the cross of the four-o'clock procession, a little behind time that day, appearing from beneath one of the arches of the monumental gradient way. There was such applause and such violent, instinctive pushing that Berthaud, waving his arms, commanded the bearers to thrust the crowd back by pulling strongly on the cords. Overpowered for a moment, the bearers had to throw themselves backward with sore hands; however, they ended by somewhat enlarging the reserved path, along which the procession was then able to slowly wend its way. At the head came a superb beadle, all blue and gold, followed by the processional cross, a tall cross shining like a star. Then followed the delegations of the different pilgrimages with their banners, standards of velvet and satin, embroidered with metal and bright silk, adorned with painted figures, and bearing the names of towns: Versailles, Rheims, Orleans, Poitiers, and Toulouse. One, which was quite white, magnificently rich, displayed in red letters the inscription "Association of Catholic Working Men's Clubs." Then came the clergy, two or three hundred priests in simple cassocks, about a hundred in surplices, and some fifty clothed in golden chasubles, effulgent like stars. They all carried lighted candles, and sang the "Laudate Sion Salvatorem" in full voices. And then the canopy appeared in royal pomp, a canopy of purple silk, braided with gold, and upheld by four ecclesiastics, who, it could be seen, had been selected from among the most robust. Beneath it, between two other priests who assisted him, was Abbe Judaine, vigorously clasping the Blessed Sacrament with both hands, as Berthaud had recommended him to do;

and the somewhat uneasy glances that he cast on the encroaching crowd right and left showed how anxious he was that no injury should befall the heavy divine monstrance, whose weight was already straining his wrists. When the slanting sun fell upon him in front, the monstrance itself looked like another sun. Choir-boys meantime were swinging censers in the blinding glow which gave splendour to the entire procession; and, finally, in the rear, there was a confused mass of pilgrims, a flock-like tramping of believers and sightseers all aflame, hurrying along, and blocking the track with their ever-rolling waves.

Father Massias had returned to the pulpit a moment previously; and this time he had devised another pious exercise. After the burning cries of faith, hope, and love that he threw forth, he all at once commanded absolute silence, in order that one and all might, with closed lips, speak to God in secret for a few minutes. These sudden spells of silence falling upon the vast crowd, these minutes of mute prayer, in which all souls unbosomed their secrets, were deeply, wonderfully impressive. Their solemnity became formidable; you heard desire, the immense desire for life, winging its flight on high. Then Father Massias invited the sick alone to speak, to implore God to grant them what they asked of His almighty power. And, in response, came a pitiful lamentation, hundreds of tremulous, broken voices rising amidst a concert of sobs. "Lord Jesus, if it please Thee, Thou canst cure me!"—"Lord Jesus take pity on Thy child, who is dying of love!"—"Lord Jesus, grant that I may see, grant that I may hear, grant that I may walk!" And, all at once, the shrill voice of a little girl, light and vivacious as the notes of a flute, rose above the universal sob, repeating in the distance: "Save the others, save the others, Lord Jesus!" Tears streamed from every eye; these supplications upset all hearts, threw the hardest into the frenzy of charity, into a sublime disorder which would have impelled them to open their breasts with both hands, if by doing so they could have given their neighbours their health and youth. And then Father Massias, not letting this enthusiasm abate, resumed his cries, and again lashed the delirious crowd with them; while Father Fourcade himself sobbed on one of the steps of the pulpit, raising his streaming face to heaven as though to command God to descend on earth.

But the procession had arrived; the delegations, the priests, had ranged themselves on the right and left; and, when the canopy entered the space reserved to the sick in front of the Grotto, when the sufferers perceived Jesus the Host, the Blessed Sacrament, shining like a sun, in the hands of Abbe Judaine, it became impossible to direct the prayers, all voices mingled together, and all will was borne away by vertigo. The cries, calls, entreaties broke, lapsing into groans. Human forms rose from pallets of suffering; trembling arms were stretched forth; clenched hands seemingly desired to clutch at the miracle on the way. "Lord Jesus, save us, for we perish!"—"Lord Jesus, we worship Thee; heal us!"—"Lord Jesus, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God; heal us!" Thrice did the despairing, exasperated voices give vent to the supreme lamentation in a clamour which rushed up to Heaven; and the tears redoubled, flooding all the burning faces which desire transformed. At one moment, the delirium became so great, the instinctive leap toward the Blessed Sacrament seemed so irresistible, that Berthaud placed the bearers who were there in a chain about it. This was the extreme protective manoeuvre, a hedge of bearers drawn up on either side of the canopy, each placing an arm firmly round his neighbour's neck, so as to establish a sort of living wall. Not the smallest aperture was left in it; nothing whatever could pass. Still, these human barriers staggered under the pressure of the unfortunate creatures who hungered for life, who wished to touch, to kiss Jesus; and, oscillating and recoiling, the bearers were at last thrust against the canopy they were defending, and the canopy itself began swaying among the crowd, ever in danger of being swept away like some holy bark in peril of being wrecked.

Then, at the very climax of this holy frenzy, the miracles began amidst supplications and sobs, as when the heavens open during a storm, and a thunderbolt falls on earth. A paralytic woman rose and cast aside her crutches. There was a piercing yell, and another woman appeared erect on her mattress, wrapped in a white blanket as in a winding sheet; and people said it was a half-dead consumptive who had thus been resuscitated. Then grace fell upon two others in quick succession: a blind woman suddenly perceived the Grotto in a flame; a dumb woman fell on both her knees, thanking the Blessed Virgin in a loud, clear voice. And all in a like way prostrated themselves at the feet of Our Lady of Lourdes, distracted with joy and gratitude.

But Pierre had not taken his eyes off Marie, and he was overcome with tender emotion at what he saw. The sufferer's eyes were still expressionless, but they had dilated, while her poor, pale face, with its heavy mask, was contracted as if she were suffering frightfully. She did not speak in her despair; she undoubtedly thought that she was again in the clutches of her ailment. But all at once, when the Blessed Sacrament passed by, and she saw the star-like monstrance sparkling in the sun, a sensation of dizziness came over her. She imagined herself struck by lightning. Her eyes caught fire from the glare which flashed upon her, and at last regained their flame of life, shining out like stars. And under the influence of a wave of blood her face became animated, suffused with colour, beaming with a smile of joy and health. And, suddenly, Pierre saw her rise, stand upright in her little car, staggering, stuttering,

and finding in her mind only these caressing words: "Oh, my friend! Oh, my friend!"

He hurriedly drew near in order to support her. But she drove him back with a gesture. She was regaining strength, looking so touching, so beautiful, in the little black woollen gown and slippers which she always wore; tall and slender, too, and crowned as with a halo of gold by her beautiful flaxen hair, which was covered with a simple piece of lace. The whole of her virgin form was quivering as if some powerful fermentation had regenerated her. First of all, it was her legs that were relieved of the chains that bound them; and then, while she felt the spirit of life—the life of woman, wife, and mother—within her, there came a final agony, an enormous weight that rose to her very throat. Only, this time, it did not linger there, did not stifle her, but burst from her open mouth, and flew away in a cry of sublime joy.

"I am cured!—I am cured!"

Then there was an extraordinary sight. The blanket lay at her feet, she was triumphant, she had a superb, glowing face. And her cry of cure had resounded with such rapturous delight that the entire crowd was distracted by it. She had become the sole point of interest, the others saw none but her, erect, grown so radiant and so divine.

"I am cured!—I am cured!"

Pierre, at the violent shock his heart had received, had begun to weep. Indeed, tears glistened again in every eye. Amidst exclamations of gratitude and praise, frantic enthusiasm passed from one to another, throwing the thousands of pilgrims who pressed forward to see into a state of violent emotion. Applause broke out, a fury of applause, whose thunder rolled from one to the other end of the valley.

However, Father Fourcade began waving his arms, and Father Massias was at last able to make himself heard from the pulpit: "God has visited us, my dear brothers, my dear sisters!" said he. "/Magnificat anima mea Dominum/, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour."

And then all the voices, the thousands of voices, began the chant of adoration and gratitude. The procession found itself at a stand-still. Abbe Judaine had been able to reach the Grotto with the monstrance, but he patiently remained there before giving the Benediction. The canopy was awaiting him outside the railings, surrounded by priests in surplices and chasubles, all a glitter of white and gold in the rays of the setting sun.

Marie, however, had knelt down, sobbing; and, whilst the canticle lasted, a burning prayer of faith and love ascended from her whole being. But the crowd wanted to see her walk, delighted women called to her, a group surrounded her, and swept her towards the Verification Office, so that the miracle might be proved true, as patent as the very light of the sun. Her box was forgotten, Pierre followed her, while she, stammering and hesitating, she who for seven years had not used her legs, advanced with adorable awkwardness, the uneasy, charming gait of a little child making its first steps; and it was so affecting, so delicious, that the young priest thought of nothing but the immense happiness of seeing her thus return to her childhood. Ah! the dear friend of infancy, the dear tenderness of long ago, so she would at last be the beautiful and charming woman that she had promised to be as a young girl when, in the little garden at Neuilly, she had looked so gay and pretty beneath the tall trees flecked with sunlight!

The crowd continued to applaud her furiously, a huge wave of people accompanied her; and all remained awaiting her egress, swarming in a fever before the door, when she had entered the office, whither Pierre only was admitted with her.

That particular afternoon there were few people at the Verification Office. The small square room, with its hot wooden walls and rudimentary furniture, its rush-bottomed chairs, and its two tables of unequal height, contained, apart from the usual staff only some five or six doctors, seated and silent. At the tables were the inspector of the piscinas and two young Abbés making entries in the registers, and consulting the sets of documents; while Father Dargeles, at one end, wrote a paragraph for his newspaper. And, as it happened, Doctor Bonamy was just then examining Elise Rouquet, who, for the third time, had come to have the increasing cicatrisation of her sore certified.

"Anyhow, gentlemen," exclaimed the doctor, "have you ever seen a lupus heal in this way so rapidly? I am aware that a new work has appeared on faith healing in which it is stated that certain sores may have a nervous origin. Only that is by no means proved in the case of lupus, and I defy a committee of doctors to assemble and explain mademoiselle's cure by ordinary means."

He paused, and turning towards Father Dargeles, inquired: "Have you noted, Father, that the suppuration has completely disappeared, and that the skin is resuming its natural colour?"

However, he did not wait for the reply, for just then Marie entered, followed by Pierre; and by her beaming radiance he immediately guessed what good-fortune was befalling him. She looked superb, admirably fitted to transport and convert the multitude. He therefore promptly dismissed Elise Rouquet, inquired the new arrival's name, and asked one of the young priests to look for her papers. Then, as she slightly staggered, he wished to seat her in the arm-chair.

"Oh no! oh no!" she exclaimed. "I am so happy to be able to use my legs!"

Pierre, with a glance, had sought for Doctor Chassigne, whom he was sorry not to see there. He remained on one side, waiting while they rummaged in the untidy drawers without being able to place their hands on the required papers. "Let's see," repeated Dr. Bonamy; "Marie de Guersaint, Marie de Guersaint. I have certainly seen that name before."

At last Raboin discovered the documents classified under a wrong letter; and when the doctor had perused the two medical certificates he became quite enthusiastic. "Here is something very interesting, gentlemen," said he. "I beg you to listen attentively. This young lady, whom you see standing here, was afflicted with a very serious lesion of the marrow. And, if one had the least doubt of it, these two certificates would suffice to convince the most incredulous, for they are signed by two doctors of the Paris faculty, whose names are well known to us all."

Then he passed the certificates to the doctors present, who read them, wagging their heads the while. It was beyond dispute; the medical men who had drawn up these documents enjoyed the reputation of being honest and clever practitioners.

"Well, gentlemen, if the diagnosis is not disputed—and it cannot be when a patient brings us documents of this value—we will now see what change has taken place in the young lady's condition."

However, before questioning her he turned towards Pierre. "Monsieur l'Abbe," said he, "you came from Paris with Mademoiselle de Guersaint, I think. Did you converse with the doctors before your departure?"

The priest shuddered amidst all his great delight.

"I was present at the consultation, monsieur," he replied.

And again the scene rose up before him. He once more saw the two doctors, so serious and rational, and he once more saw Beauclair smiling, while his colleagues drew up their certificates, which were identical. And was he, Pierre, to reduce these certificates to nothing, reveal the other diagnosis, the one that allowed of the cure being explained scientifically? The miracle had been predicted, shattered beforehand.

"You will observe, gentlemen," now resumed Dr. Bonamy, "that the presence of the Abbe gives these proofs additional weight. However, mademoiselle will now tell us exactly what she felt."

He had leant over Father Dargeles's shoulder to impress upon him that he must not forget to make Pierre play the part of a witness in the narrative.

"/Mon Dieu! gentlemen, how can I tell you?" exclaimed Marie in a halting voice, broken by her surging happiness. "Since yesterday I had felt certain that I should be cured. And yet, a little while ago, when the pins and needles seized me in the legs again, I was afraid it might only be another attack. For an instant I doubted. Then the feeling stopped. But it began again as soon as I recommenced praying. Oh! I prayed, I prayed with all my soul! I ended by surrendering myself like a child. 'Blessed Virgin, Our Lady of Lourdes, do with me as thou wilt,' I said. But the feeling did not cease, it seemed as if my blood were boiling; a voice cried to me: 'Rise! Rise!' And I felt the miracle fall on me in a cracking of all my bones, of all my flesh, as if I had been struck by lightning."

Pierre, very pale, listened to her. Beauclair had positively told him that the cure would come like a lightning flash, that under the influence of extreme excitement a sudden awakening of will so long somnolent would take place within her.

"It was my legs which the Holy Virgin first of all delivered," she continued. "I could well feel that the iron bands which bound them were gliding along my skin like broken chains. Then the weight which still suffocated me, there, in the left side, began to ascend; and I thought I was going to die, it hurt me so. But it passed my chest, it passed my throat, and I felt it there in my mouth, and spat it out violently. It was all over, I no longer had any pain, it had flown away!"

She had made a gesture expressive of the motion of a night bird beating its wings, and, lapsing into silence, stood smiling at Pierre, who was bewildered. Beauclair had told him all that beforehand, using

almost the same words and the same imagery. Point by point, his prognostics were realised, there was nothing more in the case than natural phenomena, which had been foreseen.

Raboin, however, had followed Marie's narrative with dilated eyes and the passion of a pietist of limited intelligence, ever haunted by the idea of hell. "It was the devil," he cried; "it was the devil that she spat out!"

Doctor Bonamy, who was more wary, made him hold his tongue. And turning towards the doctors he said: "Gentlemen, you know that we always avoid pronouncing the big word of miracle here. Only here is a fact, and I am curious to know how any of you can explain it by natural means. Seven years ago this young lady was struck with serious paralysis, evidently due to a lesion of the marrow. And that cannot be denied; the certificates are there, irrefutable. She could no longer walk, she could no longer make a movement without a cry of pain, she had reached that extreme state of exhaustion which precedes but by little an unfortunate issue. All at once, however, here she rises, walks, laughs, and beams on us. The paralysis has completely disappeared, no pain remains, she is as well as you and I. Come, gentlemen, approach, examine her, and tell me what has happened."

He triumphed. Not one of the doctors spoke. Two, who were doubtless true Catholics, had shown their approval of his speech by their vigorous nods, while the others remained motionless, with a constrained air, not caring to mix themselves up in the business. However, a little thin man, whose eyes shone behind the glasses he was wearing, ended by rising to take a closer look at Marie. He caught hold of her hand, examined the pupils of her eyes, and merely seemed preoccupied by the air of transfiguration which she wore. Then, in a very courteous manner, without even showing a desire to discuss the matter, he came back and sat down again.

"The case is beyond science, that is all I can assume," concluded Doctor Bonamy, victoriously. "I will add that we have no convalescence here; health is at once restored, full, entire. Observe the young lady. Her eyes are bright, her colour is rosy, her physiognomy has recovered its lively gaiety. Without doubt, the healing of the tissues will proceed somewhat slowly, but one can already say that mademoiselle has been born again. Is it not so, Monsieur l'Abbe, you who have seen her so frequently; you no longer recognise her, eh?"

"That's true, that's true," stammered Pierre.

And, in fact, she already appeared strong to him, her cheeks full and fresh, gaily blooming. But Beauclair had also foreseen this sudden joyful change, this straightening and resplendency of her invalid frame, when life should re-enter it, with the will to be cured and be happy. Once again, however, had Doctor Bonamy leant over Father Dargeles, who was finishing his note, a brief but fairly complete account of the affair. They exchanged a few words in low tones, consulting together, and the doctor ended by saying: "You have witnessed these marvels, Monsieur l'Abbe, so you will not refuse to sign the careful report which the reverend Father has drawn up for publication in the 'Journal de la Grotte.'"

He—Pierre—sign that page of error and falsehood! A revolt roused him, and he was on the point of shouting out the truth. But he felt the weight of his cassock on his shoulders; and, above all, Marie's divine joy filled his heart. He was penetrated with deep happiness at seeing her saved. Since they had ceased questioning her she had come and leant on his arm, and remained smiling at him with eyes full of enthusiasm.

"Oh, my, friend, thank the Blessed Virgin!" she murmured in a low voice.
"She has been so good to me; I am now so well, so beautiful, so young!
And how pleased my father, my poor father, will be!"

Then Pierre signed. Everything was collapsing within him, but it was enough that she should be saved; he would have thought it sacrilegious to interfere with the faith of that child, the great pure faith which had healed her.

When Marie reappeared outside the office, the applause began afresh, the crowd clapped their hands. It now seemed that the miracle was official. However, certain charitable persons, fearing that she might again fatigue herself and again require her little car, which she had abandoned before the Grotto, had brought it to the office, and when she found it there she felt deeply moved. Ah! that box in which she had lived so many years, that rolling coffin in which she had sometimes imagined herself buried alive, how many tears, how much despair, how many bad days it had witnessed! And, all at once, the idea occurred to her that it had so long been linked with her sufferings, it ought also to share her triumph. It was a sudden inspiration, a kind of holy folly, that made her seize the handle.

At that moment the procession passed by, returning from the Grotto, where Abbe Judaine had pronounced the Benediction. And thereupon Marie, dragging the little car, placed herself behind the

canopy. And, in her slippers, her head covered with a strip of lace, her bosom heaving, her face erect, glowing, and superb, she walked on behind the clergy, dragging after her that car of misery, that rolling coffin, in which she had endured so much agony. And the crowd which acclaimed her, the frantic crowd, followed in her wake.

IV

TRIUMPH—DESPAIR

PIERRE also had followed Marie, and like her was behind the canopy, carried along as it were by the blast of glory which made her drag her little car along in triumph. Every moment, however, there was so much tempestuous pushing that the young priest would assuredly have fallen if a rough hand had not upheld him.

"Don't be alarmed," said a voice; "give me your arm, otherwise you won't be able to remain on your feet."

Pierre turned round, and was surprised to recognise Father Massias, who had left Father Fourcade in the pulpit in order to accompany the procession. An extraordinary fever was sustaining him, throwing him forward, as solid as a rock, with eyes glowing like live coals, and an excited face covered with perspiration.

"Take care, then!" he again exclaimed; "give me your arm."

A fresh human wave had almost swept them away. And Pierre now yielded to the support of this terrible enthusiast, whom he remembered as a fellow-student at the seminary. What a singular meeting it was, and how greatly he would have liked to possess that violent faith, that mad faith, which was making Massias pant, with his throat full of sobs, whilst he continued giving vent to the ardent entreaty "Lord Jesus, heal our sick! Lord Jesus, heal our sick!"

There was no cessation of this cry behind the canopy, where there was always a crier whose duty it was to accord no respite to the slow clemency of Heaven. At times a thick voice full of anguish, and at others a shrill and piercing voice, would arise. The Father's, which was an imperious one, was now at last breaking through sheer emotion.

"Lord Jesus, heal our sick! Lord Jesus, heal our sick!"

The rumour of Marie's wondrous cure, of the miracle whose fame would speedily fill all Christendom, had already spread from one to the other end of Lourdes; and from this had come the increased vertigo of the multitude, the attack of contagious delirium which now caused it to whirl and rush toward the Blessed Sacrament like the resistless flux of a rising tide. One and all yielded to the desire of beholding the Sacrament and touching it, of being cured and becoming happy. The Divinity was passing; and now it was not merely a question of ailing beings glowing with a desire for life, but a longing for happiness which consumed all present and raised them up with bleeding, open hearts and eager hands.

Berthaud, who feared the excesses of this religious adoration, had decided to accompany his men. He commanded them, carefully watching over the double chain of bearers beside the canopy in order that it might not be broken.

"Close your ranks—closer—closer!" he called, "and keep your arms firmly linked!"

These young men, chosen from among the most vigorous of the bearers, had an extremely difficult duty to discharge. The wall which they formed, shoulder to shoulder, with arms linked at the waist and the neck, kept on giving way under the involuntary assaults of the throng. Nobody, certainly, fancied that he was pushing, but there was constant eddying, and deep waves of people rolled towards the procession from afar and threatened to submerge it.

When the canopy had reached the middle of the Place du Rosaire, Abbe Judaine really thought that he would be unable to go any farther. Numerous conflicting currents had set in over the vast expanse, and were whirling, assailing him from all sides, so that he had to halt under the swaying canopy, which shook like a sail in a sudden squall on the open sea. He held the Blessed Sacrament aloft with his numbed hands, each moment fearing that a final push would throw him over; for he fully realised that the golden monstrance, radiant like a sun, was the one passion of all that multitude, the Divinity they demanded to kiss, in order that they might lose themselves in it, even though they should annihilate it in doing so. Accordingly, while standing there, the priest anxiously turned his eyes on Berthaud.

"Let nobody pass!" called the latter to the bearers—"nobody! The orders are precise; you hear me?"

Voices, however, were rising in supplication on all sides, wretched beings were sobbing with arms outstretched and lips protruding, in the wild desire that they might be allowed to approach and kneel at the priest's feet. What divine grace it would be to be thrown upon the ground and trampled under foot by the whole procession!* An infirm old man displayed his withered hand in the conviction that it would be made sound again were he only allowed to touch the monstrance. A dumb woman wildly pushed her way through the throng with her broad shoulders, in order that she might loosen her tongue by a kiss. Others were shouting, imploring, and even clenching their fists in their rage with those cruel men who denied cure to their bodily sufferings and their mental wretchedness. The orders to keep them back were rigidly enforced, however, for the most serious accidents were feared.

* One is here irresistibly reminded of the car of Juggernaut, and of the Hindoo fanatics throwing themselves beneath its wheels in the belief that they would thus obtain an entrance into Paradise.
—Trans.

"Nobody, nobody!" repeated Berthaud; "let nobody whatever pass!"

There was a woman there, however, who touched every heart with compassion. Clad in wretched garments, bareheaded, her face wet with tears, she was holding in her arms a little boy of ten years or so, whose limp, paralysed legs hung down inertly. The lad's weight was too great for one so weak as herself, still she did not seem to feel it. She had brought the boy there, and was now entreating the bearers with an invincible obstinacy which neither words nor hustling could conquer.

At last, as Abbe Judaine, who felt deeply moved, beckoned to her to approach, two of the bearers, in deference to his compassion, drew apart, despite all the danger of opening a breach, and the woman then rushed forward with her burden, and fell in a heap before the priest. For a moment he rested the foot of the monstrance on the child's head, and the mother herself pressed her eager, longing lips to it; and, as they started off again, she wished to remain behind the canopy, and followed the procession, with streaming hair and panting breast, staggering the while under the heavy burden, which was fast exhausting her strength.

They managed, with great difficulty, to cross the remainder of the Place du Rosaire, and then the ascent began, the glorious ascent by way of the monumental incline; whilst upon high, on the fringe of heaven, the Basilica reared its slim spire, whence pealing bells were winging their flight, sounding the triumphs of Our Lady of Lourdes. And now it was towards an apotheosis that the canopy slowly climbed, towards the lofty portal of the high-perched sanctuary which stood open, face to face with the Infinite, high above the huge multitude whose waves continued soaring across the valley's squares and avenues. Preceding the processional cross, the magnificent beadle, all blue and silver, was already rearing the level of the Rosary cupola, the spacious esplanade formed by the roof of the lower church, across which the pilgrimage deputations began to wind, with their bright-coloured silk and velvet banners waving in the ruddy glow of the sunset. Then came the clergy, the priests in snowy surplices, and the priests in golden chasubles, likewise shining out like a procession of stars. And the censers swung, and the canopy continued climbing, without anything of its bearers being seen, so that it seemed as though a mysterious power, some troop of invisible angels, were carrying it off in this glorious ascension towards the open portal of heaven.

A sound of chanting had burst forth; the voices in the procession no longer called for the healing of the sick, now that the /cortege/ had extricated itself from amidst the crowd. The miracle had been worked, and they were celebrating it with the full power of their lungs, amidst the pealing of the bells and the quivering gaiety of the atmosphere.

"/Magnificat anima mea Dominum/"—they began. "My soul doth magnify the Lord."

'Twas the song of gratitude, already chanted at the Grotto, and again springing from every heart: "/Et exsultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo/." "And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour."

Meantime it was with increasing, overflowing joy that Marie took part in that radiant ascent, by the colossal gradient way, towards the glowing Basilica. It seemed to her, as she continued climbing, that she was growing stronger and stronger, that her legs, so long lifeless, became firmer at each step. The little car which she victoriously dragged behind her was like the earthly tenement of her illness, the /inferno/ whence the Blessed Virgin had extricated her, and although its handle was making her hands sore, she nevertheless wished to pull it up yonder with her, in order that she might cast it at last at the feet of the Almighty. No obstacle could stay her course, she laughed through the big tears which were falling on her cheeks, her bosom was swelling, her demeanour becoming warlike. One of her slippers had become unfastened, and the strip of lace had fallen from her head to her shoulders. Nevertheless,

with her lovely fair hair crowning her like a helmet and her face beaming brightly, she still marched on and on with such an awakening of will and strength that, behind her, you could hear her car leap and rattle over the rough slope of the flagstones, as though it had been a mere toy.

Near Marie was Pierre, still leaning on the arm of Father Massias, who had not relinquished his hold. Lost amidst the far-spreading emotion, the young priest was unable to reflect. Moreover his companion's sonorous voice quite deafened him.

"/Deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles/." "He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble."

On Pierre's other side, the right, Berthaud, who no longer had any cause for anxiety, was now also following the canopy. He had given his bearers orders to break their chain, and was gazing with an expression of delight on the human sea through which the procession had lately passed. The higher they the incline, the more did the Place du Rosaire and the avenues and paths of the gardens expand below them, black with the swarming multitude. It was a bird's-eye view of a whole nation, an ant-hill which ever increased in size, spreading farther and farther away. "Look!" Berthaud at last exclaimed to Pierre. "How vast and how beautiful it is! Ah! well, the year won't have been a bad one after all."

Looking upon Lourdes as a centre of propaganda, where his political rancour found satisfaction, he always rejoiced when there was a numerous pilgrimage, as in his mind it was bound to prove unpleasant to the Government. Ah! thought he, if they had only been able to bring the working classes of the towns thither, and create a Catholic democracy. "Last year we scarcely reached the figure of two hundred thousand pilgrims," he continued, "but we shall exceed it this year, I hope." And then, with the gay air of the jolly fellow that he was, despite his sectarian passions, he added: "Well, 'pon my word, I was really pleased just now when there was such a crush. Things are looking up, I thought, things are looking up."

Pierre, however, was not listening to him; his mind had been struck by the grandeur of the spectacle. That multitude, which spread out more and more as the procession rose higher and higher above it, that magnificent valley which was hollowed out below and ever became more and more extensive, displaying afar off its gorgeous horizon of mountains, filled him with quivering admiration. His mental trouble was increased by it all, and seeking Marie's glance, he waved his arm to draw her attention to the vast circular expanse of country. And his gesture deceived her, for in the purely spiritual excitement that possessed her she did not behold the material spectacle he pointed at, but thought that he was calling earth to witness the prodigious favours which the Blessed Virgin had heaped upon them both; for she imagined that he had had his share of the miracle, and that in the stroke of grace which had set her erect with her flesh healed, he, so near to her that their hearts mingled, had felt himself enveloped and raised by the same divine power, his soul saved from doubt, conquered by faith once more. How could he have witnessed her wondrous cure, indeed, without being convinced? Moreover, she had prayed so fervently for him outside the Grotto on the previous night. And now, therefore, to her excessive delight, she espied him transfigured like herself, weeping and laughing, restored to God again. And this lent increased force to her blissful fever; she dragged her little car along with unwearying hands, and—as though it were their double cross, her own redemption and her friend's redemption which she was carrying up that incline with its resounding flagstones—she would have liked to drag it yet farther, for leagues and leagues, ever higher and higher, to the most inaccessible summits, to the transplendent threshold of Paradise itself.

"O Pierre, Pierre!" she stammered, "how sweet it is that this great happiness should have fallen on us together—yes, together! I prayed for it so fervently, and she granted my prayer, and saved you even in saving me. Yes, I felt your soul mingling with my own. Tell me that our mutual prayers have been granted, tell me that I have won your salvation even as you have won mine!"

He understood her mistake and shuddered.

"If you only knew," she continued, "how great would have been my grief had I thus ascended into light alone. Oh! to be chosen without you, to soar yonder without you! But with you, Pierre, it is rapturous delight! We have been saved together, we shall be happy forever! I feel all needful strength for happiness, yes, strength enough to raise the world!"

And in spite of everything, he was obliged to answer her and lie, revolting at the idea of spoiling, dimming that great and pure felicity. "Yes, yes, be happy, Marie," he said, "for I am very happy myself, and all our sufferings are redeemed."

But even while he spoke he felt a deep rending within him, as though a brutal hatchet-stroke were parting them forever. Amidst their common sufferings, she had hitherto remained the little friend of childhood's days, the first artlessly loved woman, whom he knew to be still his own, since she could

belong to none. But now she was cured, and he remained alone in his hell, repeating to himself that she would never more be his! This sudden thought so upset him that he averted his eyes, in despair at reaping such suffering from the prodigious felicity with which she exulted.

However the chant went on, and Father Massias, hearing nothing and seeing nothing, absorbed as he was in his glowing gratitude to God, shouted the final verse in a thundering voice: "/Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros, Abraham, et semini ejus in saecula/." "As He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever!"

Yet another incline had to be climbed, yet another effort had to be made up that rough acclivity, with its large slippery flagstones. And the procession rose yet higher, and the ascent still went on in the full, bright light. There came a last turn, and the wheels of Marie's car grated against a granite curb. Then, still higher, still and ever higher, did it roll until it finally reached what seemed to be the very fringe of heaven.

And all at once the canopy appeared on the summit of the gigantic inclined ways, on the stone balcony overlooking the stretch of country outside the portal of the Basilica. Abbe Judaine stepped forward holding the Blessed Sacrament aloft with both hands. Marie, who had pulled her car up the balcony steps, was near him, her heart beating from her exertion, her face all aglow amidst the gold of her loosened hair. Then all the clergy, the snowy surplices, and the dazzling chasubles ranged themselves behind, whilst the banners waved like bunting decking the white balustrades. And a solemn minute followed.

From on high there could have been no grander spectacle. First, immediately below, there was the multitude, the human sea with its dark waves, its heaving billows, now for a moment stilled, amidst which you only distinguished the small pale specks of the faces uplifted towards the Basilica, in expectation of the Benediction; and as far as the eye could reach, from the place du Rosaire to the Gave, along the paths and avenues and across the open spaces, even to the old town in the distance; those little pale faces multiplied and multiplied, all with lips parted, and eyes fixed upon the august heaven was about to open to their gaze.

Then the vast amphitheatre of slopes and hills and mountains surged aloft, ascended upon all sides, crests following crests, until they faded away in the far blue atmosphere. The numerous convents among the trees on the first of the northern slopes, beyond the torrent—those of the Carmelites, the Dominicans, the Assumptionists, and the Sisters of Nevers—were coloured by a rosy reflection from the fire-like glow of the sunset. Then wooded masses rose one above the other, until they reached the heights of Le Buala, which were surmounted by the Serre de Julos, in its turn capped by the Miramont.

Deep valleys opened on the south, narrow gorges between piles of gigantic rocks whose bases were already steeped in lakes of bluish shadow, whilst the summits sparkled with the smiling farewell of the sun. The hills of Visens upon this side were empurpled, and shewed like a promontory of coral, in front of the stagnant lake of the ether, which was bright with a sapphire-like transparency. But, on the east, in front of you, the horizon again spread out to the very point of intersection of the seven valleys. The castle which had formerly guarded them still stood with its keep, its lofty walls, its black outlines—the outlines of a fierce fortress of feudal time,—upon the rock whose base was watered by the Gave; and upon this side of the stern old pile was the new town, looking quite gay amidst its gardens, with its swarm of white house-fronts, its large hotels, its lodging-houses, and its fine shops, whose windows were glowing like live embers; whilst, behind the castle, the discoloured roofs of old Lourdes spread out in confusion, in a ruddy light which hovered over them like a cloud of dust. At this late hour, when the declining luminary was sinking in royal splendour behind the little Gers and the big Gers, those two huge ridges of bare rock, spotted with patches of short herbage, formed nothing but a neutral, somewhat violet, background, as though, indeed, they were two curtains of sober hue drawn across the margin of the horizon.

And higher and still higher, in front of this immensity, did Abbe Judaine with both hands raise the Blessed Sacrament. He moved it slowly from one to the other horizon, causing it to describe a huge sign of the cross against the vault of heaven. He saluted the convents, the heights of Le Buala, the Serre de Julos, and the Miramont, upon his left; he saluted the huge fallen rocks of the dim valleys, and the empurpled hills of Visens, on his right; he saluted the new and the old town, the castle bathed by the Gave, the big and the little Gers, already drowsy, in front of him; and he saluted the woods, the torrents, the mountains, the faint chains linking the distant peaks, the whole earth, even beyond the visible horizon: Peace upon earth, hope and consolation to mankind! The multitude below had quivered beneath that great sign of the cross which enveloped it. It seemed as though a divine breath were passing, rolling those billows of little pale faces which were as numerous as the waves of an ocean. A loud murmur of adoration ascended; all those parted lips proclaimed the glory of God when, in the rays of the setting sun, the illumined monstrance again shone forth like another sun, a sun of pure gold,

describing the sign of the cross in streaks of flame upon the threshold of the Infinite.

The banners, the clergy, with Abbe Judaine under the canopy, were already returning to the Basilica, when Marie, who was also entering it, still dragging her car by the handle, was stopped by two ladies, who kissed her, weeping. They were Madame de Jonquiere and her daughter Raymonde, who had come thither to witness the Benediction, and had been told of the miracle.

"Ah! my dear child, what happiness!" repeated the lady-hospitaller; "and how proud I am to have you in my ward! It is so precious a favour for all of us that the Blessed Virgin should have been pleased to select you."

Raymonde, meanwhile, had kept one of the young girl's hands in her own. "Will you allow me to call you my friend, mademoiselle?" said she. "I felt so much pity for you, and I am now so pleased to see you walking, so strong and beautiful already. Let me kiss you again. It will bring me happiness."

"Thank you, thank you with all my heart," Marie stammered amidst her rapture. "I am so happy, so very happy!"

"Oh! we will not leave you," resumed Madame de Jonquiere. "You hear me, Raymonde? We must follow her, and kneel beside her, and we will take her back after the ceremony."

Thereupon the two ladies joined the /cortege/, and, following the canopy, walked beside Pierre and Father Massias, between the rows of chairs which the deputations already occupied, to the very centre of the choir. The banners alone were allowed on either side of the high altar; but Marie advanced to its steps, still dragging her car, whose wheels resounded over the flagstones. She had at last brought it to the spot whither the sacred madness of her desire had longingly impelled her to drag it. She had brought it, indeed, woeful, wretched-looking as it was, into the splendour of God's house, so that it might there testify to the truth of the miracle. The threshold had scarcely been crossed when the organs burst into a hymn of triumph, the sonorous acclamation of a happy people, from amidst which there soon arose a celestial, angelic voice, of joyful shrillness and crystalline purity. Abbe Judaine had placed the Blessed Sacrament upon the altar, and the crowd was streaming into the nave, each taking a seat, installing him or herself in a corner, pending the commencement of the ceremony. Marie had at once fallen on her knees between Madame de Jonquiere and Raymonde, whose eyes were moist with tender emotion; whilst Father Massias, exhausted by the extraordinary tension of the nerves which had been sustaining him ever since his departure from the Grotto, had sunk upon the ground, sobbing, with his head between his hands. Behind him Pierre and Berthaud remained standing, the latter still busy with his superintendence, his eyes ever on the watch, seeing that good order was preserved even during the most violent outbursts of emotion.

Then, amidst all his mental confusion, increased by the deafening strains of the organ, Pierre raised his head and examined the interior of the Basilica. The nave was narrow and lofty, and streaked with bright colours, which numerous windows flooded with light. There were scarcely any aisles; they were reduced to the proportions of a mere passage running between the side-chapels and the clustering columns, and this circumstance seemed to increase the slim loftiness of the nave, the soaring of the stonework in perpendicular lines of infantile, graceful slenderness. A gilded railing, as transparent as lace, closed the choir, where the high altar, of white marble richly sculptured, arose in all its lavish chasteness. But the feature of the building which astonished you was the mass of extraordinary ornamentation which transformed the whole of it into an overflowing exhibition of embroidery and jewellery. What with all the banners and votive offerings, the perfect river of gifts which had flowed into it and remained clinging to its walls in a stream of gold and silver, velvet and silk, covering it from top to bottom, it was, so to say, the ever-glowing sanctuary of gratitude, whose thousand rich adornments seemed to be chanting a perpetual canticle of faith and thankfulness.

The banners, in particular, abounded, as innumerable as the leaves of trees. Some thirty hung from the vaulted roof, whilst others were suspended, like pictures, between the little columns around the triforium. And others, again, displayed themselves on the walls, waved in the depths of the side-chapels, and encompassed the choir with a heaven of silk, satin, and velvet. You could count them by hundreds, and your eyes grew weary of admiring them. Many of them were quite celebrated, so renowned for their skilful workmanship that talented embroideresses took the trouble to come to Lourdes on purpose to examine them. Among these were the banner of our Lady of Fourvieres, bearing the arms of the city of Lyons; the banner of Alsace, of black velvet embroidered with gold; the banner of Lorraine, on which you beheld the Virgin casting her cloak around two children; and the white and blue banner of Brittany, on which bled the sacred heart of Jesus in the midst of a halo. All empires and kingdoms of the earth were represented; the most distant lands—Canada, Brazil, Chili, Haiti—here had their flags, which, in all piety, were being offered as a tribute of homage to the Queen of Heaven.

Then, after the banners, there were other marvels, the thousands and thousands of gold and silver

hearts which were hanging everywhere, glittering on the walls like stars in the heavens. Some were grouped together in the form of mystical roses, others described festoons and garlands, others, again, climbed up the pillars, surrounded the windows, and constellated the deep, dim chapels. Below the triforium somebody had had the ingenious idea of employing these hearts to trace in tall letters the various words which the Blessed Virgin had addressed to Bernadette; and thus, around the nave, there extended a long frieze of words, the delight of the infantile minds which busied themselves with spelling them. It was a swarming, a prodigious resplendency of hearts, whose infinite number deeply impressed you when you thought of all the hands, trembling with gratitude, which had offered them. Moreover, the adornments comprised many other votive offerings, and some of quite an unexpected description. There were bridal wreaths and crosses of honour, jewels and photographs, chaplets, and even spurs, in glass cases or frames. There were also the epaulets and swords of officers, together with a superb sabre, left there in memory of a miraculous conversion.

But all this was not sufficient; other riches, riches of every kind, shone out on all sides—marble statues, diadems enriched with brilliants, a marvellous carpet designed at Blois and embroidered by ladies of all parts of France, and a golden palm with ornaments of enamel, the gift of the sovereign pontiff. The lamps suspended from the vaulted roof, some of them of massive gold and the most delicate workmanship, were also gifts. They were too numerous to be counted, they studded the nave with stars of great price. Immediately in front of the tabernacle there was one, a masterpiece of chasing, offered by Ireland. Others—one from Lille, one from Valence, one from Macao in far-off China—were veritable jewels, sparkling with precious stones. And how great was the resplendency when the choir's score of chandeliers was illumined, when the hundreds of lamps and the hundreds of candles burned all together, at the great evening ceremonies! The whole church then became a conflagration, the thousands of gold and silver hearts reflecting all the little flames with thousands of fiery scintillations. It was like a huge and wondrous brasier; the walls streamed with live flakes of light; you seemed to be entering into the blinding glory of Paradise itself; whilst on all sides the innumerable banners spread out their silk, their satin, and their velvet, embroidered with sanguifluous sacred hearts, victorious saints, and Virgins whose kindly smiles engendered miracles.

Ah! how many ceremonies had already displayed their pomp in that Basilica! Worship, prayer, chanting, never ceased there. From one end of the year to the other incense smoked, organs roared, and kneeling multitudes prayed there with their whole souls. Masses, vespers, sermons, were continually following one upon another; day by day the religious exercises began afresh, and each festival of the Church was celebrated with unparalleled magnificence. The least noteworthy anniversary supplied a pretext for pompous solemnities. Each pilgrimage was granted its share of the dazzling resplendency. It was necessary that those suffering ones and those humble ones who had come from such long distances should be sent home consoled and enraptured, carrying with them a vision of Paradise espied through its opening portals. They beheld the luxurious surroundings of the Divinity, and would forever remain enraptured by the sight. In the depths of bare, wretched rooms, indeed, by the side of humble pallets of suffering throughout all Christendom, a vision of the Basilica with its blazing riches continually arose like a vision of fortune itself, like a vision of the wealth of that life to be, into which the poor would surely some day enter after their long, long misery in this terrestrial sphere.

Pierre, however, felt no delight; no consolation, no hope, came to him as he gazed upon all the splendour. His frightful feeling of discomfort was increasing, all was becoming black within him, with that blackness of the tempest which gathers when men's thoughts and feelings pant and shriek. He had felt immense desolation rising in his soul ever since Marie, crying that she was healed, had risen from her little car and walked along with such strength and fulness of life. Yet he loved her like a passionately attached brother, and had experienced unlimited happiness on seeing that she no longer suffered. Why, therefore, should her felicity bring him such agony? He could now no longer gaze at her, kneeling there, radiant amidst her tears, with beauty recovered and increased, without his poor heart bleeding as from some mortal wound. Still he wished to remain there, and so, averting his eyes, he tried to interest himself in Father Massias, who was still shaking with violent sobbing on the flagstones, and whose prostration and annihilation, amidst the consuming illusion of divine love, he sorely envied. For a moment, moreover, he questioned Berthaud, feigning to admire some banner and requesting information respecting it.

"Which one?" asked the superintendent of the bearers; "that lace banner over there?"

"Yes, that one on the left."

"Oh! it is a banner offered by Le Puy. The arms are those of Le Puy and Lourdes linked together by the Rosary. The lace is so fine that if you crumpled the banner up, you could hold it in the hollow of your hand."

However, Abbe Judaine was now stepping forward; the ceremony was about to begin. Again did the organs resound, and again was a canticle chanted, whilst, on the altar, the Blessed Sacrament looked like the sovereign planet amidst the scintillations of the gold and silver hearts, as innumerable as stars. And then Pierre lacked the strength to remain there any longer. Since Marie had Madame de Jonquiere and Raymonde with her, and they would accompany her back, he might surely go off by himself, vanish into some shadowy corner, and there, at last, vent his grief. In a few words he excused himself, giving his appointment with Doctor Chassigne as a pretext for his departure. However, another fear suddenly came to him, that of being unable to leave the building, so densely did the serried throng of believers bar the open doorway. But immediately afterwards he had an inspiration, and, crossing the sacristy, descended into the crypt by the narrow interior stairway.

Deep silence and sepulchral gloom suddenly succeeded to the joyous chants and prodigious radiance of the Basilica above. Cut in the rock, the crypt formed two narrow passages, parted by a massive block of stone which upheld the nave, and conducting to a subterranean chapel under the apse, where some little lamps remained burning both day and night. A dim forest of pillars rose up there, a mystic terror reigned in that semi-obscurity where the mystery ever quivered. The chapel walls remained bare, like the very stones of the tomb, in which all men must some day sleep the last sleep. And along the passages, against their sides, covered from top to bottom with marble votive offerings, you only saw a double row of confessionals; for it was here, in the lifeless tranquillity of the bowels of the earth, that sins were confessed; and there were priests, speaking all languages, to absolve the sinners who came thither from the four corners of the world.

At that hour, however, when the multitude was thronging the Basilica above, the crypt had become quite deserted. Not a soul, save Pierre's, throbbed there ever so faintly; and he, amidst that deep silence, that darkness, that coolness of the grave, fell upon his knees. It was not, however, through any need of prayer and worship, but because his whole being was giving way beneath his crushing mental torment. He felt a torturing longing to be able to see clearly within himself. Ah! why could he not plunge even more deeply into the heart of things, reflect, understand, and at last calm himself.

And it was a fearful agony that he experienced. He tried to remember all the minutes that had gone by since Marie, suddenly springing from her pallet of wretchedness, had raised her cry of resurrection. Why had he even then, despite his fraternal joy in seeing her erect, felt such an awful sensation of discomfort, as though, indeed, the greatest of all possible misfortunes had fallen upon him? Was he jealous of the divine grace? Did he suffer because the Virgin, whilst healing her, had forgotten him, whose soul was so afflicted? He remembered how he had granted himself a last delay, fixed a supreme appointment with Faith for the moment when the Blessed Sacrament should pass by, were Marie only cured; and she was cured, and still he did not believe, and henceforth there was no hope, for never, never would he be able to believe. Therein lay the bare, bleeding sore. The truth burst upon him with blinding cruelty and certainty—she was saved, he was lost. That pretended miracle which had restored her to life had, in him, completed the ruin of all belief in the supernatural. That which he had, for a moment, dreamed of seeking, and perhaps finding, at Lourdes,—naive faith, the happy faith of a little child,—was no longer possible, would never bloom again after that collapse of the miraculous, that cure which Beauclair had foretold, and which had afterwards come to pass, exactly as had been predicted. Jealous! No—he was not jealous; but he was ravaged, full of mortal sadness at thus remaining all alone in the icy desert of his intelligence, regretting the illusion, the lie, the divine love of the simpleminded, for which henceforth there was no room in his heart.

A flood of bitterness stifled him, and tears started from his eyes. He had slipped on to the flagstones, prostrated by his anguish. And, by degrees, he remembered the whole delightful story, from the day when Marie, guessing how he was tortured by doubt, had become so passionately eager for his conversion, taking hold of his hand in the gloom, retaining it in her own, and stammering that she would pray for him—oh! pray for him with her whole soul. She forgot herself, she entreated the Blessed Virgin to save her friend rather than herself if there were but one grace that she could obtain from her Divine Son. Then came another memory, the memory of the delightful hours which they had spent together amid the dense darkness of the trees during the night procession. There, again, they had prayed for one another, mingled one in the other with so ardent a desire for mutual happiness that, for a moment, they had attained to the very depths of the love which gives and immolates itself. And now their long, tear-drenched tenderness, their pure idyl of suffering, was ending in this brutal separation; she on her side saved, radiant amidst the hosannas of the triumphant Basilica; and he lost, sobbing with wretchedness, bowed down in the depths of the dark crypt in an icy, grave-like solitude. It was as though he had just lost her again, and this time forever and forever.

All at once Pierre felt the sharp stab which this thought dealt his heart. He at last understood his pain—a sudden light illumined the terrible crisis of woe amidst which he was struggling. He had lost Marie for the first time on the day when he had become a priest, saying to himself that he might well renounce his manhood since she, stricken in her sex by incurable illness, would never be a woman. But

behold! she /was/ cured. Behold! she /had/ become a woman. She had all at once appeared to him very strong, very beautiful, living, and desirable. He, who was dead, however, could not become a man again. Never more would he be able to raise the tombstone which crushed and imprisoned his flesh. She fled away alone, leaving him in the cold grave. The whole wide world was opening before her with smiling happiness, with the love which laughs in the sunlit paths, with the husband, with children, no doubt. Whereas he, buried, as it were to his shoulders, had naught of his body free, save his brain, and that remained free, no doubt, in order that he might suffer the more. She had still been his so long as she had not belonged to another; and if he had been enduring such agony during the past hour, it was only through this final rending which, this time, parted her from him forever and forever.

Then rage shook Pierre from head to foot. He was tempted to return to the Basilica, and cry the truth aloud to Marie. The miracle was a lie! The helpful beneficence of an all-powerful Divinity was but so much illusion! Nature alone had acted, life had conquered once again. And he would have given proofs: he would have shown how life, the only sovereign, worked for health amid all the sufferings of this terrestrial sphere. And then they would have gone off together; they would have fled far, far away, that they might be happy. But a sudden terror took possession of him. What! lay hands upon that little spotless soul, kill all belief in it, fill it with the ruins which worked such havoc in his own soul? It all at once occurred to him that this would be odious sacrilege. He would afterwards become horrified with himself, he would look upon himself as her murderer were he some day to realise that he was unable to give her a happiness equal to that which she would have lost. Perhaps, too, she would not believe him. And, moreover, would she ever consent to marry a priest who had broken his vows? She who would always retain the sweet and never-to-be-forgotten memory of how she had been healed in ecstasy! His design then appeared to him insane, monstrous, polluting. And his revolt rapidly subsided, until he only retained a feeling of infinite weariness, a sensation of a burning, incurable wound—the wound of his poor, bruised, lacerated heart.

Then, however, amidst his abandonment, the void in which he was whirling, a supreme struggle began, filling him again with agony. What should he do? His sufferings made a coward of him, and he would have liked to flee, so that he might never see Marie again. For he understood very well that he would now have to lie to her, since she thought that he was saved like herself, converted, healed in soul, even as she had been healed in body. She had told him of her joy while dragging her car up the colossal gradient way. Oh! to have had that great happiness together, together; to have felt their hearts melt and mingle one in the other! And even then he had already lied, as he would always be obliged to lie in order that he might not spoil her pure and blissful illusion. He let the last throbbings of his veins subside, and vowed that he would find sufficient strength for the sublime charity of feigning peacefulness of soul, the rapture of one who is redeemed. For he wished her to be wholly happy—without a regret, without a doubt—in the full serenity of faith, convinced that the blessed Virgin had indeed given her consent to their purely mystical union. What did his torments matter? Later on, perhaps, he might recover possession of himself. Amidst his desolate solitude of mind would there not always be a little joy to sustain him, all that joy whose consoling falsity he would leave to her?

Several minutes again elapsed, and Pierre, still overwhelmed, remained on the flagstones, seeking to calm his fever. He no longer thought, he no longer lived; he was a prey to that prostration of the entire being which follows upon great crises. But, all at once, he fancied he could hear a sound of footsteps, and thereupon he painfully rose to his feet, and feigned to be reading the inscriptions graven in the marble votive slabs along the walls. He had been mistaken—nobody was there; nevertheless, seeking to divert his mind, he continued perusing the inscriptions, at first in a mechanical kind of way, and then, little by little, feeling a fresh emotion steal over him.

The sight was almost beyond imagination. Faith, love, and gratitude displayed themselves in a hundred, a thousand ways on these marble slabs with gilded lettering. Some of the inscriptions were so artless as to provoke a smile. A colonel had sent a sculptured representation of his foot with the words: "Thou hast preserved it; grant that it may serve Thee." Farther on you read the line: "May Her protection extend to the glass trade." And then, by the frankness of certain expressions of thanks, you realised of what a strange character the appeals had been. "To Mary the Immaculate," ran one inscription, "from a father of a family, in recognition of health restored, a lawsuit won, and advancement gained." However, the memory of these instances faded away amidst the chorus of soaring, fervent cries. There was the cry of the lovers: "Paul and Anna entreat Our Lady of Lourdes to bless their union." There was the cry of the mothers in various forms: "Gratitude to Mary, who has thrice healed my child."—"Gratitude to Mary for the birth of Antoinette, whom I dedicate, like myself and all my kin, to Her."—"P. D., three years old, has been preserved to the love of his parents." And then came the cry of the wives, the cry, too, of the sick restored to health, and of the souls restored to happiness: "Protect my husband; grant that my husband may enjoy good health."—"I was crippled in both legs, and now I am healed."—"We came, and now we hope."—"I prayed, I wept, and She heard me." And there were yet other cries, cries whose veiled glow conjured up thoughts of long romances:

"Thou didst join us together; protect us, we pray Thee."—"To Mary, for the greatest of all blessings." And the same cries, the same words—gratitude, thankfulness, homage, acknowledgment,—occurred again and again, ever with the same passionate fervour. All! those hundreds, those thousands of cries which were forever graven on that marble, and from the depths of the crypt rose clamorously to the Virgin, proclaiming the everlasting devotion of the unhappy beings whom she had succoured.

Pierre did not weary of reading them, albeit his mouth was bitter and increasing desolation was filling him. So it was only he who had no succour to hope for! When so many sufferers were listened to, he alone had been unable to make himself heard! And he now began to think of the extraordinary number of prayers which must be said at Lourdes from one end of the year to the other. He tried to cast them up; those said during the days spent at the Grotto and during the nights spent at the Rosary, those said at the ceremonies at the Basilica, and those said at the sunlight and the starlight processions. But this continual entreaty of every second was beyond computation. It seemed as if the faithful were determined to weary the ears of the Divinity, determined to extort favours and forgiveness by the very multitude, the vast multitude of their prayers. The priests said that it was necessary to offer to God the acts of expiation which the sins of France required, and that when the number of these acts of expiation should be large enough, God would smite France no more. What a harsh belief in the necessity of chastisement! What a ferocious idea born of the gloomiest pessimism! How evil life must be if it were indeed necessary that such imploring cries, such cries of physical and moral wretchedness, should ever and ever ascend to Heaven!

In the midst of all his sadness, Pierre felt deep compassion penetrate his heart. He was upset by the thought that mankind should be so wretched, reduced to such a state of woe, so bare, so weak, so utterly forsaken, that it renounced its own reason to place the one sole possibility of happiness in the hallucinatory intoxication of dreams. Tears once more filled his eyes; he wept for himself and for others, for all the poor tortured beings who feel a need of stupefying and numbing their pains in order to escape from the realities of the world. He again seemed to hear the swarming, kneeling crowd of the Grotto, raising the glowing entreaty of its prayer to Heaven, the multitude of twenty and thirty thousand souls from whose midst ascended such a fervour of desire that you seemed to see it smoking in the sunlight like incense. Then another form of the exaltation of faith glowed, beneath the crypt, in the Church of the Rosary, where nights were spent in a paradise of rapture, amidst the silent delights of the communion, the mute appeals in which the whole being pines, burns, and soars aloft. And as though the cries raised before the Grotto and the perpetual adoration of the Rosary were not sufficient, that clamour of ardent entreaty burst forth afresh on the walls of the crypt around him; and here it was eternised in marble, here it would continue shrieking the sufferings of humanity even into the far-away ages. It was the marble, it was the walls themselves praying, seized by that shudder of universal woe which penetrated even the world's stones. And, at last, the prayers ascended yet higher, still higher, soared aloft from the radiant Basilica, which was humming and buzzing above him, full as it now was of a frantic multitude, whose mighty voice, bursting into a canticle of hope, he fancied he could hear through the flagstones of the nave. And it finally seemed to him that he was being whirled away, transported, as though he were indeed amidst the very vibrations of that huge wave of prayer, which, starting from the dust of the earth, ascended the tier of superposed churches, spreading from tabernacle to tabernacle, and filling even the walls with such pity that they sobbed aloud, and that the supreme cry of wretchedness pierced its way into heaven with the white spire, the lofty golden cross, above the steeple. O Almighty God, O Divinity, Helpful Power, whoever, whatever Thou mayst be, take pity upon poor mankind and make human suffering cease!

All at once Pierre was dazzled. He had followed the left-hand passage, and was coming out into broad daylight, above the inclined ways, and two affectionate arms at once caught hold of him and clasped him. It was Doctor Chassigne, whose appointment he had forgotten, and who had been waiting there to take him to visit Bernadette's room and Abbe Peyramale's church. "Oh! what joy must be yours, my child!" exclaimed the good old man. "I have just learnt the great news, the extraordinary favour which Our Lady of Lourdes has granted to your young friend. Recollect what I told you the day before yesterday. I am now at ease—you are saved!"

A last bitterness came to the young priest who was very pale. However, he was able to smile, and he gently answered: "Yes, we are saved, we are very happy."

It was the lie beginning; the divine illusion which in a spirit of charity he wished to give to others.

And then one more spectacle met Pierre's eyes. The principal door of the Basilica stood wide open, and a red sheet of light from the setting sun was enfilading the nave from one to the other end. Everything was flaring with the splendour of a conflagration—the gilt railings of the choir, the votive offerings of gold and silver, the lamps enriched with precious stones, the banners with their bright embroideries, and the swinging censers, which seemed like flying jewels. And yonder, in the depths of this burning splendour, amidst the snowy surplices and the golden chasubles, he recognised Marie,

with hair unbound, hair of gold like all else, enveloping her in a golden mantle. And the organs burst into a hymn of triumph; and the delirious people acclaimed God; and Abbe Judaine, who had again just taken the Blessed Sacrament from off the altar, raised it aloft and presented it to their gaze for the last time; and radiantly magnificent it shone out like a glory amidst the streaming gold of the Basilica, whose prodigious triumph all the bells proclaimed in clanging, flying peals.

V

CRADLE AND GRAVE

IMMEDIATELY afterwards, as they descended the steps, Doctor Chassaigne said to Pierre: "You have just seen the triumph; I will now show you two great injustices."

And he conducted him into the Rue des Petits-Fosses to visit Bernadette's room, that low, dark chamber whence she set out on the day the Blessed Virgin appeared to her.

The Rue des Petits-Fosses starts from the former Rue des Bois, now the Rue de la Grotte, and crosses the Rue du Tribunal. It is a winding lane, slightly sloping and very gloomy. The passers-by are few; it is skirted by long walls, wretched-looking houses, with mournful facades in which never a window opens. All its gaiety consists in an occasional tree in a courtyard.

"Here we are," at last said the doctor.

At the part where he had halted, the street contracted, becoming very narrow, and the house faced the high, grey wall of a barn. Raising their heads, both men looked up at the little dwelling, which seemed quite lifeless, with its narrow casements and its coarse, violet parquetry, displaying the shameful ugliness of poverty. The entrance passage down below was quite black; an old light iron gate was all that closed it; and there was a step to mount, which in rainy weather was immersed in the water of the gutter.

"Go in, my friend, go in," said the doctor. "You have only to push the gate."

The passage was long, and Pierre kept on feeling the damp wall with his hand, for fear of making a false step. It seemed to him as if he were descending into a cellar, in deep obscurity, and he could feel a slippery soil impregnated with water beneath his feet. Then at the end, in obedience to the doctor's direction, he turned to the right.

"Stoop, or you may hurt yourself," said M. Chassaigne; "the door is very low. There, here we are."

The door of the room, like the gate in the street, stood wide open, as if the place had been carelessly abandoned; and Pierre, who had stopped in the middle of the chamber, hesitating, his eyes still full of the bright daylight outside, could distinguish absolutely nothing. He had fallen into complete darkness, and felt an icy chill about the shoulders similar to the sensation that might be caused by a wet towel.

But, little by little, his eyes became accustomed to the dimness. Two windows of unequal size opened on to a narrow, interior courtyard, where only a greenish light descended, as at the bottom of a well; and to read there, in the middle of the day, it would be necessary to have a candle. Measuring about fifteen feet by twelve, the room was flagged with large uneven stones; while the principal beam and the rafters of the roof, which were visible, had darkened with time and assumed a dirty, sooty hue. Opposite the door was the chimney, a miserable plaster chimney, with a mantelpiece formed of a rotten old plank. There was a sink between this chimney and one of the windows. The walls, with their decaying, damp-stained plaster falling off by bits, were full of cracks, and turning a dirty black like the ceiling. There was no longer any furniture there; the room seemed abandoned; you could only catch a glimpse of some confused, strange objects, unrecognisable in the heavy obscurity that hung about the corners.

After a spell of silence, the doctor exclaimed "Yes, this is the room; all came from here. Nothing has been changed, with the exception that the furniture has gone. I have tried to picture how it was placed: the beds certainly stood against this wall, opposite the windows; there must have been three of them at least, for the Soubirouses were seven—the father, mother, two boys, and three girls. Think of that! Three beds filling this room! Seven persons living in this small space! All of them buried alive, without air, without light, almost without bread! What frightful misery! What lowly, pity-awaking poverty!"

But he was interrupted. A shadowy form, which Pierre at first took for an old woman, entered. It was a priest, however, the curate of the parish, who now occupied the house. He was acquainted with the doctor.

"I heard your voice, Monsieur Chassigne, and came down," said he. "So there you are, showing the room again?"

"Just so, Monsieur l' Abbe; I took the liberty. It does not inconvenience you?"

"Oh! not at all, not at all! Come as often as you please, and bring other people."

He laughed in an engaging manner, and bowed to Pierre, who, astonished by this quiet carelessness, observed: "The people who come, however, must sometimes plague you?"

The curate in his turn seemed surprised. "Indeed, no! Nobody comes. You see the place is scarcely known. Every one remains over there at the Grotto. I leave the door open so as not to be worried. But days and days often pass without my hearing even the sound of a mouse."

Pierre's eyes were becoming more and more accustomed to the obscurity; and among the vague, perplexing objects which filled the corners, he ended by distinguishing some old barrels, remnants of fowl cages, and broken tools, a lot of rubbish such as is swept away and thrown to the bottom of cellars. Hanging from the rafters, moreover, were some provisions, a salad basket full of eggs, and several bunches of big pink onions.

"And, from what I see," resumed Pierre, with a slight shudder, "you have thought that you might make use of the room?"

The curate was beginning to feel uncomfortable. "Of course, that's it," said he. "What can one do? The house is so small, I have so little space. And then you can't imagine how damp it is here; it is altogether impossible to occupy the room. And so, /mon Dieu/, little by little all this has accumulated here by itself, contrary to one's own desire."

"It has become a lumber-room," concluded Pierre.

"Oh no! hardly that. An unoccupied room, and yet in truth, if you insist on it, it is a lumber-room!"

His uneasiness was increasing, mingled with a little shame. Doctor Chassigne remained silent and did not interfere; but he smiled, and was visibly delighted at his companion's revolt against human ingratitude. Pierre, unable to restrain himself, now continued: "You must excuse me, Monsieur l'Abbe, if I insist. But just reflect that you owe everything to Bernadette; but for her Lourdes would still be one of the least known towns of France. And really it seems to me that out of mere gratitude the parish ought to have transformed this wretched room into a chapel."

"Oh! a chapel!" interrupted the curate. "It is only a question of a human creature: the Church could not make her an object of worship."

"Well, we won't say a chapel, then; but at all events there ought to be some lights and flowers—bouquets of roses constantly renewed by the piety of the inhabitants and the pilgrims. In a word, I should like some little show of affection—a touching souvenir, a picture of Bernadette—something that would delicately indicate that she deserves to have a place in all hearts. This forgetfulness and desertion are shocking. It is monstrous that so much dirt should have been allowed to accumulate!"

The curate, a poor, thoughtless, nervous man, at once adopted Pierre's views: "In reality, you are a thousand times right," said he; "but I myself have no power, I can do nothing. Whenever they ask me for the room, to set it to rights, I will give it up and remove my barrels, although I really don't know where else to put them. Only, I repeat, it does not depend on me. I can do nothing, nothing at all!" Then, under the pretext that he had to go out, he hastened to take leave and run away again, saying to Doctor Chassigne: "Remain, remain as long as you please; you are never in my way."

When the doctor once more found himself alone with Pierre he caught hold of both his hands with effusive delight. "Ah, my dear child," said he, "how pleased you have made me! How admirably you expressed to him all that has been boiling in my own heart so long! Like you, I thought of bringing some roses here every morning. I should have simply had the room cleaned, and would have contented myself with placing two large bunches of roses on the mantelpiece; for you know that I have long felt deep affection for Bernadette, and it seemed to me that those roses would be like the very flowering and perfume of her memory. Only—only—" and so saying he made a despairing gesture, "only courage failed me. Yes, I say courage, no one having yet dared to declare himself openly against the Fathers of the Grotto. One hesitates and recoils in the fear of stirring up a religious scandal. Fancy what a deplorable racket all this would create. And so those who are as indignant as I am are reduced to the necessity of holding their tongues—preferring a continuance of silence to anything else." Then, by way of conclusion, he added: "The ingratitude and rapacity of man, my dear child, are sad things to see. Each time I come into this dim wretchedness, my heart swells and I cannot restrain my tears."

He ceased speaking, and neither of them said another word, both being overcome by the extreme melancholy which the surroundings fostered. They were steeped in gloom. The dampness made them shudder as they stood there amidst the dilapidated walls and the dust of the old rubbish piled upon either side. And the idea returned to them that without Bernadette none of the prodigies which had made Lourdes a town unique in the world would have existed. It was at her voice that the miraculous spring had gushed forth, that the Grotto, bright with candles, had opened. Immense works were executed, new churches rose from the ground, giant-like causeways led up to God. An entire new city was built, as if by enchantment, with gardens, walks, quays, bridges, shops, and hotels. And people from the uttermost parts of the earth flocked thither in crowds, and the rain of millions fell with such force and so abundantly that the young city seemed likely to increase indefinitely—to fill the whole valley, from one to the other end of the mountains. If Bernadette had been suppressed none of those things would have existed, the extraordinary story would have relapsed into nothingness, old unknown Lourdes would still have been plunged in the sleep of ages at the foot of its castle. Bernadette was the sole labourer and creatress; and yet this room, whence she had set out on the day she beheld the Virgin, this cradle, indeed, of the miracle and of all the marvellous fortune of the town, was disdained, left a prey to vermin, good only for a lumber-room, where onions and empty barrels were put away.

Then the other side of the question vividly appeared in Pierre's mind, and he again seemed to see the triumph which he had just witnessed, the exaltation of the Grotto and Basilica, while Marie, dragging her little car, ascended behind the Blessed Sacrament, amidst the clamour of the multitude. But the Grotto especially shone out before him. It was no longer the wild, rocky cavity before which the child had formerly knelt on the deserted bank of the torrent; it was a chapel, transformed and enriched, a chapel illumined by a vast number of candles, where nations marched past in procession. All the noise, all the brightness, all the adoration, all the money, burst forth there in a splendour of constant victory. Here, at the cradle, in this dark, icy hole, there was not a soul, not a taper, not a hymn, not a flower. Of the infrequent visitors who came thither, none knelt or prayed. All that a few tender-hearted pilgrims had done in their desire to carry away a souvenir had been to reduce to dust, between their fingers, the half-rotten plank serving as a mantelshelf. The clergy ignored the existence of this spot of misery, which the processions ought to have visited as they might visit a station of glory. It was there that the poor child had begun her dream, one cold night, lying in bed between her two sisters, and seized with a fit of her ailment while the whole family was fast asleep. It was thence, too, that she had set out, unconsciously carrying along with her that dream, which was again to be born within her in the broad daylight and to flower so prettily in a vision such as those of the legends. And no one now followed in her footsteps. The manger was forgotten, and left in darkness—that manger where had germed the little humble seed which over yonder was now yielding such prodigious harvests, reaped by the workmen of the last hour amidst the sovereign pomp of ceremonies.

Pierre, whom the great human emotion of the story moved to tears, at last summed up his thoughts in three words, saying in a low voice, "It is Bethlehem."

"Yes," remarked Doctor Chassaigne, in his turn, "it is the wretched lodging, the chance refuge, where new religions are born of suffering and pity. And at times I ask myself if all is not better thus: if it is not better that this room should remain in its actual state of wretchedness and abandonment. It seems to me that Bernadette has nothing to lose by it, for I love her all the more when I come to spend an hour here."

He again became silent, and then made a gesture of revolt: "But no, no! I cannot forgive it—this ingratitude sets me beside myself. I told you I was convinced that Bernadette had freely gone to cloister herself at Nevers. But although no one smuggled her away, what a relief it was for those whom she had begun to inconvenience here! And they are the same men, so anxious to be the absolute masters, who at the present time endeavour by all possible means to wrap her memory in silence. Ah! my dear child, if I were to tell you all!"

Little by little he spoke out and relieved himself. Those Fathers of the Grotto, who showed such greed in trading on the work of Bernadette, dreaded her still more now that she was dead than they had done whilst she was alive. So long as she had lived, their great terror had assuredly been that she might return to Lourdes to claim a portion of the spoil; and her humility alone reassured them, for she was in nowise of a domineering disposition, and had herself chosen the dim abode of renunciation where she was destined to pass away. But at present their fears had increased at the idea that a will other than theirs might bring the relics of the visionary back to Lourdes; that, thought had, indeed, occurred to the municipal council immediately after her death; the town had wished to raise a tomb, and there had been talk of opening a subscription. The Sisters of Nevers, however, formally refused to give up the body, which they said belonged to them. Everyone felt that the Sisters were acting under the influence of the Fathers, who were very uneasy, and energetically bestirred themselves to prevent by all means in their power the return of those venerated ashes, in whose presence at Lourdes they foresaw a possible competition with the Grotto itself. Could they have imagined some such threatening

occurrence as this—a monumental tomb in the cemetery, pilgrims proceeding thither in procession, the sick feverishly kissing the marble, and miracles being worked there amidst a holy fervour? This would have been disastrous rivalry, a certain displacement of all the present devotion and prodigies. And the great, the sole fear, still and ever returned to them, that of having to divide the spoils, of seeing the money go elsewhere should the town, now taught by experience, know how to turn the tomb to account.

The Fathers were even credited with a scheme of profound craftiness. They were supposed to have the secret idea of reserving Bernadette's remains for themselves; the Sisters of Nevers having simply undertaken to keep it for them within the peaceful precincts of their chapel. Only, they were waiting, and would not bring it back until the affluence of the pilgrims should decrease. What was the use of a solemn return at present, when crowds flocked to the place without interruption and in increasing numbers? Whereas, when the extraordinary success of Our Lady of Lourdes should decline, like everything else in this world, one could imagine what a reawakening of faith would attend the solemn, resounding ceremony at which Christendom would behold the relics of the chosen one take possession of the soil whence she had made so many marvels spring. And the miracles would then begin again on the marble of her tomb before the Grotto or in the choir of the Basilica.

"You may search," continued Doctor Chassaigne, "but you won't find a single official picture of Bernadette at Lourdes. Her portrait is sold, but it is hung no where, in no sanctuary. It is systematic forgetfulness, the same sentiment of covert uneasiness as that which has wrought silence and abandonment in this sad chamber where we are. In the same way as they are afraid of worship at her tomb, so are they afraid of crowds coming and kneeling here, should two candles burn or a couple of bouquets of roses bloom upon this chimney. And if a paralytic woman were to rise shouting that she was cured, what a scandal would arise, how disturbed would be those good traders of the Grotto on seeing their monopoly seriously threatened! They are the masters, and the masters they intend to remain; they will not part with any portion of the magnificent farm that they have acquired and are working. Nevertheless they tremble—yes, they tremble at the memory of the workers of the first hour, of that little girl who is still so great in death, and for whose huge inheritance they burn with such greed that after having sent her to live at Nevers, they dare not even bring back her corpse, but leave it imprisoned beneath the flagstones of a convent!"

Ah! how wretched was the fate of that poor creature, who had been cut off from among the living, and whose corpse in its turn was condemned to exile! And how Pierre pitied her, that daughter of misery, who seemed to have been chosen only that she might suffer in her life and in her death! Even admitting that an unique, persistent will had not compelled her to disappear, still guarding her even in her tomb, what a strange succession of circumstances there had been—how it seemed as if someone, uneasy at the idea of the immense power she might grasp, had jealously sought to keep her out of the way! In Pierre's eyes she remained the chosen one, the martyr; and if he could no longer believe, if the history of this unfortunate girl sufficed to complete within him the ruin of his faith, it none the less upset him in all his brotherly love for mankind by revealing a new religion to him, the only one which might still fill his heart, the religion of life, of human sorrow.

Just then, before leaving the room, Doctor Chassaigne exclaimed: "And it's here that one must believe, my dear child. Do you see this obscure hole, do you think of the resplendent Grotto, of the triumphant Basilica, of the town built, of the world created, the crowds that flock to Lourdes! And if Bernadette was only hallucinated, only an idiot, would not the outcome be more astonishing, more inexplicable still? What! An idiot's dream would have sufficed to stir up nations like this! No! no! The Divine breath which alone can explain prodigies passed here."

Pierre was on the point of hastily replying "Yes!" It was true, a breath had passed there, the sob of sorrow, the inextinguishable yearning towards the Infinite of hope. If the dream of a suffering child had sufficed to attract multitudes, to bring about a rain of millions and raise a new city from the soil, was it not because this dream in a measure appeased the hunger of poor mankind, its insatiable need of being deceived and consoled? She had once more opened the Unknown, doubtless at a favourable moment both socially and historically; and the crowds had rushed towards it. Oh! to take refuge in mystery, when reality is so hard, to abandon oneself to the miraculous, since cruel nature seems merely one long injustice! But although you may organise the Unknown, reduce it to dogmas, make revealed religions of it, there is never anything at the bottom of it beyond the appeal of suffering, the cry of life, demanding health, joy, and fraternal happiness, and ready to accept them in another world if they cannot be obtained on earth. What use is it to believe in dogmas? Does it not suffice to weep and love?

Pierre, however, did not discuss the question. He withheld the answer that was on his lips, convinced, moreover, that the eternal need of the supernatural would cause eternal faith to abide among sorrowing mankind. The miraculous, which could not be verified, must be a food necessary to human despair. Besides, had he not vowed in all charity that he would not wound anyone with his doubts?

"What a prodigy, isn't it?" repeated the doctor.

"Certainly," Pierre ended by answering. "The whole human drama has been played, all the unknown forces have acted in this poor room, so damp and dark."

They remained there a few minutes more in silence; they walked round the walls, raised their eyes toward the smoky ceiling, and cast a final glance at the narrow, greenish yard. Truly it was a heart-rending sight, this poverty of the cobweb level, with its dirty old barrels, its worn-out tools, its refuse of all kinds rotting in the corners in heaps. And without adding a word they at last slowly retired, feeling extremely sad.

It was only in the street that Doctor Chassigne seemed to awaken. He gave a slight shudder and hastened his steps, saying: "It is not finished, my dear child; follow me. We are now going to look at the other great iniquity." He referred to Abbe Peyramale and his church.

They crossed the Place du Porche and turned into the Rue Saint Pierre; a few minutes would suffice them. But their conversation had again fallen on the Fathers of the Grotto, on the terrible, merciless war waged by Father Sempe against the former Cure of Lourdes. The latter had been vanquished, and had died in consequence, overcome by feelings of frightful bitterness; and, after thus killing him by grief, they had completed the destruction of his church, which he had left unfinished, without a roof, open to the wind and to the rain. With what a glorious dream had that monumental edifice filled the last year of the Cure's life! Since he had been dispossessed of the Grotto, driven from the work of Our Lady of Lourdes, of which he, with Bernadette, had been the first artisan, his church had become his revenge, his protestation, his own share of the glory, the House of the Lord where he would triumph in his sacred vestments, and whence he would conduct endless processions in compliance with the formal desire of the Blessed Virgin. Man of authority and domination as he was at bottom, a pastor of the multitude, a builder of temples, he experienced a restless delight in hurrying on the work, with the lack of foresight of an eager man who did not allow indebtedness to trouble him, but was perfectly contented so long as he always had a swarm of workmen busy on the scaffoldings. And thus he saw his church rise up, and pictured it finished, one bright summer morning, all new in the rising sun.

Ah! that vision constantly evoked gave him courage for the struggle, amidst the underhand, murderous designs by which he felt himself to be enveloped. His church, towering above the vast square, at last rose in all its colossal majesty. He had decided that it should be in the Romanesque style, very large, very simple, its nave nearly three hundred feet long, its steeple four hundred and sixty feet high. It shone out resplendently in the clear sunlight, freed on the previous day of the last scaffolding, and looking quite smart in its newness, with its broad courses of stone disposed with perfect regularity. And, in thought, he sauntered around it, charmed with its nudity, its stupendous candour, its chasteness recalling that of a virgin child, for there was not a piece of sculpture, not an ornament that would have uselessly loaded it. The roofs of the nave, transept, and apse were of equal height above the entablature, which was decorated with simple mouldings. In the same way the apertures in the aisles and nave had no other adornments than archivaults with mouldings, rising above the piers. He stopped in thought before the great coloured glass windows of the transept, whose roses were sparkling; and passing round the building he skirted the semicircular apse against which stood the vestry building with its two rows of little windows; and then he returned, never tiring of his contemplation of that regal ordonnance, those great lines standing out against the blue sky, those superposed roofs, that enormous mass of stone, whose solidity promised to defy centuries. But, when he closed his eyes he, above all else, conjured up, with rapturous pride, a vision of the facade and steeple; down below, the three portals, the roofs of the two lateral ones forming terraces, while from the central one, in the very middle of the facade, the steeple boldly sprang. Here again columns resting on piers supported archivaults with simple mouldings. Against the gable, at a point where there was a pinnacle, and between the two lofty windows lighting the nave, was a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes under a canopy. Up above, were other bays with freshly painted luffer-boards. Buttresses started from the ground at the four corners of the steeple-base, becoming less and less massive from storey to storey, till they reached the spire, a bold, tapering spire in stone, flanked by four turrets and adorned with pinnacles, and soaring upward till it vanished in the sky. And to the parish priest of Lourdes it seemed as if it were his own fervent soul which had grown and flown aloft with this spire, to testify to his faith throughout the ages, there on high, quite close to God.

At other times another vision delighted him still more. He thought he could see the inside of his church on the day of the first solemn mass he would perform there. The coloured windows threw flashes of fire brilliant like precious stones; the twelve chapels, the aisles, were beaming with lighted candles. And he was at the high altar of marble and gold; and the fourteen columns of the nave in single blocks of Pyrenean marble, magnificent marble purchased with money that had come from the four corners of Christendom, rose up supporting the vaulted roof, while the sonorous voices of the organs filled the whole building with a hymn of joy. A multitude of the faithful was gathered there,

kneeling on the flags in front of the choir, which was screened by ironwork as delicate as lace, and covered with admirably carved wood. The pulpit, the regal present of a great lady, was a marvel of art cut in massive oak. The baptismal fonts had been hewn out of hard stone by an artist of great talent. Pictures by masters ornamented the walls. Crosses, pyxes, precious monstrances, sacred vestments, similar to suns, were piled up in the vestry cupboards. And what a dream it was to be the pontiff of such a temple, to reign there after having erected it with passion, to bless the crowds who hastened to it from the entire earth, while the flying peals from the steeple told the Grotto and Basilica that they had over there, in old Lourdes, a rival, a victorious sister, in whose great nave God triumphed also!

After following the Rue Saint Pierre for a moment, Doctor Chassaigne and his companion turned into the little Rue de Langelles.

"We are coming to it," said the doctor. But though Pierre looked around him he could see no church. There were merely some wretched hovels, a whole district of poverty, littered with foul buildings. At length, however, at the bottom of a blind alley, he perceived a remnant of the half-rotten palings which still surrounded the vast square site bordered by the Rue Saint Pierre, the Rue de Bagneres, the Rue de Langelles, and the Rue des Jardins.

"We must turn to the left," continued the doctor, who had entered a narrow passage among the rubbish. "Here we are!"

And the ruin suddenly appeared amidst the ugliness and wretchedness that masked it.

The whole great carcass of the nave and the aisles, the transept and the apse was standing. The walls rose on all sides to the point where the vaulting would have begun. You entered as into a real church, you could walk about at ease, identifying all the usual parts of an edifice of this description. Only when you raised your eyes you saw the sky; the roofs were wanting, the rain could fall and the wind blow there freely. Some fifteen years previously the works had been abandoned, and things had remained in the same state as the last workman had left them. What struck you first of all were the ten pillars of the nave and the four pillars of the choir, those magnificent columns of Pyrenean marble, each of a single block, which had been covered with a casing of planks in order to protect them from damage. The bases and capitals were still in the rough, awaiting the sculptors. And these isolated columns, thus cased in wood, had a mournful aspect indeed. Moreover, a dismal sensation filled you at sight of the whole gaping enclosure, where grass had sprung up all over the ravaged, bumpy soil of the aisles and the nave, a thick cemetery grass, through which the women of the neighbourhood had ended by making paths. They came in to spread out their washing there. And even now a collection of poor people's washing—thick sheets, shirts in shreds, and babies' swaddling clothes—was fast drying in the last rays of the sun, which glided in through the broad, empty bays.

Slowly, without speaking, Pierre and Doctor Chassaigne walked round the inside of the church. The ten chapels of the aisles formed a species of compartments full of rubbish and remnants. The ground of the choir had been cemented, doubtless to protect the crypt below against infiltrations; but unfortunately the vaults must be sinking; there was a hollow there which the storm of the previous night had transformed into a little lake. However, it was these portions of the transept and the apse which had the least suffered. Not a stone had moved; the great central rose windows above the triforium seemed to be awaiting their coloured glass, while some thick planks, forgotten atop of the walls of the apse, might have made anyone think that the workmen would begin covering it the next day. But, when Pierre and the doctor had retraced their steps, and went out to look at the facade, the lamentable woefulness of the young ruin was displayed to their gaze. On this side, indeed, the works had not been carried forward to anything like the same extent: the porch with its three portals alone was built, and fifteen years of abandonment had sufficed for the winter weather to eat into the sculptures, the small columns and the archivaults, with a really singular destructive effect, as though the stones, deeply penetrated, destroyed, had melted away beneath tears. The heart grieved at the sight of the decay which had attacked the work before it was even finished. Not yet to be, and nevertheless to crumble away in this fashion under the sky! To be arrested in one's colossal growth, and simply strew the weeds with ruins!

They returned to the nave, and were overcome by the frightful sadness which this assassination of a monument provoked. The spacious plot of waste ground inside was littered with the remains of scaffoldings, which had been pulled down when half rotten, in fear lest their fall might crush people; and everywhere amidst the tall grass were boards, put-logs, moulds for arches, mingled with bundles of old cord eaten away by damp. There was also the long narrow carcass of a crane rising up like a gibbet. Spade-handles, pieces of broken wheelbarrows, and heaps of greenish bricks, speckled with moss and wild convolvuli in bloom, were still lying among the forgotten materials. In the beds of nettles you here and there distinguished the rails of a little railway laid down for the trucks, one of which was lying overturned in a corner. But the saddest sight in all this death of things was certainly the portable

engine which had remained in the shed that sheltered it. For fifteen years it had been standing there cold and lifeless. A part of the roof of the shed had ended by falling in upon it, and now the rain drenched it at every shower. A bit of the leather harness by which the crane was worked hung down, and seemed to bind the engine like a thread of some gigantic spider's web. And its metal-work, its steel and copper, was also decaying, as if rusted by lichens, covered with the vegetation of old age, whose yellowish patches made it look like a very ancient, grass-grown machine which the winters had preyed upon. This lifeless engine, this cold engine with its empty firebox and its silent boiler, was like the very soul of the departed labour vainly awaiting the advent of some great charitable heart, whose coming through the eglantine and the brambles would awaken this sleeping church in the wood from its heavy slumber of ruin.

At last Doctor Chassaigne spoke: "Ah!" he said, "when one thinks that fifty thousand francs would have sufficed to prevent such a disaster! With fifty thousand francs the roof could have been put on, the heavy work would have been saved, and one could have waited patiently. But they wanted to kill the work just as they had killed the man." With a gesture he designated the Fathers of the Grotto, whom he avoided naming. "And to think," he continued, "that their annual receipts are eight hundred thousand francs. However, they prefer to send presents to Rome to propitiate powerful friends there."

In spite of himself, he was again opening hostilities against the adversaries of Cure Peyramale. The whole story caused a holy anger of justice to haunt him. Face to face with those lamentable ruins, he returned to the facts—the enthusiastic Cure starting on the building of his beloved church, and getting deeper and deeper into debt, whilst Father Sempe, ever on the lookout, took advantage of each of his mistakes, discrediting him with the Bishop, arresting the flow of offerings, and finally stopping the works. Then, after the conquered man was dead, had come interminable lawsuits, lawsuits lasting fifteen years, which gave the winters time to devour the building. And now it was in such a woeful state, and the debt had risen to such an enormous figure, that all seemed over. The slow death, the death of the stones, was becoming irrevocable. The portable engine beneath its tumbling shed would fall to pieces, pounded by the rain and eaten away by the moss.

"I know very well that they chant victory," resumed the doctor; "that they alone remain. It is just what they wanted—to be the absolute masters, to have all the power, all the money for themselves alone. I may tell you that their terror of competition has even made them intrigue against the religious Orders that have attempted to come to Lourdes. Jesuits, Dominicans, Benedictines, Capuchins, and Carmelites have made applications at various times, and the Fathers of the Grotto have always succeeded in keeping them away. They only tolerate the female Orders, and will only have one flock. And the town belongs to them; they have opened shop there, and sell God there wholesale and retail!"

Walking slowly, he had while speaking returned to the middle of the nave, amidst the ruins, and with a sweeping wave of the arm he pointed to all the devastation surrounding him. "Look at this sadness, this frightful wretchedness! Over yonder the Rosary and Basilica cost them three millions of francs."*

* About 580,000 dollars.

Then, as in Bernadette's cold, dark room, Pierre saw the Basilica rise before him, radiant in its triumph. It was not here that you found the realisation of the dream of Cure Peyramale, officiating and blessing kneeling multitudes while the organs resounded joyfully. The Basilica, over yonder, appeared, vibrating with the pealing of its bells, clamorous with the superhuman joy of an accomplished miracle, all sparkling with its countless lights, its banners, its lamps, its hearts of silver and gold, its clergy attired in gold, and its monstrance akin to a golden star. It flamed in the setting sun, it touched the heavens with its spire, amidst the soaring of the millions of prayers which caused its walls to quiver. Here, however, was the church that had died before being born, the church placed under interdict by a mandamus of the Bishop, the church falling into dust, and open to the four winds of heaven. Each storm carried away a little more of the stones, big flies buzzed all alone among the nettles which had invaded the nave; and there were no other devotees than the poor women of the neighbourhood, who came thither to turn their sorry linen, spread upon the grass.

It seemed amidst the mournful silence as though a low voice were sobbing, perhaps the voice of the marble columns weeping over their useless beauty under their wooden shirts. At times birds would fly across the deserted apse uttering a shrill cry. Bands of enormous rats which had taken refuge under bits of the lowered scaffoldings would fight, and bite, and bound out of their holes in a gallop of terror. And nothing could have been more heart-rending than the sight of this pre-determined ruin, face to face with its triumphant rival, the Basilica, which beamed with gold.

Again Doctor Chassaigne curtly said, "Come."

They left the church, and following the left aisle, reached a door, roughly fashioned out of a few planks nailed together; and, when they had passed down a half-demolished wooden staircase, the steps

of which shook beneath their feet, they found themselves in the crypt.

It was a low vault, with squat arches, on exactly the same plan as the choir. The thick, stunted columns, left in the rough, also awaited their sculptors. Materials were lying about, pieces of wood were rotting on the beaten ground, the whole vast hall was white with plaster in the abandonment in which unfinished buildings are left. At the far end, three bays, formerly glazed, but in which not a pane of glass remained, threw a clear, cold light upon the desolate bareness of the walls.

And there, in the middle, lay Cure Peyramale's corpse. Some pious friends had conceived the touching idea of thus burying him in the crypt of his unfinished church. The tomb stood on a broad step and was all marble. The inscriptions, in letters of gold, expressed the feelings of the subscribers, the cry of truth and reparation that came from the monument itself. You read on the face: "This tomb has been erected by the aid of pious offerings from the entire universe to the blessed memory of the great servant of Our Lady of Lourdes." On the right side were these words from a Brief of Pope Pius IX.: "You have entirely devoted yourself to erecting a temple to the Mother of God." And on the left were these words from the New Testament: "Happy are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake." Did not these inscriptions embody the true plaint, the legitimate hope of the vanquished man who had fought so long in the sole desire of strictly executing the commands of the Virgin as transmitted to him by Bernadette? She, Our Lady of Lourdes, was there personified by a slender statuette, standing above the commemorative inscription, against the naked wall whose only decorations were a few bead wreaths hanging from nails. And before the tomb, as before the Grotto, were five or six benches in rows, for the faithful who desired to sit down.

But with another gesture of sorrowful compassion, Doctor Chassaigne had silently pointed out to Pierre a huge damp spot which was turning the wall at the far end quite green. Pierre remembered the little lake which he had noticed up above on the cracked cement flooring of the choir—quite a quantity of water left by the storm of the previous night. Infiltration had evidently commenced, a perfect stream ran down, invading the crypt, whenever there was heavy rain. And they both felt a pang at their hearts when they perceived that the water was trickling along the vaulted roof in narrow threads, and thence falling in large, regular rhythmical drops upon the tomb. The doctor could not restrain a groan. "Now it rains," he said; "it rains on him!"

Pierre remained motionless, in a kind of awe. In the presence of that falling water, at the thought of the blasts which must rush at winter time through the glassless windows, that corpse appeared to him both woeful and tragic. It acquired a fierce grandeur, lying there alone in its splendid marble tomb, amidst all the rubbish, at the bottom of the crumbling ruins of its own church. It was the solitary guardian, the dead sleeper and dreamer watching over the empty spaces, open to all the birds of night. It was the mute, obstinate, eternal protest, and it was expectation also. Cure Peyramale, stretched in his coffin, having all eternity before him to acquire patience, there, without weariness, awaited the workmen who would perhaps return thither some fine April morning. If they should take ten years to do so, he would be there, and if it should take them a century, he would be there still. He was waiting for the rotten scaffoldings up above, among the grass of the nave, to be resuscitated like the dead, and by the force of some miracle to stand upright once more, along the walls. He was waiting, too, for the moss-covered engine to become all at once burning hot, recover its breath, and raise the timbers for the roof. His beloved enterprise, his gigantic building, was crumbling about his head, and yet with joined hands and closed eyes he was watching over its ruins, watching and waiting too.

In a low voice, the doctor finished the cruel story, telling how, after persecuting Cure Peyramale and his work, they persecuted his tomb. There had formerly been a bust of the Cure there, and pious hands had kept a little lamp burning before it. But a woman had one day fallen with her face to the earth, saying that she had perceived the soul of the deceased, and thereupon the Fathers of the Grotto were in a flutter. Were miracles about to take place there? The sick already passed entire days there, seated on the benches before the tomb. Others knelt down, kissed the marble, and prayed to be cured. And at this a feeling of terror arose: supposing they should be cured, supposing the Grotto should find a competitor in this martyr, lying all alone, amidst the old tools left there by the masons! The Bishop of Tarbes, informed and influenced, thereupon published the mandamus which placed the church under interdict, forbidding all worship there and all pilgrimages and processions to the tomb of the former priest of Lourdes. As in the case of Bernadette, his memory was proscribed, his portrait could be found, officially, nowhere. In the same manner as they had shown themselves merciless against the living man, so did the Fathers prove merciless to his memory. They pursued him even in his tomb. They alone, again nowadays, prevented the works of the church from being proceeded with, by raising continual obstacles, and absolutely refusing to share their rich harvest of alms. And they seemed to be waiting for the winter rains to fall and complete the work of destruction, for the vaulted roof of the crypt, the walls, the whole gigantic pile to crumble down upon the tomb of the martyr, upon the body of the defeated man, so that he might be buried beneath them and at last pounded to dust!

"Ah!" murmured the doctor, "I, who knew him so valiant, so enthusiastic in all noble labour! Now, you see it, it rains, it rains on him!"

Painfully, he set himself on his knees and found relief in a long prayer.

Pierre, who could not pray, remained standing. Compassionate sorrow was overflowing from his heart. He listened to the heavy drops from the roof as one by one they broke on the tomb with a slow rhythmical pit-a-pat, which seemed to be numbering the seconds of eternity, amidst the profound silence. And he reflected on the eternal misery of this world, on the choice which suffering makes in always falling on the best. The two great makers of Our Lady of Lourdes, Bernadette and Cure Peyramale, rose up in the flesh again before him, like woeful victims, tortured during their lives and exiled after their deaths. That alone, indeed, would have completed within him the destruction of his faith; for the Bernadette, whom he had just found at the end of his researches, was but a human sister, loaded with every dolour. But none the less he preserved a tender brotherly veneration for her, and two tears slowly trickled down his cheeks.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE THREE CITIES TRILOGY: LOURDES, VOLUME
4 ***

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