

A 20th Century Miracle - A Doctor's Report

Subtitled Our Lady, Comfort of the Afflicted

By An Australian Medical Practitioner
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The author wishes to acknowledge that he has made free use of extracts from the official journal of the Medical Bureau [of Lourdes, the "Journal de la Grotte." ["Journal of the Grotto"] A report of the case of Miss Meunier by the author was published in the "Catholic Medical Guardian," London, in July, 1932.

The following account is compiled from articles appearing in the "Marist Messenger," Otaki, New Zealand, November 1st, 1952, and the "Holy Name Monthly," Melbourne, May 1st, 1956.

{At the time of writing it was considered unethical for Australian Doctors to sign their names in non-medical articles, as that was considered to be touting for business! That the author is reporting the truth about Miss Meunier can be confirmed by any sincere investigator of the Medical Bureau of Lourdes}

Our Lady, Comfort of the Afflicted

In talks and writings upon Our Blessed Lady, I have been disappointed to find so little mention of her power as physician. As Mediatrix of all graces, she is a physician of souls. Who has not felt the effects of her mercy? Who if he would search the recesses of his soul, would not discover the marvellous cure of serious maladies; obtained through her intercession? The favours come, too often forgotten, taken for granted, their wonderful marvels scarcely appreciated. Since, in the period of her own life, she gave flesh, all His flesh, to the Incarnate Word, so she carried about in her own pure body, for nine months, the source of all supernatural and natural healing. Yes, Mater Purissima [Mother Most Pure] appears to stricken man, also, as Virgin Most Powerful.

A SKILLED PHYSICIAN

Our Blessed Lady, of course, heals bodies as well as souls. How vain the devices even of the most skilled doctors, in the face of chronic disease! The outpatient departments of the hospitals of great cities bear eloquent testimony. We can hear the definite pronouncement of the physician: "I can do no more for you." Or, leaving the bedside, he whispers in the corridor to the wife or some other relation: "There is no hope"! And, alas, sometimes the information is conveyed so unexpectedly that the affections of the hearer are deeply torn. Who does not know this?

But how different the behaviour of Our Lady in such a crisis!

It is at such a time that the sick person and his relatives should have recourse to the kindest and most tender, as well as the most skilled of physicians, the Blessed Mother of God.

Yes, let a person in such a plight take courage and appeal to Mary against the judgements of men. The Mother of God will not fail. Doctors well know she often cures in the most forlorn of cases, in a clearly miraculous manner. Clear, that is to say, to all but the deliberately blind of heart. If she does not cure she will bring sure consolation. Though the whole world cry out: "There is no hope!", he will find in the Mother of God a sure refuge. She will turn misery into joy; bring peace where there was only confusion and dismay.

The great physician is the one who instils confidence in the minds of his patients. This, Our Lady does in an eminent degree. Physicians, however, charge fees, though often remitting them where there is hardship. The Blessed Virgin reserves her most gracious consolations for the most abject and miserable, charging them nothing.

Who is it who cries out loudest in his distress? Surely he whose distress is greatest. Remember the blind man outside Jericho! Who cries out longest? He who labours longest under his duress. These are the requisites for him who would be succoured, healed I say boldly, in dire cases. A loud cry to the Virgin. A cry often repeated. Such an appeal, I confidently maintain, will be heard. I ought to know. It has been heard in my case, not once but many times. I mean, of course, that the cry should be loving and humble and confident.

OUR LADY DOES CURE

In response to prayer, the Blessed Virgin visits the bedside of the sick who are her clients, throughout the world. Into many a hamlet, into the lonely islands of the Pacific; into a missioner's humble dwelling; the rude hut of a native; into the homes of rich and poor alike; into hospital wards - she brings her gift of healing. Who will be able to tell the full story of her bountiful blessings? Family and parish traditions record them. Faith acknowledges them - but the world at large may never know of them. The humble Virgin desires not glory for herself, it is true, but she desires the greater glory of her Divine Son. Yet, that she does speak to men in the language of miracles cannot be denied.

Sad to say, however, the names even of Catholic medical men can be found in scientific journals, who question them.

The world to-day is in sore need of the message of the Holy Virgin, and not less of the signs by which she attests their authenticity. In the out-patient departments of public hospitals the sufferers and the agonized are gathered together like shells on the sea-shore. Our Blessed Lady has such clinics of her own at her famous shrines. The names leap to the lips - Lourdes, La Salette, Fatima. Here, according to the Divine plan, the sick are miraculously cured as in the days of Our Lord's life on earth.

If one rejects the evidence for the miraculous in these well-attested cases, one must also reject science and the evidence of one's senses. The true scientist, like Alexis Carrel, kneels before the Grotto at Lourdes in reverent acknowledgement of the supernatural. And if, as I have done, one questions the members of a pilgrimage returning from Lourdes, one learns strange and wonderful things. Those not actually completely cured, often declare that they feel a great increase in physical well-being. Nearly all report an increase of tranquillity in their souls. Others again never expected or indeed asked for bodily cure, and await confidently the gift of grace in the soul of some relative spiritually sick. (Will the world ever understand these?)

None who went to Lourdes in a spirit of humility and love left empty-handed. And nearly all are conscious of having been in the presence of the supernatural.

MIRACLES DO OCCUR AT LOURDES

Eloquent testimony to Our Lady's works of healing at Lourdes is borne by the pitiful objects left behind by the cured. Crutches, irons, splints, steel braces. Unfortunately, relatively few people from such a country as Australia are able to visit Lourdes. It seems to me that upon those who have had this privilege, lies a duty to tell the story of Our Lady's prodigies as they have experienced them. "Such a wonderful doctor!" Everyone pays this tribute to a medical man who has attended with success even the simplest case of illness. Who shall pay this tribute to the peerless physician, Our Blessed Lady?

I can imagine an Australian free-thinker saying "Who can tell whether or not the Blessed Virgin works miracles at Lourdes? I will believe when I read of a miraculous cure worthy of scientific credibility." Well then, to such a one I say; "Here are the facts which came within my own knowledge, of just such a miracle!"

A MIRACULOUS CURE

One summer day in July 1924, the 28th of the month, and, to be quite precise, at 2.30 p.m., a young girl moved restlessly upon her bed in the chief hospital at Lourdes. Upon her countenance was a smile of joy mingled with diffidence. She appeared, in fact, to be repressing some emotion which clamoured for expression. At length her impatience could no longer be held in check. She beckoned to her bedside the Sister in charge of her ward. "Sister, I think I can walk!"

"Indeed, Lucienne. That is wonderful news. Are you sure you can even move your limbs?"

"Oh yes, Sister. Look!" The child stretched out her arms, moved her legs, laughed nervously. "I'm sure I can. Watch!" She stepped out of the bed, and then, to the astonishment of the other patients, walked with firm steps across the room. "I'm cured Sister, I really am," she cried. Lucienne Meunier came back to the bed, bent her face in her hands and wept for joy. It had been eighteen months since she had bidden farewell to health, and two and a half months since she had left her bed. And the Blessed Mother of God had cured her of tuberculosis of the spine that very morning.

MEDICAL HISTORY

This little story tells the fact, but since people are curious and want every detail of true stories, let us retrace Lucienne Meunier's history, with all the necessary paraphernalia of medical history, clinical examinations, and so forth.

The medical history of Miss Meunier begins early in 1923. She was an assistant in a sweet shop in Louhans, a town not far from the eastern border of France, near Switzerland. She felt ill, with pains at the back of the neck, and progressive fatigue. Her condition did not improve, and in October she consulted the family doctor who diagnosed Pott's disease of the vertebra (tuberculosis of the spine). The largest town in this part of France is Lyons, which lies some distance to the south, and to the Lyons hospital the young lady was admitted, and remained as an in-patient during the last two weeks of January, 1924. She was here in the care of Dr. Delore, a physician of considerable repute. An X-ray taken in the hospital served to confirm the diagnosis of vertebral caries. Miss Meunier, previously had, by order of the family physician, been treated by rest in bed. Now a plaster corset was applied. The symptoms at this time were a partial paralysis of the upper limbs, more marked on

the left side. The forearm, arm and shoulder of this side were the sites of pain so severe at times as almost to cause the patient to faint. Having left the hospital, she was obliged to return in April owing to persistence of the pains. A plaster collar with headpiece was now added to the corset, but this proved so irksome that it was removed after a few days, and the girl became a bed-patient in her own home.

About this time the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes from Lyons was being organized and it was suggested that Lucienne should go. She consented, and in anticipation of the requirements of the Medical Bureau at Lourdes, Dr. Poty, the family physician, gave a certificate in the following terms, dated June 17th, 1924: "I, the undersigned, certify that I have attended Mademoiselle Lucienne Meunier, aged 17, living at Louhans. I saw her for the first time in November, 1923. She had suffered for a year from pains at the level of the first thoracic vertebra. Her general state was bad. Asthenia, lack of appetite, headache, evening rise of temperature, were present. An X-ray was taken in the department of Dr. Delore at the Lyons Hospital in December, 1923. It showed an osseous rarefaction of the seventh cervical vertebra, with considerable flattening of the inter-vertebral disc between the seventh cervical and the 1st cervical vertebra. There was present, indubitably, Pott's disease, at the beginning of its evolution. The patient was placed in a plaster corset which was badly tolerated. The patient was treated by recumbency upon a hard bed, without corset. Her general state has improved, the appetite has returned and the temperature has fallen. There still persist, pains at the level of the vertebral lesion, which appears to be in process of cicatrisation."

AT LOURDES

At the time of the arrival of her pilgrimage, Miss Meunier was unable to move her head without pain. On Monday morning, July 28th, in the forenoon, along with numerous other Lyons pilgrims, the young girl was carried from the hospital to the Piscines. These are the bathing enclosures in which the sick are immersed. It is not, of course, necessary to go to the baths to be cured at Lourdes. Some are cured during the procession of the Blessed Sacrament; others on the homeward journey; others, months afterwards. But, in general, one may say that to take the bath is as constant a ritual at Lourdes as for a patient in ordinary circumstances to submit to the application of a physician's stethoscope. Well, the stretcher-bearers arrive with their human burdens and deposit them within the bathing houses. The patient is undressed and immersed in a narrow stone bath of icy-cold water for a few moments. When it came to her turn, Miss Meunier, like everyone else, found the water extremely cold. She was returned to the hospital and it was about the time of the mid-day meal, at 12 o'clock, that she first noticed anything unusual. She became aware suddenly of a peculiar feeling in the spine, left arm and two lower limbs and of tinglings in the region of the spine and breast. It felt as if a liquid ran down her limbs. She satisfied herself by examination that this was not the case. At the same time all pain suddenly ceased. At 2.30 p.m., she called to the Sister in Charge and declared her conviction that she was cured. Shortly afterwards she was taken to the Medical Bureau.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

And now we come to the part in the affair of the present writer. Going to Lourdes had been a great experience for me, the fulfilment of years' long hopes and wishes. I was one of a trainload of pilgrims from London which arrived on the evening of Sunday the 27th. With what joy and anticipation had our company waited during the long hours of the southward journey! "It" is in sight. A thrill like electricity ran through the train as the words were passed along the corridor in the dusk of that summer evening. The train sweeps round a mountain side and reveals the Grotto - an

excavation in a rock-face illuminated with flickering candlelight. Pilgrims are still kneeling in silent homage and petition at the shrine. We realize that we are in the presence of the supernatural. One senses that a veil, though a thin one, is let down between Heaven and earth. A deep feeling of awe descends upon us. Children of God, children of His Blessed Mother we know ourselves to be. We feel that just beyond this awful veil which separates us from Heaven, the Mother is in close communion with the Son and that He is listening to her requests on our behalf. And we feel that there is a personal message for each one of us.

I slept the sleep of exhaustion in my hotel bedroom that night. My alarm woke me at 4.30 to a cold grey dawn filtering through the chinks by the window blind. An indescribable emotion filled me then. To be at Lourdes at last, to be really here; to be able to pay reverence to the Heavenly Mother; to visit the scene of her undoubted appearance on earth with a message for mankind! Was not this bliss? Here the Mother of God chose to dispense favours to a stricken world. Perhaps some were in store for unworthy me. Indeed they were, as it proved, due to the magnanimity of that lovely mother. Time was to reveal some of them. One was to arrive this very day.

AT MEDICAL BUREAU

Accompanied by my pilgrimage companion, a young English convert, I stole down the winding main street of the town and attended Mass and received Holy Communion at the Church of the Rosary. During the morning I visited the Grotto and again experienced that sense of the supernatural which had come upon us on the preceding day. The afternoon came, and with it the question, what to do? I thought over this, walking down the long street again. It was then that I had a hunch. I have a profound distrust of hunches and only on very rare occasions have I acted on them. However, this one was an exception. The thought struck me: "You are a doctor. You ought to be at the Medical Bureau." I went there and found at the door a friend, an English Benedictine priest, Father Dom Izard, who possessed a medical degree, and who at this time was resident at Lourdes. It was half past four o'clock. A buzz of voices sounded from within the room. Father Izard introduced me to a gathering of ten medical men presided over by Dr. Marchand, Chief of the Bureau. The latter had at his side a dark-haired young girl whom he was questioning in French. The young lady was Miss Lucienne Meunier. And the proceedings I found were going forward to test a claim on behalf of the girl, of a miraculous cure of tuberculosis of the spine. I participated with the other doctors in an examination of the patient. Our findings, in fact, confirmed those arrived at earlier in the afternoon by Drs. Pourtail and Mouren, of Marseilles, who reported as follows:

MEDICAL FINDINGS

"The young girl rose unaided from the litter and proceeded easily to the examination room, hesitating a little like one who has lost the habit of walking. Neither upon palpation nor even upon violent percussion was there abnormal sensitiveness of the vertebrae. There was no spinal curvature nor gibbosity. All the movements of the vertebral column (flexion, extension, latero-flexion), were made with full amplitude and normal suppleness. There was no atrophy and no contracture of the vertebral muscles. Patellar reflexes brisk; tendo Achilles normal. except on the left, where is discernible an epileptoid tremor which however ceases quite rapidly."

After the reading of the medical report and certificate of the doctor who had treated the patient before her arrival at Lourdes, the following findings were adopted:

"Firstly, Miss Lucienne Meunier had suffered from a vertebral caries whose onset had dated from the year 1923. The malady, though in process of cicatrisation, was still in full active evolution at the time of the patient's arrival at Lourdes.

"Secondly, a cure had taken place and the morbid symptoms had disappeared instantaneously.

"Thirdly, the cure of the organic lesions could not be attributed to the immobilization, which had not been applied for longer than eight months, and, according to admitted natural laws, it should have required one or more than one year more. This result surpassed the limits of science and its processes. (Signed), Dr. A. Marchand, President of the Bureau of Medical Investigations at Lourdes."

Next day I went again to the Bureau and participated in a second examination of the patient. Miss Meunier was all smiles this day. The nervousness which had marked her appearance on the previous day had disappeared, she was radiant and happy and said she was sure she was cured. She walked better, though with a certain timidity as a person might do who had recovered from a long illness. There was not any sign of neurosis. Before the examination, Dr. Marchand warned the medical witnesses that in the cases of Pott's disease cured at Lourdes, it was usual to find that certain signs such as the disturbed reflexes which had been perceived on the preceding day, and which constituted, so to speak, the "signature" of the disease, and attested its retention in the spinal cord, disappeared in the course of one or two days. This was the case, for while the patellar, tendo Achilles, biceps and triceps reflexes were still lively, the epileptoid tremor and a clonus of the left patella had completely disappeared. What was interesting to me was the extreme freedom of movement which the patient possessed at the spinal level which had been the site of the disease. Not only this, but in addition, her absolute freedom from pain and sensitivity. Anyone who has suffered from a tuberculosis affecting a bone near the surface of the body will understand what I mean by this.

Another point of interest was the cosmopolitan character of the medical committee. This, according to the invariable custom, was constituted from doctors who happened to be in Lourdes at the time. Some were Catholic believers and some were not; they came from all over Europe and from the ends of the earth. One thing they had in common - a scientific spirit of inquiry.

"One may thus affirm," wrote Dr. Marchand, "that the cure of Miss Meunier, inexplicable because instantaneous, appears definite."

A year later I revisited Lourdes. I questioned Dr. Marchand about Miss Meunier. He assured me that according to the reports he had received, the girl had remained cured. The cure is recorded in the annals of the Medical Bureau as an instance of the miraculous.
