

A Scientist Finds GOD

By Alexis Carrel.

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Alexis Carrel was a medical scientist and author of international renown. Born in 1873 in Sainte Foy les Lyon, the son of Alexis Carrel, silk merchant, and Anne Ricard, Carrel, studied medicine at the University of Lyons and later taught there. Early in life, he won recognition because of his marvelous surgical skill.

In 1905, at the age of thirty-two, he joined the staff of the Rockefeller Institute for Research in New York City and in 1912 won the Nobel Prize for his feats in suturing blood vessels and the transplanting of organs. In 1931, he won the Nordhoff-Jung Cancer Prize. The writer had the honour of conferring upon him the Cardinal Newman Award for 1937 for his outstanding contributions to medical science.

With a chemist, Henry D. Dakin, Carrel perfected the famed Carrel-Dakin antiseptic solution for the treatment of infected wounds and was credited with the saving of the lives of thousands of wounded soldiers. France awarded him the Cross of the Legion of Honour. In 1913, he married Anne de la Motte, who had been his laboratory assistant.

In 1939, having reached the Rockefeller Institute age of retirement, Carrel continued, as member emeritus, his research in his private laboratory there. The following year he went to France to study the effects of cold and malnutrition on the young and to do what he could for the health of the people.

In 1935, he published *Man the Unknown*, which speedily became a best seller in this country, the United States, and in France. It reflects his experiences, philosophy, and intuitions as a doctor and as a man. Just before his death in 1944, he published *Prayer*, a book on the influence of prayer, while *Voyage to Lourdes* and *Reflections on Life* were published posthumously. Like Dr. Cronin, another famous convert whose story is told in *Roads to Rome*, he had drifted from the moorings of the ancient Faith in which he had been baptized, but returned to it as a result of study and prayer and died as a devout communicant. In this story he is the young doctor whom he calls Lerrac, which is Carrel spelled backward.

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THE engine whistled. Pale, wasted faces stared from the train windows, and women dressed in white-apron uniforms waved their handkerchiefs. The train moved slowly out of the station and soon was rolling rapidly toward the south.

It was hot — the late May afternoon as oppressive as the most sultry day in July. On invitation from Abbé B., the priest in charge of the pilgrimage, young Dr. Lerrac settled down in the second-class compartment marked “Management.”

Abbé B. was anxious about his sick. His face streamed with sweat as he bemoaned the fact that two of the pilgrims had apparently not had time to board the train.

“This is the twenty-fifth pilgrimage I have taken to Lourdes,” he said. “The Holy Virgin has always accorded us great favours. Out of every three hundred patients, some fifty or sixty always feel they have improved or been cured when they return.”

“And what about all those who hope for a cure and suffer the miseries of the long journey in vain?” asked Lerrac.

“You are reckoning without faith, my dear doctor,” replied Abbé B. “Those who are not cured come back comforted, and even if they die when they get home they are still happy!” A thick, knotty artery pulsed on the old priest’s temple, and he mopped his face with a checked handkerchief.

Young Dr. Louis Lerrac set to work classifying the few observations of the sick which he had been able to make before the pilgrimage got under way, and looking over the case histories of the rest, which Abbé B. had given him. He had welcomed this chance to take the place of the doctor who usually accompanied pilgrimages of the sick to Lourdes. As a faculty member of the University of Lyons Medical School, he had been attracted by the stories of the cures at Lourdes. Now he could check their authenticity.

Almost nothing was known, biologically speaking, of such phenomena. It was a mistake to deny anything on the basis of laws which themselves were scarcely understood. When such extraordinary cures were proclaimed as those attributed to Lourdes, it was perfectly simple to examine the facts objectively, as a patient was examined in a hospital or an experiment conducted in a laboratory. No such systematic study of the cures had ever been undertaken. Lerrac had decided to make the attempt. If the cures turned out to be only imaginary, he would be losing much time. If, on the other hand, there were definite results, no matter what caused them, this fact established scientifically might have considerable interest.

At six in the morning, Lerrac went into the corridor to escape the stifling atmosphere of his compartment, where the prayers of the rosary were being monotonously reiterated by the other occupants. There he met a fat priest, Abbé P., the second in command of the pilgrimage. He, like Abbé B., seemed fully aware of the suffering of these stricken people in the bleak train.

“There is one young woman I was asked to look after specially,” Abbé P. told Lerrac. “I would be so grateful if you could take charge of her. She is so weak,” he added, “that I fear a disaster.”

Since the cars in which the sick were packed had no corridor, the priest and Lerrac got out at the next station and went over to a third-class compartment. The door was open, but a mattress stretched across the benches completely blocked the entrance. On the mattress was lying a young girl, her face drawn and ashen, her lips drained of all colour. Her name was Marie Ferrand. {Editor’s note: In actuality, her name was Marie Bailly. Dr Carrel changed it for this narrative as he did for all the characters.}

“I am suffering a great deal,” she said, “but I am happy I came. The Sisters did not want me to leave!”

“I shall come back to see you tonight,” said Lerrac. “Meanwhile, if the pain is worse, your nurse can fetch me and we’ll give you an injection to make you more comfortable.”

As Lerrac left with Abbé P., he said: “Your patient’s condition is not exactly hopeful. What do you do when someone dies on the journey?”

“It almost never happens,” the Abbé replied. “But when it does, the body is taken off at the next station. It is perfectly simple.”

All the people able to do so were stepping down from the cars now. One trained nurse and a number of student nurses had been assigned to each car, and several young nurses went back and forth on the platform, looking happy and pretty in their white apron uniforms. There were also peasants and country-folk, farm women with tanned, rather dazed faces. Many were carrying empty bottles, for holy water, and various small bundles. The pilgrimage was not unlike a vacation train, Lerrac thought; the predominating mood was one of buoyant gaiety.

The second night seemed very long. For all unfortunate people — for the sick who tremble and suffer, as well as for those who watch over them — three o’clock in the morning, that hour just before day comes to banish night, is a time of fear, anguish and hopelessness.

When the train came into the next station, Mademoiselle d’O., the volunteer nurse who had been taking care of Marie Ferrand all night, sent in haste for Lerrac. “She looked agonized,” Mademoiselle d’O. told Lerrac, “each time the train came into a station and jolted to a stop I kept thinking she was going to faint and I did not know what to do for her.”

Ferrand was lying on her mattress. Her face was green, and she was only partly conscious. The heat in the dimly lighted compartment was overwhelming. Lerrac lowered the window and the gusts of fresher air brought her completely to her senses.

“I shall never reach Lourdes,” she sighed in distress.

“We shall give you an injection,” said Lerrac, and the nurse drew up the sleeve from Marie Ferrand’s wasted arm. “In five minutes the pain will be gone. Meanwhile, let me have a look at your abdomen and put some laudanum on it.” Skillfully, the nurse laid bare Marie Ferrand’s distended belly.

The glistening skin was stretched tight and at the sides, the ribs protruded sharply. The swelling was apparently caused by solid masses, and there was a pocket of fluid under the umbilicus. It was a classic case of tuberculous peritonitis. The legs were swollen, too. The temperature was above normal. Both the heartbeat and the breathing were accelerated.

Lerrac then verified what the nun who had brought Marie Ferrand to the train had told him: that Marie Ferrand’s parents had died of similar maladies, that Marie herself had been ill all her life. At seventeen, she had a dry cough and spat blood; at eighteen, she had a pleurisy, and fluid had been taken from the left lung. Although she had improved after that, she had never actually recovered; and eight months ago, when she entered the hospital, her abdomen began to swell, she ran a fever and the doctor diagnosed tuberculous peritonitis. A few days before the pilgrimage an operation had been considered, but the chief surgeon had felt her condition too precarious, and her family was told that her case was hopeless. She had been so determined to make the journey to Lourdes that consent had finally been given.

All this information fitted in exactly with Lerrac’s own observations. As he looked at the patient’s abdomen, he thought that an incision of an inch or two might be made just above the umbilicus,

using cocaine as an anaesthetic. He told himself that, if she came back alive from Lourdes, he would suggest it.

The morphine had begun to take effect.

"I feel better," Marie Ferrand murmured.

Unable to return to his own compartment till the train stopped, Lerrac sat down on the bench to wait.

It would soon be sunrise. The fields gave off a sweet smell, but that first fresh morning air did not penetrate the stale enclosed atmosphere in which the sick breathed so uneasily. Marie Ferrand, her face up-tilted, was also breathing the fetid air. Her bluish eyelids were closed. The morphine seemed to have put her to sleep. The nurse watched her with obvious relief as she lay there so quietly.

The rosy rays of the sun, rising slowly above the line of green hills, fell on the doors of the car, and then upon the sick girl's face.

Birds had begun to sing. From the earth rose the fine smell of hay. Each detail of the landscape emerged more and more sharply in the dawning day. Against this heavenly beauty, the horrors of the trainload of sick crossing the triumphant countryside stood out in sharp relief. How much more pitiful became the poor face of that young girl, Marie Ferrand, the door of whose life were closing at the very threshold of maturity when contrasted with nature's impassive serenity!

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The train was reaching its destination. The holy land, the city of miracles, the goal of this long and bitter journey — Lourdes itself — would soon appear in the radiant glory of the spring day. Above the rounded foothill of the Pyrenees, big white clouds hung motionless, and far in the distance a slender spire, delicate and pure, sprang into view through the mist.

The train came to a halt before entering the station. From every window pale faces looked out, alight with joy and exaltation, to greet the chosen land where their misfortunes were to vanish like smoke upon the wind. No one spoke. Everyone was gazing toward the basilica where each private prayer might be miraculously answered.

At the end of the train, a voice began to chant the sacred hymn:

"Ave maris stella

Dei mater alma..." (Hail, star of the sea, Nurturing Mother of God.)

From car to car, the prayer was taken up and burst from every throat. Through the babble of sound the shrill voices of children could be distinguished, and the loud hoarse voices of priests and the voices of the women.

This was no everyday song sung by choirs of chirping girls at a church service. It was the Prayer of the Poor, hungering for the Bread of Life: In every car, the tension gathered. The train jolted forward and, accompanied by this hymn of happiness and hope, slowly moved into the Lourdes station.

It was nearly noon when Louis Lerrac came out of the hotel and walked slowly down the street toward the great hospital building a few hundred yards away. Named for Our Lady of the Seven

Sorrows, it was here that the sick, brought to Lourdes in the pilgrimage train, were now herded together. He soon reached the tall gateway that fenced off the hospital from the road. Beyond lay a vast courtyard, blazing in the sun's heat like a desert.

S. M., chief of volunteers — the red ribbon of the high papal decoration in his buttonhole testifying to his devoted service — was standing at the entrance to the hospital, surrounded by a group of stretcher-bearers. Excitedly, anxiously, and with a look of rapture, he was giving orders to his men like a general before the attack.

At Lourdes, the sick are looked after by volunteers from all ranks of society who come there every year to spend a few weeks ministering to the patients. Their task is exhausting but they perform it with the utmost devotion. Among the volunteers, Lerrac had found a former classmate, A. B., who was one of the stretcher-bearers waiting now on the hospital steps. Lerrac asked him: "What time do they take the patients to the pools?"

"We start at about half past one," A. B. replied.

"Well, it's not quite twelve now," Lerrac said. "There's plenty of time. Let's go for a little walk."

Together they went along the empty, sunlit street until they came to a small café nestled in the peaceful shadows of a high stone wall. Here they stopped and ordered coffee. A. B. asked for ink and paper and began a letter to his young wife back in Paris.

Lerrac leaned back against the wall and studied his friend's face. It was so surprising that a young man of the world like A. B. had been willing to travel third class with all those revolting, helpless invalids, to devote himself unremittingly to their care, to pull one of those little carts for the sick through the public streets, while saying prayers out loud. Maybe it was because his young wife was expecting a child. Probably she had sent him to Lourdes to invoke the Virgin's blessing on it. No doubt that was why he had accepted this painful task. Yet A. B.'s faith was obviously unquestioning, like that of a small child.

Lerrac pondered how differently he himself had developed, despite the fact that he and A. B. were products of the same school, had received the same religious education. Absorbed in his scientific studies, Lerrac had been strongly attracted by the German system of critical analysis. His religious ideas, ground down by the analytic process, had finally been destroyed, leaving him only a lovely memory of a delicate and beautiful dream. He had then taken refuge in tolerant scepticism. Rationalism completely satisfied his mind, but in the depths of his heart a secret pain lay hidden — a feeling of being compressed in too narrow a space, an un-assuaged thirst for certainty, rest and love. He had learned so little, he reflected, and it had cost him much of the beauty stored within him. Truth, he thought to himself, was always a sad and bitter thing. He was an unhappy man.

Turning to A. B., who had finished his letter, he asked: "Do you know if any patients were cured at the pools this morning?"

"No," A. B. answered. "But I saw a miracle at the Grotto. An old nun who, as a result of a sprain six months ago, had developed an incurable disease in her foot. She was cured and threw aside her crutches."

Lerrac rapidly scanned the pages of his notebook. "Isn't that the nun called Sister D., who was a nurse, at the 'Hotel Dieu' (the Hostel of God) in Lyons?" he asked.

"Yes, that's the one," said A. B.

“Well, her cure is an interesting example of autosuggestion,” said Lerrac. “She happens to be one of the patients I examined. Her sprained foot was completely well, but the good Sister persuaded herself that she would never walk normally again. She had become neurasthenic. She came to Lourdes and she was cured. What could be more natural?”

“But how do you explain that Lourdes succeeded in curing her, when other treatments failed?”

“Because,” answered Lerrac, “there is an incredible power of suggestion in a pilgrimage. A crowd, exalted and united by prayer, can have tremendous effect on the nervous system but absolutely no effect on organic disease.

“I myself saw the tragic aftermath of a failure this very morning,” continued Lerrac, and described a father’s over-whelming disappointment when his ten-year-old boy afflicted with a malignant growth failed to react to the “miracle waters.”

“You see,” Lerrac concluded, “Lourdes is powerless against organic disease.”

“Just the same,” A. B. replied, “I assure you that real organic diseases, such as tumours, can disappear. But you cannot believe it, because you are convinced that miracles are impossible. Yet it lies entirely within God’s power to suspend the laws of nature, since it was He Himself who created them.”

“Of course,” said Lerrac, “if God exists, miracles are possible. But does God exist, objectively? How am I to know? All I can say is that no miracle has ever yet been scientifically observed. To the scientific mind a miracle is an absurdity.”

“What kind of disease would you have to see cured,” asked A. B., “to convince you that miracles exist?”

“I would have to see an organic disease cured,” replied Lerrac; “a leg growing back after amputation, a cancer disappearing, a congenital dislocation suddenly vanishing.”

“If you were present when a new leg grew back after an amputation,” said A. B., “you would be very much put out; all your theories would be overthrown.”

“If I should ever see such a phenomenon,” Lerrac answered, “I would willingly throw overboard all the theories and hypotheses in the world. But there is little danger. My one purpose in coming here is to record what I see with all possible accuracy.

“I propose to be entirely objective,” he went on, “and I assure you that, if I actually saw one single wound close and heal before my eyes, I would either become a fanatic believer or go mad. However, that is not very likely, because I have had a chance to examine only a few patients with organic diseases. The others suffer from nervous paralyses and traumatic hysterias. Patients of this kind might easily be cured, or at least improved. But there is one patient,” Lerrac went on, “who is closer to death than any of the others. Her name is Marie Ferrand. If such a case as hers were cured, it would indeed be a miracle. I would never doubt again.

“In Lourdes, all the laws of nature are constantly turned upside down,” said A. B. “I myself am convinced that the girl you speak of could be cured. But it’s one o’clock. We must go back.”

“At two,” Lerrac said, “I am to see Marie Ferrand again. Her condition is steadily deteriorating. If she gets home again alive, that in itself will be a miracle. Come along with me and have a look at her.”

The air in the ward of the Immaculate Conception, reserved for the most serious cases, was heavy with the nauseous odour of disinfectant. About twenty beds were lined up along the whitewashed walls. Some patients sat up on chairs, others lay on their beds fully dressed. They were waiting to be taken to the pools. Lerrac and A. B. walked past them in silence and went over to the bedside of the girl, Marie Ferrand. The Mother Superior was there, and Mademoiselle d'O., the volunteer nurse.

"Doctor," she said, "we've been waiting for you anxiously. She can hardly speak. I'm afraid she is sinking fast."

Lerrac leaned over the bed and studied Marie Ferrand. Her head, with its white, emaciated face, was flung back on the pillow. Her wasted arms lay flat at her sides. Her breathing was rapid and shallow.

"How are you feeling?" Lerrac asked her, gently.

She turned her dim, dark-circled eyes toward him and her grey lips moved in an inaudible reply.

Taking her hand, Lerrac put his fingertips on her wrist. Her pulse was excessively rapid and irregular. Her heart was giving out. "Get me the hypodermic syringe," he told the nurse. "We'll give her an injection of caffeine."

Pulling back the covers, the nurse removed the cradle that held up the bedclothes and the rubber ice bag which hung over the patient's abdomen. Marie Ferrand's emaciated body lay exposed again, her abdomen distended as before. The solid masses were still there; at the centre, under the umbilicus, he could still feel the fluid. As the caffeine entered her thin thigh, Marie Ferrand's face contracted suddenly.

Lerrac turned to A. B. "It's just what I told you," he said; "advanced tuberculous peritonitis. She may last a few days more, but she is doomed. Death is very near."

As Lerrac turned to leave, the nurse stopped him. "Doctor, is it all right to take Marie Ferrand to the pool?"

Lerrac looked at her in amazement. "What if she dies on the way?" he asked.

"She is absolutely determined to be bathed. She came all the way for this."

At that moment, Dr. J., who practised in a town outside Bordeaux and had accompanied his own patients to Lourdes, entered the ward. Lerrac asked his opinion about having Marie Ferrand carried to the pool. Once again, the covers were removed and Dr. J. examined Marie Ferrand. "She's at the point of death," he said finally in a low voice. "She might very well die at the Grotto."

"You see, mademoiselle," said Lerrac, "how imprudent it would be to take this patient to the pool. However, I have no authority here; I cannot give permission, or refuse it."

"The girl has nothing to lose," said the Mother Superior. "It would be cruel to deprive her of the supreme happiness of being taken to the Grotto, though I fear she may not live to reach it. We shall take her there now, in a few minutes."

"I will be at the pool myself, in any case," said Lerrac. "If she goes into a coma, send for me."

"She will certainly die," Dr. J. repeated as they left the ward. It was nearing two o'clock when Lerrac approached the pools, but the patients had not yet arrived. By the gushing cold waters of the turbulent stream, and surrounded by huge plane trees stood the blue painted buildings where the

sick were bathed. The semicircle set apart for the stretchers and carts of the patients was separated from the crowds of pilgrims by an iron fence.

Lerrac went in and sat down on a bench near the door of the women's pool. All around was coolness, joy and peace. With pleasure, he absorbed the strange charm of this Lourdes where so many horrors were gathered and exposed in an ineffably tender light.

A group of pilgrims appeared. A. B., with another volunteer, was carrying a stretcher. On it lay Marie Ferrand. Over the deathly mask of her face Mademoiselle d'O. was holding a white parasol. The sight of such misery, commonplace in any hospital, made a shocking impression outdoors where each detail was so clearly etched.

For a moment, before going to the pool, they lowered the stretcher to the ground. The sick girl was apparently unconscious. Lerrac put his hand on her wrist. Her pulse was more rapid than ever, her face ashen. It was obvious that this young girl was about to die. He wondered how it would affect the pilgrims if she died in the pool. What would they think of miracles then?

The church clock struck two. Groups of little carts drawn by the stretcher-bearers were approaching, followed by more and more pilgrims. Formerly, Lerrac had been moved by the sights and sounds of suffering, but now, as he looked at all these tragic people and saw the steadfast faith in their faces, he experienced a strange, new emotion.

Like so many of these afflicted, Marie Ferrand was not really as unhappy as she seemed. This was because she put her whole soul and all her hope in Christ. The death of a believer, Lerrac told himself, was a peaceful death. To every sufferer He offered the solace of eternity. Ah, how much wiser to believe in it! A longing now swept over Lerrac to believe, with these unhappy people among whom he found himself. He was praying, now, praying for Marie Ferrand who had suffered so unendurably; he was asking the Virgin Mary to restore her to life, and himself to faith.

Lerrac's exaltation did not last. He forced himself back into the safe paths of methodical scientific investigations and determined to be completely objective. He knew that Marie Ferrand was incurable, that recovery from advanced tuberculous peritonitis was impossible. However, Lerrac kept his detachment and was prepared to accept the evidence of any phenomenon he might observe himself.

The sick were still crowding into the enclosure, and by now, all the cases from the hospital ward had arrived and were lying on the ground. All of them showed a great serenity. S. M., the chief of the volunteers and self-constituted master of ceremonies; came bustling up, and ordered his band to even up the line of stretchers. Then a young priest took his place, standing before the stretchers. The time had come for the solemn litany. Beyond the benches, a rippling mass of white faces, hatless heads, reached to the edge of the stream.

Lerrac saw Marie Ferrand carried past. He hurried over to her.

Her condition was unchanged; the shrunken form under the blanket still had the same distended abdomen.

"We could only pour some of the water on her abdomen," said Mademoiselle d'O. "They did not dare to immerse her. Now we are taking her to the Massabielle Grotto."

"I'll join you in a moment," said Lerrac. "I see no change. If you need me, send for me."

Lerrac turned back to the enclosure. The priest was kneeling down, facing the line of patients and the crowds beyond. He lifted his arms and held them out like a cross. "Holy Virgin, heal our sick," he cried out, his mouth twisted with emotion.

"Holy Virgin, heal our sick," the crowd responded with a cry like the rolling of waves.

"Holy Virgin," intoned the priest, "hear our prayers!"

"Jesus, we love You! Jesus, we love You!"

The voice of the crowd thundered on. Here and there, people held out their arms. The sick half-raised themselves on their stretchers. The atmosphere was tense with expectancy.

Then the priest stood up. "My brothers, let us lift our arms in prayer!" he called.

A forest of arms was raised. A wind seemed to blow through the crowd; intangible, silent, powerful, irresistible, it swept over the people, lashing them, like a mountain storm. Lerrac felt its impact. It was impossible to describe, but it caught his throat and sent a tremor along his spine. Suddenly, he wanted to cry. If a strong, healthy man could be carried away, what must be the effect on sick and suffering people in all their weakness?

He walked past the lines of little carts and through the crowd toward the Grotto. Pausing for a moment at the edge of the stream, he observed the crowd. A young intern from Bordeaux, Mr. M., whom Lerrac had met the day before, greeted him.

"Have you had any cures?" Lerrac asked.

"No," replied M. "A few of the hysteria cases have recovered, but there had been nothing unexpected, nothing that one can't see any day in a hospital."

"Come and look at my patient," said Lerrac. "Her case is not unusual, but I think she is dying. She is at the Grotto."

"I saw her a few minutes ago," said M. "What a pity they let her come to Lourdes."

It was now about half past two. Beneath the rock of Massabielle, the Grotto glittered in the light of its thousand candles. Beyond the high iron grille was a statue of the Virgin, standing in the hollowed rock where Bernadette once saw the glowing vision of the lady in white, the Immaculate Conception. In front of the iron grille and almost touching it, a stretcher was already lying. Beside it, Lerrac recognized the slender figure of Marie Ferrand's nurse. He and M. made their way through the crowd and, stopping near Marie Ferrand's stretcher, leaned against the low wall. She was motionless, her breathing still rapid and shallow; she seemed to be at the point of death. More pilgrims were approaching the Grotto. Volunteers and stretcher-bearers came crowding in. The little carts were being wheeled from the pools to the Grotto.

Lerrac glanced again at Marie Ferrand. Suddenly he stared. It seemed to him that there had been a change, that the harsh shadows on her face had disappeared, that her skin was somehow less ashen. Surely, he thought, this was an hallucination. But the hallucination itself was interesting psychologically; hastily he jotted down the time in his notebook. It was twenty minutes before three. But if the change in Marie Ferrand was an hallucination, it was the first one Lerrac had ever had. He turned to M. "Look at our patient again," he said. "Does it seem to you that she has rallied a little?"

"She looks much the same to me," answered M. "All I can see is that she is no worse."

Leaning over the stretcher, Lerrac took her pulse again and listened to her breathing. "The respiration is less rapid," he told M, after a moment.

"That may mean that she is about to die," said M.

Lerrac made no reply. To him it was obvious that there was a sudden improvement of her general condition. Something was taking place. He stiffened to resist a tremor of emotion, and concentrated all his powers of observation on Marie Ferrand. He did not lift his eyes from her face. A priest was preaching to the assembled throngs of pilgrims and patients; hymns and prayers burst out sporadically; and in this atmosphere of fervour, under Lerrac's cool, objective gaze, the face of Marie Ferrand slowly continued to change. Her eyes, so dim before, were now wide with ecstasy as she turned them toward the Grotto. The change was undeniable. The nurse leaned over and held her. Suddenly, Lerrac felt himself turning pale. The blanket which covered Marie Ferrand's distended abdomen was gradually flattening out. "Look at her abdomen!" he exclaimed to M.

M. looked. "Why yes," he said, "it seems to have gone down. It's probably the folds in the blanket that give that impression."

The bell of the basilica had just struck three. A few minutes later, there was no longer any sign of distension in the girl's abdomen.

Lerrac felt as though he were going mad.

Standing beside Marie Ferrand, he watched the intake of her breath and the pulsing at her throat with fascination. The heartbeat, though still very rapid, had become regular.

"How do you feel?" he asked her.

"I feel very well," she answered in a low voice. "I am still weak, but I feel I am cured."

There was no longer any doubt: Marie Ferrand's condition was improving so much that she was scarcely recognizable.

Lerrac stood there in silence, profoundly troubled, unable to analyse what he beheld. This event, exactly the opposite of what he had expected, must surely be nothing but a dream.

Mademoiselle d'O. offered Marie Ferrand a cup of milk. She drank it all. In a few minutes, she raised her head, looked around, moved her limbs a little, then turned over on her side, without having shown the least sign of pain.

Abruptly, Lerrac moved off. Making his way through the crowd of pilgrims whose loud prayers he hardly heard, he left the Grotto. It was now about four o'clock. He had not yet examined her; he could not yet know the real condition of her lesions. But he had seen with his own eyes a functional improvement which was in itself a miracle. How simple, how private, it had been! The crowd at the Grotto was not even aware that it had happened.

A dying girl was recovering.

It was the resurrection of the dead; it was a miracle!

Lerrac went back to his hotel, forbidding himself to draw any conclusions until he could find out exactly what had happened. Yet a profound feeling of happiness welled up in him at the thought that his journey had borne fruit. He went over Marie Ferrand's case in his mind and told himself that,

with such absolutely unmistakable symptoms as hers, he could not possibly have made a false diagnosis. Yet he was extremely anxious.

At half past seven, he started for the hospital, tense and on fire with curiosity. One question alone filled his mind: Had the incurable Marie Ferrand been cured?

Opening the door of the ward of the Immaculate Conception, he hastened across the room to her bedside. With mute astonishment, he stood and gazed. The change was overpowering. Marie Ferrand, in a white jacket, was sitting up in bed. Though her face was still grey and emaciated, it was alight with life; her eyes shone; a faint colour tinged her cheeks. Such an indescribable serenity emanated from her person that it seemed to illuminate the whole sad ward with joy. "Doctor," she said, "I am completely cured. I feel very weak, but I think I could even walk."

Lerrac put his hand on her wrist. The pulse beat was calm and regular. Her respiration had also become completely normal. Confusion flooded Lerrac's mind. Was this merely an apparent cure, the result of a violent stimulus of autosuggestion? Or was it a new fact, an astounding, unacceptable event — a miracle? For a brief moment, before subjecting Marie Ferrand to the supreme test of examining her abdomen, Lerrac hesitated. Then, torn between hope and fear, he threw back the blanket. The skin was smooth and white. Above the narrow hips was the small, flat slightly concave abdomen of a young, undernourished girl. Lightly, he put his hands on the wall of the abdomen, looking for traces of the distension and the hard masses he had found before. They had vanished like a bad dream.

The sweat broke out on Lerrac's forehead. He felt as though someone had struck him on the head. His heart began to pump furiously. He held himself in with iron determination.

He had not heard Doctor J. and M. entering the ward.

Suddenly he noticed them, standing beside him. "She seems to be cured," he said then. "I cannot find anything wrong. Please examine her yourselves."

While his two colleagues carefully palpated Marie Ferrand's abdomen, Lerrac stood aside and watched them with shining eyes. There could be no doubt whatever that the girl was cured.

It was a miracle, the kind of miracle which took the public by storm and sent them in hordes to Lourdes. And the public was justified in its enthusiasm. Whatever the source of these cures, the results were not only breath-taking but positive and good. Again it swept over Lerrac how fortunate he was, that among all the patients at Lourdes that day it was one he had known and studied carefully whom he saw cured!

Now Lerrac was himself involved in the everlasting controversy over miracles. So much the better, he decided. No matter what came of it, he would carry through the investigation as objectively as though he were completing an experiment on a dog. He would continue to be an accurate recording instrument. Turning to M., who was still palpating Marie Ferrand's abdomen, Lerrac asked if he found any symptoms.

"None whatsoever," M. replied. "But I want to listen to her breathing."

He laid his ear on Marie Ferrand's chest. At the same time Dr. J. was counting her pulse, and a Dr. C., an Italian, was also watching the examination. At the head of her bed stood Mademoiselle d'O. By now, there was quite a crowd around the bed. No one spoke.

Marie Ferrand, probed, palpated, kneaded and pressed, was radiant. Everyone felt her unspoken joy. Peace and serenity seemed to flood the room. At last, the two doctors had finished their examination.

“She is cured,” said Dr. J., deeply moved.

“I find nothing,” said M. “Her respiration is normal. She is well. She can get up.”

“There is no explanation for this cure,” said Dr. J.

Lerrac was silent. He did not know what to say. He no longer knew what to think. He had no explanation to offer. But the search for explanations was unimportant in the face of this girl’s happiness. She had been reclaimed from her misery; she had been restored to light, freedom, love — to life itself! This was the real, the blessed achievement; this was the miraculous fact.

“What will you do,” Lerrac asked Marie Ferrand, “now that you feel you are cured?”

“I shall join the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul and nurse the sick,” she answered.

To hide his emotion, Lerrac left the room.

After examining a few more patients, Lerrac went out into the street. Night had fallen. At the end of the street, the basilica loomed up against the sky, an unbroken chain of lights leading up to the main entrance. A torchlight procession of pilgrims made a luminous serpentine as it wound its way along the esplanade.

From every direction rose the full-throated, discordant voices of the vast crowd, chanting the Lourdes hymn, with its Ave, Ave, Ave, repeated over and over again. ‘Hail, Hail, Hail Mary!’

As he hurried through the crowds, toward the edge of the stream where he could take refuge, Lerrac found that he no longer wanted to smile at the pilgrims’ childlike, fantastic hopes. All he had ever believed was turned upside down. The wildly improbable had become a simple fact. The dying were cured in a few hours. These pilgrimages had a power of their own and brought results; above all, they taught humility.

At last, Lerrac was alone by the stream. For a long time he sat and watched the Grotto, with its thousands of candles which flickered in the darkness and shed a red glow on the surroundings. He stared at the statue of the Virgin and, farther down in the shadows, the rows of copper faucets from which flowed the miraculous water, the spring water gushing out from the rock. It was the direct agent for the cures — and this Lerrac still could not believe.

Midnight came, and as the moon rose from behind the hill Lerrac was still at the Grotto — nothing but a solitary, troubled human being, wrestling in the darkness with the scientific doubts and questionings he had tried to quell. How was he to explain the cures of Lourdes?

There was no denying that it was distressingly unpleasant to be personally involved in a miracle. Most doctors were so fearful for their own prestige that even when they had been to Lourdes and seen for themselves, they did not dare admit it. Most of them still believed that there was nothing but charlatanism in Lourdes. They were afraid that if they showed any interest they would be taken for bigots or fools.

Though Lerrac himself was embarrassed at being involved in a miracle, he was far too proud to evade his responsibility. He determined to follow it through, no matter what it might cost him. He

had no idea where it would lead him. But he felt an imperious need to find the answer, the explanation for these inexplicable facts. The natural phenomena, the laws of life, were for the most part still cloaked in mystery. Perhaps a vast crowd united in fervent prayer could release a natural force, not yet understood, which in itself had undreamed-of therapeutic value. It was not so long ago that the existence of telepathy had seemed miraculous. And before thunder and lightning were found to be natural phenomena, men had mistaken them for the expression of God's wrath. It was therefore possible that there existed natural laws, as yet unknown to men, which would explain such mysterious phenomena as the Lourdes cures.

It was possible. But how profoundly bitter it was not to know for sure! Deeply absorbed, Lerrac now paced up and down the great walled terrace at the entrance to the basilica. The hush of an infinite peace hung over the countryside. The conflict in Lerrac's soul went on. Lerrac could neither prove the existence of God nor yet deny it. He wondered how great men like Pasteur had managed to reconcile their faith in science with their religion. Perhaps science and religion each had a system of its own.

When a scientist tried to apply his intellectual techniques and convictions to metaphysics, he was lost. He could no longer use his reasoning, since reason did not go beyond the establishing of facts and their relations to each other. In the search for causes, there was nothing absolute, there were no signposts along the way, there was no proof of right or wrong. All things in this mysterious realm were therefore possible. Intellectual systems no longer seemed to count. In the face of life and death, mere theories were void. It was not science that nourished the inner life of man; it was the faith of the soul. He had to reach a conclusion. He was certain of his diagnosis. It was incontestable that a miracle had taken place. But was it the hand of God? Someday he would know. Meanwhile, it was safe to say it was a cure; that much he could guarantee. Yet deep within himself, he felt that was not all.

He climbed the steps of the church in the glitter of lights while the organ boomed and a thousand voices chanted. He sat down on a chair at the back near an old peasant. For a long time he sat there motionless, his hands over his face, listening to the hymns, Then he found himself praying... "I believe in You. You did answer my prayers by a blazing miracle. I am still blind to it, I still doubt. But the greatest desire of my life is to believe, to believe passionately, implicitly, and never more to analyse and doubt... Beneath the deep, harsh warnings of my intellectual pride a smothered dream persists. Alas, it is still only a dream but the most enchanting of them all. It is the dream of believing in You and of loving You with the shining spirit of the men of God."

Slowly, Lerrac walked down the long avenues in the peaceful night, absorbed in his prayer. He scarcely felt the fresh night air. Back in his hotel room again, it seemed to him as though weeks had gone by since he had left it. He took the big green notebook from his bag and sat down to write his observations on the final events of the day.

By now, it was three o'clock. A pale light in the east was already breaking through the depths of the night sky. A new coolness penetrated from the open window. He felt the serenity of nature entering his soul with gentle calm. All preoccupations with daily life, hypotheses, theories and intellectual doubts had vanished. It seemed to him that he held certitude. He thought he could feel its wonderful appeasing peace. He felt it so deeply that he was no longer troubled; he banished all threat of encroaching doubts.

In the ineffable beauty of the dawn, Lerrac slept.

