

LOURDES: A JOURNAL

BY

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TUESDAY: Seven o'clock; it has been a hot, sweltering day and down through the dusty vineyards of Bordeaux the train, like a caterpillar, has made its way on the last lap of the journey. A courier has said that we will be in Lourdes in twenty minutes and already in other carriages other pilgrims are singing the *Ave*; in our own compartment, in a formal English way, we remain mute. One of the priests begins to say the rosary to himself and we all follow suit. For the last few minutes we have been winding with the Gave as it runs its twisting course, never having lost sight of it for more than a few seconds. Then at last for one brief moment the Grotto comes into view: at such a distance on an initial encounter it is difficult to gain any perspective of it, for all that can be seen is one blaze of candles; of many flickers knit together into one flame that rises in the evening stillness as a prayer. For some reason I want to break the silence; to cheer as the Italians do when the Pope is carried into St Peter's. But I remember that I am an Englishman and I begin thinking about taking my suitcase off the rack.

Dinner over, it is time to seek out the Grotto; to give thanks for a safe arrival.

Going through the town for the first time one is horrified: nearly every other shop seems a piety stall. As one walks down La Rue de la Grotte, vendor after vendor plies one with the same wares—candles, rosaries, statues, post-cards (two francs plain, twelve francs coloured). If one came expecting a small village with a narrow street and a number of hotels, one is sadly disappointed: here is a town the size of Oxford which can accommodate over 40,000 people. The first illusion about Lourdes—that it is an unsophisticated hamlet—is dispelled.

Down in the Rosary square the torchlight procession is just beginning. The singing sounds strangely united: then one realises that it is being relayed; that it is being led by a group of priests standing on the steps of the Rosary Church. It is an odd experience to stand and stare; to let the procession file past one as each contingent sings in its own language and then becomes one in the chorus-verse. *Et unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam*. . . For

the time being, however, one still remains somewhat aloof, a sight-seer rather than a pilgrim. As the procession gathers numbers and begins to trail up and down the ramps on each side of the square, the upper church is lit: it is not floodlit but lit with bulbs which drape its spire and entrance as if it were Brighton Pier. The second illusion about Lourdes—that it is a shrine of rustic beauty—is dispelled.

Yet a fragment of that rustic beauty still remains, and it is to be found at the Grotto. During processions the Grotto is comparatively empty and, against the artificiality of the loud-speakers and lighting-effects, it has a simplicity of its own which makes it both a retreat and at the same time the centre of everything. The rows of crutches alone are a testimony to this. Some of them are quite new.

WEDNESDAY: After Mass at the Church of the Seven Dolours, at breakfast one finds somebody talking about a miracle; about a girl who on the recent French National Pilgrimage was cured on the return journey between Lourdes and Paris. One is eager to know more. But that is always the way in Lourdes; miracles are passed round by word of mouth, since not until a year has elapsed does the Church give them her official sanction.

In the afternoon it is time for the baths. One takes one's place, thinking, as the sick are wheeled into the enclosure—for whom shall I offer my bath? It is hard to decide because there are so many needy cases. Over there lies a boy—born in 1925 as his stretcher proclaims—suffering from palsy; another small child of five or six—a moron—is led in by his father. First as a spectator one watches, then as a participant one joins in with the priest as he leads the people in their public prayers. In between the rosary-decades one's attention wanders to the brancardiers as they help the sick towards the *Piscines*. As a body of men they are especially impressive, with their refined aristocratic faces and their gentility of manner pervasive in all their actions but nowhere emphatic. One pauses to reflect: it is strange this way Catholicism so often is composed of two extremes—the poorest and the richest (one notices the same phenomenon in London during the annual Tyburn Walk).

Inside one's cubicle the air is sweaty and misty, like a bathing tent. Rather than linger I decide to undress fast and thus be the first of my group to be dipped. At the steps into the bath, with a clammy loin cloth girded round one, the grey water looks singularly uninviting. Again as the two attendants let one lie back in it, despite its uninviting greyness, the water feels icy. There can be no doubt

about it that it is spring water direct from the source. Undried as one dresses, one feels oddly warm.

Outside, the mother of the boy born in 1925 waits, her arms outstretched in a prayer of supplication. When they bring him out, she goes over to him; he is still twitching. A voice mutters in patois that he is better: in clearer and differing accents the cry is taken up and runs through the crowd. Other voices intermingle: they declare that no two miracles are the same, nor cures always instantaneous. Uncertain, one leaves.

By four o'clock the sick are lined up under the trees in the main square. Between the rows of sick, nurses and nursing sisters are carrying flasks of Lourdes water, ready to hand them to those in need. As the procession nears its end the eucharistic canopy comes to a halt; the Bishop surrounded by servers and acolytes steps with the Blessed Sacrament towards the rows of sick; behind him troop a small legion of doctors. Each section of the sick he blesses; as he does so and the various invocations follow one after the other—the slow, dignified Italian, the more exclamatory French—one waits tensely, expecting a miracle. As the group gradually make their way along the lines of sick accompanied by the different cries and responses—'Lord say but the word and I shall be healed'—one feels this is probably the nearest one can be to knowing what it felt like when Christ walked amongst the lame at Galilee; one thinks, now, if ever, there should be a sign from heaven. Ultimately the procession ends: one has seen no miracle and one feels rather chagrined—but perhaps this is the feeling of all when they arrive: it is certainly not the feeling with which one leaves.

THURSDAY: For today a visit to Bernadette's house has been arranged. There is nothing very special about her home; it is just a humble little peasant's cottage of the last century. Later in the morning one visits another small house in the town where she lived for some while. The walls are lined with other pilgrims' mementoes—photographs and visiting cards: on some of them is written, 'Bernadette priez pour nous'. One becomes especially aware of Bernadette: although she did not live here long her presence pervades the rooms. It is similar in Rome in the house in which Keats died. There is a historical presence about these rooms which only great spirits can impart: in this particular house which was given to the Soubirous in 1867, it is as if Bernadette might be in the next room. Of course, when it comes to it, this is not so peculiar after all: indeed if in this context one may be permitted to use twentieth century terminology one might say that prayer is a kind of telephone conversation—the saints are always there to answer one.

This evening is the day when the English pilgrimage can have midnight Mass. Leaving afterwards, Lourdes seems extraordinarily quiet: but it is not empty. Already priests and their servers are making their way up to the crypt to say early Masses. From midnight to midday Mass seems continuous.

One walks back to the hotel and ahead there is a small band of Irishmen walking arm-in-arm. They are singing, somewhat dreamily, the hymn 'Star of the Sea'. The sight is not unfamiliar but the words are: how often in other European towns and cities one has witnessed the same scene, but where the walk has been a drunken sprawl and the song a string of barrack-room obscenities.

FRIDAY. Appropriately enough the morning is given over to the Stations of the Cross. Never before have I known such a long Stations of the Cross: I suppose all in all one walks about two miles. At the Seventh Station they are repainting the life-size figures and as our party approaches them, a workman takes a swig from his bottle. After the first gulp he discreetly turns away; evidently he has noticed our group and thinks it in bad taste to drink before pilgrims. At the Twelfth Station there is Mass. After Mass—and some have been making this way of the Cross barefoot—as one clammers down from this rugged representation of Calvary one has a new understanding of the Christian religion. The week before I had seen an open air production of Goethe's *Faust* and its theme of redemption struck me on this occasion with an added force. For here can be seen redemption simultaneously in human terms in two lights. On the one hand one sees the penance symbolised by those making the Stations of the Cross ascending to Heaven, whilst on the other side of the hill it is descending upon the baths, blessed every so often with the power to heal. It is as if the tears and sweat of men are being drawn up like dew and bestowed as a rain of mercy upon those who need it most.

SATURDAY: An excursion to Gavarnie in the Pyrenees.

SUNDAY: Tomorrow the pilgrimage will be over. Today, then, will be a day for crystallising impressions; and the horarium is much the same as on previous days. At the High Mass there is a sermon on the priesthood: it is highly rhetorical and savours of last century oratory. There are people standing all the way up the aisles and at times they annoy one; they fidget and push and fidget. One is inclined to agree with the critic who said that the Americans should take over Lourdes for a year because then there might be some hope of organisation. As it is the French say it is their shrine and therefore they can behave as they please. Again at lunch a woman

says, 'Did you hear that Belgian sermon?', and goes on, 'When the Belgians pray, why, it is as if they were scolding, not asking. . . .'
Again at tea in a café in the upper part of the town a conversation is going on. 'This place is a gold mine. . . . Did you know that the authorities tried to impose a five-franc tax on all pilgrims staying in Lourdes? and do you know how the bishop retaliated? . . . He said if they did, he would ban all national pilgrimages for a year. . . .'
Certainly there are two spirits in Lourdes: that of the town and that of the Grotto, and they conflict. It is a somewhat different conflict to that which rages, say, in Oxford 'between town and gown', because the conflict is of a more serious order: it is one between the secular and ecclesiastical authorities. Again in spite of the monstrous commercialisation of piety in the shops (it runs to tablets of soap stamped with the apparitions on them and sweets made from Grotto water) one cannot deny that there is a demand for it. Again one cannot deny that there is an element of hysteria (sometimes considerably more than an element) in the crowds. There is for instance a distinctly different atmosphere amongst those who watch the blessing of the sick from outside and those who are beside the sick whilst they are being blessed. Indeed if Lourdes has a secret it is here, for it is amazing how the sick accept their suffering with equanimity and patience. Theirs is a spirit of resignation and total surrender to God; no concessions are asked and sacrifice is the keynote. Long after one has left one remembers their tranquil faces, since it is not a town bestrewn with bad repository art, a church lit like a pier, nor a series of moon-eyed statues, which stay to the fore in the mind's eye: these remembrances only become fragments of the experience as a whole. Rather, as the train sets out for Paris, past Bordeaux Cathedral, past Poitiers Cathedral, another and more crucial question comes to mind: when peasants believe, what is the architect's answer? Patrician Rome and plebeian Lourdes, what a contrast: but the same spirit is beneath, for between the two lies the paradox of a united Christendom. In Athens as in Alexandria, beside the Tiber as beside the Thames, in Nagasaki as in New Orleans—Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide in thy most need to go by thy side.