

## THE MYSTERY OF LOURDES

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FIFTY years ago the extraordinary J. K. Huysmans wrote his *Crowds of Lourdes*. Huysmans has been described as 'un écrivain précis, subtil, et tourmenté' and certainly his study of Lourdes reveals these characteristics. Though one may disagree entirely, his devastating comments on religious art and architecture in this city of our Lady are refreshing and provocative. His observant eye misses nothing. The most critical visitor to Lourdes could not rival his invective about the commercial by-products of the shrine. And that, after all, is what the apologist for Lourdes has to face.

Huysmans's book can be taken as a half-century mark in the history of the Lourdes shrine. He wrote it after he had become a militant convert to Catholicism. Surprisingly, though it is probably now neglected, the book is not out of date in essentials. Mrs Ruth Cranston's *The Mystery of Lourdes* (Evans; 18s.) might well be taken to mark the approaching centenary of the apparitions, 1958. It eclipses the Huysmans book and, one might even venture to say, all the English books on Lourdes. It is a remarkable book to have come from the pen of a Protestant bishop's daughter, herself a Protestant. Huysmans, after his conversion and quite against his own inclinations, came to Lourdes to investigate it for himself. A specialized interest in faith healing drew Mrs Cranston to the place where so many miracles of healing take place. 'The three years since I began the study of this wonderful place, and its great cures of soul and body', she writes, 'have been among the richest of my life.' Huysmans, who detested crowds, went to Lourdes reluctantly but he, too, like so many others, was captured by its spirit.

Huysmans describes the Lourdes of about 1900; Mrs Cranston describes the Lourdes of today. She has the advantage of superb photographs to supplement her descriptions; Huysmans has the advantage of that style 'précis, subtil et tourmenté'. He suffers aesthetic agonies because of, as it seems to him, hideous religious art. Mrs Cranston is untouched by this, as probably even the most sensitive pilgrim is, in face of the overwhelming faith and suffering nobly borne.

The Basilica does not recall the glory of our Lady's Cathedral at Chartres. Even illuminated with its myriad lights it is not particularly captivating or compelling. The frescoes within may well cause some to shudder, as they did Huysmans. They do not matter. It is the niche in the grotto, the holy spot where the Blessed Virgin appeared, that matters. There are luxury hotels, simple hotels, *pensions*; there are the

many cafés; there are the shops beyond counting that sell souvenirs, fascinating in their ingenuity and not all tawdry. It is still the niche in the grotto that matters. Everything leads towards that. Vigilant policemen stand by the grotto gates to enforce dress regulations. They are not necessary to keep out the commercial side of Lourdes, for that stops short of the gates.

The faith of the sick, the patience of the sick, the prayers they say, the prayers that others say: all these are Lourdes. They make the same deep impression on all, on Huysmans and on Mrs Cranston. The indifferent town of Lourdes, 'a jewel slipped into the velvet pocket of the Pyrenees', in Mrs Cranston's words, goes on about its business, as does the world. At the grotto there is something of heaven; the hosanna from many nations as the Blessed Sacrament approaches the Basilica for the blessing of the sick; the breath-taking spectacle of the torchlight procession with its repetitive hymn saluting our Lady in many tongues. 'Have you ever heard sixty thousand people singing one great hymn together?' Mrs Cranston asks. 'Have you ever seen sixty thousand faces lighted up not only by candles but with radiant love and devotion? It is something you will not forget in this bomb-ridden disillusioned twentieth century.' Huysmans, too, was overwhelmed by this manifestation of faith and love. 'From the incandescent basin soars up the *Credo* in plainchant. It is unfurled and upborne with the help of thousands of voices, and rises from amongst the flames with an august lingering movement into the darkness of the sky. It is the profession of faith of the whole world finally freed from the confusion of tongues to find expression in the language of the liturgy; it is the concentration of the individual prayers of the day now gathered up into a single sheaf of common prayer; it is the offering to the Lord—before whom the Virgin, who has hitherto been set on high, disappears—of the vocal perfume of the Apostles' Creed, of the incense of the chant of his own Church.'

Mrs Cranston is particularly concerned with the miracles of Lourdes and she describes in illuminating detail the medical organization behind the scenes, of which, perhaps, the ordinary pilgrim is unaware. She gives, too, impressive accounts of many miracles. The result of her 'full and independent enquiry' is a comprehensive, satisfying picture of Lourdes as it is today. Pilgrims who know Lourdes well, pilgrims of Lourdes in spirit, Catholics who feel no enthusiasm for this world-centre of Marian devotion, could read this book with pleasure and edification. Huysmans decided fifty years ago that Lourdes 'is a place both repulsive and divine, but it is only right to make a trial of it by personal experience'. For those who are unable to make this trial, Mrs Ruth Cranston's book is a splendid substitute.