

## IMPRESSIONS OF LOURDES

### MARVELLOUS CURES

When I arrived in Lourdes six days ago (says a special correspondent of the *Catholic Times*, writing on August 9) I thought I knew all about the place. I had read all the books on the subject and scores of articles. I had seen pictures and photographs, and talked with people who had been at Lourdes. But in the first half-hour in the place itself I realised that no description can do it justice. One must go to Lourdes to understand it.

I have heard of people who hesitated to go there for fear of being disappointed and disillusioned after all they had read of it. These are empty fears. The reality goes far beyond any preconceived idea.

It is one of the few places I have visited which has surpassed all expectation.

The oval valley shut in by the foot-hills of the Pyrenees, and traversed by the rapid stream of the Gave, which forms a roaring cascade just above the town, is very beautiful. Lourdes clusters round the bold crag, on which stands its old castle, and the town has spread to the steep hill slopes on either side of the river. The castle rock is at the east end of the valley. The Gave curves round the western side of the town below the fortified height, and at the end of the main street a bridge of a single arch spans the river. Beyond the bridge there is rather more than a quarter of a mile of fairly level ground, laid out as a park, and at the end of this open space a mass of rock juts out from the green hillside towards the river. This is the

#### World-famed Rock of Massabielle.

Its northern face towards the Gave is a sheer precipice, and in this cliff opens the cave that was the scene of Bernadette's visions. On the summit of the cliff rises the basilica with its tall spire. There are really three churches, one above the other. Highest of all is the basilica. In its foundations there is a second church, the chapel of the crypt. The platform on the summit of the rock before the basilica is approached by two open stone staircases, and by long curving roads borne on arches. Between these arcades a third church, that of the Rosary, has been built on the ground level. It is a circular-domed building. Under the dome is the high altar. Fifteen other altars, arranged in three groups of five, form a great semi-circle round it. Above each is a mosaic with life-size figures, the series of fifteen altar pieces representing the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary. The walls and piers of all three churches are covered to the roof with marble tablets to the number of many hundreds, each tablet inscribed in letters of gold, with the record of some favor granted through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes.

From the railway, as the train slows for the station, one catches a glimpse of the basilica-crowned rock, and sees the cave in its northern front, the well-known white figure of

#### The Statue in the Grotto,

the blaze of hundreds of candles, the crowd of pilgrims kneeling before it. The station itself is a sight to be seen. It reminded me of some of the great military stations in the east of France arranged for the rapid detrainment of thousands of troops. There are the same long platforms and endless array of sidings. It is a station planned for dealing with exceptional traffic. It is no unusual thing for several thousands of pilgrims to entrain or detrain in a single morning. On the days of the arrival and departure of the great French National Pilgrimage 20,000 passengers arrive and depart from Lourdes station.

The most numerous pilgrimages are during the Octave of the Assumption, but on every day of the year there are pilgrims at Lourdes, and during the summer there is not a day on which there are not many thousands here. During these last six days we have seen pilgrimages from many of the French dioceses, including the picturesque pilgrimages of Brittany and La Vendée, districts where the people still wear their old national costumes. There have also been pilgrimages from Austria and Hungary, Northern Italy, Holland, and Belgium. The Belgians came 1300 strong, but this is only one of their minor pilgrimages. There are a few tourists here—mere sightseers—but they are lost and unnoticed in the clouds of devout clients of Our Lady of Lourdes.

One might imagine that all these crowds would mean bustle, noise, confusion, and that the little Pyrenean town would present the aspect of some excursion centre. But it is not so. One is impressed with the peace, order, and religious quiet of the place. There is

#### An Atmosphere of Joyful Serenity

over it all. There are no long faces at Lourdes. Even the sick people, borne on their stretchers to the grotto, seem smilingly happy. It was the same even on the days of cold and rain, for Lourdes has had its share of this year's bad weather. Excursionists would have been depressed, but the pilgrims seemed even on the darkest day to be living in the sunshine of another world.

Those who have not visited Lourdes probably imagine that what is uppermost in people's minds during their stay in the place is the hope of seeing miraculous cures, and that these are the chief topic of interest. To my surprise I

found that all this is quite subsidiary. Lourdes is a focus of strong spiritual activity and devotion. Even the grotto, the scene of visions and miracles, is not its real centre. There is a wonderful daily demonstration of devotion to Our Blessed Lady, but it leads at once to devotion to her Divine Son, and

#### The True Centre of Lourdes

is the altar and the tabernacle. At early dawn Masses are being said at a hundred altars. Each day thousands crowd to the altar rails. After the morning Masses and Communion the great event of the day is the afternoon procession of the Blessed Sacrament. It is a very touching ceremony. On the great open space in front of the Church of the Rosary the sick are ranged in two rows to right and left. Some are lying on stretchers; others seated in bath-chairs or on benches. Escorted by hundreds of men, the Blessed Sacrament is carried round the grounds of the basilica. As the procession returns to the church there is a halt, and the priest who bears the monstrance approaches each of the sick people, and, holding the monstrance over each one's head, gives them an individual Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Meanwhile the crowd, formed in a great hollow square, joins in prayers for the sick or sings the 'Adoremus.' The prayers are brief invocations taken from the Gospel history of Our Lord's miracles, words such as 'Lord, he whom Thou lovest is sick—Lord, if Thou wilt Thou canst make me whole,' or acts of faith and worship such as 'Thou art the Christ the Son of the Living God,' and invocation of Our Lady's intercession. In recent years there have been more cures during this blessing of the sick than at the grotto itself. The ceremony ends with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament given from the steps of the church.

Hardly a day passes without reports of one or more cures. There is no credulous eagerness to accept these reports as well-founded. To the right of the church, under the arcade that carries the sloping roadway to the upper basilica, is the office of

#### The Medical Bureau.

There every reported cure is subjected to the most rigid scientific examination by Dr. Boissarie and his assistant, Dr. Cox. Journalists and doctors, whether they are Catholics, Protestants, or Freethinkers and sceptics, are admitted to be present at these inquiries, and the doctors are invited to assist in the medical examination. One is struck by the business-like, judicial air of all concerned. It is fully recognised that especially in cases of nervous origin there may be delusion, or there may be a real cure that can be accounted for by suggestion and excitement. There is no hurry to decide. If the medical history of the case is not already known, a telegram is sent to the doctor who has treated it, asking him to send full particulars. The investigation often lasts several days.

The records of the bureau and its collection of photographs include evidence that no reasonable man can doubt of the marvellous cure of terrible surgical cases—cases in which imagination or self-delusion could play no part. Amongst the cases investigated during these last few days there have been none of external injuries, but there have been some striking medical cases.

#### Cure of a Consumptive.

One day I found at the bureau a young Frenchwoman from St. Etienne, near Lyons. She had come to Lourdes in thanksgiving for a remarkable cure of advanced tuberculosis of both lungs. She was the picture of health, and the doctors who had just examined her reported that the lungs were quite sound. The history of the case was complete. There had been many cases of consumption in her family, and last winter she was far gone herself in the disease, and the report of the doctors who treated her at St. Etienne was that she could not hope for recovery, but that with care life might be prolonged. In April she came to Lourdes, bathed at the grotto, received Holy Communion, was present at the blessing of the sick, and went away without any sign of improvement. At home she went on praying for a cure. In May she was worse. There was feverishness, blood-spitting, and increasing emaciation. But one morning in May, when she woke, she declared that she was cured. From that moment she gained flesh, and showed no further sign of the illness. The doctors are quite satisfied that she has been completely cured.

#### A Paralytic Cured.

Another remarkable case was that of a young Belgian working man cured at the baths of the grotto. He was helpless with paralysis, resulting from spinal disease, from which he had suffered during four years. He looked like a dying man as he was carried on a stretcher to the bath. An hour after I saw him walking in the bureau. There seemed evidence enough of a cure, but the doctors were not yet satisfied. They had telegraphed for a record of the case from his medical attendant at Tournai, and they said we must wait a few days and see if the recovery was permanent. The man was told to come back every morning for further examination. Every day he was better, gaining weight and strength.

The attendants of the sick, the nurses at the rest hospital, the stretcher-bearers who take the most helpless from the station to the hospital and to the grotto, and who perform every office of charity for them, are a confraternity that includes in its ranks men and women belonging to the

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