

The Three Cities Trilogy: Lourdes, Vol. 3

Emile Zola

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Produced by Dagny [dagnypg@yahoo.com]
and David Widger [widger@cecomet.net]

THE THREE CITIES

LOURDES

BY

EMILE ZOLA

Volume 3.

TRANSLATED BY ERNEST A. VIZETELLY

THE THIRD DAY

I

BED AND BOARD

AT seven o'clock on the morning of that fine, bright, warm August Sunday, M. de Guersaint was already up and dressed in one of the two little rooms which he had fortunately been able to secure on the third floor of the Hotel of the Apparitions. He had gone to bed at eleven o'clock the night before and had awoke feeling quite fresh and gay. As soon as he was dressed he entered the adjoining room which Pierre occupied; but the young priest, who had not returned to the hotel until past one in the morning, with his blood heated by insomnia, had been unable to doze off until daybreak and was now still slumbering. His cassock flung across a chair, his other garments scattered here and there, testified to his great weariness and agitation of mind.

"Come, come, you lazybones!" cried M. de Guersaint gaily; "can't you hear the bells ringing?"

Pierre awoke with a start, quite surprised to find himself in that little hotel room into which the sunlight was streaming. All the joyous peals of the bells, the music of the chiming, happy town, moreover, came in through the window which he had left open.

"We shall never have time to get to the hospital before eight o'clock to fetch Marie," resumed M. de Guersaint, "for we must have some breakfast, eh?"

"Of course, make haste and order two cups of chocolate. I will get up at once, I sha'n't be long," replied Pierre.

In spite of the fatigue which had already stiffened his joints, he sprang out of bed as soon as he was alone, and made all haste with his toilet. However, he still had his head in the washing basin, ducking it in the fresh, cool water, when M. de Guersaint, who was unable to remain alone,

came back again. "I've given the order," said he; "they will bring it up. Ah! what a curious place this hotel is! You have of course seen the landlord, Master Majeste, clad in white from head to foot and looking so dignified in his office. The place is crammed, it appears; they have never had so many people before. So it is no wonder that there should be such a fearful noise. I was wakened up three times during the night. People kept on talking in the room next to mine. And you, did you sleep well?"

"No, indeed," answered Pierre; "I was tired to death, but I couldn't close my eyes. No doubt it was the uproar you speak of that prevented me."

In his turn he then began to talk of the thin partitions, and the manner in which the house had been crammed with people until it seemed as though the floors and the walls would collapse with the strain. The place had been shaking all night long; every now and then people suddenly rushed along the passages, heavy footfalls resounded, gruff voices ascended nobody knew whence; without speaking of all the moaning and coughing, the frightful coughing which seemed to re-echo from every wall. Throughout the night people evidently came in and went out, got up and lay down again, paying no attention to time in the disorder in which they lived, amid shocks of passion which made them hurry to their devotional exercises as to pleasure parties.

"And Marie, how was she when you left her last night?" M. de Guersaint suddenly inquired.

"A great deal better," replied Pierre; "she had an attack of extreme discouragement, but all her courage and faith returned to her at last."

A pause followed; and then the girl's father resumed with his tranquil optimism: "Oh! I am not anxious. Things will go on all right, you'll see. For my own part, I am delighted. I had asked the Virgin to grant me her protection in my affairs--you know, my great invention of navigable balloons. Well, suppose I told you that she has already shown me her favour? Yes, indeed yesterday evening while I was talking with Abbe des Hermoises, he told me that at Toulouse he would no doubt be able to find a person to finance me--one of his friends, in fact, who is extremely wealthy and takes great interest in mechanics! And in this I at once saw the hand of God!" M. de Guersaint began laughing with his childish laugh, and then he added: "That Abbe des Hermoises is a charming man. I shall see this afternoon if there is any means of my accompanying him on an excursion to the Cirque de Gavarnie at small cost."

Pierre, who wished to pay everything, the hotel bill and all the rest, at once encouraged him in this idea. "Of course," said he, "you ought not to miss this opportunity to visit the mountains, since you have so great a wish to do so. Your daughter will be very happy to know that you are pleased."

Their talk, however, was now interrupted by a servant girl bringing the two cups of chocolate with a couple of rolls on a metal tray covered with a napkin. She left the door open as she entered the room, so that a glimpse was obtained of some portion of the passage. "Ah! they are already doing my neighbour's room!" exclaimed M. de Guersaint. "He is a married man, isn't he? His wife is with him?"

The servant looked astonished. "Oh, no," she replied, "he is quite

alone!"

"Quite alone? Why, I heard people talking in his room this morning."

"You must be mistaken, monsieur," said the servant; "he has just gone out after giving orders that his room was to be tidied up at once." And then, while taking the cups of chocolate off the tray and placing them on the table, she continued: "Oh! he is a very respectable gentleman. Last year he was able to have one of the pavilions which Monsieur Majeste lets out to visitors, in the lane by the side of the hotel; but this year he applied too late and had to content himself with that room, which greatly worried him, for it isn't a large one, though there is a big cupboard in it. As he doesn't care to eat with everybody, he takes his meals there, and he orders good wine and the best of everything, I can tell you."

"That explains it all!" replied M. de Guersaint gaily; "he dined too well last night, and I must have heard him talking in his sleep."

Pierre had been listening somewhat inquisitively to all this chatter.

"And on this side, my side," said he, "isn't there a gentleman with two ladies, and a little boy who walks about with a crutch?"

"Yes, Monsieur l'Abbe, I know them. The aunt, Madame Chaise, took one of the two rooms for herself; and Monsieur and Madame Vigner on with their son Gustave have had to content themselves with the other one. This is the second year they have come to Lourdes. They are very respectable people too."

Pierre nodded. During the night he had fancied he could recognise the voice of M. Vigner on, whom the heat doubtless had incommoded. However, the servant was now thoroughly started, and she began to enumerate the other persons whose rooms were reached by the same passage; on the left hand there was a priest, then a mother with three daughters, and then an old married couple; whilst on the right lodged another gentleman who was all alone, a young lady, too, who was unaccompanied, and then a family party which included five young children. The hotel was crowded to its garrets. The servants had had to give up their rooms the previous evening and lie in a heap in the washhouse. During the night, also, some camp bedsteads had even been set up on the landings; and one honourable ecclesiastic, for lack of other accommodation, had been obliged to sleep on a billiard-table.

When the girl had retired and the two men had drunk their chocolate, M. de Guersaint went back into his own room to wash his hands again, for he was very careful of his person; and Pierre, who remained alone, felt attracted by the gay sunlight, and stepped for a moment on to the narrow balcony outside his window. Each of the third-floor rooms on this side of the hotel was provided with a similar balcony, having a carved-wood balustrade. However, the young priest's surprise was very great, for he had scarcely stepped outside when he suddenly saw a woman protrude her head over the balcony next to him--that of the room occupied by the gentleman whom M. de Guersaint and the servant had been speaking of.

And this woman he had recognised: it was Madame Volmar. There was no mistaking her long face with its delicate drawn features, its magnificent large eyes, those brasiers over which a veil, a dimming /moire/, seemed to pass at times. She gave a start of terror on perceiving him. And he, extremely ill at ease, grieved that he should have frightened her, made all haste to withdraw into his apartment. A sudden light had dawned upon

him, and he now understood and could picture everything. So this was why she had not been seen at the hospital, where little Madame Desagneaux was always asking for her. Standing motionless, his heart upset, Pierre fell into a deep reverie, reflecting on the life led by this woman whom he knew, that torturing conjugal life in Paris between a fierce mother-in-law and an unworthy husband, and then those three days of complete liberty spent at Lourdes, that brief bonfire of passion to which she had hastened under the sacrilegious pretext of serving the divinity. Tears whose cause he could not even explain, tears that ascended from the very depths of his being, from his own voluntary chastity, welled into his eyes amidst the feeling of intense sorrow which came over him.

"Well, are you ready?" joyously called M. de Guersaint as he came back, with his grey jacket buttoned up and his hands gloved.

"Yes, yes, let us go," replied Pierre, turning aside and pretending to look for his hat so that he might wipe his eyes.

Then they went out, and on crossing the threshold heard on their left hand an unctuous voice which they recognised; it was that of M. Vigneron, who was loudly repeating the morning prayers. A moment afterwards came a meeting which interested them. They were walking down the passage when they were passed by a middle-aged, thick-set, sturdy-looking gentleman, wearing carefully trimmed whiskers. He bent his back and passed so rapidly that they were unable to distinguish his features, but they noticed that he was carrying a carefully made parcel. And immediately afterwards he slipped a key into the lock of the room adjoining M. de Guersaint's, and opening the door disappeared noiselessly, like a shadow.

M. de Guersaint had glanced round: "Ah! my neighbour," said he; "he has been to market and has brought back some delicacies, no doubt!"

Pierre pretended not to hear, for his companion was so light-minded that he did not care to trust him with a secret which was not his own. Besides, a feeling of uneasiness was returning to him, a kind of chaste terror at the thought that the world and the flesh were there taking their revenge, amidst all the mystical enthusiasm which he could feel around him.

They reached the hospital just as the patients were being brought out to be carried to the Grotto; and they found that Marie had slept well and was very gay. She kissed her father and scolded him when she learnt that he had not yet decided on his trip to Gavarnie. She should really be displeased with him, she said, if he did not go. Still with the same restful, smiling expression, she added that she did not expect to be cured that day; and then, assuming an air of mystery, she begged Pierre to obtain permission for her to spend the following night before the Grotto. This was a favour which all the sufferers ardently coveted, but which only a few favoured ones with difficulty secured. After protesting, anxious as he felt with regard to the effect which a night spent in the open air might have upon her health, the young priest, seeing how unhappy she had suddenly become, at last promised that he would make the application. Doubtless she imagined that she would only obtain a hearing from the Virgin when they were alone together in the slumbering peacefulness of the night. That morning, indeed, she felt so lost among the innumerable patients who were heaped together in front of the Grotto, that already at ten o'clock she asked to be taken back to the hospital, complaining that the bright light tired her eyes. And when her father and the priest had again installed her in the Sainte-Honorine Ward, she gave

them their liberty for the remainder of the day. "No, don't come to fetch me," she said, "I shall not go back to the Grotto this afternoon--it would be useless. But you will come for me this evening at nine o'clock, won't you, Pierre? It is agreed, you have given me your word."

He repeated that he would endeavour to secure the requisite permission, and that, if necessary, he would apply to Father Fourcade in person.

"Then, till this evening, darling," said M. de Guersaint, kissing his daughter. And he and Pierre went off together, leaving her lying on her bed, with an absorbed expression on her features, as her large, smiling eyes wandered away into space.

It was barely half-past ten when they got back to the Hotel of the Apparitions; but M. de Guersaint, whom the fine weather delighted, talked of having /dejeuner/ at once, so that he might the sooner start upon a ramble through Lourdes. First of all, however, he wished to go up to his room, and Pierre following him, they encountered quite a drama on their way. The door of the room occupied by the Vignerons was wide open, and little Gustave could be seen lying on the sofa which served as his bed. He was livid; a moment previously he had suddenly fainted, and this had made the father and mother imagine that the end had come. Madame Vigneron was crouching on a chair, still stupefied by her fright, whilst M. Vigneron rushed about the room, thrusting everything aside in order that he might prepare a glass of sugared-water, to which he added a few drops of some elixir. This draught, he exclaimed, would set the lad right again. But all the same, it was incomprehensible. The boy was still strong, and to think that he should have fainted like that, and have turned as white as a chicken! Speaking in this wise, M. Vigneron glanced at Madame Chaise, the aunt, who was standing in front of the sofa, looking in good health that morning; and his hands shook yet more violently at the covert idea that if that stupid attack had carried off his son, they would no longer have inherited the aunt's fortune. He was quite beside himself at this thought, and eagerly opening the boy's mouth he compelled him to swallow the entire contents of the glass. Then, however, when he heard Gustave sigh, and saw him open his eyes again, his fatherly good-nature reappeared, and he shed tears, and called the lad his dear little fellow. But on Madame Chaise drawing near to offer some assistance, Gustave repulsed her with a sudden gesture of hatred, as though he understood how this woman's money unconsciously perverted his parents, who, after all, were worthy folks. Greatly offended, the old lady turned on her heel, and seated herself in a corner, whilst the father and mother, at last freed from their anxiety, returned thanks to the Blessed Virgin for having preserved their darling, who smiled at them with his intelligent and infinitely sorrowful smile, knowing and understanding everything as he did, and no longer having any taste for life, although he was not fifteen.

"Can we be of any help to you?" asked Pierre in an obliging way.

"No, no, I thank you, gentlemen," replied M. Vigneron, coming for a moment into the passage. "But oh! we did have a fright! Think of it, an only son, who is so dear to us too."

All around them the approach of the /dejeuner/ hour was now throwing the house into commotion. Every door was banging, and the passages and the staircase resounded with the constant pitter-patter of feet. Three big girls passed by, raising a current of air with the sweep of their skirts. Some little children were crying in a neighbouring room. Then there were

old people who seemed quite scared, and distracted priests who, forgetting their calling, caught up their cassocks with both hands, so that they might run the faster to the dining-room. From the top to the bottom of the house one could feel the floors shaking under the excessive weight of all the people who were packed inside the hotel.

"Oh, I hope that it is all over now, and that the Blessed Virgin will cure him," repeated M. Vigneron, before allowing his neighbours to retire. "We are going down-stairs, for I must confess that all this has made me feel faint. I need something to eat, I am terribly hungry."

When Pierre and M. de Guersaint at last left their rooms, and went down-stairs, they found to their annoyance that there was not the smallest table-corner vacant in the large dining-room. A most extraordinary mob had assembled there, and the few seats that were still unoccupied were reserved. A waiter informed them that the room never emptied between ten and one o'clock, such was the rush of appetite, sharpened by the keen mountain air. So they had to resign themselves to wait, requesting the waiter to warn them as soon as there should be a couple of vacant places. Then, scarcely knowing what to do with themselves, they went to walk about the hotel porch, whence there was a view of the street, along which the townsfolk, in their Sunday best, streamed without a pause.

All at once, however, the landlord of the Hotel of the Apparitions, Master Majeste in person, appeared before them, clad in white from head to foot; and with a great show of politeness he inquired if the gentlemen would like to wait in the drawing-room. He was a stout man of five-and-forty, and strove to bear the burden of his name in a right royal fashion. Bald and clean-shaven, with round blue eyes in a waxy face, displaying three superposed chins, he always deported himself with much dignity. He had come from Nevers with the Sisters who managed the orphan asylum, and was married to a dusky little woman, a native of Lourdes. In less than fifteen years they had made their hotel one of the most substantial and best patronised establishments in the town. Of recent times, moreover, they had started a business in religious articles, installed in a large shop on the left of the hotel porch and managed by a young niece under Madame Majeste's Supervision.

"You can wait in the drawing-room, gentlemen," again suggested the hotel-keeper whom Pierre's cassock rendered very attentive.

They replied, however, that they preferred to walk about and wait in the open air. And thereupon Majeste would not leave them, but deigned to chat with them for a moment as he was wont to do with those of his customers whom he desired to honour. The conversation turned at first on the procession which would take place that night and which promised to be a superb spectacle as the weather was so fine. There were more than fifty thousand strangers gathered together in Lourdes that day, for visitors had come in from all the neighbouring bathing stations. This explained the crush at the /table d'hôte/. Possibly the town would run short of bread as had been the case the previous year.

"You saw what a scramble there is," concluded Majeste, "we really don't know how to manage. It isn't my fault, I assure you, if you are kept waiting for a short time."

At this moment, however, a postman arrived with a large batch of newspapers and letters which he deposited on a table in the office. He

had kept one letter in his hand and inquired of the landlord, "Have you a Madame Maze here?"

"Madame Maze, Madame Maze," repeated the hotel-keeper. "No, no, certainly not."

Pierre had heard both question and answer, and drawing near he exclaimed, "I know of a Madame Maze who must be lodging with the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, the Blue Sisters as people call them here, I think."

The postman thanked him for the information and went off, but a somewhat bitter smile had risen to Majeste's lips. "The Blue Sisters," he muttered, "ah! the Blue Sisters." Then, darting a side glance at Pierre's cassock, he stopped short, as though he feared that he might say too much. Yet his heart was overflowing; he would have greatly liked to ease his feelings, and this young priest from Paris, who looked so liberal-minded, could not be one of the "band" as he called all those who discharged functions at the Grotto and coined money out of Our Lady of Lourdes. Accordingly, little by little, he ventured to speak out.

"I am a good Christian, I assure you, Monsieur l'Abbe," said he. "In fact we are all good Christians here. And I am a regular worshipper and take the sacrament every Easter. But, really, I must say that members of a religious community ought not to keep hotels. No, no, it isn't right!"

And thereupon he vented all the spite of a tradesman in presence of what he considered to be disloyal competition. Ought not those Blue Sisters, those Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, to have confined themselves to their real functions, the manufacture of wafers for sacramental purposes, and the repairing and washing of church linen? Instead of that, however, they had transformed their convent into a vast hostelry, where ladies who came to Lourdes unaccompanied found separate rooms, and were able to take their meals either in privacy or in a general dining-room. Everything was certainly very clean, very well organised and very inexpensive, thanks to the thousand advantages which the Sisters enjoyed; in fact, no hotel at Lourdes did so much business. "But all the same," continued Majeste, "I ask you if it is proper. To think of nuns selling victuals! Besides, I must tell you that the lady superior is really a clever woman, and as soon as she saw the stream of fortune rolling in, she wanted to keep it all for her own community and resolutely parted with the Fathers of the Grotto who wanted to lay their hands on it. Yes, Monsieur l'Abbe, she even went to Rome and gained her cause there, so that now she pockets all the money that her bills bring in. Think of it, nuns, yes nuns, /mon Dieu/! letting furnished rooms and keeping a /table d'hote/!"

He raised his arms to heaven, he was stifling with envy and vexation.

"But as your house is crammed," Pierre gently objected, "as you no longer have either a bed or a plate at anybody's disposal, where would you put any additional visitors who might arrive here?"

Majeste at once began protesting. "Ah! Monsieur l'Abbe!" said he, "one can see very well that you don't know the place. It's quite true that there is work for all of us, and that nobody has reason to complain during the national pilgrimage. But that only lasts four or five days, and in ordinary times the custom we secure isn't nearly so great. For myself, thank Heaven, I am always satisfied. My house is well known, it

occupies the same rank as the Hotel of the Grotto, where two landlords have already made their fortunes. But no matter, it is vexing to see those Blue Sisters taking all the cream of the custom, for instance the ladies of the /bourgeoisie/ who spend a fortnight and three weeks here at a stretch; and that, too, just in the quiet season, when there are not many people here. You understand, don't you? There are people of position who dislike uproar; they go by themselves to the Grotto, and pray there all day long, for days together, and pay good prices for their accommodation without any higgling."

Madame Majeste, whom Pierre and M. de Guersaint had not noticed leaning over an account-book in which she was adding up some figures, thereupon intervened in a shrill voice: "We had a customer like that, gentlemen, who stayed here for two months last year. She went to the Grotto, came back, went there again, took her meals, and went to bed. And never did we have a word of complaint from her; she was always smiling, as though to say that she found everything very nice. She paid her bill, too, without even looking at it. Ah! one regrets people of that kind."

Short, thin, very dark, and dressed in black, with a little white collar, Madame Majeste had risen to her feet; and she now began to solicit custom: "If you would like to buy a few little souvenirs of Lourdes before you leave, gentlemen, I hope that you will not forget us. We have a shop close by, where you will find an assortment of all the articles that are most in request. As a rule, the persons who stay here are kind enough not to deal elsewhere."

However, Majeste was again wagging his head, with the air of a good Christian saddened by the scandals of the time. "Certainly," said he, "I don't want to show any disrespect to the reverend Fathers, but it must in all truth be admitted that they are too greedy. You must have seen the shop which they have set up near the Grotto, that shop which is always crowded, and where tapers and articles of piety are sold. A bishop declared that it was shameful, and that the buyers and sellers ought to be driven out of the temple afresh. It is said, too, that the Fathers run that big shop yonder, just across the street, which supplies all the petty dealers in the town. And, according to the reports which circulate, they have a finger in all the trade in religious articles, and levy a percentage on the millions of chaplets, statuettes, and medals which are sold every year at Lourdes."

Majeste had now lowered his voice, for his accusations were becoming precise, and he ended by trembling somewhat at his imprudence in talking so confidentially to strangers. However, the expression of Pierre's gentle, attentive face reassured him; and so he continued with the passion of a wounded rival, resolved to go on to the very end: "I am willing to admit that there is some exaggeration in all this. But all the same, it does religion no good for people to see the reverend Fathers keeping shops like us tradesmen. For my part, of course, I don't go and ask for a share of the money which they make by their masses, or a percentage on the presents which they receive, so why should they start selling what I sell? Our business was a poor one last year owing to them. There are already too many of us; nowadays everyone at Lourdes sells 'religious articles,' to such an extent, in fact, that there will soon be no butchers or wine merchants left--nothing but bread to eat and water to drink. Ah! Monsieur l'Abbe, it is no doubt nice to have the Blessed Virgin with us, but things are none the less very bad at times."

A person staying at the hotel at that moment disturbed him, but he

returned just as a young girl came in search of Madame Majeste. The damsel, who evidently belonged to Lourdes, was very pretty, small but plump, with beautiful black hair, and a round face full of bright gaiety.

"That is our niece Apolline," resumed Majeste. "She has been keeping our shop for two years past. She is the daughter of one of my wife's brothers, who is in poor circumstances. She was keeping sheep at Ossun, in the neighbourhood of Bartres, when we were struck by her intelligence and nice looks and decided to bring her here; and we don't repent having done so, for she has a great deal of merit, and has become a very good saleswoman."

A point to which he omitted to refer, was that there were rumours current of somewhat flighty conduct on Mademoiselle Apolline's part. But she undoubtedly had her value: she attracted customers by the power, possibly, of her large black eyes, which smiled so readily. During his sojourn at Lourdes the previous year, Gerard de Peyrelongue had scarcely stirred from the shop she managed, and doubtless it was only the matrimonial ideas now flitting through his head that prevented him from returning thither. It seemed as though the Abbe des Hermoises had taken his place, for this gallant ecclesiastic brought a great many ladies to make purchases at the repository.

"Ah! you are speaking of Apolline," said Madame Majeste, at that moment coming back from the shop. "Have you noticed one thing about her, gentlemen--her extraordinary likeness to Bernadette? There, on the wall yonder, is a photograph of Bernadette when she was eighteen years old."

Pierre and M. de Guersaint drew near to examine the portrait, whilst Majeste exclaimed: "Bernadette, yes, certainly--she was rather like Apolline, but not nearly so nice; she looked so sad and poor."

He would doubtless have gone on chattering, but just then the waiter appeared and announced that there was at last a little table vacant. M. de Guersaint had twice gone to glance inside the dining-room, for he was eager to have his /dejeuner/ and spend the remainder of that fine Sunday out-of-doors. So he now hastened away, without paying any further attention to Majeste, who remarked, with an amiable smile, that the gentlemen had not had so very long to wait after all.

To reach the table mentioned by the waiter, the architect and Pierre had to cross the dining-room from end to end. It was a long apartment, painted a light oak colour, an oily yellow, which was already peeling away in places and soiled with stains in others. You realised that rapid wear and tear went on here amidst the continual scramble of the big eaters who sat down at table. The only ornaments were a gilt zinc clock and a couple of meagre candelabra on the mantelpiece. Guipure curtains, moreover, hung at the five large windows looking on to the street, which was flooded with sunshine; some of the fierce arrow-like rays penetrating into the room although the blinds had been lowered. And, in the middle of the apartment, some forty persons were packed together at the /table d'hote/, which was scarcely eleven yards in length and did not supply proper accommodation for more than thirty people; whilst at the little tables standing against the walls upon either side another forty persons sat close together, hustled by the three waiters each time that they went by. You had scarcely reached the threshold before you were deafened by the extraordinary uproar, the noise of voices and the clatter of forks and plates; and it seemed, too, as if you were entering a damp oven, for a warm, steamy mist, laden with a suffocating smell of victuals, assailed

the face.

Pierre at first failed to distinguish anything, but, when he was installed at the little table--a garden-table which had been brought indoors for the occasion, and on which there was scarcely room for two covers--he felt quite upset, almost sick, in fact, at the sight presented by the /table d'hôte/, which his glance now enfiladed from end to end. People had been eating at it for an hour already, two sets of customers had followed one upon the other, and the covers were strewn about in higgledy-piggledy fashion. On the cloth were numerous stains of wine and sauce, while there was no symmetry even in the arrangement of the glass fruit-stands, which formed the only decorations of the table. And one's astonishment increased at sight of the motley mob which was collected there--huge priests, scraggy girls, mothers overflowing with superfluous fat, gentlemen with red faces, and families ranged in rows and displaying all the pitiable, increasing ugliness of successive generations. All these people were perspiring, greedily swallowing, seated slantwise, lacking room to move their arms, and unable even to use their hands deftly. And amidst this display of appetite, increased tenfold by fatigue, and of eager haste to fill one's stomach in order to return to the Grotto more quickly, there was a corpulent ecclesiastic who in no wise hurried, but ate of every dish with prudent slowness, crunching his food with a ceaseless, dignified movement of the jaws.

"/Fichtre!/" exclaimed M. de Guersaint, "it is by no means cool in here. All the same, I shall be glad of something to eat, for I've felt a sinking in the stomach ever since I have been at Lourdes. And you--are you hungry?"

"Yes, yes, I shall eat," replied Pierre, though, truth to tell, he felt quite upset.

The /menu/ was a copious one. There was salmon, an omelet, mutton cutlets with mashed potatoes, stewed kidneys, cauliflowers, cold meats, and apricot tarts--everything cooked too much, and swimming in sauce which, but for its grittiness, would have been flavourless. However, there was some fairly fine fruit on the glass stands, particularly some peaches. And, besides, the people did not seem at all difficult to please; they apparently had no palates, for there was no sign of nausea. Hemmed in between an old priest and a dirty, full-bearded man, a girl of delicate build, who looked very pretty with her soft eyes and silken skin, was eating some kidneys with an expression of absolute beatitude, although the so-called "sauce" in which they swam was simply greyish water.

"Hum!" resumed even M. de Guersaint, "this salmon is not so bad. Add a little salt to it and you will find it all right."

Pierre made up his mind to eat, for after all he must take sustenance for strength's sake. At a little table close by, however, he had just caught sight of Madame Vigneron and Madame Chaise, who sat face to face, apparently waiting. And indeed, M. Vigneron and his son Gustave soon appeared, the latter still pale, and leaning more heavily than usual on his crutch. "Sit down next to your aunt," said his father; "I will take the chair beside your mother." But just then he perceived his two neighbours, and stepping up to them, he added: "Oh! he is now all right again. I have been rubbing him with some eau-de-Cologne, and by-and-by he will be able to take his bath at the piscina."

Thereupon M. Vigneron sat down and began to devour. But what an awful

fright he had had! He again began talking of it aloud, despite himself, so intense had been his terror at the thought that the lad might go off before his aunt. The latter related that whilst she was kneeling at the Grotto the day before, she had experienced a sudden feeling of relief; in fact, she flattered herself that she was cured of her heart complaint, and began giving precise particulars, to which her brother-in-law listened with dilated eyes, full of involuntary anxiety. Most certainly he was a good-natured man, he had never desired anybody's death; only he felt indignant at the idea that the Virgin might cure this old woman, and forget his son, who was so young. Talking and eating, he had got to the cutlets, and was swallowing the mashed potatoes by the forkful, when he fancied he could detect that Madame Chaise was sulking with her nephew. "Gustave," he suddenly inquired, "have you asked your aunt's forgiveness?" The lad, quite astonished, began staring at his father with his large clear eyes. "Yes," added M. Vignerons, "you behaved very badly, you pushed her back just now when she wanted to help you to sit up."

Madame Chaise said nothing, but waited with a dignified air, whilst Gustave, who, without any show of appetite, was finishing the /noix/ of his cutlet, which had been cut into small pieces, remained with his eyes lowered on his plate, this time obstinately refusing to make the sorry show of affection which was demanded of him.

"Come, Gustave," resumed his father, "be a good boy. You know how kind your aunt is, and all that she intends to do for you."

But no, he would not yield. At that moment, indeed, he really hated that woman, who did not die quickly enough, who polluted the affection of his parents, to such a point that when he saw them surround him with attentions he no longer knew whether it were himself or the inheritance which his life represented that they wished to save. However, Madame Vignerons, so dignified in her demeanour, came to her husband's help. "You really grieve me, Gustave," said she; "ask your aunt's forgiveness, or you will make me quite angry with you."

Thereupon he gave way. What was the use of resisting? Was it not better that his parents should obtain that money? Would he not himself die later on, so as to suit the family convenience? He was aware of all that; he understood everything, even when not a word was spoken. So keen was the sense of hearing with which suffering had endowed him, that he even heard the others' thoughts.

"I beg your pardon, aunt," he said, "for not having behaved well to you just now."

Then two big tears rolled from his eyes, whilst he smiled with the air of a tender-hearted man who has seen too much of life and can no longer be deceived by anything. Madame Chaise at once kissed him and told him that she was not at all angry. And the Vignerons' delight in living was displayed in all candour.

"If the kidneys are not up to much," M. de Guersaint now said to Pierre, "here at all events are some cauliflowers with a good flavour."

The formidable mastication was still going on around them. Pierre had never seen such an amount of eating, amidst such perspiration, in an atmosphere as stifling as that of a washhouse full of hot steam. The odour of the victuals seemed to thicken into a kind of smoke. You had to shout to make yourself heard, for everybody was talking in loud tones,

and the scared waiters raised a fearful clatter in changing the plates and forks; not to mention the noise of all the jaw-crunching, a mill-like grinding which was distinctly audible. What most hurt the feelings of the young priest, however, was the extraordinary promiscuity of the /table d'hôte/, at which men and women, young girls and ecclesiastics, were packed together in chance order, and satisfied their hunger like a pack of hounds snapping at offal in all haste. Baskets of bread went round and were promptly emptied. And there was a perfect massacre of cold meats, all the remnants of the victuals of the day before, leg of mutton, veal, and ham, encompassed by a fallen mass of transparent jelly which quivered like soft glue. They had all eaten too much already, but these viands seemed to whet their appetites afresh, as though the idea had come to them that nothing whatever ought to be left. The fat priest in the middle of the table, who had shown himself such a capital knife-and-fork, was now lingering over the fruit, having just got to his third peach, a huge one, which he slowly peeled and swallowed in slices with an air of compunction.

All at once, however, the whole room was thrown into agitation. A waiter had come in and begun distributing the letters which Madame Majeste had finished sorting. "Hallo!" exclaimed M. Vignerón; "a letter for me! This is surprising--I did not give my address to anybody." Then, at a sudden recollection, he added, "Yes I did, though; this must have come from Sauvageot, who is filling my place at the Ministry." He opened the letter, his hands began to tremble, and suddenly he raised a cry: "The chief clerk is dead!"

Deeply agitated, Madame Vignerón was also unable to bridle her tongue: "Then you will have the appointment!"

This was the secret dream in which they had so long and so fondly indulged: the chief clerk's death, in order that he, Vignerón, assistant chief clerk for ten years past, might at last rise to the supreme post, the bureaucratic marshalship. And so great was his delight that he cast aside all restraint. "Ah! the Blessed Virgin is certainly protecting me, my dear. Only this morning I again prayed to her for a rise, and, you see, she grants my prayer!"

However, finding Madame Chaise's eyes fixed upon his own, and seeing Gustave smile, he realised that he ought not to exult in this fashion. Each member of the family no doubt thought of his or her interests and prayed to the Blessed Virgin for such personal favours as might be desired. And so, again putting on his good-natured air, he resumed: "I mean that the Blessed Virgin takes an interest in every one of us and will send us all home well satisfied. Ah! the poor chief, I'm sorry for him. I shall have to send my card to his widow."

In spite of all his efforts he could not restrain his exultation, and no longer doubted that his most secret desires, those which he did not even confess to himself, would soon be gratified. And so all honour was done to the apricot tarts, even Gustave being allowed to eat a portion of one.

"It is surprising," now remarked M. de Guersaint, who had just ordered a cup of coffee; "it is surprising that one doesn't see more sick people here. All these folks seem to me to have first-rate appetites."

After a close inspection, however, in addition to Gustave, who ate no more than a little chicken, he ended by finding a man with a goitre seated at the /table d'hôte/ between two women, one of whom certainly

suffered from cancer. Farther on, too, there was a girl so thin and pale that she must surely be a consumptive. And still farther away there was a female idiot who had made her entry leaning on two relatives, and with expressionless eyes and lifeless features was now carrying her food to her mouth with a spoon, and slobbering over her napkin. Perhaps there were yet other ailing ones present who could not be distinguished among all those noisy appetites, ailing ones whom the journey had braced, and who were eating as they had not eaten for a long time past. The apricot tarts, the cheese, the fruits were all engulfed amidst the increasing disorder of the table, where at last there only remained the stains of all the wine and sauce which had been spilt upon the cloth.

It was nearly noon. "We will go back to the Grotto at once, eh?" said M. Vigneron.

Indeed, "To the Grotto! To the Grotto!" were well-nigh the only words you now heard. The full mouths were eagerly masticating and swallowing, in order that they might repeat prayers and hymns again with all speed. "Well, as we have the whole afternoon before us," declared M. de Guersaint, "I suggest that we should visit the town a little. I want to see also if I can get a conveyance for my excursion, as my daughter so particularly wishes me to make it."

Pierre, who was stifling, was glad indeed to leave the dining-room. In the porch he was able to breathe again, though even there he found a torrent of customers, new arrivals who were waiting for places. No sooner did one of the little tables become vacant than its possession was eagerly contested, whilst the smallest gap at the /table d'hôte/ was instantly filled up. In this wise the assault would continue for more than another hour, and again would the different courses of the /menu/ appear in procession, to be engulfed amidst the crunching of jaws, the stifling heat, and the growing nausea.

II

THE "ORDINARY."

WHEN Pierre and M. de Guersaint got outside they began walking slowly amidst the ever-growing stream of the Sundayfied crowd. The sky was a bright blue, the sun warmed the whole town, and there was a festive gaiety in the atmosphere, the keen delight that attends those great fairs which bring entire communities into the open air. When they had descended the crowded footway of the Avenue de la Grotte, and had reached the corner of the Plateau de la Merlasse, they found their way barred by a throng which was flowing backward amidst a block of vehicles and stamping of horses. "There is no hurry, however," remarked M. de Guersaint. "My idea is to go as far as the Place du Marcadal in the old town; for the servant girl at the hotel told me of a hairdresser there whose brother lets out conveyances cheaply. Do you mind going so far?"

"I?" replied Pierre. "Go wherever you like, I'll follow you."

"All right--and I'll profit by the opportunity to have a shave."

They were nearing the Place du Rosaire, and found themselves in front of the lawns stretching to the Gave, when an encounter again stopped them. Mesdames Desagneaux and Raymonde de Jonquiere were here, chatting gaily

with Gerard de Peyrelongue. Both women wore light-coloured gowns, seaside dresses as it were, and their white silk parasols shone in the bright sunlight. They imparted, so to say, a pretty note to the scene--a touch of society chatter blended with the fresh laughter of youth.

"No, no," Madame Desagneaux was saying, "we certainly can't go and visit your 'ordinary' like that--at the very moment when all your comrades are eating."

Gerard, however, with a very gallant air, insisted on their accompanying him, turning more particularly towards Raymonde, whose somewhat massive face was that day brightened by the radiant charm of health.

"But it is a very curious sight, I assure you," said the young man, "and you would be very respectfully received. Trust yourself to me, mademoiselle. Besides, we should certainly find M. Berthaud there, and he would be delighted to do you the honours."

Raymonde smiled, her clear eyes plainly saying that she was quite agreeable. And just then, as Pierre and M. de Guersaint drew near in order to present their respects to the ladies, they were made acquainted with the question under discussion. The "ordinary" was a kind of restaurant or /table d'hote/ which the members of the Hospitality of Our Lady of Salvation--the bearers, the hospitallers of the Grotto, the piscinas, and the hospitals--had established among themselves with the view of taking their meals together at small cost. Many of them were not rich, for they were recruited among all classes; however, they had contrived to secure three good meals for the daily payment of three francs apiece. And in fact they soon had provisions to spare and distributed them among the poor. Everything was in their own management; they purchased their own supplies, recruited a cook and a few waiters, and did not disdain to lend a hand themselves, in order that everything might be comfortable and orderly.

"It must be very interesting," said M. de Guersaint, when these explanations had been given him. "Let us go and see it, if we are not in the way."

Little Madame Desagneaux thereupon gave her consent. "Well, if we are going in a party," said she, "I am quite willing. But when this gentleman first proposed to take Raymonde and me, I was afraid that it might not be quite proper."

Then, as she began to laugh, the others followed her example. She had accepted M. de Guersaint's arm, and Pierre walked beside her on the other hand, experiencing a sudden feeling of sympathy for this gay little woman, who was so full of life and so charming with her fair frizzy hair and creamy complexion.

Behind them came Raymonde, leaning upon Gerard's arm and talking to him in the calm, staid voice of a young lady who holds the best principles despite her air of heedless youth. And since here was the husband whom she had so often dreamt of, she resolved that she would this time secure him, make him beyond all question her own. She intoxicated him with the perfume of health and youth which she diffused, and at the same time astonished him by her knowledge of housewifely duties and of the manner in which money may be economised even in the most trifling matters; for having questioned him with regard to the purchases which he and his comrades made for their "ordinary," she proceeded to show him that they

might have reduced their expenditure still further.

Meantime M. de Guersaint and Madame Desagneaux were also chatting together: "You must be fearfully tired, madame," said the architect.

But with a gesture of revolt, and an exclamation of genuine anger, she replied: "Oh no, indeed! Last night, it is true, fatigue quite overcame me at the hospital; I sat down and dozed off, and Madame de Jonquiere and the other ladies were good enough to let me sleep on." At this the others again began to laugh; but still with the same angry air she continued: "And so I slept like a log until this morning. It was disgraceful, especially as I had sworn that I would remain up all night." Then, merriment gaining upon her in her turn, she suddenly burst into a sonorous laugh, displaying her beautiful white teeth. "Ah! a pretty nurse I am, and no mistake! It was poor Madame de Jonquiere who had to remain on her legs all the time. I tried to coax her to come out with us just now. But she preferred to take a little rest."

Raymonde, who overheard these words, thereupon raised her voice to say: "Yes, indeed, my poor mamma could no longer keep on her feet. It was I who compelled her to lie down, telling her that she could go to sleep without any uneasiness, for we should get on all right without her--"

So saying, the girl gave Gerard a laughing glance. He even fancied that he could detect a faint squeeze of the fresh round arm which was resting on his own, as though, indeed, she had wished to express her happiness at being alone with him so that they might settle their own affairs without any interference. This quite delighted him; and he began to explain that if he had not had /dejeuner/ with his comrades that day, it was because some friends had invited him to join them at the railway-station refreshment-room at ten o'clock, and had not given him his liberty until after the departure of the eleven-thirty train.

"Ah! the rascals!" he suddenly resumed. "Do you hear them, mademoiselle?"

The little party was now nearing its destination, and the uproarious laughter and chatter of youth rang out from a clump of trees which concealed the old zinc and plaster building in which the "ordinary" was installed. Gerard began by taking the visitors into the kitchen, a very spacious apartment, well fitted up, and containing a huge range and an immense table, to say nothing of numerous gigantic cauldrons. Here, moreover, the young man called the attention of his companions to the circumstance that the cook, a fat, jovial-looking man, had the red cross pinned on his white jacket, being himself a member of the pilgrimage. Then, pushing open a door, Gerard invited his friends to enter the common room.

It was a long apartment containing two rows of plain deal tables; and the only other articles of furniture were numerous rush-seated tavern chairs, with an additional table which served as a sideboard. The whitewashed walls and the flooring of shiny, red tiles looked, however, extremely clean amidst this intentional bareness, which was similar to that of a monkish refectory. But, the feature of the place which more particularly struck you, as you crossed the threshold, was the childish gaiety which reigned there; for, packed together at the tables, were a hundred and fifty hospitallers of all ages, eating with splendid appetites, laughing, applauding, and singing, with their mouths full. A wondrous fraternity united these men, who had flocked to Lourdes from every province of France, and who belonged to all classes, and represented every degree of

fortune. Many of them knew nothing of one another, save that they met here and elbowed one another during three days every year, living together like brothers, and then going off and remaining in absolute ignorance of each other during the rest of the twelvemonth. Nothing could be more charming, however, than to meet again at the next pilgrimage, united in the same charitable work, and to spend a few days of hard labour and boyish delight in common once more; for it all became, as it were, an "outing" of a number of big fellows, let loose under a lovely sky, and well pleased to be able to enjoy themselves and laugh together. And even the frugality of the table, with the pride of managing things themselves, of eating the provisions which they had purchased and cooked, added to the general good humour.

"You see," explained Gerard, "we are not at all inclined to be sad, although we have so much hard work to get through. The Hospitality numbers more than three hundred members, but there are only about one hundred and fifty here at a time, for we have had to organise two successive services, so that there may always be some of us on duty at the Grotto and the hospitals."

The sight of the little party of visitors assembled on the threshold of the room seemed to have increased the general delight; and Berthaud, the superintendent of the bearers, who was lunching at the head of one of the tables, gallantly rose up to receive the ladies.

"But it smells very nice," exclaimed Madame Desagneaux in her giddy way. "Won't you invite us to come and taste your cookery to-morrow?"

"Oh! we can't ask ladies," replied Berthaud, laughing. "But if you gentlemen would like to join us to-morrow we should be extremely pleased to entertain you."

He had at once noticed the good understanding which prevailed between Gerard and Raymonde, and seemed delighted at it, for he greatly wished his cousin to make this match. He laughed pleasantly, at the enthusiastic gaiety which the young girl displayed as she began to question him. "Is not that the Marquis de Salmon-Roquebert," she asked, "who is sitting over yonder between those two young men who look like shop assistants?"

"They are, in fact, the sons of a small stationer at Tarbes," replied Berthaud; "and that is really the Marquis, your neighbour of the Rue de Lille, the owner of that magnificent mansion, one of the richest and most noble men of title in France. You see how he is enjoying our mutton stew!"

It was true, the millionaire Marquis seemed delighted to be able to board himself for his three francs a day, and to sit down at table in genuine democratic fashion by the side of petty /bourgeois/ and workmen who would not have dared to accost him in the street. Was not that chance table symbolical of social communion, effected by the joint practice of charity? For his part, the Marquis was the more hungry that day, as he had bathed over sixty patients, sufferers from all the most abominable diseases of unhappy humanity, at the piscinas that morning. And the scene around him seemed like a realisation of the evangelical commonalty; but doubtless it was so charming and so gay simply because its duration was limited to three days.

Although M. de Guersaint had but lately risen from table, his curiosity prompted him to taste the mutton stew, and he pronounced it perfect.

Meantime, Pierre caught sight of Baron Suire, the director of the Hospitality, walking about between the rows of tables with an air of some importance, as though he had allotted himself the task of keeping an eye on everything, even on the manner in which his staff fed itself. The young priest thereupon remembered the ardent desire which Marie had expressed to spend the night in front of the Grotto, and it occurred to him that the Baron might be willing to give the necessary authorisation.

"Certainly," replied the director, who had become quite grave whilst listening to Pierre, "we do sometimes allow it; but it is always a very delicate matter! You assure me at all events that this young person is not consumptive? Well, well, since you say that she so much desires it I will mention the matter to Father Fourcade and warn Madame de Jonquiere, so that she may let you take the young lady away."

He was in reality a very good-natured fellow, albeit so fond of assuming the air of an indispensable man weighed down by the heaviest responsibilities. In his turn he now detained the visitors, and gave them full particulars concerning the organisation of the Hospitality. Its members said prayers together every morning. Two board meetings were held each day, and were attended by all the heads of departments, as well as by the reverend Fathers and some of the chaplains. All the hospitallers took the Sacrament as frequently as possible. And, moreover, there were many complicated tasks to be attended to, a prodigious rotation of duties, quite a little world to be governed with a firm hand. The Baron spoke like a general who each year gains a great victory over the spirit of the age; and, sending Berthaud back to finish his /dejeuner/, he insisted on escorting the ladies into the little sanded courtyard, which was shaded by some fine trees.

"It is very interesting, very interesting," repeated Madame Desagneaux. "We are greatly obliged to you for your kindness, monsieur."

"Don't mention it, don't mention it, madame," answered the Baron. "It is I who am pleased at having had an opportunity to show you my little army."

So far Gerard had not quitted Raymonde's side; but M. de Guersaint and Pierre were already exchanging glances suggestive of leave-taking, in order that they might repair by themselves to the Place du Marcadal, when Madame Desagneaux suddenly remembered that a friend had requested her to send her a bottle of Lourdes water. And she thereupon asked Gerard how she was to execute this commission. The young man began to laugh. "Will you again accept me as a guide?" said he. "And by the way, if these gentlemen like to come as well, I will show you the place where the bottles are filled, corked, packed in cases, and then sent off. It is a curious sight."

M. de Guersaint immediately consented; and all five of them set out again, Madame Desagneaux still between the architect and the priest, whilst Raymonde and Gerard brought up the rear. The crowd in the burning sunlight was increasing; the Place du Rosaire was now overflowing with an idle sauntering mob resembling some concourse of sight-seers on a day of public rejoicing.

The bottling and packing shops were situated under one of the arches on the left-hand side of the Place. They formed a suite of three apartments of very simple aspect. In the first one the bottles were filled in the most ordinary of fashions. A little green-painted zinc barrel, not unlike

a watering-cask, was dragged by a man from the Grotto, and the light-coloured bottles were then simply filled at its tap, one by one; the blouse-clad workman entrusted with the duty exercising no particular watchfulness to prevent the water from overflowing. In fact there was quite a puddle of it upon the ground. There were no labels on the bottles; the little leaden capsules placed over the corks alone bore an inscription, and they were coated with a kind of ceruse, doubtless to ensure preservation. Then came two other rooms which formed regular packing shops, with carpenters' benches, tools, and heaps of shavings. The boxes, most frequently made for one bottle or for two, were put together with great care, and the bottles were deposited inside them, on beds of fine wood parings. The scene reminded one in some degree of the packing halls for flowers at Nice and for preserved fruits at Grasse.

Gerard went on giving explanations with a quiet, satisfied air. "The water," he said, "really comes from the Grotto, as you can yourselves see, so that all the foolish jokes which one hears really have no basis. And everything is perfectly simple, natural, and goes on in the broad daylight. I would also point out to you that the Fathers don't sell the water as they are accused of doing. For instance, a bottle of water here costs twenty centimes,* which is only the price of the bottle itself. If you wish to have it sent to anybody you naturally have to pay for the packing and the carriage, and then it costs you one franc and seventy centimes.** However, you are perfectly at liberty to go to the source and fill the flasks and cans and other receptacles that you may choose to bring with you."

* Four cents, U.S.A.

** About 32 cents, U.S.A.

Pierre reflected that the profits of the reverend Fathers in this respect could not be very large ones, for their gains were limited to what they made by manufacturing the boxes and supplying the bottles, which latter, purchased by the thousand, certainly did not cost them so much as twenty centimes apiece. However, Raymonde and Madame Desagneaux, as well as M. de Guersaint, who had such a lively imagination, experienced deep disappointment at sight of the little green barrel, the capsules, sticky with ceruse, and the piles of shavings lying around the benches. They had doubtless imagined all sorts of ceremonies, the observance of certain rites in bottling the miraculous water, priests in vestments pronouncing blessings, and choir-boys singing hymns of praise in pure crystalline voices. For his part, Pierre, in presence of all this vulgar bottling and packing, ended by thinking of the active power of faith. When one of those bottles reaches some far-away sick-room, and is unpacked there, and the sufferer falls upon his knees, and so excites himself by contemplating and drinking the pure water that he actually brings about the cure of his ailment, there must truly be a most extraordinary plunge into all-powerful illusion.

"Ah!" exclaimed Gerard as they came out, "would you like to see the storehouse where the tapers are kept, before going to the offices? It is only a couple of steps away."

And then, not even waiting for their answer, he led them to the opposite side of the Place du Rosaire. His one desire was to amuse Raymonde, but, in point of fact, the aspect of the place where the tapers were stored was even less entertaining than that of the packing-rooms which they had just left. This storehouse, a kind of deep vault under one of the

right-hand arches of the Place, was divided by timber into a number of spacious compartments, in which lay an extraordinary collection of tapers, classified according to size. The overplus of all the tapers offered to the Grotto was deposited here; and such was the number of these superfluous candles that the little conveyances stationed near the Grotto railing, ready to receive the pilgrims' offerings, had to be brought to the storehouse several times a day in order to be emptied there, after which they were returned to the Grotto, and were promptly filled again. In theory, each taper that was offered ought to have been burnt at the feet of the Virgin's statue; but so great was the number of these offerings, that, although a couple of hundred tapers of all sizes were kept burning by day and night, it was impossible to exhaust the supply, which went on increasing and increasing. There was a rumour that the Fathers could not even find room to store all this wax, but had to sell it over and over again; and, indeed, certain friends of the Grotto confessed, with a touch of pride, that the profit on the tapers alone would have sufficed to defray all the expenses of the business.

The quantity of these votive candles quite stupefied Raymonde and Madame Desagneaux. How many, how many there were! The smaller ones, costing from fifty centimes to a franc apiece, were piled up in fabulous numbers. M. de Guersaint, desirous of getting at the exact figures, quite lost himself in the puzzling calculation he attempted. As for Pierre, it was in silence that he gazed upon this mass of wax, destined to be burnt in open daylight to the glory of God; and although he was by no means a rigid utilitarian, and could well understand that some apparent acts of extravagance yield an illusive enjoyment and satisfaction which provide humanity with as much sustenance as bread, he could not, on the other hand, refrain from reflecting on the many benefits which might have been conferred on the poor and the ailing with the money represented by all that wax, which would fly away in smoke.

"But come, what about that bottle which I am to send off?" abruptly asked Madame Desagneaux.

"We will go to the office," replied Gerard. "In five minutes everything will be settled."

They had to cross the Place du Rosaire once more and ascend the stone stairway leading to the Basilica. The office was up above, on the left hand, at the corner of the path leading to the Calvary. The building was a paltry one, a hut of lath and plaster which the wind and the rain had reduced to a state of ruin. On a board outside was the inscription: "Apply here with reference to Masses, Offerings, and Brotherhoods. Forwarding office for Lourdes water. Subscriptions to the 'Annals of O. L. of Lourdes.'" How many millions of people must have already passed through this wretched shanty, which seemed to date from the innocent days when the foundations of the adjacent Basilica had scarcely been laid!

The whole party went in, eager to see what might be inside. But they simply found a wicket at which Madame Desagneaux had to stop in order to give her friend's name and address; and when she had paid one franc and seventy centimes, a small printed receipt was handed her, such as you receive on registering luggage at a railway station.

As soon as they were outside again Gerard pointed to a large building standing two or three hundred yards away, and resumed: "There, that is where the Fathers reside."

"But we see nothing of them," remarked Pierre.

This observation so astonished the young man that he remained for a moment without replying. "It's true," he at last said, "we do not see them, but then they give up the custody of everything--the Grotto and all the rest--to the Fathers of the Assumption during the national pilgrimage."

Pierre looked at the building which had been pointed out to him, and noticed that it was a massive stone pile resembling a fortress. The windows were closed, and the whole edifice looked lifeless. Yet everything at Lourdes came from it, and to it also everything returned. It seemed, in fact, to the young priest that he could hear the silent, formidable rake-stroke which extended over the entire valley, which caught hold of all who had come to the spot, and placed both the gold and the blood of the throng in the clutches of those reverend Fathers! However, Gerard just then resumed in a low voice "But come, they do show themselves, for here is the reverend superior, Father Capdebarthe himself."

An ecclesiastic was indeed just passing, a man with the appearance of a peasant, a knotty frame, and a large head which looked as though carved with a billhook. His opaque eyes were quite expressionless, and his face, with its worn features, had retained a loamy tint, a gloomy, russet reflection of the earth. Monseigneur Laurence had really made a politic selection in confiding the organisation and management of the Grotto to those Garaison missionaries, who were so tenacious and covetous, for the most part sons of mountain peasants and passionately attached to the soil.

However, the little party now slowly retraced its steps by way of the Plateau de la Merlasse, the broad boulevard which skirts the inclined way on the left hand and leads to the Avenue de la Grotte. It was already past one o'clock, but people were still eating their /dejeuners/ from one to the other end of the overflowing town. Many of the fifty thousand pilgrims and sight-seers collected within it had not yet been able to sit down and eat; and Pierre, who had left the /table d'hote/ still crowded, who had just seen the hospitallers squeezing together so gaily at the "ordinary," found more and more tables at each step he took. On all sides people were eating, eating without a pause. Hereabouts, however, in the open air, on either side of the broad road, the hungry ones were humble folk who had rushed upon the tables set up on either footway--tables formed of a couple of long boards, flanked by two forms, and shaded from the sun by narrow linen awnings. Broth and coffee were sold at these places at a penny a cup. The little loaves heaped up in high baskets also cost a penny apiece. Hanging from the poles which upheld the awnings were sausages, chitterlings, and hams. Some of the open-air /restaurateurs/ were frying potatoes, and others were concocting more or less savoury messes of inferior meat and onions. A pungent smoke, a violent odour, arose into the sunlight, mingling with the dust which was raised by the continuous tramp of the promenaders. Rows of people, moreover, were waiting at each cantine, so that each time a party rose from table fresh customers took possession of the benches ranged beside the oilcloth-covered planks, which were so narrow that there was scarcely room for two bowls of soup to be placed side by side. And one and all made haste, and devoured with the ravenous hunger born of their fatigue, that insatiable appetite which so often follows upon great moral shocks. In fact, when the mind had exhausted itself in prayer, when everything physical had been forgotten amidst the mental flight into the legendary

heavens, the human animal suddenly appeared, again asserted itself, and began to gorge. Moreover, under that dazzling Sunday sky, the scene was like that of a fair-field with all the gluttony of a merrymaking community, a display of the delight which they felt in living, despite the multiplicity of their abominable ailments and the dearth of the miracles they hoped for.

"They eat, they amuse themselves; what else can one expect?" remarked Gerard, guessing the thoughts of his amiable companions.

"Ah! poor people!" murmured Pierre, "they have a perfect right to do so."

He was greatly touched to see human nature reassert itself in this fashion. However, when they had got to the lower part of the boulevard near the Grotto, his feelings were hurt at sight of the desperate eagerness displayed by the female vendors of tapers and bouquets, who with the rough fierceness of conquerors assailed the passers-by in bands. They were mostly young women, with bare heads, or with kerchiefs tied over their hair, and they displayed extraordinary effrontery. Even the old ones were scarcely more discreet. With parcels of tapers under their arms, they brandished the one which they offered for sale and even thrust it into the hand of the promenader. "Monsieur," "madame," they called, "buy a taper, buy a taper, it will bring you luck!" One gentleman, who was surrounded and shaken by three of the youngest of these harpies, almost lost the skirts of his frock-coat in attempting to escape their clutches. Then the scene began afresh with the bouquets--large round bouquets they were, carelessly fastened together and looking like cabbages. "A bouquet, madame!" was the cry. "A bouquet for the Blessed Virgin!" If the lady escaped, she heard muttered insults behind her. Trafficking, impudent trafficking, pursued the pilgrims to the very outskirts of the Grotto. Trade was not merely triumphantly installed in every one of the shops, standing close together and transforming each street into a bazaar, but it overran the footways and barred the road with hand-carts full of chaplets, medals, statuettes, and religious prints. On all sides people were buying almost to the same extent as they ate, in order that they might take away with them some souvenir of this holy Kermesse. And the bright gay note of this commercial eagerness, this scramble of hawkers, was supplied by the urchins who rushed about through the crowd, crying the "Journal de la Grotte." Their sharp, shrill voices pierced the ear: "The 'Journal de la Grotte,' this morning's number, two sous, the 'Journal de la Grotte.'"

Amidst the continual pushing which accompanied the eddying of the ever-moving crowd, Gerard's little party became separated. He and Raymonde remained behind the others. They had begun talking together in low tones, with an air of smiling intimacy, lost and isolated as they were in the dense crowd. And Madame Desagneaux at last had to stop, look back, and call to them: "Come on, or we shall lose one another!"

As they drew near, Pierre heard the girl exclaim: "Mamma is so very busy; speak to her before we leave." And Gerard thereupon replied: "It is understood. You have made me very happy, mademoiselle."

Thus the husband had been secured, the marriage decided upon, during this charming promenade among the sights of Lourdes. Raymonde had completed her conquest, and Gerard had at last taken a resolution, realising how gay and sensible she was, as she walked beside him leaning on his arm.

M. de Guersaint, however, had raised his eyes, and was heard inquiring:

"Are not those people up there, on that balcony, the rich folk who made the journey in the same train as ourselves?--You know whom I mean, that lady who is so very ill, and whose husband and sister accompany her?"

He was alluding to the Dieulafays; and they indeed were the persons whom he now saw on the balcony of a suite of rooms which they had rented in a new house overlooking the lawns of the Rosary. They here occupied a first-floor, furnished with all the luxury that Lourdes could provide, carpets, hangings, mirrors, and many other things, without mentioning a staff of servants despatched beforehand from Paris. As the weather was so fine that afternoon, the large armchair on which lay the poor ailing woman had been rolled on to the balcony. You could see her there, clad in a lace /peignoir/. Her husband, always correctly attired in a black frock-coat, stood beside her on her right hand, whilst her sister, in a delightful pale mauve gown, sat on her left smiling and leaning over every now and then so as to speak to her, but apparently receiving no reply.

"Oh!" declared little Madame Desagneaux, "I have often heard people speak of Madame Jousseur, that lady in mauve. She is the wife of a diplomatist who neglects her, it seems, in spite of her great beauty; and last year there was a deal of talk about her fancy for a young colonel who is well known in Parisian society. It is said, however, in Catholic /salons/ that her religious principles enabled her to conquer it."

They all five remained there, looking up at the balcony. "To think," resumed Madame Desagneaux, "that her sister, poor woman, was once her living portrait." And, indeed, there was an expression of greater kindness and more gentle gaiety on Madame Dieulafay's face. And now you see her--no different from a dead woman except that she is above instead of under ground--with her flesh wasted away, reduced to a livid, boneless thing which they scarcely dare to move. Ah! the unhappy woman!

Raymonde thereupon assured the others that Madame Dieulafay, who had been married scarcely two years previously, had brought all the jewellery given her on the occasion of her wedding to offer it as a gift to Our Lady of Lourdes; and Gerard confirmed this assertion, saying that the jewellery had been handed over to the treasurer of the Basilica that very morning with a golden lantern studded with gems and a large sum of money destined for the relief of the poor. However, the Blessed Virgin could not have been touched as yet, for the sufferer's condition seemed, if anything, to be worse.

From that moment Pierre no longer beheld aught save that young woman on that handsome balcony, that woeful, wealthy creature lying there high above the merrymaking throng, the Lourdes mob which was feasting and laughing in the Sunday sunshine. The two dear ones who were so tenderly watching over her--her sister who had forsaken her society triumphs, her husband who had forgotten his financial business, his millions dispersed throughout the world--increased, by their irreproachable demeanour, the woefulness of the group which they thus formed high above all other heads, and face to face with the lovely valley. For Pierre they alone remained; and they were exceedingly wealthy and exceedingly wretched.

However, lingering in this wise on the footway with their eyes upturned, the five promenaders narrowly escaped being knocked down and run over, for at every moment fresh vehicles were coming up, for the most part landaus drawn by four horses, which were driven at a fast trot, and whose bells jingled merrily. The occupants of these carriages were tourists,

visitors to the waters of Pau, Bareges, and Cauterets, whom curiosity had attracted to Lourdes, and who were delighted with the fine weather and quite inspired by their rapid drive across the mountains. They would remain at Lourdes only a few hours; after hastening to the Grotto and the Basilica in seaside costumes, they would start off again, laughing, and well pleased at having seen it all. In this wise families in light attire, bands of young women with bright parasols, darted hither and thither among the grey, neutral-tinted crowd of pilgrims, imparting to it, in a yet more pronounced manner, the aspect of a fair-day mob, amidst which folks of good society deign to come and amuse themselves.

All at once Madame Desagneaux raised a cry "What, is it you, Berthe?" And thereupon she embraced a tall, charming brunette who had just alighted from a landau with three other young women, the whole party smiling and animated. Everyone began talking at once, and all sorts of merry exclamations rang out, in the delight they felt at meeting in this fashion. "Oh! we are at Cauterets, my dear," said the tall brunette. "And as everybody comes here, we decided to come all four together. And your husband, is he here with you?"

Madame Desagneaux began protesting: "Of course not," said she. "He is at Trouville, as you ought to know. I shall start to join him on Thursday."

"Yes, yes, of course," resumed the tall brunette, who, like her friend, seemed to be an amiable, giddy creature, "I was forgetting; you are here with the pilgrimage."

Then Madame Desagneaux offered to guide her friends, promising to show them everything of interest in less than a couple of hours; and turning to Raymonde, who stood by, smiling, she added "Come with us, my dear; your mother won't be anxious."

The ladies and Pierre and M. de Guersaint thereupon exchanged bows: and Gerard also took leave, tenderly pressing Raymonde's hand, with his eyes fixed on hers, as though to pledge himself definitively. The women swiftly departed, directing their steps towards the Grotto, and when Gerard also had gone off, returning to his duties, M. de Guersaint said to Pierre: "And the hairdresser on the Place du Marcadal, I really must go and see him. You will come with me, won't you?"

"Of course I will go wherever you like. I am quite at your disposal as Marie does not need us."

Following the pathways between the large lawns which stretch out in front of the Rosary, they reached the new bridge, where they had another encounter, this time with Abbe des Hermoises, who was acting as guide to two young married ladies who had arrived that morning from Tarbes. Walking between them with the gallant air of a society priest, he was showing them Lourdes and explaining it to them, keeping them well away, however, from its more repugnant features, its poor and its ailing folk, its odour of low misery, which, it must be admitted, had well-nigh disappeared that fine, sunshiny day. At the first word which M. de Guersaint addressed to him with respect to the hiring of a vehicle for the trip to Gavarnie, the Abbe was seized with a dread lest he should be obliged to leave his pretty lady-visitors: "As you please, my dear sir," he replied. "Kindly attend to the matter, and--you are quite right, make the cheapest arrangements possible, for I shall have two ecclesiastics of small means with me. There will be four of us. Let me know at the hotel this evening at what hour we shall start."

Thereupon he again joined his lady-friends, and led them towards the Grotto, following the shady path which skirts the Gave, a cool, sequestered path well suited for lovers' walks.

Feeling somewhat tired, Pierre had remained apart from the others, leaning against the parapet of the new bridge. And now for the first time he was struck by the prodigious number of priests among the crowd. He saw all varieties of them swarming across the bridge: priests of correct mien who had come with the pilgrimage and who could be recognised by their air of assurance and their clean cassocks; poor village priests who were far more timid and badly clothed, and who, after making sacrifices in order that they might indulge in the journey, would return home quite scared and, finally, there was the whole crowd of unattached ecclesiastics who had come nobody knew whence, and who enjoyed such absolute liberty that it was difficult to be sure whether they had even said their mass that morning. They doubtless found this liberty very agreeable; and thus the greater number of them, like Abbe des Hermoises, had simply come on a holiday excursion, free from all duties, and happy at being able to live like ordinary men, lost, unnoticed as they were in the multitude around them. And from the young, carefully groomed and perfumed priest, to the old one in a dirty cassock and shoes down at heel, the entire species had its representative in the throng--there were corpulent ones, others but moderately fat, thin ones, tall ones and short ones, some whom faith had brought and whom ardour was consuming, some also who simply plied their calling like worthy men, and some, moreover, who were fond of intriguing, and who were only present in order that they might help the good cause. However, Pierre was quite surprised to see such a stream of priests pass before him, each with his special passion, and one and all hurrying to the Grotto as one hurries to a duty, a belief, a pleasure, or a task. He noticed one among the number, a very short, slim, dark man with a pronounced Italian accent, whose glittering eyes seemed to be taking a plan of Lourdes, who looked, indeed, like one of those spies who come and peer around with a view to conquest; and then he observed another one, an enormous fellow with a paternal air, who was breathing hard through inordinate eating, and who paused in front of a poor sick woman, and ended by slipping a five-franc piece into her hand.

Just then, however, M. de Guersaint returned: "We merely have to go down the boulevard and the Rue Basse," said he.

Pierre followed him without answering. He had just felt his cassock on his shoulders for the first time that afternoon, for never had it seemed so light to him as whilst he was walking about amidst the scramble of the pilgrimage. The young fellow was now living in a state of mingled unconsciousness and dizziness, ever hoping that faith would fall upon him like a lightning flash, in spite of all the vague uneasiness which was growing within him at sight of the things which he beheld. However, the spectacle of that ever-swelling stream of priests no longer wounded his heart; fraternal feelings towards these unknown colleagues had returned to him; how many of them there must be who believed no more than he did himself, and yet, like himself, honestly fulfilled their mission as guides and consolers!

"This boulevard is a new one, you know," said M. de Guersaint, all at once raising his voice. "The number of houses built during the last twenty years is almost beyond belief. There is quite a new town here."

The Lapaca flowed along behind the buildings on their right and, their

curiosity inducing them to turn into a narrow lane, they came upon some strange old structures on the margin of the narrow stream. Several ancient mills here displayed their wheels; among them one which Monseigneur Laurence had given to Bernadette's parents after the apparitions. Tourists, moreover, were here shown the pretended abode of Bernadette, a hovel whither the Soubirous family had removed on leaving the Rue des Petits Fosses, and in which the young girl, as she was already boarding with the Sisters of Nevers, can have but seldom slept. At last, by way of the Rue Basse, Pierre and his companion reached the Place du Marcadal.

This was a long, triangular, open space, the most animated and luxurious of the squares of the old town, the one where the cafes, the chemists, all the finest shops were situated. And, among the latter, one showed conspicuously, coloured as it was a lively green, adorned with lofty mirrors, and surmounted by a broad board bearing in gilt letters the inscription: "Cazaban, Hairdresser".

M. de Guersaint and Pierre went in, but there was nobody in the salon and they had to wait. A terrible clatter of forks resounded from the adjoining room, an ordinary dining-room transformed into a /table d'hote/, in which some twenty people were having /dejeuner/ although it was already two o'clock. The afternoon was progressing, and yet people were still eating from one to the other end of Lourdes. Like every other householder in the town, whatever his religious convictions might be, Cazaban, in the pilgrimage season, let his bedrooms, surrendered his dining-room, and sought refuge in his cellar, where, heaped up with his family, he ate and slept, although this unventilated hole was no more than three yards square. However, the passion for trading and moneymaking carried all before it; at pilgrimage time the whole population disappeared like that of a conquered city, surrendering even the beds of its women and its children to the pilgrims, seating them at its tables, and supplying them with food.

"Is there nobody here?" called M. de Guersaint after waiting a moment.

At last a little man made his appearance, Cazaban himself, a type of the knotty but active Pyrenean, with a long face, prominent cheek-bones, and a sunburned complexion spotted here and there with red. His big, glittering eyes never remained still; and the whole of his spare little figure quivered with incessant exuberance of speech and gesture.

"For you, monsieur--a shave, eh?" said he. "I must beg your pardon for keeping you waiting; but my assistant has gone out, and I was in there with my boarders. If you will kindly sit down, I will attend to you at once."

Thereupon, deigning to operate in person, Cazaban began to stir up the lather and strop the razor. He had glanced rather nervously, however, at the cassock worn by Pierre, who without a word had seated himself in a corner and taken up a newspaper in the perusal of which he appeared to be absorbed.

A short interval of silence followed; but it was fraught with suffering for Cazaban, and whilst lathering his customer's chin he began to chatter: "My boarders lingered this morning such a long time at the Grotto, monsieur, that they have scarcely sat down to /dejeuner/. You can hear them, eh? I was staying with them out of politeness. However, I owe myself to my customers as well, do I not? One must try to please

everybody."

M. de Guersaint, who also was fond of a chat, thereupon began to question him: "You lodge some of the pilgrims, I suppose?"

"Oh! we all lodge some of them, monsieur; it is necessary for the town," replied the barber.

"And you accompany them to the Grotto?"

At this, however, Cazaban revolted, and, holding up his razor, he answered with an air of dignity "Never, monsieur, never! For five years past I have not been in that new town which they are building."

He was still seeking to restrain himself, and again glanced at Pierre, whose face was hidden by the newspaper. The sight of the red cross pinned on M. de Guersaint's jacket was also calculated to render him prudent; nevertheless his tongue won the victory. "Well, monsieur, opinions are free, are they not?" said he. "I respect yours, but for my part I don't believe in all that phantasmagoria! Oh I've never concealed it! I was already a republican and a freethinker in the days of the Empire. There were barely four men of those views in the whole town at that time. Oh! I'm proud of it."

He had begun to shave M. de Guersaint's left cheek and was quite triumphant. From that moment a stream of words poured forth from his mouth, a stream which seemed to be inexhaustible. To begin with, he brought the same charges as Majeste against the Fathers of the Grotto. He reproached them for their dealings in tapers, chaplets, prints, and crucifixes, for the disloyal manner in which they competed with those who sold those articles as well as with the hotel and lodging-house keepers. And he was also wrathful with the Blue Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, for had they not robbed him of two tenants, two old ladies, who spent three weeks at Lourdes each year? Moreover you could divine within him all the slowly accumulated, overflowing spite with which the old town regarded the new town--that town which had sprung up so quickly on the other side of the castle, that rich city with houses as big as palaces, whither flowed all the life, all the luxury, all the money of Lourdes, so that it was incessantly growing larger and wealthier, whilst its elder sister, the poor, antique town of the mountains, with its narrow, grass-grown, deserted streets, seemed near the point of death. Nevertheless the struggle still continued; the old town seemed determined not to die, and, by lodging pilgrims and opening shops on her side, endeavoured to compel her ungrateful junior to grant her a share of the spoils. But custom only flowed to the shops which were near the Grotto, and only the poorer pilgrims were willing to lodge so far away; so that the unequal conditions of the struggle intensified the rupture and turned the high town and the low town into two irreconcilable enemies, who preyed upon one another amidst continual intrigues.

"Ah, no! They certainly won't see me at their Grotto," resumed Cazaban, with his rageful air. "What an abusive use they make of that Grotto of theirs! They serve it up in every fashion! To think of such idolatry, such gross superstition in the nineteenth century! Just ask them if they have cured a single sufferer belonging to the town during the last twenty years! Yet there are plenty of infirm people crawling about our streets. It was our folk that benefited by the first miracles; but it would seem that the miraculous water has long lost all its power, so far as we are concerned. We are too near it; people have to come from a long distance

if they want it to act on them. It's really all too stupid; why, I wouldn't go there even if I were offered a hundred francs!"

Pierre's immobility was doubtless irritating the barber. He had now begun to shave M. de Guersaint's right cheek; and was inveighing against the Fathers of the Immaculate Conception, whose greed for gain was the one cause of all the misunderstanding. These Fathers who were at home there, since they had purchased from the Municipality the land on which they desired to build, did not even carry out the stipulations of the contract they had signed, for there were two clauses in it forbidding all trading, such as the sale of the water and of religious articles. Innumerable actions might have been brought against them. But they snapped their fingers, and felt themselves so powerful that they no longer allowed a single offering to go to the parish, but arranged matters so that the whole harvest of money should be garnered by the Grotto and the Basilica.

And, all at once, Cazaban candidly exclaimed: "If they were only reasonable, if they would only share with us!" Then, when M. de Guersaint had washed his face, and reseated himself, the hairdresser resumed: "And if I were to tell you, monsieur, what they have done with our poor town! Forty years ago all the young girls here conducted themselves properly, I assure you. I remember that in my young days when a young man was wicked he generally had to go elsewhere. But times have changed, our manners are no longer the same. Nowadays nearly all the girls content themselves with selling candles and nosegays; and you must have seen them catching hold of the passers-by and thrusting their goods into their hands! It is really shameful to see so many bold girls about! They make a lot of money, acquire lazy habits, and, instead of working during the winter, simply wait for the return of the pilgrimage season. And I assure you that the young men don't need to go elsewhere nowadays. No, indeed! And add to all this the suspicious floating element which swells the population as soon as the first fine weather sets in--the coachmen, the hawkers, the cantine keepers, all the low-class, wandering folk reeking with grossness and vice--and you can form an idea of the honest new town which they have given us with the crowds that come to their Grotto and their Basilica!"

Greatly struck by these remarks, Pierre had let his newspaper fall and begun to listen. It was now, for the first time, that he fully realised the difference between the two Lourdes--old Lourdes so honest and so pious in its tranquil solitude, and new Lourdes corrupted, demoralised by the circulation of so much money, by such a great enforced increase of wealth, by the ever-growing torrent of strangers sweeping through it, by the fatal rotting influence of the conflux of thousands of people, the contagion of evil examples. And what a terrible result it seemed when one thought of Bernadette, the pure, candid girl kneeling before the wild primitive grotto, when one thought of all the naive faith, all the fervent purity of those who had first begun the work! Had they desired that the whole countryside should be poisoned in this wise by lucre and human filth? Yet it had sufficed that the nations should flock there for a pestilence to break out.

Seeing that Pierre was listening, Cazaban made a final threatening gesture as though to sweep away all this poisonous superstition. Then, relapsing into silence, he finished cutting M. de Guersaint's hair.

"There you are, monsieur!"

The architect rose, and it was only now that he began to speak of the

conveyance which he wished to hire. At first the hairdresser declined to enter into the matter, pretending that they must apply to his brother at the Champ Commun; but at last he consented to take the order. A pair-horse landau for Gavarnie was priced at fifty francs. However, he was so pleased at having talked so much, and so flattered at hearing himself called an honest man, that he eventually agreed to charge only forty francs. There were four persons in the party, so this would make ten francs apiece. And it was agreed that they should start off at about two in the morning, so that they might get back to Lourdes at a tolerably early hour on the Monday evening.

"The landau will be outside the Hotel of the Apparitions at the appointed time," repeated Cazaban in his emphatic way. "You may rely on me, monsieur."

Then he began to listen. The clatter of crockery did not cease in the adjoining room. People were still eating there with that impulsive voracity which had spread from one to the other end of Lourdes. And all at once a voice was heard calling for more bread.

"Excuse me," hastily resumed Cazaban, "my boarders want me." And thereupon he rushed away, his hands still greasy through fingering the comb.

The door remained open for a second, and on the walls of the dining-room Pierre espied various religious prints, and notably a view of the Grotto, which surprised him; in all probability, however, the hairdresser only hung these engravings there during the pilgrimage season by way of pleasing his boarders.

It was now nearly three o'clock. When the young priest and M. de Guersaint got outside they were astonished at the loud pealing of bells which was flying through the air. The parish church had responded to the first stroke of vespers chiming at the Basilica; and now all the convents, one after another, were contributing to the swelling peals. The crystalline notes of the bell of the Carmelites mingled with the grave notes of the bell of the Immaculate Conception; and all the joyous bells of the Sisters of Nevers and the Dominicans were jingling together. In this wise, from morning till evening on fine days of festivity, the chimes winged their flight above the house-roofs of Lourdes. And nothing could have been gayer than that sonorous melody resounding in the broad blue heavens above the gluttonous town, which had at last lunched, and was now comfortably digesting as it strolled about in the sunlight.

III

THE NIGHT PROCESSION

AS soon as night had fallen Marie, still lying on her bed at the Hospital of Our Lady of Dolours, became extremely impatient, for she had learnt from Madame de Jonquiere that Baron Suire had obtained from Father Fourcade the necessary permission for her to spend the night in front of the Grotto. Thus she kept on questioning Sister Hyacinthe, asking her: "Pray, Sister, is it not yet nine o'clock?"

"No, my child, it is scarcely half-past eight," was the reply. "Here is a nice woollen shawl for you to wrap round you at daybreak, for the Gave is

close by, and the mornings are very fresh, you know, in these mountainous parts."

"Oh! but the nights are so lovely, Sister, and besides, I sleep so little here!" replied Marie; "I cannot be worse off out-of-doors. /Mon Dieu/, how happy I am; how delightful it will be to spend the whole night with the Blessed Virgin!"

The entire ward was jealous of her; for to remain in prayer before the Grotto all night long was the most ineffable of joys, the supreme beatitude. It was said that in the deep peacefulness of night the chosen ones undoubtedly beheld the Virgin, but powerful protection was needed to obtain such a favour as had been granted to Marie; for nowadays the reverend Fathers scarcely liked to grant it, as several sufferers had died during the long vigil, falling asleep, as it were, in the midst of their ecstasy.

"You will take the Sacrament at the Grotto tomorrow morning, before you are brought back here, won't you, my child?" resumed Sister Hyacinthe.

However, nine o'clock at last struck, and, Pierre not arriving, the girl wondered whether he, usually so punctual, could have forgotten her? The others were now talking to her of the night procession, which she would see from beginning to end if she only started at once. The ceremonies concluded with a procession every night, but the Sunday one was always the finest, and that evening, it was said, would be remarkably splendid, such, indeed, as was seldom seen. Nearly thirty thousand pilgrims would take part in it, each carrying a lighted taper: the nocturnal marvels of

the sky would be revealed; the stars would descend upon earth. At this thought the sufferers began to bewail their fate; what a wretched lot was theirs, to be tied to their beds, unable to see any of those wonders.

At last Madame de Jonquiere approached Marie's bed. "My dear girl," said she, "here is your father with Monsieur l'Abbe."

Radiant with delight, the girl at once forgot her weary waiting. "Oh! pray let us make haste, Pierre," she exclaimed; "pray let us make haste!"

They carried her down the stairs, and the young priest harnessed himself to the little car, which gently rolled along, under the star-studded heavens, whilst M. de Guersaint walked beside it. The night was moonless, but extremely beautiful; the vault above looked like deep blue velvet, spangled with diamonds, and the atmosphere was exquisitely mild and pure, fragrant with the perfumes from the mountains. Many pilgrims were hurrying along the street, all bending their steps towards the Grotto, but they formed a discreet, pensive crowd, with naught of the fair-field, lounging character of the daytime throng. And, as soon as the Plateau de la Merlasse was reached, the darkness spread out, you entered into a great lake of shadows formed by the stretching lawns and lofty trees, and saw nothing rising on high save the black, tapering spire of the Basilica.

Pierre grew rather anxious on finding that the crowd became more and more compact as he advanced. Already on reaching the Place du Rosaire it was difficult to take another forward step. "There is no hope of getting to the Grotto yet awhile," he said. "The best course would be to turn into one of the pathways behind the pilgrims' shelter-house and wait there."

Marie, however, greatly desired to see the procession start. "Oh! pray try to go as far as the Gave," said she. "I shall then see everything from a distance; I don't want to go near."

M. de Guersaint, who was equally inquisitive, seconded this proposal. "Don't be uneasy," he said to Pierre. "I am here behind, and will take care to let nobody jostle her."

Pierre had to begin pulling the little vehicle again. It took him a quarter of an hour to pass under one of the arches of the inclined way on the left hand, so great was the crush of pilgrims at that point. Then, taking a somewhat oblique course, he ended by reaching the quay beside the Gave, where there were only some spectators standing on the sidewalk, so that he was able to advance another fifty yards. At last he halted, and backed the little car against the quay parapet, in full view of the Grotto. "Will you be all right here?" he asked.

"Oh yes, thank you. Only you must sit me up; I shall then be able to see much better."

M. de Guersaint raised her into a sitting posture, and then for his part climbed upon the stonework running from one to the other end of the quay. A mob of inquisitive people had already scaled it in part, like sight-seers waiting for a display of fireworks; and they were all raising themselves on tiptoe, and craning their necks to get a better view. Pierre himself at last grew interested, although there was, so far, little to see.

Some thirty thousand people were assembled, and, every moment there were fresh arrivals. All carried candles, the lower parts of which were wrapped in white paper, on which a picture of Our Lady of Lourdes was printed in blue ink. However, these candles were not yet lighted, and the only illumination that you perceived above the billowy sea of heads was the bright, forge-like glow of the taper-lighted Grotto. A great buzzing arose, whiffs of human breath blew hither and thither, and these alone enabled you to realise that thousands of serried, stifling creatures were gathered together in the black depths, like a living sea that was ever eddying and spreading. There were even people hidden away under the trees beyond the Grotto, in distant recesses of the darkness of which one had no suspicion.

At last a few tapers began to shine forth here and there, like sudden sparks of light spangling the obscurity at random. Their number rapidly increased, eyots of stars were formed, whilst at other points there were meteoric trails, milky ways, so to say, flowing midst the constellations. The thirty thousand tapers were being lighted one by one, their beams gradually increasing in number till they obscured the bright glow of the Grotto and spread, from one to the other end of the promenade, the small yellow flames of a gigantic brasier.

"Oh! how beautiful it is, Pierre!" murmured Marie; "it is like the resurrection of the humble, the bright awakening of the souls of the poor."

"It is superb, superb!" repeated M. de Guersaint, with impassioned artistic satisfaction. "Do you see those two trails of light yonder, which intersect one another and form a cross?"

Pierre's feelings, however, had been touched by what Marie had just said.

He was reflecting upon her words. There was truth in them. Taken singly, those slender flames, those mere specks of light, were modest and unobtrusive, like the lowly; it was only their great number that supplied the effulgence, the sun-like resplendency. Fresh ones were continually appearing, farther and farther away, like waifs and strays. "Ah!" murmured the young priest, "do you see that one which has just begun to flicker, all by itself, far away--do you see it, Marie? Do you see how it floats and slowly approaches until it is merged in the great lake of light?"

In the vicinity of the Grotto one could see now as clearly as in the daytime. The trees, illumined from below, were intensely green, like the painted trees in stage scenery. Above the moving brasier were some motionless banners, whose embroidered saints and silken cords showed with vivid distinctness. And the great reflection ascended to the rock, even to the Basilica, whose spire now shone out, quite white, against the black sky; whilst the hillsides across the Gave were likewise brightened, and displayed the pale fronts of their convents amidst their sombre foliage.

There came yet another moment of uncertainty. The flaming lake, in which each burning wick was like a little wave, rolled its starry sparkling as though it were about to burst from its bed and flow away in a river. Then the banners began to oscillate, and soon a regular motion set in.

"Oh! so they won't pass this way!" exclaimed M. de Guersaint in a tone of disappointment.

Pierre, who had informed himself on the matter, thereupon explained that the procession would first of all ascend the serpentine road--constructed at great cost up the hillside--and that it would afterwards pass behind the Basilica, descend by the inclined way on the right hand, and then spread out through the gardens.

"Look!" said he; "you can see the foremost tapers ascending amidst the greenery."

Then came an enchanting spectacle. Little flickering lights detached themselves from the great bed of fire, and began gently rising, without it being possible for one to tell at that distance what connected them with the earth. They moved upward, looking in the darkness like golden particles of the sun. And soon they formed an oblique streak, a streak which suddenly twisted, then extended again until it curved once more. At last the whole hillside was streaked by a flaming zigzag, resembling those lightning flashes which you see falling from black skies in cheap engravings. But, unlike the lightning, the luminous trail did not fade away; the little lights still went onward in the same slow, gentle, gliding manner. Only for a moment, at rare intervals, was there a sudden eclipse; the procession, no doubt, was then passing behind some clump of trees. But, farther on, the tapers beamed forth afresh, rising heavenward by an intricate path, which incessantly diverged and then started upward again. At last, however, the time came when the lights no longer ascended, for they had reached the summit of the hill and had begun to disappear at the last turn of the road.

Exclamations were rising from the crowd. "They are passing behind the Basilica," said one. "Oh! it will take them twenty minutes before they begin coming down on the other side," remarked another. "Yes, madame," said a third, "there are thirty thousand of them, and an hour will go by

before the last of them leaves the Grotto."

Ever since the start a sound of chanting had risen above the low rumbling of the crowd. The hymn of Bernadette was being sung, those sixty couplets between which the Angelic Salutation, with its all-besetting rhythm, was ever returning as a refrain. When the sixty couplets were finished they were sung again; and that lullaby of "Ave, ave, ave Maria!" came back incessantly, stupefying the mind, and gradually transporting those thousands of beings into a kind of wide-awake dream, with a vision of Paradise before their eyes. And, indeed, at night-time when they were asleep, their beds would rock to the eternal tune, which they still and ever continued singing.

"Are we going to stop here?" asked M. de Guersaint, who speedily got tired of remaining in any one spot. "We see nothing but the same thing over and over again."

Marie, who had informed herself by listening to what was said in the crowd, thereupon exclaimed: "You were quite right, Pierre; it would be much better to go back yonder under the trees. I so much wish to see everything."

"Yes, certainly; we will seek a spot whence you may see it all," replied the priest. "The only difficulty lies in getting away from here."

Indeed, they were now inclosed within the mob of sight-seers; and, in order to secure a passage, Pierre with stubborn perseverance had to keep on begging a little room for a suffering girl.

M. de Guersaint meantime brought up the rear, screening the little conveyance so that it might not be upset by the jostling; whilst Marie turned her head, still endeavouring to see the sheet of flame spread out before the Grotto, that lake of little sparkling waves which never seemed to diminish, although the procession continued to flow from it without a pause.

At last they all three found themselves out of the crowd, near one of the arches, on a deserted spot where they were able to breathe for a moment. They now heard nothing but the distant canticle with its besetting refrain, and they only saw the reflection of the tapers, hovering like a luminous cloud in the neighbourhood of the Basilica.

"The best plan would be to climb to the Calvary," said M. de Guersaint. "The servant at the hotel told me so this morning. From up there, it seems, the scene is fairy-like."

But they could not think of making the ascent. Pierre at once enumerated the difficulties. "How could we hoist ourselves to such a height with Marie's conveyance?" he asked. "Besides, we should have to come down again, and that would be dangerous work in the darkness amidst all the scrambling."

Marie herself preferred to remain under the trees in the gardens, where it was very mild. So they started off, and reached the esplanade in front of the great crowned statue of the Virgin. It was illuminated by means of blue and yellow globes which encompassed it with a gaudy splendour; and despite all his piety M. de Guersaint could not help finding these decorations in execrable taste.

"There!" exclaimed Marie, "a good place would be near those shrubs yonder."

She was pointing to a shrubbery near the pilgrims' shelter-house; and the spot was indeed an excellent one for their purpose, as it enabled them to see the procession come down by the gradient way on the left, and watch it as it passed between the lawns to the new bridge and back again. Moreover, a delightful freshness prevailed there by reason of the vicinity of the Gave. There was nobody there as yet, and one could enjoy deep peacefulness in the dense shade which fell from the big plane-trees bordering the path.

In his impatience to see the first tapers reappear as soon as they should have passed behind the Basilica, M. de Guersaint had risen on tiptoe. "I see nothing as yet," he muttered, "so whatever the regulations may be I shall sit on the grass for a moment. I've no strength left in my legs." Then, growing anxious about his daughter, he inquired: "Shall I cover you up? It is very cool here."

"Oh, no! I'm not cold, father!" answered Marie; "I feel so happy. It is long since I breathed such sweet air. There must be some roses about--can't you smell that delicious perfume?" And turning to Pierre she asked: "Where are the roses, my friend? Can you see them?"

When M. de Guersaint had seated himself on the grass near the little vehicle, it occurred to Pierre to see if there was not some bed of roses near at hand. But it was in vain that he explored the dark lawns; he could only distinguish sundry clumps of evergreens. And, as he passed in front of the pilgrims' shelter-house on his way back, curiosity prompted him to enter it.

This building formed a long and lofty hall, lighted by large windows upon two sides. With bare walls and a stone pavement, it contained no other furniture than a number of benches, which stood here and there in haphazard fashion. There was neither table nor shelf, so that the homeless pilgrims who had sought refuge there had piled up their baskets, parcels, and valises in the window embrasures. Moreover, the place was apparently empty; the poor folk that it sheltered had no doubt joined the procession. Nevertheless, although the door stood wide open, an almost unbearable smell reigned inside. The very walls seemed impregnated with an odour of poverty, and in spite of the bright sunshine which had prevailed during the day, the flagstones were quite damp, soiled and soaked with expectorations, spilt wine, and grease. This mess had been made by the poorer pilgrims, who with their dirty skins and wretched rags lived in the hall, eating and sleeping in heaps on the benches. Pierre speedily came to the conclusion that the pleasant smell of roses must emanate from some other spot; still, he was making the round of the hall, which was lighted by four smoky lanterns, and which he believed to be altogether unoccupied, when, against the left-hand wall, he was surprised to espy the vague figure of a woman in black, with what seemed to be a white parcel lying on her lap. She was all alone in that solitude, and did not stir; however, her eyes were wide open.

He drew near and recognised Madame Vincent. She addressed him in a deep, broken voice: "Rose has suffered so dreadfully to-day! Since daybreak she has not ceased moaning. And so, as she fell asleep a couple of hours ago, I haven't dared to stir for fear lest she should awake and suffer again."

Thus the poor woman remained motionless, martyr-mother that she was,

having for long months held her daughter in her arms in this fashion, in the stubborn hope of curing her. In her arms, too, she had brought her to Lourdes; in her arms she had carried her to the Grotto; in her arms she had rocked her to sleep, having neither a room of her own, nor even a hospital bed at her disposal.

"Isn't the poor little thing any better?" asked Pierre, whose heart ached at the sight.

"No, Monsieur l'Abbe; no, I think not."

"But you are very badly off here on this bench. You should have made an application to the pilgrimage managers instead of remaining like this, in the street, as it were. Some accommodation would have been found for your little girl, at any rate; that's certain."

"Oh! what would have been the use of it, Monsieur l'Abbe? She is all right on my lap. And besides, should I have been allowed to stay with her? No, no, I prefer to have her on my knees; it seems to me that it will end by curing her." Two big tears rolled down the poor woman's motionless cheeks, and in her stifled voice she continued: "I am not penniless. I had thirty sous when I left Paris, and I still have ten left. All I need is a little bread, and she, poor darling, can no longer drink any milk even. I have enough to last me till we go back, and if she gets well again, oh! we shall be rich, rich, rich!"

She had leant forward while speaking, and by the flickering light of a lantern near by, gazed at Rose, who was breathing faintly, with parted lips. "You see how soundly she is sleeping," resumed the unhappy mother. "Surely the Blessed Virgin will take pity on her and cure her, won't she, Monsieur l'Abbe? We only have one day left; still, I don't despair; and I shall again pray all night long without moving from here. She will be cured to-morrow; we must live till then."

Infinite pity was filling the heart of Pierre, who, fearing that he also might weep, now went away. "Yes, yes, my poor woman, we must hope, still hope," said he, as he left her there among the scattered benches, in that deserted, malodorous hall, so motionless in her painful maternal passion as to hold her own breath, fearful lest the heaving of her bosom should awaken the poor little sufferer. And in deepest grief, with closed lips, she prayed ardently.

On Pierre returning to Marie's side, the girl inquired of him: "Well, and those roses? Are there any near here?"

He did not wish to sadden her by telling her what he had seen, so he simply answered: "No, I have searched the lawns; there are none."

"How singular!" she rejoined, in a thoughtful way. "The perfume is both so sweet and penetrating. You can smell it, can't you? At this moment it is wonderfully strong, as though all the roses of Paradise were flowering around us in the darkness."

A low exclamation from her father interrupted her. M. de Guersaint had risen to his feet again on seeing some specks of light shine out above the gradient ways on the left side of the Basilica. "At last! Here they come!" said he.

It was indeed the head of the procession again appearing; and at once the

specks of light began to swarm and extend in long, wavering double files. The darkness submerged everything except these luminous points, which seemed to be at a great elevation, and to emerge, as it were, from the black depths of the Unknown. And at the same time the everlasting canticle was again heard, but so lightly, for the procession was far away, that it seemed as yet merely like the rustle of a coming storm, stirring the leaves of the trees.

"Ah! I said so," muttered M. de Guersaint; "one ought to be at the Calvary to see everything." With the obstinacy of a child he kept on returning to his first idea, again and again complaining that they had chosen "the worst possible place."

"But why don't you go up to the Calvary, papa?" at last said Marie. "There is still time. Pierre will stay here with me." And with a mournful laugh she added: "Go; you know very well that nobody will run away with me."

He at first refused to act upon the suggestion, but, unable to resist his desire, he all at once fell in with it. And he had to hasten his steps, crossing the lawns at a run. "Don't move," he called; "wait for me under the trees. I will tell you of all that I may see up there."

Then Pierre and Marie remained alone in that dim, solitary nook, whence came such a perfume of roses, albeit no roses could be found. And they did not speak, but in silence watched the procession, which was now coming down from the hill with a gentle, continuous, gliding motion.

A double file of quivering stars leapt into view on the left-hand side of the Basilica, and then followed the monumental, gradient way, whose curve is gradually described. At that distance you were still unable to see the pilgrims themselves, and you beheld simply those well-disciplined travelling lights tracing geometrical lines amidst the darkness. Under the deep blue heavens, even the buildings at first remained vague, forming but blacker patches against the sky. Little by little, however, as the number of candles increased, the principal architectural lines--the tapering spire of the Basilica, the cyclopean arches of the gradient ways, the heavy, squat facade of the Rosary--became more distinctly visible. And with that ceaseless torrent of bright sparks, flowing slowly downward with the stubborn persistence of a stream which has overflowed its banks and can be stopped by nothing, there came as it were an aurora, a growing, invading mass of light, which would at last spread its glory over the whole horizon.

"Look, look, Pierre!" cried Marie, in an access of childish joy. "There is no end of them; fresh ones are ever shining out."

Indeed, the sudden appearances of the little lights continued with mechanical regularity, as though some inexhaustible celestial source were pouring forth all those solar specks. The head of the procession had just reached the gardens, near the crowned statue of the Virgin, so that as yet the double file of flames merely outlined the curves of the Rosary and the broad inclined way. However, the approach of the multitude was foretold by the perturbation of the atmosphere, by the gusts of human breath coming from afar; and particularly did the voices swell, the canticle of Bernadette surging with the clamour of a rising tide, through which, with rhythmical persistence, the refrain of "Ave, ave, ave Maria!" rolled ever in a louder key.

"Ah, that refrain!" muttered Pierre; "it penetrates one's very skin. It seems to me as though my whole body were at last singing it."

Again did Marie give vent to that childish laugh of hers. "It is true," said she; "it follows me about everywhere. I heard it the other night whilst I was asleep. And now it is again taking possession of me, rocking me, wafting me above the ground." Then she broke off to say: "Here they come, just across the lawn, in front of us."

The procession had entered one of the long, straight paths; and then, turning round the lawn by way of the Breton's Cross, it came back by a parallel path. It took more than a quarter of an hour to execute this movement, during which the double file of tapers resembled two long parallel streams of flame. That which ever excited one's admiration was the ceaseless march of this serpent of fire, whose golden coils crept so gently over the black earth, winding, stretching into the far distance, without the immense body ever seeming to end. There must have been some jostling and scrambling every now and then, for some of the luminous lines shook and bent as though they were about to break; but order was soon re-established, and then the slow, regular, gliding movement set in afresh. There now seemed to be fewer stars in the heavens; it was as though a milky way had fallen from on high, rolling its glittering dust of worlds, and transferring the revolutions of the planets from the empyrean to earth. A bluish light streamed all around; there was naught but heaven left; the buildings and the trees assumed a visionary aspect in the mysterious glow of those thousands of tapers, whose number still and ever increased.

A faint sigh of admiration came from Marie. She was at a loss for words, and could only repeat "How beautiful it is! /Mon Dieu!/ how beautiful it is! Look, Pierre, is it not beautiful?"

However, since the procession had been going by at so short a distance from them it had ceased to be a rhythmic march of stars which no human hand appeared to guide, for amidst the stream of light they could distinguish the figures of the pilgrims carrying the tapers, and at times even recognise them as they passed. First they espied La Grivotte, who, exaggerating her cure, and repeating that she had never felt in better health, had insisted upon taking part in the ceremony despite the lateness of the hour; and she still retained her excited demeanour, her dancing gait in that cool night air, which often made her shiver. Then the Vignerons appeared; the father at the head of the party, raising his taper on high, and followed by Madame Vigneron and Madame Chaise, who dragged their weary legs; whilst little Gustave, quite worn out, kept on tapping the sanded path with his crutch, his right hand covered meantime with all the wax that had dripped upon it. Every sufferer who could walk was there, among others Elise Rouquet, who, with her bare red face, passed by like some apparition from among the damned. Others were laughing; Sophie Couteau, the little girl who had been miraculously healed the previous year, was quite forgetting herself, playing with her taper as though it were a switch. Heads followed heads without a pause, heads of women especially, more often with sordid, common features, but at times wearing an exalted expression, which you saw for a second ere it vanished amidst the fantastic illumination. And there was no end to that terrible march past; fresh pilgrims were ever appearing. Among them Pierre and Marie noticed yet another little black shadowy figure, gliding along in a discreet, humble way; it was Madame Maze, whom they would not have recognised if she had not for a moment raised her pale face, down which the tears were streaming.

"Look!" exclaimed Pierre; "the first tapers in the procession are reaching the Place du Rosaire, and I am sure that half of the pilgrims are still in front of the Grotto."

Marie had raised her eyes. Up yonder, on the left-hand side of the Basilica, she could see other lights incessantly appearing with that mechanical kind of movement which seemed as though it would never cease. "Ah!" she said, "how many, how many distressed souls there are! For each of those little flames is a suffering soul seeking deliverance, is it not?"

Pierre had to lean over in order to hear her, for since the procession had been streaming by, so near to them, they had been deafened by the sound of the endless canticle, the hymn of Bernadette. The voices of the pilgrims rang out more loudly than ever amidst the increasing vertigo; the couplets became jumbled together--each batch of processionists chanted a different one with the ecstatic voices of beings possessed, who can no longer hear themselves. There was a huge indistinct clamour, the distracted clamour of a multitude intoxicated by its ardent faith. And meantime the refrain of "Ave, ave, ave Maria!" was ever returning, rising, with its frantic, importunate rhythm, above everything else.

All at once Pierre and Marie, to their great surprise, saw M. de Guersaint before them again. "Ah! my children," he said, "I did not want to linger too long up there, I cut through the procession twice in order to get back to you. But what a sight, what a sight it is! It is certainly the first beautiful thing that I have seen since I have been here!" Thereupon he began to describe the procession as he had beheld it from the Calvary height. "Imagine," said he, "another heaven, a heaven down below reflecting that above, a heaven entirely filled by a single immense constellation. The swarming stars seem to be lost, to lie in dim faraway depths; and the trail of fire is in form like a monstrance--yes, a real monstrance, the base of which is outlined by the inclined ways, the stem by the two parallel paths, and the Host by the round lawn which crowns them. It is a monstrance of burning gold, shining out in the depths of the darkness with a perpetual sparkle of moving stars. Nothing else seems to exist; it is gigantic, paramount. I really never saw anything so extraordinary before!"

He was waving his arms, beside himself, overflowing with the emotion of an artist.

"Father dear," said Marie, tenderly, "since you have come back you ought to go to bed. It is nearly eleven o'clock, and you know that you have to start at two in the morning." Then, to render him compliant, she added: "I am so pleased that you are going to make that excursion! Only, come back early to-morrow evening, because you'll see, you'll see--" She stopped short, not daring to express her conviction that she would be cured.

"You are right; I will go to bed," replied M. de Guersaint, quite calmed. "Since Pierre will be with you I sha'n't feel anxious."

"But I don't wish Pierre to pass the night out here. He will join you by-and-by after he has taken me to the Grotto. I sha'n't have any further need of anybody; the first bearer who passes can take me back to the hospital to-morrow morning."

Pierre had not interrupted her, and now he simply said: "No, no, Marie, I shall stay. Like you, I shall spend the night at the Grotto."

She opened her mouth to insist and express her displeasure. But he had spoken those words so gently, and she had detected in them such a dolorous thirst for happiness, that, stirred to the depths of her soul, she stayed her tongue.

"Well, well, my children," replied her father, "settle the matter between you. I know that you are both very sensible. And now good-night, and don't be at all uneasy about me."

He gave his daughter a long, loving kiss, pressed the young priest's hands, and then went off, disappearing among the serried ranks of the procession, which he once more had to cross.

Then they remained alone in their dark, solitary nook under the spreading trees, she still sitting up in her box, and he kneeling on the grass, with his elbow resting on one of the wheels. And it was truly sweet to linger there while the tapers continued marching past, and, after a turning movement, assembled on the Place du Rosaire. What delighted Pierre was that nothing of all the daytime junketing remained. It seemed as though a purifying breeze had come down from the mountains, sweeping away all the odour of strong meats, the greedy Sunday delights, the scorching, pestilential, fair-field dust which, at an earlier hour, had hovered above the town. Overhead there was now only the vast sky, studded with pure stars, and the freshness of the Gave was delicious, whilst the wandering breezes were laden with the perfumes of wild flowers. The mysterious Infinite spread far around in the sovereign peacefulness of night, and nothing of materiality remained save those little candle-flames which the young priest's companion had compared to suffering souls seeking deliverance. All was now exquisitely restful, instinct with unlimited hope. Since Pierre had been there all the heart-rending memories of the afternoon, of the voracious appetites, the impudent simony, and the poisoning of the old town, had gradually left him, allowing him to savour the divine refreshment of that beautiful night, in which his whole being was steeped as in some revivifying water.

A feeling of infinite sweetness had likewise come over Marie, who murmured: "Ah! how happy Blanche would be to see all these marvels."

She was thinking of her sister, who had been left in Paris to all the worries of her hard profession as a teacher forced to run hither and thither giving lessons. And that simple mention of her sister, of whom Marie had not spoken since her arrival at Lourdes, but whose figure now unexpectedly arose in her mind's eye, sufficed to evoke a vision of all the past.

Then, without exchanging a word, Marie and Pierre lived their childhood's days afresh, playing together once more in the neighbouring gardens parted by the quickset hedge. But separation came on the day when he entered the seminary and when she kissed him on the cheeks, vowing that she would never forget him. Years went by, and they found themselves forever parted: he a priest, she prostrated by illness, no longer with any hope of ever being a woman. That was their whole story--an ardent affection of which they had long been ignorant, then absolute severance, as though they were dead, albeit they lived side by side. They again beheld the sorry lodging whence they had started to come to Lourdes after so much battling, so much discussion--his doubts and her passionate

faith, which last had conquered. And it seemed to them truly delightful to find themselves once more quite alone together, in that dark nook on that lovely night, when there were as many stars upon earth as there were in heaven.

Marie had hitherto retained the soul of a child, a spotless soul, as her father said, good and pure among the purest. Stricken low in her thirteenth year, she had grown no older in mind. Although she was now three-and-twenty, she was still a child, a child of thirteen, who had retired within herself, absorbed in the bitter catastrophe which had annihilated her. You could tell this by the frigidity of her glance, by her absent expression, by the haunted air she ever wore, unable as she was to bestow a thought on anything but her calamity. And never was woman's soul more pure and candid, arrested as it had been in its development. She had had no other romance in life save that tearful farewell to her friend, which for ten long years had sufficed to fill her heart. During the endless days which she had spent on her couch of wretchedness, she had never gone beyond this dream--that if she had grown up in health, he doubtless would not have become a priest, in order to live near her. She never read any novels. The pious works which she was allowed to peruse maintained her in the excitement of a superhuman love. Even the rumours of everyday life died away at the door of the room where she lived in seclusion; and, in past years, when she had been taken from one to the other end of France, from one inland spa to another, she had passed through the crowds like a somnambulist who neither sees nor hears anything, possessed, as she was, by the idea of the calamity that had befallen her, the bond which made her a sexless thing. Hence her purity and childishness; hence she was but an adorable daughter of suffering, who, despite the growth of her sorry flesh, harboured nothing in her heart save that distant awakening of passion, the unconscious love of her thirteenth year.

Her hand sought Pierre's in the darkness, and when she found it, coming to meet her own, she, for a long time, continued pressing it. Ah! how sweet it was! Never before, indeed, had they tasted such pure and perfect joy in being together, far from the world, amidst the sovereign enchantment of darkness and mystery. Around them nothing subsisted, save the revolving stars. The lulling hymns were like the very vertigo that bore them away. And she knew right well that after spending a night of rapture at the Grotto, she would, on the morrow, be cured. Of this she was, indeed, absolutely convinced; she would prevail upon the Blessed Virgin to listen to her; she would soften her, as soon as she should be alone, imploring her face to face. And she well understood what Pierre had wished to say a short time previously, when expressing his desire to spend the whole night outside the Grotto, like herself. Was it not that he intended to make a supreme effort to believe, that he meant to fall upon his knees like a little child, and beg the all-powerful Mother to restore his lost faith? Without need of any further exchange of words, their clasped hands repeated all those things. They mutually promised that they would pray for each other, and so absorbed in each other did they become that they forgot themselves, with such an ardent desire for one another's cure and happiness, that for a moment they attained to the depths of the love which offers itself in sacrifice. It was divine enjoyment.

"Ah!" murmured Pierre, "how beautiful is this blue night, this infinite darkness, which has swept away all the hideousness of things and beings, this deep, fresh peacefulness, in which I myself should like to bury my doubts!"

His voice died away, and Marie, in her turn, said in a very low voice: "And the roses, the perfume of the roses? Can't you smell them, my friend? Where can they be since you could not see them?"

"Yes, yes, I smell them, but there are none," he replied. "I should certainly have seen them, for I hunted everywhere."

"How can you say that there are no roses when they perfume the air around us, when we are steeped in their aroma? Why, there are moments when the scent is so powerful that I almost faint with delight in inhaling it! They must certainly be here, innumerable, under our very feet."

"No, no," said Pierre, "I swear to you I hunted everywhere, and there are no roses. They must be invisible, or they may be the very grass we tread and the spreading trees that are around us; their perfume may come from the soil itself, from the torrent which flows along close by, from the woods and the mountains that rise yonder."

For a moment they remained silent. Then, in an undertone, she resumed: "How sweet they smell, Pierre! And it seems to me that even our clasped hands form a bouquet."

"Yes, they smell delightfully sweet; but it is from you, Marie, that the perfume now ascends, as though the roses were budding from your hair."

Then they ceased speaking. The procession was still gliding along, and at the corner of the Basilica bright sparks were still appearing, flashing suddenly from out of the obscurity, as though spurting from some invisible source. The vast train of little flames, marching in double file, threw a riband of light across the darkness. But the great sight was now on the Place du Rosaire, where the head of the procession, still continuing its measured evolutions, was revolving and revolving in a circle which ever grew smaller, with a stubborn whirl which increased the dizziness of the weary pilgrims and the violence of their chants. And soon the circle formed a nucleus, the nucleus of a nebula, so to say, around which the endless riband of fire began to coil itself. And the brasier grew larger and larger--there was first a pool, then a lake of light. The whole vast Place du Rosaire changed at last into a burning ocean, rolling its little sparkling wavelets with the dizzy motion of a whirlpool that never rested. A reflection like that of dawn whitened the Basilica; while the rest of the horizon faded into deep obscurity, amidst which you only saw a few stray tapers journeying alone, like glowworms seeking their way with the help of their little lights. However, a straggling rear-guard of the procession must have climbed the Calvary height, for up there, against the sky, some moving stars could also be seen. Eventually the moment came when the last tapers appeared down below, marched round the lawns, flowed away, and were merged in the sea of flame. Thirty thousand tapers were burning there, still and ever revolving, quickening their sparkles under the vast calm heavens where the planets had grown pale. A luminous glow ascended in company with the strains of the canticle which never ceased. And the roar of voices incessantly repeating the refrain of "Ave, ave, ave Maria!" was like the very crackling of those hearts of fire which were burning away in prayers in order that souls might be saved.

The candles had just been extinguished, one by one, and the night was falling again, paramount, densely black, and extremely mild, when Pierre and Marie perceived that they were still there, hand in hand, hidden away

among the trees. In the dim streets of Lourdes, far off, there were now only some stray, lost pilgrims inquiring their way, in order that they might get to bed. Through the darkness there swept a rustling sound--the rustling of those who prowl and fall asleep when days of festivity draw to a close. But the young priest and the girl lingered in their nook forgetfully, never stirring, but tasting delicious happiness amidst the perfume of the invisible roses.

IV

THE VIGIL

WHEN Pierre dragged Marie in her box to the front of the Grotto, and placed her as near as possible to the railing, it was past midnight, and about a hundred persons were still there, some seated on the benches, but the greater number kneeling as though prostrated in prayer. The Grotto shone from afar, with its multitude of lighted tapers, similar to the illumination round a coffin, though all that you could distinguish was a star-like blaze, from the midst of which, with visionary whiteness, emerged the statue of the Virgin in its niche. The hanging foliage assumed an emerald sheen, the hundreds of crutches covering the vault resembled an inextricable network of dead wood on the point of reflowering. And the darkness was rendered more dense by so great a brightness, the surroundings became lost in a deep shadow in which nothing, neither walls nor trees, remained; whilst all alone ascended the angry and continuous murmur of the Gave, rolling along beneath the gloomy, boundless sky, now heavy with a gathering storm.

"Are you comfortable, Marie?" gently inquired Pierre. "Don't you feel chilly?"

She had just shivered. But it was only at a breath from the other world, which had seemed to her to come from the Grotto.

"No, no, I am so comfortable! Only place the shawl over my knees. And--thank you, Pierre--don't be anxious about me. I no longer require anyone now that I am with her."

Her voice died away, she was already falling into an ecstasy, her hands clasped, her eyes raised towards the white statue, in a beatific transfiguration of the whole of her poor suffering face.

Yet Pierre remained a few minutes longer beside her. He would have liked to wrap her in the shawl, for he perceived the trembling of her little wasted hands. But he feared to annoy her, so confined himself to tucking her in like a child; whilst she, slightly raised, with her elbows on the edges of her box, and her eyes fixed on the Grotto, no longer beheld him.

A bench stood near, and he had just seated himself upon it, intending to collect his thoughts, when his glance fell upon a woman kneeling in the gloom. Dressed in black, she was so slim, so discreet, so unobtrusive, so wrapt in darkness, that at first he had not noticed her. After a while, however, he recognised her as Madame Maze. The thought of the letter which she had received during the day then recurred to him. And the sight of her filled him with pity; he could feel for the forlornness of this solitary woman, who had no physical sore to heal, but only implored the Blessed Virgin to relieve her heart-pain by converting her inconstant

husband. The letter had no doubt been some harsh reply, for, with bowed head, she seemed almost annihilated, filled with the humility of some poor beaten creature. It was only at night-time that she readily forgot herself there, happy at disappearing, at being able to weep, suffer martyrdom, and implore the return of the lost caresses, for hours together, without anyone suspecting her grievous secret. Her lips did not even move; it was her wounded heart which prayed, which desperately begged for its share of love and happiness.

Ah! that inextinguishable thirst for happiness which brought them all there, wounded either in body or in spirit; Pierre also felt it parching his throat, in an ardent desire to be quenched. He longed to cast himself upon his knees, to beg the divine aid with the same humble faith as that woman. But his limbs were as though tied; he could not find the words he wanted, and it was a relief when he at last felt someone touch him on the arm. "Come with me, Monsieur l'Abbe, if you do not know the Grotto," said a voice. "I will find you a place. It is so pleasant there at this time!"

He raised his head, and recognised Baron Suire, the director of the Hospitality of Our Lady of Salvation. This benevolent and simple man no doubt felt some affection for him. He therefore accepted his offer, and followed him into the Grotto, which was quite empty. The Baron had a key, with which he locked the railing behind them.

"You see, Monsieur l'Abbe," said he, "this is the time when one can really be comfortable here. For my part, whenever I come to spend a few days at Lourdes, I seldom retire to rest before daybreak, as I have fallen into the habit of finishing my night here. The place is deserted, one is quite alone, and is it not pleasant? How well one feels oneself to be in the abode of the Blessed Virgin!"

He smiled with a kindly air, doing the honours of the Grotto like an old frequenter of the place, somewhat enfeebled by age, but full of genuine affection for this delightful nook. Moreover, in spite of his great piety, he was in no way ill at ease there, but talked on and explained matters with the familiarity of a man who felt himself to be the friend of Heaven.

"Ah! you are looking at the tapers," he said. "There are about two hundred of them which burn together night and day; and they end by making the place warm. It is even warm here in winter."

Indeed, Pierre was beginning to feel incommoded by the warm odour of the wax. Dazzled by the brilliant light into which he was penetrating, he gazed at the large, central, pyramidal holder, all bristling with little tapers, and resembling a luminous clipped yew glistening with stars. In the background, a straight holder, on a level with the ground, upheld the large tapers, which, like the pipes of an organ, formed a row of uneven height, some of them being as large as a man's thigh. And yet other holders, resembling massive candelabra, stood here and there on the jutting parts of the rock. The vault of the Grotto sank towards the left, where the stone seemed baked and blackened by the eternal flames which had been heating it for years. And the wax was perpetually dripping like fine snow; the trays of the holders were smothered with it, whitened by its ever-thickening dust. In fact, it coated the whole rock, which had become quite greasy to the touch; and to such a degree did it cover the ground that accidents had occurred, and it had been necessary to spread some mats about to prevent persons from slipping.

"You see those large ones there," obligingly continued Baron Suire. "They are the most expensive and cost sixty francs apiece; they will continue burning for a month. The smallest ones, which cost but five sous each, only last three hours. Oh! we don't husband them; we never run short. Look here! Here are two more hampers full, which there has not yet been time to remove to the storehouse."

Then he pointed to the furniture, which comprised a harmonium covered with a cloth, a substantial dresser with several large drawers in which the sacred vestments were kept, some benches and chairs reserved for the privileged few who were admitted during the ceremonies, and finally a very handsome movable altar, which was adorned with engraved silver plates, the gift of a great lady, and--for fear of injury from dampness--was only brought out on the occasions of remunerative pilgrimages.

Pierre was disturbed by all this well-meant chatter. His religious emotion lost some of its charm. In spite of his lack of faith, he had, on entering, experienced a feeling of agitation, a heaving of the soul, as though the mystery were about to be revealed to him. It was at the same time both an anxious and a delicious feeling. And he beheld things which deeply stirred him: bunches of flowers, lying in a heap at the Virgin's feet, with the votive offerings of children--little faded shoes, a tiny iron corselet, and a doll-like crutch which almost seemed to be a toy. Beneath the natural ogival cavity in which the apparition had appeared, at the spot where the pilgrims rubbed the chaplets and medals they wished to consecrate, the rock was quite worn away and polished. Millions of ardent lips had pressed kisses on the wall with such intensity of love that the stone was as though calcined, streaked with black veins, shining like marble.

However, he stopped short at last opposite a cavity in which lay a considerable pile of letters and papers of every description.

"Ah! I was forgetting," hastily resumed Baron Suire; "this is the most interesting part of it. These are the letters which the faithful throw into the Grotto through the railing every day. We gather them up and place them there; and in the winter I amuse myself by glancing through them. You see, we cannot burn them without opening them, for they often contain money--francs, half-francs, and especially postage-stamps."

He stirred up the letters, and, selecting a few at random, showed the addresses, and opened them to read. Nearly all of them were letters from illiterate persons, with the superscription, "To Our Lady of Lourdes," scrawled on the envelopes in big, irregular handwriting. Many of them contained requests or thanks, incorrectly worded and wondrously spelt; and nothing was more affecting than the nature of some of the petitions: a little brother to be saved, a lawsuit to be gained, a lover to be preserved, a marriage to be effected. Other letters, however, were angry ones, taking the Blessed Virgin to task for not having had the politeness to acknowledge a former communication by granting the writer's prayers. Then there were still others, written in a finer hand, with carefully worded phrases containing confessions and fervent entreaties; and these were from women who confided to the Queen of Heaven things which they dared not even say to a priest in the shadow of the confessional. Finally, one envelope, selected at random, merely contained a photograph; a young girl had sent her portrait to Our Lady of Lourdes, with this dedication: "To my good Mother." In short, they every day received the correspondence of a most powerful Queen, to whom both prayers and secrets

were addressed, and who was expected to reply with favours and kindnesses of every kind. The franc and half-franc pieces were simple tokens of love to propitiate her; while, as for the postage-stamps, these could only be sent for convenience' sake, in lieu of coined money; unless, indeed, they were sent guilelessly, as in the case of a peasant woman who had added a postscript to her letter to say that she enclosed a stamp for the reply.

"I can assure you," concluded the Baron, "that there are some very nice ones among them, much less foolish than you might imagine. During a period of three years I constantly found some very interesting letters from a lady who did nothing without relating it to the Blessed Virgin. She was a married woman, and entertained a most dangerous passion for a friend of her husband's. Well, Monsieur l'Abbe, she overcame it; the Blessed Virgin answered her by sending her an armour for her chastity, an all-divine power to resist the promptings of her heart." Then he broke off to say: "But come and seat yourself here, Monsieur l'Abbe. You will see how comfortable you will be."

Pierre went and placed himself beside him on a bench on the left hand, at the spot where the rock sloped down. This was a deliciously reposeful corner, and neither the one nor the other spoke; a profound silence had ensued, when, behind him, Pierre heard an indistinct murmur, a light crystalline voice, which seemed to come from the Invisible. He gave a start, which Baron Suire understood.

"That is the spring which you hear," said he; "it is there, underground, below this grating. Would you like to see it?"

And without waiting for Pierre's reply, he at once bent down to open one of the iron plates protecting the spring, mentioning that it was thus closed up in order to prevent freethinkers from throwing poison into it. For a moment this extraordinary idea quite amazed the priest; but he ended by attributing it entirely to the Baron, who was, indeed, very childish. The latter, meantime, was vainly struggling with the padlock, which opened by a combination of letters, and refused to yield to his endeavours. "It is singular," he muttered; "the word is /Rome/, and I am positive that it hasn't been changed. The damp destroys everything. Every two years or so we are obliged to replace those crutches up there, otherwise they would all rot away. Be good enough to bring me a taper."

By the light of the candle which Pierre then took from one of the holders, he at last succeeded in unfastening the brass padlock, which was covered with /vert-de-gris/. Then, the plate having been raised, the spring appeared to view. Upon a bed of muddy gravel, in a fissure of the rock, there was a limpid stream, quite tranquil, but seemingly spreading over a rather large surface. The Baron explained that it had been necessary to conduct it to the fountains through pipes coated with cement; and he even admitted that, behind the piscinas, a large cistern had been dug in which the water was collected during the night, as otherwise the small output of the source would not suffice for the daily requirements.

"Will you taste it?" he suddenly asked. "It is much better here, fresh from the earth."

Pierre did not answer; he was gazing at that tranquil, innocent water, which assumed a moire-like golden sheen in the dancing light of the taper. The falling drops of wax now and again ruffled its surface. And, as he gazed at it, the young priest pondered upon all the mystery it

brought with it from the distant mountain slopes.

"Come, drink some!" said the Baron, who had already dipped and filled a glass which was kept there handy. The priest had no choice but to empty it; it was good pure, water, fresh and transparent, like that which flows from all the lofty uplands of the Pyrenees.

After refastening the padlock, they both returned to the bench. Now and again Pierre could still hear the spring flowing behind him, with a music resembling the gentle warble of some unseen bird. And now the Baron again raised his voice, giving him the history of the Grotto at all times and seasons, in a pathetic babble, replete with puerile details.

The summer was the roughest season, for then came the great itinerant pilgrimage crowds, with the uproarious fervour of thousands of eager beings, all praying and vociferating together. But with the autumn came the rain, those diluvial rains which beat against the Grotto entrance for days together; and with them arrived the pilgrims from remote countries, small, silent, and ecstatic bands of Indians, Malays, and even Chinese, who fell upon their knees in the mud at the sign from the missionaries accompanying them. Of all the old provinces of France, it was Brittany that sent the most devout pilgrims, whole parishes arriving together, the men as numerous as the women, and all displaying a pious deportment, a simple and unostentatious faith, such as might edify the world. Then came the winter, December with its terrible cold, its dense snow-drifts blocking the mountain ways. But even then families put up at the hotels, and, despite everything, faithful worshippers--all those who, fleeing the noise of the world, wished to speak to the Virgin in the tender intimacy of solitude--still came every morning to the Grotto. Among them were some whom no one knew, who appeared directly they felt certain they would be alone there to kneel and love like jealous lovers; and who departed, frightened away by the first suspicion of a crowd. And how warm and pleasant the place was throughout the foul winter weather! In spite of rain and wind and snow, the Grotto still continued flaring. Even during nights of howling tempest, when not a soul was there, it lighted up the empty darkness, blazing like a brasier of love that nothing could extinguish. The Baron related that, at the time of the heavy snowfall of the previous winter, he had spent whole afternoons there, on the bench where they were then seated. A gentle warmth prevailed, although the spot faced the north and was never reached by a ray of sunshine. No doubt the circumstance of the burning tapers continually heating the rock explained this generous warmth; but might one not also believe in some charming kindness on the part of the Virgin, who endowed the spot with perpetual springtide? And the little birds were well aware of it; when the snow on the ground froze their feet, all the finches of the neighbourhood sought shelter there, fluttering about in the ivy around the holy statue. At length came the awakening of the real spring: the Gave, swollen with melted snow, and rolling on with a voice of thunder: the trees, under the action of their sap, arraying themselves in a mantle of greenery, whilst the crowds, once more returning, noisily invaded the sparkling Grotto, whence they drove the little birds of heaven.

"Yes, yes," repeated Baron Suire, in a declining voice, "I spent some most delightful winter days here all alone. I saw no one but a woman, who leant against the railing to avoid kneeling in the snow. She was quite young, twenty-five perhaps, and very pretty--dark, with magnificent blue eyes. She never spoke, and did not even seem to pray, but remained there for hours together, looking intensely sad. I do not know who she was, nor have I ever seen her since."

He ceased speaking; and when, a couple of minutes later, Pierre, surprised at his silence, looked at him, he perceived that he had fallen asleep. With his hands clasped upon his belly, his chin resting on his chest, he slept as peacefully as a child, a smile hovering the while about his mouth. Doubtless, when he said that he spent the night there, he meant that he came thither to indulge in the early nap of a happy old man, whose dreams are of the angels. And now Pierre tasted all the charms of the solitude. It was indeed true that a feeling of peacefulness and comfort permeated the soul in this rocky nook. It was occasioned by the somewhat stifling fumes of the burning wax, by the transplendent ecstasy into which one sank amidst the glare of the tapers. The young priest could no longer distinctly see the crutches on the roof, the votive offerings hanging from the sides, the altar of engraved silver, and the harmonium in its wrapper, for a slow intoxication seemed to be stealing over him, a gradual prostration of his whole being. And he particularly experienced the divine sensation of having left the living world, of having attained to the far realms of the marvellous and the superhuman, as though that simple iron railing yonder had become the very barrier of the Infinite.

However, a slight noise on his left again disturbed him. It was the spring flowing, ever flowing on, with its bird-like warble. Ah! how he would have liked to fall upon his knees and believe in the miracle, to acquire a certain conviction that that divine water had gushed from the rock solely for the healing of suffering humanity. Had he not come there to prostrate himself and implore the Virgin to restore the faith of his childhood? Why, then, did he not pray, why did he not beseech her to bring him back to grace? His feeling of suffocation increased, the burning tapers dazzled him almost to the point of giddiness. And, all at once, the recollection came to him that for two days past, amidst the great freedom which priests enjoyed at Lourdes, he had neglected to say his mass. He was in a state of sin, and perhaps it was the weight of this transgression which was oppressing his heart. He suffered so much that he was at last compelled to rise from his seat and walk away. He gently closed the gate behind him, leaving Baron Suire still asleep do the bench. Marie, he found, had not stirred, but was still raised on her elbows, with her ecstatic eyes uplifted towards the figure of the Virgin.

"How are you, Marie?" asked Pierre. "Don't you feel cold?"

She did not reply. He felt her hands and found them warm and soft, albeit slightly trembling. "It is not the cold which makes you tremble, is it, Marie?" he asked.

In a voice as gentle as a zephyr she replied: "No, no! let me be; I am so happy! I shall see her, I feel it. Ah! what joy!"

So, after slightly pulling up her shawl, he went forth into the night, a prey to indescribable agitation. Beyond the bright glow of the Grotto was a night as black as ink, a region of darkness, into which he plunged at random. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to this gloom, he found himself near the Gave, and skirted it, following a path shaded by tall trees, where he again came upon a refreshing obscurity. This shade and coolness, both so soothing, now brought him relief. And his only surprise was that he had not fallen on his knees in the Grotto, and prayed, even as Marie was praying, with all the power of his soul. What could be the obstacle within him? Whence came the irresistible revolt which prevented him from surrendering himself to faith even when his overtaxed, tortured

being longed to yield? He understood well enough that it was his reason alone which protested, and the time had come when he would gladly have killed that voracious reason, which was devouring his life and preventing him from enjoying the happiness allowed to the ignorant and the simple. Perhaps, had he beheld a miracle, he might have acquired enough strength of will to believe. For instance, would he not have bowed himself down, vanquished at last, if Marie had suddenly risen up and walked before him. The scene which he conjured up of Marie saved, Marie cured, affected him so deeply that he stopped short, his trembling arms uplifted towards the star-spangled vault of heaven. What a lovely night it was!--so deep and mysterious, so airy and fragrant; and what joy rained down at the hope that eternal health might be restored, that eternal love might ever revive, even as spring returns! Then he continued his walk, following the path to the end. But his doubts were again coming back to him; when you need a miracle to gain belief, it means that you are incapable of believing. There is no need for the Almighty to prove His existence. Pierre also felt uneasy at the thought that, so long as he had not discharged his priestly duties by saying his mass, his prayers would not be answered. Why did he not go at once to the church of the Rosary, whose altars, from midnight till noon, are placed at the disposal of the priests who come from a distance? Thus thinking, he descended by another path, again finding himself beneath the trees, near the leafy spot whence he and Marie had watched the procession of tapers. Not a light now remained, there was but a boundless expanse of gloom.

Here Pierre experienced a fresh attack of faintness, and as though to gain time, he turned mechanically into the pilgrims' shelter-house. Its door had remained wide open; still this failed to sufficiently ventilate the spacious hall, which was now full of people. On the very threshold Pierre felt oppressed by the stifling heat emanating from the multitude of bodies, the dense pestilential smell of human breath and perspiration. The smoking lanterns gave out so bad a light that he had to pick his way with extreme care in order to avoid treading upon outstretched limbs; for the overcrowding was extraordinary, and many persons, unable to find room on the benches, had stretched themselves on the pavement, on the damp stone slabs fouled by all the refuse of the day. And on all sides indescribable promiscuousness prevailed: prostrated by overpowering weariness, men, women, and priests were lying there, pell-mell, at random, open-mouthed and utterly exhausted. A large number were snoring, seated on the slabs, with their backs against the walls and their heads drooping on their chests. Others had slipped down, with limbs intermingled, and one young girl lay prostrate across an old country priest, who in his calm, childlike slumber was smiling at the angels. It was like a cattle-shed sheltering poor wanderers of the roads, all those who were homeless on that beautiful holiday night, and who had dropped in there and fallen fraternally asleep. Still, there were some who found no repose in their feverish excitement, but turned and twisted, or rose up to finish eating the food which remained in their baskets. Others could be seen lying perfectly motionless, their eyes wide open and fixed upon the gloom. The cries of dreamers, the wailing of sufferers, arose amidst general snoring. And pity came to the heart, a pity full of anguish, at sight of this flock of wretches lying there in heaps in loathsome rags, whilst their poor spotless souls no doubt were far away in the blue realm of some mystical dream. Pierre was on the point of withdrawing, feeling sick at heart, when a low continuous moan attracted his attention. He looked, and recognised Madame Vincent, on the same spot and in the same position as before, still nursing little Rose upon her lap. "Ah! Monsieur l'Abbe," the poor woman murmured, "you hear her; she woke up nearly an hour ago, and has been sobbing ever since. Yet I assure you I have not

moved even a finger, I felt so happy at seeing her sleep."

The priest bent down, examining the little one, who had not even the strength to raise her eyelids. A plaintive cry no stronger than a breath was coming from her lips; and she was so white that he shuddered, for he felt that death was hovering near.

"Dear me! what shall I do?" continued the poor mother, utterly worn out. "This cannot last; I can no longer bear to hear her cry. And if you knew all that I have been saying to her: 'My jewel, my treasure, my angel, I beseech you cry no more. Be good; the Blessed Virgin will cure you!' And yet she still cries on."

With these words the poor creature burst out sobbing, her big tears falling on the face of the child, whose rattle still continued. "Had it been daylight," she resumed, "I would long ago have left this hall, the more especially as she disturbs the others. There is an old lady yonder who has already complained. But I fear it may be chilly outside; and besides, where could I go in the middle of the night? Ah! Blessed Virgin, Blessed Virgin, take pity upon us!"

Overcome by emotion, Pierre kissed the child's fair head, and then hastened away to avoid bursting into tears like the sorrowing mother. And he went straight to the Rosary, as though he were determined to conquer death.

He had already beheld the Rosary in broad daylight, and had been displeased by the aspect of this church, which the architect, fettered by the rockbound site, had been obliged to make circular and low, so that it seemed crushed beneath its great cupola, which square pillars supported. The worst was that, despite its archaic Byzantine style, it altogether lacked any religious appearance, and suggested neither mystery nor meditation. Indeed, with the glaring light admitted by the cupola and the broad glazed doors it was more like some brand-new corn-market. And then, too, it was not yet completed: the decorations were lacking, the bare walls against which the altars stood had no other embellishment than some artificial roses of coloured paper and a few insignificant votive offerings; and this bareness heightened the resemblance to some vast public hall. Moreover, in time of rain the paved floor became as muddy as that of a general waiting-room at a railway station. The high altar was a temporary structure of painted wood. Innumerable rows of benches filled the central rotunda, benches free to the public, on which people could come and rest at all hours, for night and day alike the Rosary remained open to the swarming pilgrims. Like the shelter-house, it was a cow-shed in which the Almighty received the poor ones of the earth.

On entering, Pierre felt himself to be in some common hall trod by the footsteps of an ever-changing crowd. But the brilliant sunlight no longer streamed on the pallid walls, the tapers burning at every altar simply gleamed like stars amidst the uncertain gloom which filled the building. A solemn high mass had been celebrated at midnight with extraordinary pomp, amidst all the splendour of candles, chants, golden vestments, and swinging, steaming censers; but of all this glorious display there now remained only the regulation number of tapers necessary for the celebration of the masses at each of the fifteen altars ranged around the edifice. These masses began at midnight and did not cease till noon. Nearly four hundred were said during those twelve hours at the Rosary alone. Taking the whole of Lourdes, where there were altogether some fifty altars, more than two thousand masses were celebrated daily. And so

great was the abundance of priests, that many had extreme difficulty in fulfilling their duties, having to wait for hours together before they could find an altar unoccupied. What particularly struck Pierre that evening, was the sight of all the altars besieged by rows of priests patiently awaiting their turn in the dim light at the foot of the steps; whilst the officiating minister galloped through the Latin phrases, hastily punctuating them with the prescribed signs of the cross. And the weariness of all the waiting ones was so great, that most of them were seated on the flagstones, some even dozing on the altar steps in heaps, quite overpowered, relying on the beadle to come and rouse them.

For a moment Pierre walked about undecided. Was he going to wait like the others? However, the scene determined him against doing so. At every altar, at every mass, a crowd of pilgrims was gathered, communicating in all haste with a sort of voracious fervour. Each pyx was filled and emptied incessantly; the priests' hands grew tired in thus distributing the bread of life; and Pierre's surprise increased at the sight. Never before had he beheld a corner of this earth so watered by the divine blood, whence faith took wing in such a flight of souls. It was like a return to the heroic days of the Church, when all nations prostrated themselves beneath the same blast of credulity in their terrified ignorance which led them to place their hope of eternal happiness in an Almighty God. He could fancy himself carried back some eight or nine centuries, to the time of great public piety, when people believed in the approaching end of the world; and this he could fancy the more readily as the crowd of simple folk, the whole host that had attended high mass, was still seated on the benches, as much at ease in God's house as at home. Many had no place of refuge. Was not the church their home, the asylum where consolation awaited them both by day and by night? Those who knew not where to sleep, who had not found room even at the shelter place, came to the Rosary, where sometimes they succeeded in finding a vacant seat on a bench, at others sufficient space to lie down on the flagstones. And others who had beds awaiting them lingered there for the joy of passing a whole night in that divine abode, so full of beautiful dreams. Until daylight the concourse and promiscuity were extraordinary; every row of benches was occupied, sleeping persons were scattered in every corner and behind every pillar; men, women, children were leaning against each other, their heads on one another's shoulders, their breath mingling in calm unconsciousness. It was the break-up of a religious gathering overwhelmed by sleep, a church transformed into a chance hospital, its doors wide open to the lovely August night, giving access to all who were wandering in the darkness, the good and the bad, the weary and the lost. And all over the place, from each of the fifteen altars, the bells announcing the elevation of the Host incessantly sounded, whilst from among the mob of sleepers bands of believers now and again arose, went and received the sacrament, and then returned to mingle once more with the nameless, shepherdless flock which the semi-obscurity enveloped like a veil.

With an air of restless indecision, Pierre was still wandering through the shadowy groups, when an old priest, seated on the step of an altar, beckoned to him. For two hours he had been waiting there, and now that his turn was at length arriving he felt so faint that he feared he might not have strength to say the whole of his mass, and preferred, therefore, to surrender his place to another. No doubt the sight of Pierre, wandering so distressfully in the gloom, had moved him. He pointed the vestry out to him, waited until he returned with chasuble and chalice, and then went off and fell into a sound sleep on one of the neighbouring benches. Pierre thereupon said his mass in the same way as he said it at

Paris, like a worthy man fulfilling a professional duty. He outwardly maintained an air of sincere faith. But, contrary to what he had expected from the two feverish days through which he had just gone, from the extraordinary and agitating surroundings amidst which he had spent the last few hours, nothing moved him nor touched his heart. He had hoped that a great commotion would overpower him at the moment of the communion, when the divine mystery is accomplished; that he would find himself in view of Paradise, steeped in grace, in the very presence of the Almighty; but there was no manifestation, his chilled heart did not even throb, he went on to the end pronouncing the usual words, making the regulation gestures, with the mechanical accuracy of the profession. In spite of his effort to be fervent, one single idea kept obstinately returning to his mind--that the vestry was far too small, since such an enormous number of masses had to be said. How could the sacristans manage to distribute the holy vestments and the cloths? It puzzled him, and engaged his thoughts with absurd persistency.

At length, to his surprise, he once more found himself outside. Again he wandered through the night, a night which seemed to him utterly void, darker and stiller than before. The town was lifeless, not a light was gleaming. There only remained the growl of the Gave, which his accustomed ears no longer heard. And suddenly, similar to a miraculous apparition, the Grotto blazed before him, illumining the darkness with its everlasting brasier, which burnt with a flame of inextinguishable love. He had returned thither unconsciously, attracted no doubt by thoughts of Marie. Three o'clock was about to strike, the benches before the Grotto were emptying, and only some twenty persons remained there, dark, indistinct forms, kneeling in slumberous ecstasy, wrapped in divine torpor. It seemed as though the night in progressing had increased the gloom, and imparted a remote visionary aspect to the Grotto. All faded away amidst delicious lassitude, sleep reigned supreme over the dim, far-spreading country side; whilst the voice of the invisible waters seemed to be merely the breathing of this pure slumber, upon which the Blessed Virgin, all white with her aureola of tapers, was smiling. And among the few unconscious women was Madame Maze, still kneeling, with clasped hands and bowed head, but so indistinct that she seemed to have melted away amidst her ardent prayer.

Pierre, however, had immediately gone up to Marie. He was shivering, and fancied that she must be chilled by the early morning air. "I beseech you, Marie, cover yourself up," said he. "Do you want to suffer still more?" And thereupon he drew up the shawl which had slipped off her, and endeavoured to fasten it about her neck. "You are cold, Marie," he added; "your hands are like ice."

She did not answer, she was still in the same attitude as when he had left her a couple of hours previously. With her elbows resting on the edges of her box, she kept herself raised, her soul still lifted towards the Blessed Virgin and her face transfigured, beaming with a celestial joy. Her lips moved, though no sound came from them. Perhaps she was still carrying on some mysterious conversation in the world of enchantments, dreaming wide awake, as she had been doing ever since he had placed her there. He spoke to her again, but still she answered not. At last, however, of her own accord, she murmured in a far-away voice: "Oh! I am so happy, Pierre! I have seen her; I prayed to her for you, and she smiled at me, slightly nodding her head to let me know that she heard me and would grant my prayers. And though she did not speak to me, Pierre, I understood what she wished me to know. 'Tis to-day, at four o'clock in the afternoon, when the Blessed Sacrament passes by, that I

shall be cured!"

He listened to her in deep agitation. Had she been sleeping with her eyes wide open? Was it in a dream that she had seen the marble figure of the Blessed Virgin bend its head and smile? A great tremor passed through him at the thought that this poor child had prayed for him. And he walked up to the railing, and dropped upon his knees, stammering: "O Marie! O Marie!" without knowing whether this heart-cry were intended for the Virgin or for the beloved friend of his childhood. And he remained there, utterly overwhelmed, waiting for grace to come to him.

Endless minutes went by. This was indeed the superhuman effort, the waiting for the miracle which he had come to seek for himself, the sudden revelation, the thunderclap which was to sweep away his unbelief and restore him, rejuvenated and triumphant, to the faith of the simple-minded. He surrendered himself, he wished that some mighty power might ravage his being and transform it. But, even as before whilst saying his mass, he heard naught within him but an endless silence, felt nothing but a boundless vacuum. There was no divine intervention, his despairing heart almost seemed to cease beating. And although he strove to pray, to fix his mind wholly upon that powerful Virgin, so compassionate to poor humanity, his thoughts none the less wandered, won back by the outside world, and again turning to puerile trifles. Within the Grotto, on the other side of the railing, he had once more caught sight of Baron Suire, still asleep, still continuing his pleasant nap with his hands clasped in front of him. Other things also attracted his attention: the flowers deposited at the feet of the Virgin, the letters cast there as though into a heavenly letter-box, the delicate lace-like work of wax which remained erect around the flames of the larger tapers, looking like some rich silver ornamentation. Then, without any apparent reason, his thoughts flew away to the days of his childhood, and his brother Guillaume's face rose before him with extreme distinctness. He had not seen him since their mother's death. He merely knew that he led a very secluded life, occupying himself with scientific matters, in a little house in which he had buried himself with a mistress and two big dogs; and he would have known nothing more about him, but for having recently read his name in a newspaper in connection with some revolutionary attempt. It was stated that he was passionately devoting himself to the study of explosives, and in constant intercourse with the leaders of the most advanced parties. Why, however, should Guillaume appear to him in this wise, in this ecstatic spot, amidst the mystical light of the tapers,—appear to him, moreover, such as he had formerly known him, so good, affectionate, and brotherly, overflowing with charity for every affliction! The thought haunted him for a moment, and filled him with painful regret for that brotherliness now dead and gone. Then, with hardly a moment's pause, his mind reverted to himself, and he realised that he might stubbornly remain there for hours without regaining faith. Nevertheless, he felt a sort of tremor pass through him, a final hope, a feeling that if the Blessed Virgin should perform the great miracle of curing Marie, he would at last believe. It was like a final delay which he allowed himself, an appointment with Faith for that very day, at four o'clock in the afternoon, when, according to what the girl had told him, the Blessed Sacrament would pass by. And at this thought his anguish at once ceased, he remained kneeling, worn out with fatigue and overcome by invincible drowsiness.

The hours passed by, the resplendent illumination of the Grotto was still projected into the night, its reflection stretching to the neighbouring hillsides and whitening the walls of the convents there. However, Pierre

noticed it grow paler and paler, which surprised him, and he roused himself, feeling thoroughly chilled; it was the day breaking, beneath a leaden sky overcast with clouds. He perceived that one of those storms, so sudden in mountainous regions, was rapidly rising from the south. The thunder could already be heard rumbling in the distance, whilst gusts of wind swept along the roads. Perhaps he also had been sleeping, for he no longer beheld Baron Suire, whose departure he did not remember having witnessed. There were scarcely ten persons left before the Grotto, though among them he again recognised Madame Maze with her face hidden in her hands. However, when she noticed that it was daylight and that she could be seen, she rose up, and vanished at a turn of the narrow path leading to the convent of the Blue Sisters.

Feeling anxious, Pierre went up to Marie to tell her she must not remain there any longer, unless she wished to get wet through. "I will take you back to the hospital," said he.

She refused and then entreated: "No, no! I am waiting for mass; I promised to communicate here. Don't trouble about me, return to the hotel at once, and go to bed, I implore you. You know very well that covered vehicles are sent here for the sick whenever it rains."

And she persisted in refusing to leave, whilst on his side he kept on repeating that he did not wish to go to bed. A mass, it should be mentioned, was said at the Grotto early every morning, and it was a divine joy for the pilgrims to be able to communicate, amidst the glory of the rising sun, after a long night of ecstasy. And now, just as some large drops of rain were beginning to fall, there came the priest, wearing a chasuble and accompanied by two acolytes, one of whom, in order to protect the chalice, held a large white silk umbrella, embroidered with gold, over him.

Pierre, after pushing Marie's little conveyance close to the railing, so that the girl might be sheltered by the overhanging rock, under which the few other worshippers had also sought refuge, had just seen her receive the sacrament with ardent fervour, when his attention was attracted by a pitiful spectacle which quite wrung his heart.

Beneath a dense, heavy deluge of rain, he caught sight of Madame Vincent, still with that precious, woeful burden, her little Rose, whom with outstretched arms she was offering to the Blessed Virgin. Unable to stay any longer at the shelter-house owing to the complaints caused by the child's constant moaning, she had carried her off into the night, and during two hours had roamed about in the darkness, lost, distracted, bearing this poor flesh of her flesh, which she pressed to her bosom, unable to give it any relief. She knew not what road she had taken, beneath what trees she had strayed, so absorbed had she been in her revolt against the unjust sufferings which had so sorely stricken this poor little being, so feeble and so pure, and as yet quite incapable of sin. Was it not abominable that the grip of disease should for weeks have been incessantly torturing her child, whose cry she knew not how to quiet? She carried her about, rocking her in her arms as she went wildly along the paths, obstinately hoping that she would at last get her to sleep, and so hush that wail which was rending her heart. And suddenly, utterly worn-out, sharing each of her daughter's death pangs, she found herself opposite the Grotto, at the feet of the miracle-working Virgin, she who forgave and who healed.

"O Virgin, Mother most admirable, heal her! O Virgin, Mother of Divine

Grace, heal her!"

She had fallen on her knees, and with quivering, outstretched arms was still offering her expiring daughter, in a paroxysm of hope and desire which seemed to raise her from the ground. And the rain, which she never noticed, beat down behind her with the fury of an escaped torrent, whilst violent claps of thunder shook the mountains. For one moment she thought her prayer was granted, for Rose had slightly shivered as though visited by the archangel, her face becoming quite white, her eyes and mouth opening wide; and with one last little gasp she ceased to cry.

"O Virgin, Mother of Our Redeemer, heal her! O Virgin, All-powerful Mother, heal her!"

But the poor woman felt her child become even lighter in her extended arms. And now she became afraid at no longer hearing her moan, at seeing her so white, with staring eyes and open mouth, without a sign of life. How was it that she did not smile if she were cured? Suddenly a loud heart-rending cry rang out, the cry of the mother, surpassing even the din of the thunder in the storm, whose violence was increasing. Her child was dead. And she rose up erect, turned her back on that deaf Virgin who let little children die, and started off like a madwoman beneath the lashing downpour, going straight before her without knowing whither, and still and ever carrying and nursing that poor little body which she had held in her arms during so many days and nights. A thunderbolt fell, shivering one of the neighbouring trees, as though with the stroke of a giant axe, amidst a great crash of twisted and broken branches.

Pierre had rushed after Madame Vincent, eager to guide and help her. But he was unable to follow her, for he at once lost sight of her behind the blurring curtain of rain. When he returned, the mass was drawing to an end, and, as soon as the rain fell less violently, the officiating priest went off under the white silk umbrella embroidered with gold. Meantime a kind of omnibus awaited the few patients to take them back to the hospital.

Marie pressed Pierre's hands. "Oh! how happy I am!" she said. "Do not come for me before three o'clock this afternoon."

On being left amidst the rain, which had now become an obstinate fine drizzle, Pierre re-entered the Grotto and seated himself on the bench near the spring. He would not go to bed, for in spite of his weariness he dreaded sleep in the state of nervous excitement in which he had been plunged ever since the day before. Little Rose's death had increased his fever; he could not banish from his mind the thought of that heart-broken mother, wandering along the muddy paths with the dead body of her child. What could be the reasons which influenced the Virgin? He was amazed that she could make a choice. Divine Mother as she was, he wondered how her heart could decide upon healing only ten out of a hundred sufferers--that ten per cent. of miracles which Doctor Bonamy had proved by statistics. He, Pierre, had already asked himself the day before which ones he would have chosen had he possessed the power of saving ten. A terrible power in all truth, a formidable selection, which he would never have had the courage to make. Why this one, and not that other? Where was the justice, where the compassion? To be all-powerful and heal every one of them, was not that the desire which rose from each heart? And the Virgin seemed to him to be cruel, badly informed, as harsh and indifferent as even impassible nature, distributing life and death at random, or in accordance with laws which mankind knew nothing of.

The rain was at last leaving off, and Pierre had been there a couple of hours when he felt that his feet were damp. He looked down, and was greatly surprised, for the spring was overflowing through the gratings. The soil of the Grotto was already covered; whilst outside a sheet of water was flowing under the benches, as far as the parapet against the Gave. The late storms had swollen the waters in the neighbourhood. Pierre thereupon reflected that this spring, in spite of its miraculous origin, was subject to the laws that governed other springs, for it certainly communicated with some natural reservoirs, wherein the rain penetrated and accumulated. And then, to keep his ankles dry, he left the place.

V

THE TWO VICTIMS

PIERRE walked along thirsting for fresh air, his head so heavy that he took off his hat to relieve his burning brow. Despite all the fatigue of that terrible night of vigil, he did not think of sleeping. He was kept erect by that rebellion of his whole being which he could not quiet. Eight o'clock was striking, and he walked at random under the glorious morning sun, now shining forth in a spotless sky, which the storm seemed to have cleansed of all the Sunday dust.

All at once, however, he raised his head, anxious to know where he was; and he was quite astonished, for he found that he had already covered a deal of ground, and was now below the station, near the municipal hospital. He was hesitating at a point where the road forked, not knowing which direction to take, when a friendly hand was laid on his shoulder, and a voice inquired: "Where are you going at this early hour?"

It was Doctor Chassaigne who addressed him, drawing up his lofty figure, clad in black from head to foot. "Have you lost yourself?" he added; "do you want to know your way?"

"No, thanks, no," replied Pierre, somewhat disturbed. "I spent the night at the Grotto with that young patient to whom I am so much attached, and my heart was so upset that I have been walking about in the hope it would do me good, before returning to the hotel to take a little sleep."

The doctor continued looking at him, clearly detecting the frightful struggle which was raging within him, the despair which he felt at being unable to sink asleep in faith, the suffering which the futility of all his efforts brought him. "Ah, my poor child!" murmured M. Chassaigne; and in a fatherly way he added: "Well, since you are walking, suppose we take a walk together? I was just going down yonder, to the bank of the Gave. Come along, and on our way back you will see what a lovely view we shall have."

For his part, the doctor took a walk of a couple of hours' duration each morning, ever alone, seeking, as it were, to tire and exhaust his grief. First of all, as soon as he had risen, he repaired to the cemetery, and knelt on the tomb of his wife and daughter, which, at all seasons, he decked with flowers. And afterwards he would roam along the roads, with tearful eyes, never returning home until fatigue compelled him.

With a wave of the hand, Pierre accepted his proposal, and in perfect silence they went, side by side, down the sloping road. They remained for a long time without speaking; the doctor seemed more overcome than was his wont that morning; it was as though his chat with his dear lost ones had made his heart bleed yet more copiously. He walked along with his head bowed; his face, round which his white hair streamed, was very pale, and tears still blurred his eyes. And yet it was so pleasant, so warm in the sunlight on that lovely morning. The road now followed the Gave on its right bank, on the other side of the new town; and you could see the gardens, the inclined ways, and the Basilica. And, all at once, the Grotto appeared, with the everlasting flare of its tapers, now paling in the broad light.

Doctor Chassaigne, who had turned his head, made the sign of the cross, which Pierre did not at first understand. And when, in his turn, he had perceived the Grotto, he glanced in surprise at his old friend, and once more relapsed into the astonishment which had come over him a couple of days previously on finding this man of science, this whilom atheist and materialist, so overwhelmed by grief that he was now a believer, longing for the one delight of meeting his dear ones in another life. His heart had swept his reason away; old and lonely as he was, it was only the illusion that he would live once more in Paradise, where loving souls meet again, that prolonged his life on earth. This thought increased the young priest's discomfort. Must he also wait until he had grown old and endured equal sufferings in order to find a refuge in faith?

Still walking beside the Gave, leaving the town farther and farther behind them, they were lulled as it were by the noise of those clear waters rolling over the pebbles between banks shaded by trees. And they still remained silent, walking on with an equal step, each, on his own side, absorbed in his sorrows.

"And Bernadette," Pierre suddenly inquired; "did you know her?"

The doctor raised his head. "Bernadette? Yes, yes," said he. "I saw her once--afterwards." He relapsed into silence for a moment, and then began chatting: "In 1858, you know, at the time of the apparitions, I was thirty years of age. I was in Paris, still young in my profession, and opposed to all supernatural notions, so that I had no idea of returning to my native mountains to see a girl suffering from hallucinations. Five or six years later, however, some time about 1864, I passed through Lourdes, and was inquisitive enough to pay Bernadette a visit. She was then still at the asylum with the Sisters of Nevers."

Pierre remembered that one of the reasons of his journey had been his desire to complete his inquiry respecting Bernadette. And who could tell if grace might not come to him from that humble, lovable girl, on the day when he should be convinced that she had indeed fulfilled a mission of divine love and forgiveness? For this consummation to ensue it would perhaps suffice that he should know her better and learn to feel that she was really the saint, the chosen one, as others believed her to have been.

"Tell me about her, I pray you," he said; "tell me all you know of her."

A faint smile curved the doctor's lips. He understood, and would have greatly liked to calm and comfort the young priest whose soul was so grievously tortured by doubt. "Oh! willingly, my poor child!" he answered. "I should be so happy to help you on the path to light. You do

well to love Bernadette--that may save you; for since all those old-time things I have deeply reflected on her case, and I declare to you that I never met a more charming creature, or one with a better heart."

Then, to the slow rhythm of their footsteps along the well-kept, sunlit road, in the delightful freshness of morning, the doctor began to relate his visit to Bernadette in 1864. She had then just attained her twentieth birthday, the apparitions had taken place six years previously, and she had astonished him by her candid and sensible air, her perfect modesty. The Sisters of Nevers, who had taught her to read, kept her with them at the asylum in order to shield her from public inquisitiveness. She found an occupation there, helping them in sundry petty duties; but she was very often taken ill, and would spend weeks at a time in her bed. The doctor had been particularly struck by her beautiful eyes, pure, candid, and frank, like those of a child. The rest of her face, said he, had become somewhat spoilt; her complexion was losing its clearness, her features had grown less delicate, and her general appearance was that of an ordinary servant-girl, short, puny, and unobtrusive. Her piety was still keen, but she had not seemed to him to be the ecstatic, excitable creature that many might have supposed; indeed, she appeared to have a rather positive mind which did not indulge in flights of fancy; and she invariably had some little piece of needlework, some knitting, some embroidery in her hand. In a word, she appeared to have entered the common path, and in no wise resembled the intensely passionate female worshippers of the Christ. She had no further visions, and never of her own accord spoke of the eighteen apparitions which had decided her life. To learn anything it was necessary to interrogate her, to address precise questions to her. These she would briefly answer, and then seek to change the conversation, as though she did not like to talk of such mysterious things. If wishing to probe the matter further, you asked her the nature of the three secrets which the Virgin had confided to her, she would remain silent, simply averting her eyes. And it was impossible to make her contradict herself; the particulars she gave invariably agreed with her original narrative, and, indeed, she always seemed to repeat the same words, with the same inflections of the voice.

"I had her in hand during the whole of one afternoon," continued Doctor Chassaigne, "and there was not the variation of a syllable in her story. It was disconcerting. Still, I am prepared to swear that she was not lying, that she never lied, that she was altogether incapable of falsehood."

Pierre boldly ventured to discuss this point. "But won't you admit, doctor, the possibility of some disorder of the will?" he asked. "Has it not been proved, is it not admitted nowadays, that when certain degenerate creatures with childish minds fall into an hallucination, a fancy of some kind or other, they are often unable to free themselves from it, especially when they remain in the same environment in which the phenomenon occurred? Cloistered, living alone with her fixed idea, Bernadette, naturally enough, obstinately clung to it."

The doctor's faint smile returned to his lips, and vaguely waving his arm, he replied: "Ah! my child, you ask me too much. You know very well that I am now only a poor old man, who prides himself but little on his science, and no longer claims to be able to explain anything. However, I do of course know of that famous medical-school example of the young girl who allowed herself to waste away with hunger at home, because she imagined that she was suffering from a serious complaint of the digestive organs, but who nevertheless began to eat when she was taken elsewhere.

However, that is but one circumstance, and there are so many contradictory cases."

For a moment they became silent, and only the rhythmical sound of their steps was heard along the road. Then the doctor resumed: "Moreover, it is quite true that Bernadette shunned the world, and was only happy in her solitary corner. She was never known to have a single intimate female friend, any particular human love for anybody. She was kind and gentle towards all, but it was only for children that she showed any lively affection. And as, after all, the medical man is not quite dead within me, I will confess to you that I have sometimes wondered if she remained as pure in mind, as, most undoubtedly, she did remain in body. However, I think it quite possible, given her sluggish, poor-blooded temperament, not to speak of the innocent sphere in which she grew up, first Bartres, and then the convent. Still, a doubt came to me when I heard of the tender interest which she took in the orphan asylum built by the Sisters of Nevers, farther along this very road. Poor little girls are received into it, and shielded from the perils of the highways. And if Bernadette wished it to be extremely large, so as to lodge all the little lambs in danger, was it not because she herself remembered having roamed the roads with bare feet, and still trembled at the idea of what might have become of her but for the help of the Blessed Virgin?"

Then, resuming his narrative, he went on telling Pierre of the crowds that flocked to see Bernadette and pay her reverence in her asylum at Lourdes. This had proved a source of considerable fatigue to her. Not a day went by without a stream of visitors appearing before her. They came from all parts of France, some even from abroad; and it soon proved necessary to refuse the applications of those who were actuated by mere inquisitiveness, and to grant admittance only to the genuine believers, the members of the clergy, and the people of mark on whom the doors could not well have been shut. A Sister was always present to protect Bernadette against the excessive indiscretion of some of her visitors, for questions literally rained upon her, and she often grew faint through having to repeat her story so many times. Ladies of high position fell on their knees, kissed her gown, and would have liked to carry a piece of it away as a relic. She also had to defend her chaplet, which in their excitement they all begged her to sell to them for a fabulous amount. One day a certain marchioness endeavoured to secure it by giving her another one which she had brought with her--a chaplet with a golden cross and beads of real pearls. Many hoped that she would consent to work a miracle in their presence; children were brought to her in order that she might lay her hands upon them; she was also consulted in cases of illness, and attempts were made to purchase her influence with the Virgin. Large sums were offered to her. At the slightest sign, the slightest expression of a desire to be a queen, decked with jewels and crowned with gold, she would have been overwhelmed with regal presents. And while the humble remained on their knees on her threshold, the great ones of the earth pressed round her, and would have counted it a glory to act as her escort. It was even related that one among them, the handsomest and wealthiest of princes, came one clear sunny April day to ask her hand in marriage.

"But what always struck and displeased me," said Pierre, "was her departure from Lourdes when she was two-and-twenty, her sudden disappearance and sequestration in the convent of Saint Gildard at Nevers, whence she never emerged. Didn't that give a semblance of truth to those spurious rumours of insanity which were circulated? Didn't it help people to suppose that she was being shut up, whisked away for fear of some indiscretion on her part, some naive remark or other which might

have revealed the secret of a prolonged fraud? Indeed, to speak plainly, I will confess to you that for my own part I still believe that she was spirited away."

Doctor Chassaigne gently shook his head. "No, no," said he, "there was no story prepared in advance in this affair, no big melodrama secretly staged and afterwards performed by more or less unconscious actors. The developments came of themselves, by the sole force of circumstances; and they were always very intricate, very difficult to analyse. Moreover, it is certain that it was Bernadette herself who wished to leave Lourdes. Those incessant visits wearied her, she felt ill at ease amidst all that noisy worship. All that /she/ desired was a dim nook where she might live in peace, and so fierce was she at times in her disinterestedness, that when money was handed to her, even with the pious intent of having a mass said or a taper burnt, she would fling it upon the floor. She never accepted anything for herself or for her family, which remained in poverty. And with such pride as she possessed, such natural simplicity, such a desire to remain in the background, one can very well understand that she should have wished to disappear and cloister herself in some lonely spot so as to prepare herself to make a good death. Her work was accomplished; she had initiated this great movement scarcely knowing how or why; and she could really be of no further utility. Others were about to conduct matters to an issue and insure the triumph of the Grotto."

"Let us admit, then, that she went off of her own accord," said Pierre; "still, what a relief it must have been for the people you speak of, who thenceforth became the real masters, whilst millions of money were raining down on Lourdes from the whole world."

"Oh! certainly; I don't pretend that any attempt was made to detain her here!" exclaimed the doctor. "Frankly, I even believe that she was in some degree urged into the course she took. She ended by becoming somewhat of an incumbrance. It was not that any annoying revelations were feared from her; but remember that with her extreme timidity and frequent illnesses she was scarcely ornamental. Besides, however small the room which she took up at Lourdes, however obedient she showed herself, she was none the less a power, and attracted the multitude, which made her, so to say, a competitor of the Grotto. For the Grotto to remain alone, resplendent in its glory, it was advisable that Bernadette should withdraw into the background, become as it were a simple legend. Such, indeed, must have been the reasons which induced Monseigneur Laurence, the Bishop of Tarbes, to hasten her departure. The only mistake that was made was in saying that it was a question of screening her from the enterprises of the world, as though it were feared that she might fall into the sin of pride, by growing vain of the saintly fame with which the whole of Christendom re-echoed. And this was doing her a grave injury, for she was as incapable of pride as she was of falsehood. Never, indeed, was there a more candid or more modest child."

The doctor was growing impassioned, excited. But all at once he became calm again, and a pale smile returned to his lips. "'Tis true," said he, "I love her; the more I have thought of her, the more have I learned to love her. But you must not think, Pierre, that I am completely brutified by belief. If I nowadays acknowledge the existence of an unseen power, if I feel a need of believing in another, better, and more just life, I nevertheless know right well that there are men remaining in this world of ours; and at times, even when they wear the cowl or the cassock, the work they do is vile."

There came another interval of silence. Each was continuing his dream

apart from the other. Then the doctor resumed: "I will tell you of a fancy which has often haunted me. Suppose we admit that Bernadette was not the shy, simple child we knew her to be; let us endow her with a spirit of intrigue and domination, transform her into a conqueress, a leader of nations, and try to picture what, in that case, would have happened. It is evident that the Grotto would be hers, the Basilica also. We should see her lording it at all the ceremonies, under a dais, with a gold mitre on her head. She would distribute the miracles; with a sovereign gesture her little hand would lead the multitudes to heaven. All the lustre and glory would come from her, she being the saint, the chosen one, the only one that had been privileged to see the Divinity face to face. And indeed nothing would seem more just, for she would triumph after toiling, enjoy the fruit of her labour in all glory. But you see, as it happens, she is defrauded, robbed. The marvellous harvests sown by her are reaped by others. During the twelve years which she lived at Saint Gildard, kneeling in the gloom, Lourdes was full of victors, priests in golden vestments chanting thanksgivings, and blessing churches and monuments erected at a cost of millions. She alone did not behold the triumph of the new faith, whose author she had been. You say that she dreamt it all. Well, at all events, what a beautiful dream it was, a dream which has stirred the whole world, and from which she, dear girl, never awakened!"

They halted and sat down for a moment on a rock beside the road, before returning to the town. In front of them the Gave, deep at this point of its course, was rolling blue waters tinged with dark moire-like reflections, whilst, farther on, rushing hurriedly over a bed of large stones, the stream became so much foam, a white froth, light like snow. Amidst the gold raining from the sun, a fresh breeze came down from the mountains.

Whilst listening to that story of how Bernadette had been exploited and suppressed, Pierre had simply found in it all a fresh motive for revolt; and, with his eyes fixed on the ground, he began to think of the injustice of nature, of that law which wills that the strong should devour the weak. Then, all at once raising his head, he inquired: "And did you also know Abbe Peyramale?"

The doctor's eyes brightened once more, and he eagerly replied: "Certainly I did! He was an upright, energetic man, a saint, an apostle. He and Bernadette were the great makers of Our Lady of Lourdes. Like her, he endured frightful sufferings, and, like her, he died from them. Those who do not know his story can know nothing, understand nothing, of the drama enacted here."

Thereupon he related that story at length. Abbe Peyramale was the parish priest of Lourdes at the time of the apparitions. A native of the region, tall, broad-shouldered, with a powerful leonine head, he was extremely intelligent, very honest and goodhearted, though at times violent and domineering. He seemed built for combat. An enemy of all pious exaggerations, discharging the duties of his ministry in a broad, liberal spirit, he regarded the apparitions with distrust when he first heard of them, refused to believe in Bernadette's stories, questioned her, and demanded proofs. It was only at a later stage, when the blast of faith became irresistible, upsetting the most rebellious minds and mastering the multitude, that he ended, in his turn, by bowing his head; and when he was finally conquered, it was more particularly by his love for the

humble and the oppressed which he could not restrain when he beheld Bernadette threatened with imprisonment. The civil authorities were persecuting one of his flock; at this his shepherd's heart awoke, and, in her defence, he gave full reign to his ardent passion for justice. Moreover, the charm which the child diffused had worked upon him; he felt her to be so candid, so truthful, that he began to place a blind faith in her and love her even as everybody else loved her. Moreover, why should he have curtly dismissed all questions of miracles, when miracles abound in the pages of Holy Writ? It was not for a minister of religion, whatever his prudence, to set himself up as a sceptic when entire populations were falling on their knees and the Church seemed to be on the eve of another great triumph. Then, too, he had the nature of one who leads men, who stirs up crowds, who builds, and in this affair he had really found his vocation, the vast field in which he might exercise his energy, the great cause to which he might wholly devote himself with all his passionate ardour and determination to succeed.

From that moment, then, Abbe Peyramale had but one thought, to execute the orders which the Virgin had commissioned Bernadette to transmit to him. He caused improvements to be carried out at the Grotto. A railing was placed in front of it; pipes were laid for the conveyance of the water from the source, and a variety of work was accomplished in order to clear the approaches. However, the Virgin had particularly requested that a chapel might be built; and he wished to have a church, quite a triumphal Basilica. He pictured everything on a grand scale, and, full of confidence in the enthusiastic help of Christendom, he worried the architects, requiring them to design real palaces worthy of the Queen of Heaven. As a matter of fact, offerings already abounded, gold poured from the most distant dioceses, a rain of gold destined to increase and never end. Then came his happy years: he was to be met among the workmen at all hours, instilling activity into them like the jovial, good-natured fellow he was, constantly on the point of taking a pick or trowel in hand himself, such was his eagerness to behold the realisation of his dream. But days of trial were in store for him: he fell ill, and lay in danger of death on the fourth of April, 1864, when the first procession started from his parish church to the Grotto, a procession of sixty thousand pilgrims, which wound along the streets amidst an immense concourse of spectators.

On the day when Abbe Peyramale rose from his bed, saved, a first time, from death, he found himself despoiled. To second him in his heavy task, Monseigneur Laurence, the Bishop, had already given him as assistant a former episcopal secretary, Father Sempe, whom he had appointed warden of the Missionaries of Geraison, a community founded by himself. Father Sempe was a sly, spare little man, to all appearance most disinterested and humble, but in reality consumed by all the thirst of ambition. At the outset he kept in his place, serving the parish priest of Lourdes like a faithful subordinate, attending to matters of all kinds in order to lighten the other's work, and acquiring information on every possible subject in his desire to render himself indispensable. He must soon have realised what a rich farm the Grotto was destined to become, and what a colossal revenue might be derived from it, if only a little skill were exercised. And thenceforth he no longer stirred from the episcopal residence, but ended by acquiring great influence over the calm, practical Bishop, who was in great need of money for the charities of his diocese. And thus it was that during Abbe Peyramale's illness Father Sempe succeeded in effecting a separation between the parish of Lourdes and the domain of the Grotto, which last he was commissioned to manage at the head of a few Fathers of the Immaculate Conception, over whom the

Bishop placed him as Father Superior.

The struggle soon began, one of those covert, desperate, mortal struggles which are waged under the cloak of ecclesiastical discipline. There was a pretext for rupture all ready, a field of battle on which the longer purse would necessarily end by conquering. It was proposed to build a new parish church, larger and more worthy of Lourdes than the old one already in existence, which was admitted to have become too small since the faithful had been flocking into the town in larger and larger numbers. Moreover, it was an old idea of Abbe Peyramale, who desired to carry out the Virgin's orders with all possible precision. Speaking of the Grotto, she had said that people would go "thither in procession"; and the Abbe had always seen the pilgrims start in procession from the town, whither they were expected to return in the same fashion, as indeed had been the practice on the first occasions after the apparitions. A central point, a rallying spot, was therefore required, and the Abbe's dream was to erect a magnificent church, a cathedral of gigantic proportions, which would accommodate a vast multitude. Builder as he was by temperament, impassioned artisan working for the glory of Heaven, he already pictured this cathedral springing from the soil, and rearing its clanging belfry in the sunlight. And it was also his own house that he wished to build, the edifice which would be his act of faith and adoration, the temple where he would be the pontiff, and triumph in company with the sweet memory of Bernadette, in full view of the spot of which both he and she had been so cruelly dispossessed. Naturally enough, bitterly as he felt that act of spoliation, the building of this new parish church was in some degree his revenge, his share of all the glory, besides being a task which would enable him to utilise both his militant activity and the fever that had been consuming him ever since he had ceased going to the Grotto, by reason of his soreness of heart.

At the outset of the new enterprise there was again a flash of enthusiasm. At the prospect of seeing all the life and all the money flow into the new city which was springing from the ground around the Basilica, the old town, which felt itself thrust upon one side, espoused the cause of its priest. The municipal council voted a sum of one hundred thousand francs, which, unfortunately, was not to be paid until the new church should be roofed in. Abbe Peyramale had already accepted the plans of his architect--plans which, he had insisted, should be on a grand scale--and had also treated with a contractor of Chartres, who engaged to complete the church in three or four years if the promised supplies of funds should be regularly forthcoming. The Abbe believed that offerings would assuredly continue raining down from all parts, and so he launched into this big enterprise without any anxiety, overflowing with a careless bravery, and fully expecting that Heaven would not abandon him on the road. He even fancied that he could rely upon the support of Monseigneur Jourdan, who had now succeeded Monseigneur Laurence as Bishop of Tarbes, for this prelate, after blessing the foundation-stone of the new church, had delivered an address in which he admitted that the enterprise was necessary and meritorious. And it seemed, too, as though Father Sempe, with his customary humility, had bowed to the inevitable and accepted this vexatious competition, which would compel him to relinquish a share of the plunder; for he now pretended to devote himself entirely to the management of the Grotto, and even allowed a collection-box for contributions to the building of the new parish church to be placed inside the Basilica.

Then, however, the secret, rageful struggle began afresh. Abbe Peyramale, who was a wretched manager, exulted on seeing his new church so rapidly

take shape. The work was being carried on at a fast pace, and he troubled about nothing else, being still under the delusion that the Blessed Virgin would find whatever money might be needed. Thus he was quite stupefied when he at last perceived that the offerings were falling off, that the money of the faithful no longer reached him, as though, indeed, someone had secretly diverted its flow. And eventually the day came when he was unable to make the stipulated payments. In all this there had been so much skilfully combined strangulation, of which he only became aware later on. Father Sempe, however, had once more prevailed on the Bishop to grant his favour exclusively to the Grotto. There was even a talk of some confidential circulars distributed through the various dioceses, so that the many sums of money offered by the faithful should no longer be sent to the parish. The voracious, insatiable Grotto was bent upon securing everything, and to such a point were things carried that five hundred franc notes slipped into the collection-box at the Basilica were kept back; the box was rifled and the parish robbed. Abbe Peyramale, however, in his passion for the rising church, his child, continued fighting most desperately, ready if need were to give his blood. He had at first treated with the contractor in the name of the vestry; then, when he was at a loss how to pay, he treated in his own name. His life was bound up in the enterprise, he wore himself out in the heroic efforts which he made. Of the four hundred thousand francs that he had promised, he had only been able to pay two hundred thousand; and the municipal council still obstinately refused to hand over the hundred thousand francs which it had voted, until the new church should be covered in. This was acting against the town's real interests. However, it was said that Father Sempe was trying to bring influence to bear on the contractor. And, all at once, the work was stopped.

From that moment the death agony began. Wounded in the heart, the Abbe Peyramale, the broad-shouldered mountaineer with the leonine face, staggered and fell like an oak struck down by a thunderbolt. He took to his bed, and never left it alive. Strange stories circulated: it was said that Father Sempe had sought to secure admission to the parsonage under some pious pretext, but in reality to see if his much-dreaded adversary were really mortally stricken; and it was added, that it had been necessary to drive him from the sick-room, where his presence was an outrageous scandal. Then, when the unhappy priest, vanquished and steeped in bitterness, was dead, Father Sempe was seen triumphing at the funeral, from which the others had not dared to keep him away. It was affirmed that he openly displayed his abominable delight, that his face was radiant that day with the joy of victory. He was at last rid of the only man who had been an obstacle to his designs, whose legitimate authority he had feared. He would no longer be forced to share anything with anybody now that both the founders of Our Lady of Lourdes had been suppressed--Bernadette placed in a convent, and Abbe Peyramale lowered into the ground. The Grotto was now his own property, the alms would come to him alone, and he could do what he pleased with the eight hundred thousand francs* or so which were at his disposal every year. He would complete the gigantic works destined to make the Basilica a self-supporting centre, and assist in embellishing the new town in order to increase the isolation of the old one and seclude it behind its rock, like an insignificant parish submerged beneath the splendour of its all-powerful neighbour. All the money, all the sovereignty, would be his; he henceforth would reign.

* About 145,000 dollars.

However, although the works had been stopped, and the new parish church

was slumbering inside its wooden fence, it was none the less more than half built. The vaulted aisles were already erected. And the imperfect pile remained there like a threat, for the town might some day attempt to finish it. Like Abbe Peyramale, therefore, it must be killed for good, turned into an irreparable ruin. The secret labour therefore continued, a work of refined cruelty and slow destruction. To begin with, the new parish priest, a simple-minded creature, was cowed to such a point that he no longer opened the envelopes containing remittances for the parish; all the registered letters were at once taken to the Fathers. Then the site selected for the new parish church was criticised, and the diocesan architect was induced to draw up a report stating that the old church was still in good condition and of ample size for the requirements of the community. Moreover, influence was brought to bear on the Bishop, and representations were made to him respecting the annoying features of the pecuniary difficulties which had arisen with the contractor. With a little imagination poor Peyramale was transformed into a violent, obstinate madman, through whose undisciplined zeal the Church had almost been compromised. And, at last, the Bishop, forgetting that he himself had blessed the foundation-stone, issued a pastoral letter laying the unfinished church under interdict, and prohibiting all religious services in it. This was the supreme blow. Endless lawsuits had already begun; the contractor, who had only received two hundred thousand francs for the five hundred thousand francs' worth of work which had been executed, had taken proceedings against Abbe Peyramale's heir-at-law, the vestry, and the town, for the last still refused to pay over the amount which it had voted. At first the Prefect's Council declared itself incompetent to deal with the case, and when it was sent back to it by the Council of State, it rendered a judgment by which the town was condemned to pay the hundred thousand francs and the heir-at-law to finish the church. At the same time the vestry was put out of court. However, there was a fresh appeal to the Council of State, which quashed this judgment, and condemned the vestry, and, in default, the heir-at-law, to pay the contractor. Neither party being solvent, matters remained in this position. The lawsuits had lasted fifteen years. The town had now resignedly paid over the hundred thousand francs, and only two hundred thousand remained owing to the contractor. However, the costs and the accumulated interest had so increased the amount of indebtedness that it had risen to six hundred thousand francs; and as, on the other hand, it was estimated that four hundred thousand francs would be required to finish the church, a million was needed to save this young ruin from certain destruction. The Fathers of the Grotto were thenceforth able to sleep in peace; they had assassinated the poor church; it was as dead as Abbe Peyramale himself.

The bells of the Basilica rang out triumphantly, and Father Sempe reigned as a victor at the conclusion of that great struggle, that dagger warfare in which not only a man but stones also had been done to death in the shrouding gloom of intriguing sacristies. And old Lourdes, obstinate and unintelligent, paid a hard penalty for its mistake in not giving more support to its minister, who had died struggling, killed by his love for his parish, for now the new town did not cease to grow and prosper at the expense of the old one. All the wealth flowed to the former: the Fathers of the Grotto coined money, financed hotels and candle shops, and sold the water of the source, although a clause of their agreement with the municipality expressly prohibited them from carrying on any commercial pursuits.

The whole region began to rot and fester; the triumph of the Grotto had brought about such a passion for lucre, such a burning, feverish desire to possess and enjoy, that extraordinary perversion set in, growing worse

and worse each day, and changing Bernadette's peaceful Bethlehem into a perfect Sodom or Gomorrah. Father Sempe had ensured the triumph of his Divinity by spreading human abominations all around and wrecking thousands of souls. Gigantic buildings rose from the ground, five or six millions of francs had already been expended, everything being sacrificed to the stern determination to leave the poor parish out in the cold and keep the entire plunder for self and friends. Those costly, colossal gradient ways had only been erected in order to avoid compliance with the Virgin's express desire that the faithful should come to the Grotto in procession. For to go down from the Basilica by the incline on the left, and climb up to it again by the incline on the right, could certainly not be called going to the Grotto in procession: it was simply so much revolving in a circle. However, the Fathers cared little about that; they had succeeded in compelling people to start from their premises and return to them, in order that they might be the sole proprietors of the affair, the opulent farmers who garnered the whole harvest. Abbe Peyramale lay buried in the crypt of his unfinished, ruined church, and Bernadette, who had long since dragged out her life of suffering in the depths of a convent far away, was now likewise sleeping the eternal sleep under a flagstone in a chapel.

Deep silence fell when Doctor Chassaigne had finished this long narrative. Then, with a painful effort, he rose to his feet again: "It will soon be ten o'clock, my dear child," said he, "and I want you to take a little rest. Let us go back."

Pierre followed him without speaking; and they retraced their steps toward the town at a more rapid pace.

"Ah! yes," resumed the doctor, "there were great iniquities and great sufferings in it all. But what else could you expect? Man spoils and corrupts the most beautiful things. And you cannot yet understand all the woeful sadness of the things of which I have been talking to you. You must see them, lay your hand on them. Would you like me to show you Bernadette's room and Abbe Peyramale's unfinished church this evening?"

"Yes, I should indeed," replied Pierre.

"Well, I will meet you in front of the Basilica after the four-o'clock procession, and you can come with me."

Then they spoke no further, each becoming absorbed in his reverie once more.

The Gave, now upon their right hand, was flowing through a deep gorge, a kind of cleft into which it plunged, vanishing from sight among the bushes. But at intervals a clear stretch of it, looking like unburnished silver, would appear to view; and, farther on, after a sudden turn in the road, they found it flowing in increased volume across a plain, where it spread at times into glassy sheets which must often have changed their beds, for the gravelly soil was ravined on all sides. The sun was now becoming very hot, and was already high in the heavens, whose limpid azure assumed a deeper tinge above the vast circle of mountains.

And it was at this turn of the road that Lourdes, still some distance away, reappeared to the eyes of Pierre and Doctor Chassaigne. In the splendid morning atmosphere, amid a flying dust of gold and purple rays, the town shone whitely on the horizon, its houses and monuments becoming more and more distinct at each step which brought them nearer. And the

doctor, still silent, at last waved his arm with a broad, mournful gesture in order to call his companion's attention to this growing town, as though to a proof of all that he had been telling him. There, indeed, rising up in the dazzling daylight, was the evidence which confirmed his words.

The flare of the Grotto, fainter now that the sun was shining, could already be espied amidst the greenery. And soon afterwards the gigantic monumental works spread out: the quay with its freestone parapet skirting the Gave, whose course had been diverted; the new bridge connecting the new gardens with the recently opened boulevard; the colossal gradient ways, the massive church of the Rosary, and, finally, the slim, tapering Basilica, rising above all else with graceful pride. Of the new town spread all around the monuments, the wealthy city which had sprung, as though by enchantment, from the ancient impoverished soil, the great convents and the great hotels, you could, at this distance, merely distinguish a swarming of white facades and a scintillation of new slates; whilst, in confusion, far away, beyond the rocky mass on which the crumbling castle walls were profiled against the sky, appeared the humble roofs of the old town, a jumble of little time-worn roofs, pressing timorously against one another. And as a background to this vision of the life of yesterday and to-day, the little and the big Gers rose up beneath the splendour of the everlasting sun, and barred the horizon with their bare slopes, which the oblique rays were tingeing with streaks of pink and yellow.

Doctor Chassaing insisted on accompanying Pierre to the Hotel of the Apparitions, and only parted from him at its door, after reminding him of their appointment for the afternoon. It was not yet eleven o'clock. Pierre, whom fatigue had suddenly mastered, forced himself to eat before going to bed, for he realised that want of food was one of the chief causes of the weakness which had come over him. He fortunately found a vacant seat at the /table d'hote/, and made some kind of a /dejeuner/, half asleep all the time, and scarcely knowing what was served to him. Then he went up-stairs and flung himself on his bed, after taking care to tell the servant to awake him at three o'clock.

However, on lying down, the fever that consumed him at first prevented him from closing his eyes. A pair of gloves, forgotten in the next room, had reminded him of M. de Guersaint, who had left for Gavarnie before daybreak, and would only return in the evening. What a delightful gift was thoughtlessness, thought Pierre. For his own part, with his limbs worn out by weariness and his mind distracted, he was sad unto death. Everything seemed to conspire against his willing desire to regain the faith of his childhood. The tale of Abbe Peyramale's tragic adventures had simply aggravated the feeling of revolt which the story of Bernadette, chosen and martyred, had implanted in his breast. And thus he asked himself whether his search after the truth, instead of restoring his faith, would not rather lead him to yet greater hatred of ignorance and credulity, and to the bitter conviction that man is indeed all alone in the world, with naught to guide him save his reason.

At last he fell asleep, but visions continued hovering around him in his painful slumber. He beheld Lourdes, contaminated by Mammon, turned into a spot of abomination and perdition, transformed into a huge bazaar, where everything was sold, masses and souls alike! He beheld also Abbe Peyramale, dead and slumbering under the ruins of his church, among the nettles which ingratitude had sown there. And he only grew calm again, only tasted the delights of forgetfulness when a last pale, woeful vision

had faded from his gaze--a vision of Bernadette upon her knees in a gloomy corner at Nevers, dreaming of her far-away work, which she was never, never to behold.

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