

A Protestant Looks At Lourdes

By Ruth Cranston

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Introduction

The cures of Lourdes - cures of the hopelessly sick and disabled by forces unknown to modern science - have made that small French town the most visited shrine in the world. They have also, for nearly 100 years, been a source of endless controversy and wonder among doctors and laymen alike.

"The Miracle of Lourdes" is an exhaustive firsthand study of the famous Catholic shrine and its cures. To prepare it, Ruth Cranston lived in Lourdes, talked with doctors, nurses, stretcher-bearers, patients. A Protestant herself, her approach was that of the reporter and impartial investigator. She has verified and documented the facts she presents. No reader will finish her report without feeling that, whatever the explanation, the experience of Lourdes reveals something profoundly significant to men and women everywhere.

The Miracle of Lourdes

Condensed from the Book by Ruth Cranston

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The Miracle of Lourdes

I went to Lourdes out of an irrepressible curiosity.

For years I had been interested in the part that faith can play in alleviating our human ills. But I had known very little about this famous French shrine until one morning my eye fell on the headline:

**IDIOT CHILD CURED AT LOURDES, BOY OF SEVEN REGAINS FULL INTELLIGENCE
AFTER YEARS OF LIVING LIKE AN ANIMAL.**

This incredible newspaper story, which also told of other startling cures - cancer of the stomach, peritonitis, lung tumour, angina - stirred my imagination. I wanted to know more about Lourdes. [Footnote: The boy in this newspaper story was named Guy Leydet. More of him later.]

I read every book I could find on the subject, both in English and French, for I spent much of my youth in France and knew the language. The more I read about it, the more deeply I became interested. Was this Catholic shrine, which apparently produced such staggering physical cures, and which certainly drew two million pilgrims each year, simply a mass delusion?

Was it a gigantic hoax or was it truly, as my French authors presented it, a place of simple sincerity, reverence, and amazing miracles?

I decided to see for myself. I had no axe to grind. I was not a Catholic but a Protestant. I belonged to no organization, religious, medical or metaphysical, which had any special interest in my findings. I was just an ordinary citizen with an inquiring mind, bent on my own quest.

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When I reached Lourdes, in the spring of 1953, the help of Monseigneur Theas, Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, and of Dr. Francois Leuret, President of the Medical Bureau, opened every door. Nurses, Protestant physicians, the sick and those who had been cured co-operated wholeheartedly to make this report possible.

Lourdes, a thriving town of some 13,000 residents, lies near the Spanish border. If you are lucky, you come into it - as I did - in the radiant early morning: the sun just rolling up into a dazzling sky, silver streams rushing along between rows of swaying willows; the mountains soft and hazy in the distance.

For an hour the train has been speeding through rich waving cornfields, dotted with red-roofed farmhouses and clumps of dark-green cypress trees. As we enter Lourdes, we see that a long pilgrimage train is also just arriving. From every window eager faces of the sick look out, full of hope. Although many of them have endured bitter sufferings during their journey, they seem amazingly cheerful. Someone starts a hymn, the "Song of Bernadette." As I learned later, this is the theme song here. One hears it everywhere. Now car after car takes it up, till the whole long pilgrimage train is ringing with it:

"Ave, Ave - Ave, Maria. Ave, Ave - Ave, Mari-ia!"

On this wave of joyous praise and hope, we move into the Lourdes station. There groups of leather-harnessed stretcher-bearers and blue-caped nurses hurry along the platform to assist with the very sick. The well pilgrims line up with the pilgrimage director or rush about to see their invalids safely established in the hospital ambulances.

Lourdes is not like any place you ever saw before. You are in a city of pilgrims, and they are everywhere; people who have come from the four corners of the earth with but one purpose: prayer and healing, for themselves or their loved ones. The city exists for them. You will be surrounded by them every moment of your stay in Lourdes.

The main street - ancient (but renamed) Rue de la Grotte - is a typical mountain town thoroughfare, narrow, bustling, noisy; shops offering varied Lourdes souvenirs crowd the tiny sidewalks. Pilgrims tramp up and down here all day long with their knap-sacks and lunch-boxes.

Follow this street to the bottom of the hill (Lourdes is a town of steep hills and sudden dramatic vistas) and it takes you into the Avenue Bernadette. Equally crowded, equally noisy, this leads directly to the Domaine, the vast enclosed park which contains the baths, the sanctuaries, the hospital, and all the buildings for the complex administration of the shrine.

This is the section for which the rest of Lourdes exists. All day and every day, a continuous throng is surging toward it. Here are people of many tongues and many garbs: a Scottish stretcher-bearer in a kilt, a Swiss pastor, shepherding his picturesque flock with their wide lace head-dresses; English

curates, Italian Monsignori, American and Irish bishops in colourful purple; French peasants, American students, Dutch sailors, bevvies of little boys and girls in provincial costume.

The old and the new jostle each other at every turn: donkeys carrying huge bundles of laundry to the convent on the hill; young men tearing through on motor bikes; groups of humble village priests trudging along barefoot; an actress in a long convertible en route to Biarritz. At the corner, cars and buses rush by - until suddenly a girl appears with a big herd of sheep. All halt, resignedly, and wait for her to go through. After all, Lourdes is still very much a country town.

Cross the perilous, strident highway, enter the big iron gate, and you are in the Domaine, the refuge in which the endless stream of pilgrims turn their backs upon the world outside and give themselves to prayer. Directly you enter this consecrated area, you yourself feel more peaceful. It is a place of wide green lawns dotted with sacred statuary, of magnificent trees, of spacious vistas; and all about are rolling hills and the beauty of the grey-green countryside. Walk to the right, under the arcades of the great horseshoe ramp which sweeps out from the shrine's three churches, and you find the famous piscines, or baths, where the pilgrims come to be plunged into the waters of the spring. Pass the fountains where thousands come to drink and to carry away Lourdes water, and presently you come to the very heart of Lourdes, the Grotto.

Here, in a cleft in the mountain wall, flanked by tall pyramids of creamy flowers and hundreds of flickering candles, stands a statue of the Virgin. The sides of the Grotto are worn smooth by all the hands and lips that have reverently touched it.

All day long people are praying here, absorbed, withdrawn. Procession after procession comes and goes: pilgrims from Brussels, from Bordeaux, from Strasbourg, Luxembourg, Dublin; from everywhere. For this is today the most visited shrine in the world.

And all, the people of Lourdes will tell you, because a young girl had a vision, and was faithful to it to the end.

The story goes that, nearly a hundred years ago - it was February 11, 1858 - the Virgin Mary appeared to a 14-year-old peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, while she was out gathering firewood. Bernadette saw "The Lady" in a sort of radiant mist in the grotto. There followed a series of such visions, during which The Lady instructed Bernadette: "Tell the priests to build a chapel on this spot. I want people to come here in procession. . . . Pray - tell them to pray! . . . Go and drink from the spring and wash in it."

No spring had been known to exist there, but when the child dug in the earth at the indicated spot it appeared. At first a mere trickle, it soon became a powerful stream.

From the beginning the people believed in Bernadette. She communicated her intense faith and vision to them and they followed her implicitly, built a rude shrine at the spring and prayed there in increasing numbers. But local authorities scorned the visions, threatened Bernadette and her family, and attempted to close the shrine.

Then the miracles began. A blind man who washed his eyes in the spring water found - that his sight was restored. A mother, one of Bernadette's neighbours, dipped her dying child in the waters, and the little boy not only lived but became well and robust for the first time in his life. The child had suffered from a bone disease which had completely paralysed his legs, and had been beset by

violent convulsions until the physician finally pronounced his death "only a matter of hours." And since the cure restored the child to complete health within 24 hours, the case made a profound impression, even on the medical profession. Soon people began to bring their sick from all over the land.

Finally the Church set up a commission to investigate the whole matter. After four years' study it completely vindicated Bernadette and declared that certain cures had occurred which must be considered contrary to all known biological laws. Eventually in 1933, some 54 years after her death, Bernadette was canonized at St. Peter's in Rome. One of the honoured guests at that ceremony was a 77-year-old man, Louis-Justin Bouhohorts, who owed his life to Bernadette. For he had been that dying child, paralysed and convulsive, who had been saved by one of Lourdes' first widely publicized miracles.

Although the Church quite early accepted the miracles of Lourdes as authentic, the medical profession did not. For many years doctors pronounced Bernadette "hallucinated," and the dramatically cured patients victims of "false diagnosis," "hysteria," and "auto-suggestion." Lourdes was considered a resort for dupes and fakers.

In 1903 a young doctor at the University of Lyons was ridiculed because he mentioned that a tuberculosis case he attended had been miraculously cured at Lourdes. "With such views, sir," said the Dean coldly, "you can hardly expect to be received as a member of our faculty!" "In that case," said the young physician, "I must look elsewhere." He went to New York, to the Rockefeller Institute, and in 1912, as a result of his researches there, received the Nobel Prize. His name was Alexis Carrel.

But the implacable professional prejudice against Lourdes was already breaking down. The Bureau of Medical Verification, established at Lourdes in 1885 for professional study of alleged cures, attracted an increasing number of curious doctors of all beliefs to the shrine. In 1893 the celebrated French neurologist, Jean Martin Charcot, wrote sympathetically of Lourdes cures under the title: "The Faith Which Heals." In 1906, when a Paris editor launched a bitter press campaign to close Lourdes in the name of hygiene, he met with an unexpected and thunderous reply. A physician in Lyons (the city from which Dr. Alexis Carrel had departed only a few years before) now got together the signatures of 3000 doctors testifying to the invaluable services rendered by Lourdes to the sick "whom we doctors have been powerless to save," and insisting that nothing be done to interfere with them.

A large number of books have since appeared by medical men of high reputation, discussing the phenomena of Lourdes and giving accounts of outstanding cures. But the most powerful force in transforming public and professional opinion has been the cures themselves. They have constituted a living argument difficult to explain away.

Their cases are documented in the archives of the Medical Bureau. Here are some of them.

In December, 1900, Gabriel Gargam, a railway postal clerk, was at his work sorting mail on the Orleans Southwest Express when the train was wrecked. He woke up in a hospital bandaged from head to foot. He had been crushed almost to death. His collarbone was broken, his spine was hopelessly injured, paralysing him from the waist down. The least movement produced vomiting,

and he had to be fed painfully through a tube. A court ordered the railroad to pay 6000 francs annually, since he was "a human wreck who would henceforth need at least two persons to care for him."

After 20 months in the hospital Gargam was growing daily weaker. He could no longer swallow. The doctors warned his family that death was near.

Gargam had not set foot in a church for 15 years. But his mother, a deeply religious woman, persuaded him to undertake the pilgrimage to Lourdes. The journey was accomplished with great suffering, on a stretcher.

On his first afternoon at Lourdes he lay on the route of the Procession of the Blessed Sacrament, extremely weak, and soon entirely unconscious; his features relaxed, cold and blue. But at the moment when his nurse thought him dying, suddenly he opened his eyes, raised himself on his elbow, reeled back again, but tried a second time and succeeded in getting up. His paralysis was gone. He had recovered entire freedom of movement.

He was taken to the Medical Bureau, where doctors and newspaper correspondents surrounded him. "Gargam arrived wrapped in a long bathrobe," one records. "He stood before us, a spectre. Big staring eyes alone were living in his emaciated colourless face." But he was now able to throw aside his tube and eat normally, and in a few days he was to gain 20 pounds. When he returned home the post-office department's physician told him he could immediately resume his post.

His case created a sensation. The 60 physicians who examined him at Lourdes all agreed that this cure was scientifically inexplicable. Indeed, Gargam had great difficulty in persuading the incredulous railroad officers to discontinue his annuity. But he enjoyed robust health for the rest of his life. He came to Lourdes each year, serving tirelessly as a stretcher-bearer, until he finally died in 1952 at the age of 83.

Madame Marie Bire of Lucon, hard-working mother of six children, suffered fiendish headaches, dizziness, and was finally stricken with blindness. After examining her the doctor said, "I hate to tell you, Madame, but there has been a complete wasting of the optic nerves. I'm afraid there's no cure."

Some months later Madame Bire went to Lourdes, accompanied by her doctor and her oldest daughter. At the Grotto, which she visited in an invalid carriage, she suddenly stood up and said, "Ah, I see the Blessed Virgin!" She fell back into the carriage-seat, fainting. Her daughter thought she was dying. But Madame Bire quickly recovered consciousness and found that she could still see.

She was taken to the Medical Bureau and examined by several doctors - among them Dr. Henri Lainey, an oculist from Rouen, who wrote: "Examination of the eyes with the ophthalmoscope showed on both sides a white pearly papilla, devoid of all colour. The diagnosis was forced upon me: here was white atrophy of the optic nerve, of cerebral cause. This, one of the gravest afflictions, is recognized by all authorities as incurable. But Madame Bire could read the finest print, and her distant vision was just as good." She had recovered her sight, but the lesions remained. They were to disappear a little later.

Ten doctors made a second examination next day. Same results: the organ still atrophied and lifeless, but the sight still clear and perfect. Questions followed thick and fast. "How can you see, Madame, when you have no papillae?" one doctor asked impatiently.

"Listen gentlemen, I am not familiar with your learned words," Madame Bire replied with spirit. "I have just one thing to say. For nearly six months I could not see, and now I can see. That is enough for me!"

It had to be enough for her questioners also. They acknowledged that the cure appeared complete. The future would tell whether it was permanent.

A month after her return home three eye specialists examined Madame Bire again. The Medical Bureau wished to know whether she was still seeing with "dead" eyes. They found that the phenomena had ceased. "All traces of papillary atrophy have disappeared," one of the examining physicians wrote. "There are no longer lesions. The cure is complete."

That was in the fall of 1908. When the president of the Medical Bureau, Dr. Auguste Vallet, saw her 20 years later her sight was still excellent. All the doctors who studied the case found her cure "absolutely inexplicable clinically."

Other extraordinary cures baffled the doctors during those early years of the shrine. Little Yvonne Aumaitre, daughter of a Nantes physician, was cured, at the age of two, of double clubfoot - the case being recorded by her father in the Medical Bureau records.

Constance Piquet was cured of cancer of the breast - an advanced case pronounced inoperable by two Parisian doctors.

Marie Le Marchand, her face half eaten away by a tuberculous skin disease, came out of the piscine with only a long red scar to remind her of her former malady. A vivid account of her before-and-after appearance is on file in the Medical Bureau.

Such cases gave pause to even the most antagonistic doctors, and the attitude of the medical profession as a whole changed considerably. As a British doctor wrote in 1930. "The change is from scepticism and incredulity to an acknowledgement, not necessarily of the supernatural, but that cures do occur at Lourdes which cannot be explained by any known biological laws." A year later the Society of Medicine and Surgery of Bordeaux devoted an entire meeting to Lourdes. The papers read by the various doctors, discussing cases of sudden inexplicable healing, were later printed in Bordeaux's solidly respectable Fortnightly Gazette of Medical Science. Obviously medical men no longer dismissed the shrine as merely a resort for charlatans and crackpots.

This interest of the medical profession has continued. In 1953 some 1500 doctors from all over the world registered at the Lourdes Medical Bureau. Many of them, as is true every year, studied the records and helped examine the patients. The International Medical Association of Lourdes, organized in 1927, has an enrolment of 5000 doctors, from 30 countries, who assist in the methodical checking of alleged cures.

All this does not mean there is no longer opposition or hostility. There is plenty. "But," as Dr. A. Marchand wrote in his *The Facts of Lourdes*, "the time of systematic contempt has passed."

"What is the most remarkable cure you've witnessed?" I asked one of the doctors at the Bureau, an old-timer who had been coming to Lourdes every year for 20 years.

"It's hard to select," he said. "But - well, there was Madame Augustine Augault - a remarkable case. I lived near her, knew the two surgeons who attended her, and also her parish priest. So I know that her cure was genuine."

This woman had been ill for 12 years with a fibroid tumour of the uterus. It had grown to such enormous proportions that the pressure had caused chronic gastric troubles and vomiting. A heart condition made an operation impossible, and the case had reached an apparently hopeless stage.

As a last resort Madame Augault decided to go to Lourdes. Her family physician strongly opposed this, telling her that she would never come back alive. But Madame Augault persisted.

She made the journey on a mattress, at the end of her strength and very close to death. Four injections were necessary to help her heart during the trip. A doctor who visited her on the train told the Medical Bureau later that he "had been startled by the dimensions of her abdomen."

On the first morning at Lourdes she was taken to the baths on a stretcher. During the brief instant of her immersion she felt excruciating pain, then the pressure in her abdomen seemed to disappear. But she was very tired and continued to suffer terribly until she was carried on her stretcher to the Procession at four that afternoon. Then, at the precise moment when the Blessed Sacrament passed by, her sufferings vanished, and she was conscious of a rebirth of her energies.

She stayed on her cot, however, and said nothing about how she felt. The next day she was again taken to the piscine. The attendants who had bathed her before observed with amazement that her abdomen was entirely flat and apparently normal. Moreover, she was able to walk.

After this bath she was taken to the Medical Bureau and examined by some 30 doctors. The official record states: "On examination, the abdomen was found to be perfectly supple. The skin was 'pleated' like that of a woman who has had a child. The belt which the invalid wore on her arrival at Lourdes is now seven inches too large. The coat, on which the buttonholes show marks of stretching from the distension of the abdomen, has become much too big and now overlaps considerably."

Madame Augault's cure was permanent.

How are the cures verified? What safeguards are there against fraud? To begin with, every pilgrimage is accompanied by one or more medical men, and no sick person is accepted without a medical certificate from his home physician stating his disease and present condition. When a supposed cure occurs, the pilgrimage doctor reports at once to the Medical Bureau. The doctors there then examine the patient and discuss the case. Did the illness really exist? Is there a cure? If so, can it be explained naturally? Neurotic cases are ruled out completely. No case is accepted unless there has been some organic change - the healing of malignant tissue, the restoration of wasted nerves and muscles, the sudden knitting of chronic bone fractures.

If the case appears inconclusive, it is immediately dropped. If it is retained, the patient is kept under observation by a local physician for at least a year, and complete documentation, including X rays, laboratory reports, statements from attending physicians and other witnesses, is collected. Then the patient is brought back to Lourdes for another examination by doctors of the most varied backgrounds.

"The medical work at Lourdes is run entirely by doctors, never forget that," Dr. Leuret, until his recent death the president of the Medical Bureau, told me. Dr. Leuret was a remarkable person: Legion of Honour, Croix de Guerre, professor of medicine and head of a large clinic in the worst section of Bordeaux.

"During my time here," Dr. Leuret continued, "Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, Protestants of all sects, have been among our colleagues; atheists and unbelievers, too. It's this study of the cures by men of such different viewpoints that guarantees our good faith."

After the medical commission at Lourdes decides that a cure is outside the laws of nature, it is sent on to the medical commission at Paris. This commission, composed of 20 distinguished physicians and surgeons, then declares (or decides not to declare), "We find no natural or scientific explanation of this cure." Only when this body has passed a case does it finally go to a Canonical Commission of the Church for final evaluation as a miracle.

How many have occurred at Lourdes? In nearly a century of the shrine's existence 51 cases have been pronounced miraculous cures by the Church. [66 by 1999] This however, represents the most stringent selection. The Church does not deny the possibility of miracles "less complete," of which there have been many; but it refuses to authenticate them. Among other stipulations a Canonical Commission's requirements for a miraculous cure are:

1. That the malady was grave and not improving under medication.
2. That the cure was instantaneous, with no period of convalescence.
3. That the cure was perfect, and that there was no relapse.

A large number of actual cures go without official recognition because of insufficient data. Sometimes home physicians have not kept sufficiently precise data. Other doctors refuse point-blank to furnish X rays, diagnoses or laboratory reports. "If it's Lourdes, we're not interested," they say. And scores of people who are cured do not report it simply because they dislike publicity. Indeed, many people who now enjoy the blessings of being well after years of agony care not at all that their cures are not recognized as miracles. They come to Lourdes and give thanks every year just the same.

The Medical Bureau at Lourdes has fairly complete records of 1200 cures which it recognizes as being "inexplicable under natural laws," but which the Church, for one reason or another, has refused to authenticate as miracles. In addition it has notations and material concerning some 4000 other cases that are very probably complete and genuine cures. This may seem a small number, in view of the many thousands who come. But ten such cures - or even one - would be equally dumbfounding.

When a patient who has been cured returns to Lourdes for examination, one of the visiting doctors is often asked to officiate. An American, Dr. Smiley Blanton, directed the examination of one of the most famous cures - Charles McDonald. Thirty-two doctors at the Bureau studied this remarkable case, and Dr. Blanton later read an account of it before a joint session of the American Psychoanalytic and Psychiatric Associations.

Charles McDonald was brought to Lourdes from Dublin on September 6, 1936, with the Catholic Young Men's Pilgrimage of Ireland. He was then 31 and had been ill since he was 20. His Dublin

physician certified that he had tuberculosis of the spine, nephritis, and tuberculous arthritis of the left shoulder. For 15 months he had been completely bedfast, and had five large draining abscesses. He endured maddening pain, was unable to sit up for more than four minutes at a time, and was pronounced beyond medical aid.

No change in McDonald's condition occurred during his first day at Lourdes. The next day he was bathed again and later carried to a service at the Grotto. It was then that he began to feel the first glow of health.

"It should be remembered," says Dr. Blanton, "that for 15 months the patient had been unable to move his hips or shoulders without severe pain. Now, lying on a stretcher at the Grotto, he experimented by moving his arm slightly. There was no pain. He loosened the brace strap on his shoulder and raised his shoulders from the pillow - still without pain."

The next morning, when the doctors and nurses who had forbidden him to get up were out of the room, he got out of bed and dressed himself without help. That day he was taken to the Grotto in an invalid chair. Afterwards, though he had made not the slightest move without agonizing pain for more than a year, he walked up the steps into the Rosary Church and was able to make a genuflection and kneel at one of the benches.

When he returned to Dublin, McDonald had the supreme pleasure of dispensing with the ambulance which had been so vitally necessary one short week before. The pilgrimage physician, Dr. Christopher Hannigan, wrote on August 29, 1937: "I have seen Mr. McDonald twice since his return from Lourdes. I can declare definitely that there are no traces of his former illness. I am glad to testify to this cure, as when I first saw him I regarded his case as hopeless."

On September 16, 1937, McDonald returned to Lourdes. Dr. Blanton and 32 other doctors then examined him, found him in excellent health (as he is to this day), [1955] and agreed that "No medical explanation, in the present state of science, can be given for his cure."

In his report to his American confreres Dr. Blanton concludes: "We must lay aside as untenable the accusation that cases such as Charles McDonald's are in any way 'fixed' or the histories 'doctored.' There does appear to be at this shrine a sudden quickening of the healing processes. The percentages of such cures are certainly too great to be laid to coincidence, nor do the details of the cures conform to the laws of recovery as we know them.

"Even coincidental cures in our hospitals do not in the space of two or three days get up and walk without pain after 15 months in bed with continual pain. I believe that something does occur which is 'on the margin of the laws of nature'. "

Many observers think the extraordinary emotional climate of Lourdes responsible for many of the cures achieved there. For the whole atmosphere of the shrine is one which intensifies faith.

One amazing aspect of Lourdes is the fact that the city has never had an epidemic. Two million travellers and 30,000 sick pass through there every year. Hundreds are given baths each day, and many persons suffering from all manner of diseases are immersed in the same water. Yet apparently no infection ever results.

The Lourdes water is a strange phenomenon. In the early days some canny Lourdes citizens had visions of exploiting the spring and turning the town into a flourishing thermal resort like Aix-les-Bains or Vichy.

They were bitterly disappointed when analysis revealed that the water contained no curative or medicinal properties whatever. It was found to be "similar in composition to most water found in mountainous areas where the soil is rich in calcium."

However, a bacterial study of the bath waters did bring a remarkable discovery. The Medical Bureau, curious to learn why no infection resulted when one diseased patient after another was bathed in the same water, took samples from the baths and had them analysed. The reports showed extreme pollution - streptococcus, staphylococcus, colibacillus, and all sorts of other germs. Yet, astonishingly, when guinea pigs were inoculated with this polluted water they remained perfectly healthy. At the same time, two out of three guinea pigs died when inoculated with water from the river Seine containing much the same bacilli.

Hence the shrine's devotees have an extraordinary regard for Lourdes' water, as is attested by the following dramatic foot-note: At the end of the day the stretcher-bearers and nurses often dip a glass of water from the baths and drink it as an act of faith.

The service of these voluntary workers is lavish and untiring. Many of them are themselves cures of former years, and their mere presence - the fact that they are now obviously strong and well - gives tremendous inspiration and hope to the sick.

The brancardiers, as the stretcher-bearers are called, come from all walks of life - generals, mechanics, judges, clerks, bankers, civil servants. There are more than 2000 of them in the permanent association, each pledged to give a certain amount of time each year. They are on duty from dawn until midnight, and sometimes later. Their tasks are heavy, their meals uncertain, their rest slight and often broken by emergency calls, for during the busy season they must care for the sick from as many as 22 pilgrim trains a day.

Every brancardier is given a small hand-book of rules, the last of which is: "He must pray without ceasing." The brancardiers ask nothing for themselves but the privilege of serving. "In 30 years' service," the president of their order told me proudly, "I have never once been refused by a brother brancardier, or even heard a murmur from him, when I asked him to perform one more hard job at the end of the day."

The volunteer nurses, of whom there are likewise about 2000 enlisted from all social classes, also work indefatigably. They run up and down long flights of stairs, carry bedpans, change fetid dressing, bathe malodorous wounds. They do it cheerfully, joyfully, and with constant prayer.

Indeed the devotion, the spirit of dedication and self-giving that permeates the whole place, is a powerful element in the Lourdes atmosphere. Hundreds of people look forward to giving up their vacation time to this work, year after year. The girl in the souvenir shop at my hotel comes from England every year and works in the shop mornings so that she can help at the baths in the afternoon. The girl at the Cook's Travel Agency, who works all day, goes every evening to help at the Grotto until midnight.

All these people find the utmost happiness in such service. As one stretcher-bearer said, "These few days at Lourdes each August fix me up for the whole year. I live for 12 months on what I get here in just this one week!"

Early each morning you meet them swinging along the Esplanade on their way to the Mass - the leather-harnessed brancardiers carrying the stretcher cases, pushing the tragic little carriages. Among the "grands malades" - the very sick - are sights to wring the heart: a girl with beautiful classic features peering out from the plaster cast imprisoning her from head to foot; a priest, white and shrunk, in the last stages of tuberculosis; a woman in a black veil, trying to conceal a face covered with flaming red sores; an old man hobbling along on twisted stumps. But as they pass, you see their lips moving in prayer, you hear the nurses and brancardiers softly humming Ave Maria.

Once the patients are back from Mass, the trek to the baths begins. Volunteer nurses bathe the patients one by one, lotioning those too ill to be immersed, but carefully removing all bandages so that the water makes direct contact. All morning, and from two till four in the afternoon, the lines of stretchers and little carriages go to and from the pool. Behind the sick stands a tightly packed mass of friends and relatives, all praying earnestly. The prayer and faith perpetually going up as with one voice constitute an almost living force whose rhythms get into the blood. One would have to be made of stone not to be moved by it.

At four o'clock the bells peal, and the Procession of the Blessed Sacrament forms at the Grotto. The loud-speakers open up and a great hymn rolls out, the huge crowd joining in unison. The procession then makes its long and impressive way along the Esplanade, each pilgrimage under its own banner. In the square the sick are lined up in two long rows, and as the Blessed Sacrament approaches, the ardour of their prayer mounts. Then the officiating bishop, robed in white and gold, leaves the shelter of his golden canopy carrying the monstrance. The sick raise their terrible faces for the blessing, the great crowd falls to its knees, and the Host is raised above each one. This is the moment when a sick one sometimes rises and, pale but triumphant, follows the Procession with calm, victorious tread up the steps and into the Church.

Every evening at eight o'clock, when the torchlight procession begins, the Domaine becomes a blazing field of light. Everyone carries a paper-shaded candle to the Grotto, where the various pilgrimages gather under their illuminated signs. The tiny candle flames form larger and larger blocks of light until they become a huge wheel of fire about the Grotto. Then the procession starts out through the enveloping darkness like a moving serpent of fire. As it winds down the path, there is a great burst of singing under the stars. It is the "Song of Bernadette" - Ave, Ave Maria. The procession continues around the great horseshoe ramp, down the side of one Esplanade and up the other. The doors of the Hospital of Our Lady of Lourdes, on the Esplanade, are opened, and from the rows of beds the sick join in the song, each in his own tongue.

For two hours the marching and singing continue, and then the marchers mass in the square before the Rosary Church. At a signal from the bishop all singing stops. Then, declaring their belief in God in Latin, the universal language of the Roman Catholic Church, all burst into the majestic chanting of the Credo. It is an experience no one who shares it will forget.

Thus, even on a normal day, Lourdes is a tremendously exhilarating and inspiring place. When a possible miracle occurs, it becomes positively electrifying. I saw it happen.

One afternoon I sat on the terrace of the Cafe Royale, directly across from the entrance to the Domaine. Everybody "falls in" there at the end of a hard day. The brancardiers unharness. The directors of the pilgrimages lean back in their chairs and relax over coffee and little cakes. Some of the old priests enjoy a joke and a cigar with the younger men, and perhaps a thimble of cognac in their coffee.

The Hospital of the Sept Douleurs (Our Lady of Seven Sorrows) is just a few steps away, and stretcher-bearers and invalid carriages go by constantly. Buses swing by too, bearing crowds of singing pilgrims - the Basques and Italians waving a last good-bye to the Dutch and English in the cafe, with whom they have shared their five pilgrimage days. Traffic is terrific, as the different groups and organizations pour out of the Domaine after the Procession.

Suddenly, through all the hubbub and commotion, there is a swirl of figures over at the gateway, and the mighty roll of the Magnificat. All spring to their feet, rush to the pavement, cross themselves excitedly. Something is happening. A cure perhaps - a miracle? Then you see them.

Following the long line of stretchers and carriages returning to the hospital comes a jubilant little procession: a group of brancardiers forming a guard of honour for a radiant young girl who walks as if on air. She is one of the Dutch pilgrims; she had been carried down to the Grotto that afternoon on a stretcher, after four years in bed with a tubercular spine. She is returning on her own two feet, singing and praising God.

Everybody joins in the singing. The Dutch and Spanish women hug each other. The little boys throw their caps in the air and cheer. The waiters smile and bring a double order for everyone.

Was it a miracle, really? Time will tell. But that girl's eyes - !

I recognized one of the "unbelieving" French doctors, standing at the curb quite near me. "Well, what did you think of it?" I asked casually.

"It was - " He suddenly turned and fled into a shop, handkerchief held up to his face. I didn't realize until afterwards that he was weeping. Never again did he have anything derisive to say about miracles.

At dinner everybody talks about it. The Dutch are staying at our hotel, and one of their nurses tells the wonderful story over and over. She is impatient because the pilgrimage doctor still hesitates to admit a miracle. He wants to wait and see. "But it's true!" the nurse insists. "I saw it with my own eyes! Four of us had to carry the girl to the bath. And after we had plunged her in, stiff as a board, I saw her arms and legs bend. And I saw her sit down on the edge of the bath and help us while we put her clothes back on again!"

"She left her cast and brace at the Grotto," another verifies joyfully. "The other patients are enraptured. They had all been praying for this girl day and night - she was the worst of our cases."

She is right. There is neither envy nor disappointment among the ambulant patients who have been denied their own cures. All round the big dining room there are faces alight, shining eyes and triumphal smiles of delight at their comrade's good fortune. It is something to cherish and remember, for the joy in these facts, the spirit in this room, transcend description.

One might think the uncured would regard their pilgrimage as an unmitigated tragedy. Instead they seem to find at Lourdes a new hope and a new strength with which to bear their burdens. Some

patients, of course, do return home disappointed and rebellious, and still passionately longing for the cure that was denied them. But they are rare.

They come to Lourdes weary and worn with pain, hardly able to make the dreadful journey, resenting their sickness and wondering why God has thus afflicted them - a burden to themselves and to those who bring them. At Lourdes station the humblest of them, the despairing and the lost, are warmly welcomed, gently transported, tenderly looked after. In their quarters they are surrounded with all that lavish care, love and devotion can give. At the shrine they find themselves in company with hundreds of other sick - many worse off than they - and the transformation begins. They start to think about their neighbour in the next bed or in the next little carriage. They pray for him and soon begin to long, above everything else, for his cure.

In sum, they forget themselves. They soon become absorbed in love of God and love for fellow man, the two great solvents for all human ills, as Jesus taught.

Time after time I have been told at Lourdes - by doctors, nurses, brancardiers, even by the man who sweeps the paths: "The sick? Oh, Madame, they've forgotten about their own cure. All they care about is that the man in the next row shall get well. . . . 'Don't bother about me - that fellow over there needs you more.' . . . 'Never mind, nurse, I can wait.' . . . 'Look after this poor lady in the next carriage - she really needs attention'."

Naturally the pain comes back again, but it hasn't the same hold. Their minds are not centred on it any longer. And when the time comes to go home, though they haven't been physically cured, though they know what hardships and suffering yet another pilgrimage will mean, their one cry is: "If only I can come back next year! If only. I can come again to Lourdes!"

During my study of this shrine, which occupied more than a year, I looked up several famous cures, or miraculees, as they are called. Perhaps the most astonishing of them was Guy Leydet, whose restoration from hopeless idiocy first drew my attention to Lourdes.

Today [1955] Guy Leydet is a tall, nice-looking lad of 14. When I visited his home in St. Etienne, where his father is a professor in a local business college, I found him happily running off with his friends to play football. His mother, a charming and very pretty woman, was proud of his standing in his classes, said he hoped soon to go to England as an exchange student.

But less than ten years ago he had the brain of an idiot. Doctors had pronounced the dread word: "Incurable."

Guy Leydet was a normal child till the age of five. Then he was stricken with acute meningo-encephalitis - a brain disease that can wreck the nervous system. It paralysed both arms and legs, caused frequent convulsions and epileptic fits, and, worst of all, finally brought about complete idiocy. The child could no longer even recognize his parents, and could utter only guttural sounds. This condition lasted for two years, and the parents all but ruined themselves financially in fruitless efforts to find a cure.

Finally they went to Lourdes. At the piscine, compassionate nurses dipped the rigid little boy into the water. His mother, fearing another convulsion, stood near anxiously, and they handed him back to her.

Then suddenly it happened.

Guy Leydet opened his eyes, reached his arms toward his mother and in a clear, childish voice cried, "Mama!" He then began to count his fingers, naming them over, as French children do. Moreover, he moved his arms and legs perfectly.

Back home the Leydets called in their doctor, who gazed in stupefaction at his former patient. He admitted that he could not understand it at all. "Well - try to re-educate the boy," he said, still incredulous.

It was easy. The child's mind rapidly reawakened, and he soon learned to read and write as well as play vigorously like other children. On September 26, 1947 - one year after his cure - he was examined by 40 doctors at the Medical Bureau. Dr. Robert Dailly, a child specialist of Paris, tested his mental development for two hours. Then he announced simply: "This child is normal."

The case provoked long and heated discussion at the Medical Bureau, for the cure of such a condition - of post-encephalitic idiocy - was unprecedented. One major question tantalized the doctors. As one of them bluntly put it: "With what brain does this child think? What brain was he using when he stood up and suddenly called to his mother? Was it a new brain or the partially destroyed idiot's brain he had a moment before?"

Whatever the answer, it was contrary to all natural laws, and in the end the 40 doctors unanimously declared that the child had been supernaturally cured. The case was never proclaimed a miracle because the doctors who attended the boy before his visit to Lourdes have absolutely refused to submit any records or certificates.

"But what do we care about that?" said the mother. "We have our boy - happy and well. Our Te Deums are sung right here at home, every day!"

Another famous cure I visited was Fernand Legrand. He had come to Lourdes as a grand malade more than 20 years ago, but one of the brancardiers there still remembers him vividly. "The most terrible case I ever helped to carry," he told me.

I went to see Legrand at his home in Gisors, a small town near Paris. He is a cobbler and lives in a narrow house behind his modest shop. We sat by the fire in the cheerful little sitting room, and I studied his fine face. He is a man of 50 with the face of an Emerson, the hands of a shoemaker. As customers dropped in at intervals to claim a pair of boots, Fernand Legrand told me his story.

When he was a husky young fellow of 26 he met with a hunting accident, and the lower part of his left leg had to be amputated. He recovered from the operation, but a year later severe pains began in that leg, followed by numbness which gradually spread all over his body. The trouble was diagnosed as poly-neuritis, involving particularly the spinal nerves and the spinal cord itself.

All the classic treatments were tried, but Legrand only grew worse. His legs became gangrenous and greatly swollen, the rest of his body as thin as a skeleton. He suffered tortures, and finally his fiancée persuaded him to go to Lourdes.

It took six men to get him from the automobile into the pilgrimage train, for Legrand could make no movement of any kind. Each effort, each disturbance of the bedclothes even, gave him excruciating pain. The journey was a horror.

His own physician, Dr. Edouard Decrette of Vernon, accompanied him and described the case with such concern at Lourdes that the Medical Bureau appointed Dr. Marc Clement of Hyeres to examine Legrand. Together Drs. Clement and Decrette went to the hospital, where they found that Legrand had just returned from his first bath.

Dr. Clement took the right leg out of its cast and bandages. "Look here," he said to Dr. Decrette, "you told me he had a swollen leg. This one isn't swollen, and it is dry."

"Impossible!" said Decrette. Then, as he looked, he gave a quick exclamation.

"But - since when?"

"Since my bath," said the patient. "When they dipped me in the water I felt a moment of agonizing pain, as though my arms and legs were being broken to pieces. Then a heavenly warmth spread through my body, my legs could bend, and I no longer had any pain." Dr. Decrette, who had seen Legrand in such a horrible condition for so long, was so moved that it was several minutes before he could even speak.

Legrand's recovery was complete. He has since returned to Lourdes nearly every year as a brancardier.

"Doesn't your artificial leg make it difficult for you?" I asked.

"Difficult!" he laughed. "Madame, you should see me. Since my cure I can run like a rabbit, wooden leg and all. None of the brancardiers with real legs can get ahead of me!"

One evening, I had dinner with Jeanne Fretel, one of the most famous of recent Lourdes cures. When I met her at the doors of the Sept Douleurs Hospital, she had been on duty there since six o'clock that morning. Yet as she came swinging along in her nurse's uniform, a slim girl with big dark eyes, she was fresh, smiling and unfatigued. As she sat opposite me in the hotel restaurant a few minutes later, laughing and chatting over the meal, it was hard to imagine how desperate was her plight five years ago (in 1948 to be exact). But her case history, one of the most completely documented at Lourdes, contains 80 pages of detailed hospital reports, laboratory analysis, X-ray records, etc., to prove it.

Jeanne was born in 1914 in the town of Sougeal, near Rennes. She came of simple people. She had her way to make. She was a waitress, practical nurse, mother's helper. From childhood on, her health was precarious. In January, 1938, when she was 24, she was operated on for appendicitis. This proved to be the first of 13 operations, for she developed tubercular peritonitis. Her abdomen gradually increased in size, became hard and intensely painful. Nothing helped, and her condition continued to grow worse.

She was put aboard the train of the Rosary Pilgrimage unconscious, and arrived at Lourdes on Tuesday, October 5, 1948. No improvement occurred during the first three days there. On Friday morning she was carried, dying, to the Mass for the Sick. The priest hesitated to give her Communion because of her constant vomiting and extreme weakness, but her brancardier insisted, and she was given a bit of the consecrated wafer.

"It was then," said Jeanne Fretel, "that suddenly I felt well and became aware, for the first time, that I was at Lourdes. They asked me how I felt. I said I felt very well. My abdomen was still hard and swollen, but I was not suffering at all.

"After Mass they took me to the Grotto on my stretcher. After some minutes there I had a sensation as if someone took me under the arms to help me sit up. I found myself in a sitting position. I looked around to see who had helped me, but could see no one. Then I had the feeling that the same hands that had helped me to sit up now took my hands and put them on my abdomen. I perceived that it had become normal. And then I was seized with an extraordinary hunger."

The journey home was accomplished without fatigue, although she was on her feet in the train much of the time, tending the other patients. When her own physician, Dr. Alphonse Pelle, saw her he was speechless, and left the room, overcome. When he came back a few minutes later, the tears were running down his cheeks. He then gave Jeanne a rigorous examination, but could hardly believe his findings.

An interesting sidelight is the fact that Dr. Pelle was an agnostic and unbeliever - "hostile" to religion, the Medical Bureau report says. But it was his precise records and certificates that established the case as a miraculous cure. "I have been a terrible blow to Dr. Pelle's scientific self-respect," Jeanne said.

Jeanne is in perfect health now, and the long hours of her work as a practical nurse do not affect her at all. The life of a miracleee isn't easy, however. Her correspondence is tremendous. Letters come from all over the world - from doctors, from sick people, from unbelievers wanting to be reassured. If she sends typewritten replies, people are not satisfied. The letters must be in her own hand, and after her day's work she frequently stays up far into the night writing them.

When she comes to Lourdes, everybody points her out. Her work in the hospital is interrupted time and again by visitors, by relatives of the sick who want to see her, to touch her. Six persons came up and spoke to her while we were dining together at the hotel. "I can't refuse them," Jeanne Fretel said. "I can't refuse anything, after what has been done for me."

All the miraclees I know about - and I have talked with many of them - have certain characteristics in common.

First, they are simple people, the poor and the humble. Not one came from a wealthy or impressive family. "The Blessed Virgin does not interest herself much in the rich," they say at Lourdes.

Second, they seem to be immune to illness after their cure. They don't get sick at all, even with common colds or digestive troubles. They are in excellent health at all times.

Finally, they have a poise, an inner dignity, that comes from the desire to be worthy of the great thing they have experienced. They are completely unassuming, and have no wish to exploit the publicity which surrounds them. They just want to give, in gratitude for what has been done for them.

Whatever one may consider is the real source of their cure, there is no slightest doubt that a transcendental influence has laid its hand upon these people and blessed them not merely with a physical cure but with enduring serenity, peace and deep joy. I count it a privilege to have known them.

But now come the crucial questions: What is the origin, the cause of all these cures? How do you explain them? If they are not miracles - that is, produced by some supernatural power - what are they?

The answer of the sceptics, both lay and medical, is a flat, "I don't believe it! It's too fantastic."

When I was a young reporter in Asia, people in remote Indian and Chinese villages did not believe in the New York skyline either. Nothing I could say would change their conviction that it was "only a picture." They had never seen such a place. It was something outside their experience. Therefore it could not be.

"Before you enter into a discussion about Lourdes with anybody," says Dr. Blanton, "it will save time and much useless argument if you find out first if the person you are talking to was ever there." After the rationalist physician has actually seen a cure his scientific cock-sureness is severely shaken. He no longer avoids the word "miracle." Instead he uses it freely - almost involuntarily.

He does not, however, necessarily concede that the miracles have a supernatural origin. One of the favourite explanations of Lourdes cures by rationalist doctors is that they are produced by "unknown natural forces" - unknown today, but whose laws may be uncovered tomorrow.

Most of the doctors at the Medical Bureau discount this theory. They point out that the action of the forces of nature is always uniform and unchanging. The law of gravity, for example, works in exactly the same way for everybody. If "unknown natural forces" were responsible for Lourdes cures, they would have to act the same for all persons under similar conditions. But the exact opposite is true. The "unknown forces" act neither constantly nor uniformly. They act today, but not tomorrow; for some people, but not for others. One of the baffling things about Lourdes cures is their extreme variability and unpredictability.

What, then, is the cause of the miracles? Many ascribe it to prayer.

When the great scientist, Charles Steinmetz of General Electric, was asked by his colleagues what was the most important line of research for them to follow next, he answered without hesitation: "Prayer. Find out about prayer!"

Alexis Carrel has stated his conviction that "the power of prayer is the greatest power in the world."

Writing about the miracles, Carrel has noted that "patients have been cured almost instantaneously of various afflictions such as peritoneal or bone tuberculosis, abscesses, osteitis, suppurating wounds, cancer, etc. In a few seconds, or at the most a few hours, wounds are cicatrized, pathological symptoms disappear, appetite returns. The miracle is characterized by an extreme acceleration of the processes of organic repair. No scientific hypothesis up to the present accounts for the phenomena, but the only condition indispensable for its occurrence is prayer. The patient does not need himself to pray or to have any religious faith; but someone around him must be in a state of prayer."

Dr. Vallet, former president of the Medical Bureau, does not believe that prayer in itself is capable of releasing the process of healing. Summing it up, he says that prayer is necessary, "but it is also necessary that God agree to it. These cures are not the result of accident but of an all-powerful Will which hears this prayer and Whom nothing resists, neither sickness - nor death."
