

TALKS WITH A MIRACULÉE, LOURDES, 1929

I

WE had been sitting in the *galerie* through the lovely August afternoon, watching the wind ruffle the grasses in the fields before us, and gently swing the trees. Better, we felt, under that hot sun, to contemplate beauty, than to waste energy in dissecting it. So we sat in the flickering shade of the wisteria, breaking now into tardy hesitant heavenly blossoming, and saw the acacias foam on the brink of the steep to the south. Above them, the crosses on Calvary hill were steadfast amongst the changing verdure. Higher still, the Pyrenees leapt to meet the sky.

As we sat at ease, a woman came into view along the path fringed by the acacias. We leant forward a little to watch her, wondering what friend this might be. She wore black, she was slender, she was unusually graceful; and none of us could remember having seen her before.

She approached the gate; and, as I ran down to greet her, she smiled at me from under her drooping hat.

'I am Mlle. Deschamps,' she said. 'Forgive me for coming to call on you first. I came because I was told you would be glad to see me, to talk about the pilgrimage.'

She was charming, I thought, and distinguished, with delightful gestures. Her head was small and beautifully poised. The forehead was broad and low, the eyes so dark a brown as to make one think them black, the nose aquiline, the mouth strong and tender. The face was oval, and the skin a pure olive without

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tint of rose except in the sensitive lips. What startled me, however, was neither her distinction nor her charm, though both of these existed in a remarkable degree, but rather the impression she gave of intense vitality cradled in peace. She was like a blade of finely tempered steel or an exquisitely balanced spring.

I knew at once who she was, and I might have been flattered at her visit, had I not realised that her interest was not in the very least with myself, but with the cause of Our Lady. It was obvious that, had she pleased herself, she would have hidden and come into no unnecessary contact with the world, whose crudities and cruelties must hurt so sensitive a nature. Yet she had come to me quite simply, to talk either of her cure or of her experiences, that by so doing she might serve Our Lady of Lourdes.

I had already read her own account of her cure, as the letter in which she described it had previously been handed to me.

Mlle. Deschamps is one of the three hundred or so *grandes malades* who have been certified as cured at Lourdes.

She had suffered from tuberculous peritonitis and Pott's disease. She was three times cased in plaster, but it had to be removed on account of inflammation. She had fallen on the kerb of a pavement so violently that the plaster case she was for the time wearing was shattered, and her spine was gravely injured. She was picked up unconscious and carried home. When she came to her senses she found that her legs were paralysed, but alas! by no means insensitive. Phlebitis set in and caused such pain that the light pressure of her nightdress was unbearable, and every day and almost all day long she was in agony from the abdominal pains of peritonitis.

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She was strapped to a plank with her head perfectly flat; but as some slight movement was still possible, and movement was considered injurious, the plank was replaced by a case resembling a tightly-fitting coffin. Morphia was administered every three hours with a view to relieving her sufferings, but this caused vomiting, intolerable to her in her prostrate position, and she begged that it might be discontinued. Sometimes she had her way. Sometimes they would not listen to her.

For six years she waited for death in this double agony, at last so weak that three times they thought she had died.

In the year 1922 she was brought to Lourdes and bathed in the Piscine, and while in the water she suddenly felt quite well. There was no pain, such as sometimes accompanies miraculous healing—only an extraordinary feeling of being perfectly well.

When the doctors at the Medical Bureau examined her, they could find no trace of her disease.

We had listened, enthralled, while Mlle. Deschamps herself described the cure which had caused such sensation in its day . . . the beautiful voice, the measured, beautiful gestures, holding us still as the lizard that basked in the sun at her feet . . . but I interrupted her now to ask her what her feelings were in that astounding moment.

‘Great joy,’ she said; ‘great gratitude, of course, but, above all, great fear.’

When I expressed astonishment, asking of what she was afraid, she answered me simply:

‘Of God’; and, seeing my bewilderment, she added:

‘You see, He had come so close to me. He had touched me.’

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There was silence for a moment, she reviewing the ineffable memory, I striving to follow her as she reviewed it.

‘The fear,’ she went on, ‘stayed with me for a long time. Had it been possible, I should have gone into a convent to make a retreat, and so have understood it better; but I did not belong to myself. I belonged to Our Lady of Lourdes, and I had to give myself up to the crowds that wanted to see me . . . first of all, the doctors at the Bureau, and then the other pilgrims. Poor things,’ she said. ‘They need to see a miracle. They come to Lourdes and see nothing and go away again, and people tell them no miracles ever happen at Lourdes, and they almost come to believe it. Miracles aren’t worked for the doctors,’ she protested. ‘They are worked for the common people, so that they may have faith.’

I thought of the ending of her letter, and of the soul nearest and dearest to her, who had received again the gift of faith. . . .

‘Our Lady had fulfilled my desires, and in her goodness had willed that my cure, which I had not asked for, should be the means of converting my father. I met him at Buisson Station, and he found me standing at the door of his compartment when he got down from the train. He was white with emotion, and could only say: ‘My daughter!’ A minute later, when I asked him to come and thank Our Lady by communicating with me the following Sunday in the Parish Church, he replied: ‘Daughter, on Sunday I shall be in Lourdes,’ and he kept his word. Until his death, which happened a year later, he was an example to everyone by the faith to which he testified joyfully on every possible occasion.’

‘And ever since your cure, seven years ago, you have been perfectly well?’ I asked.

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'Yes,' she replied, unhesitatingly, 'though at first I had enough strain to cause a breakdown. Imagine it. For weeks and months I was besieged morning, noon and night, by crowds anxious to hear details. Doctors, priests, enemies of the supernatural, and ordinary people, all wanted to hear from my own lips what had happened . . . or to prove that it had never happened at all. Sometimes they insisted on being shown into my room before I was up. I remember once it was after midday before I had any chance of getting out of bed. Our housemaid was in despair. She said before them all, 'But, Mademoiselle will starve if *ces messieurs* will not have the goodness to leave her alone for a moment or two. They don't give her time even to eat.' So now, when I am at Lourdes and hear that there has been a miracle, I don't try to see the *miraculé*, for I remember my own experience, and how tired I was of the hubbub about me.'

'But sometimes you have seen the miraculous close to you, without going out of your way to find it. Isn't that so?' I suggested.

'Yes,' she said; 'that happens sometimes. This year, during the French National Pilgrimage, there was a woman in my ward at the *Sept Douleurs* Hospital who had had an operation for mastoid growth and *caries* of the bone had set in. She came to Lourdes in a pretty bad state . . . in great pain, totally deaf in one ear and just hearing with the other, and both ears suppurating. It was a particularly distressing case because the pus that soaked her bandages had an offensive odour, most distressing to those near her. *Eh bien*, she suddenly found that she could hear perfectly. The pus ceased running, the bandages were unstained, there was no longer any foul smell. From her own point of view, she seems to be perfectly cured. However, the case has not yet

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been declared completely devoid of natural explanation by the Medical Bureau, though it looks as if there is every hope of its being finally registered as miraculous. The history of the case must be carefully gone into, the certificates must be flawless, and also, as you know, the cure must be proved lasting. Probably the woman will return with the French National Pilgrimage next year, and if she is still in perfect health, and if, as I have already said, her medical certificates are satisfactory, her name will be added to the lists of people miraculously healed at Lourdes, and her photograph will go up in the Medical Bureau.'

'I have seen yours there,' I said, laughing. 'You looked like one risen from the dead.'

'There is a worse one than that,' she assured me, laughing in her turn. 'It was taken in the afternoon of my cure, after I had undergone the medical examination and the interviews had begun. Imagine what it is like to have any number of doctors . . . thirty perhaps . . . of many nationalities around you, bombarding you with questions, examining you, furiously discussing your case, a terrible battle of words. Some poor little *miraculées* would be frightened and burst into tears, if Our Lady did not continue the miracle and help them through.'

'Why are there so many miracles during the French National Pilgrimage?' I asked her. 'There seem to be almost always some pretty astounding cures. Is it because it's a pilgrimage of the very poor?'

'Partly that, I think,' she answered me; 'and partly that they pray so well. And you must remember that we begin praying long before the pilgrimage. We don't wait till we get to Lourdes to ask for cures.'

'This year I see that once more the French National Pilgrimage had a cure registered at once. Not, perhaps, so exciting a cure, if one may be permitted to say so, as the disappearance of Madame

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Augault's enormous tumour last year; but an interesting one, all the same.'

Mademoiselle Deschamps smiled indulgently at my phraseology, and waited.

'I mean the cure of the girl who had been paralysed for thirteen years as a result of injuring five vertebrae by falling on the ice.'

'She was cured in her sleep,' said Mademoiselle. 'She woke in the night and found she could turn over in bed. Next morning she walked normally. As there was no doubt as to the injury, there has been none as to the supernatural nature of the cure.'

'The *Journal de la Grotte* speaks of fifty people presenting themselves at the Medical Bureau as cured during the five days of the French National Pilgrimage this year, of whom twenty-six were retained for further investigation.'

'Yes,' said my visitor; 'and no doubt there have been others, and many ameliorations, that have not been brought to the notice of the Medical Bureau. But, after all, though these cures are magnificent, and mean everything to the happy people who are cured, it is the spiritual cures that matter. It is for them that Lourdes exists. If I had time, I could tell you true tales that would leave you lost in admiration of the marvellous mercies of God!'

She rose to go, her figure straight as an arrow, her gaze directed to the Grotto, veiled here by the fringe of young acacias. The afternoon procession had just ended. We could hear the *Laudate* above the hooting of motors on the *Route de Pau*.

I turned to her and pleaded, 'May I come to see you at your convent, one evening after dinner? And will you tell me something more of what you have seen at Lourdes?'

She promised me, holding my hand firmly in her steady grasp.

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II

It was a few evenings after our talk in the *galerie* that I called on Mlle. Deschamps.

She came to me in the great *parloir* of the Assumption convent, where the French windows stood wide to welcome the night wind.

As the last light faded and the stars came out, the candles in the Grotto beyond the river burnt with ever intenser gold, till the whole cave seemed aflame. The Gave murmured in its rocky bed. The spire of the Basilica pointed to Heaven; and in the great shadow, the statue of Mary the Maiden glimmered palely against the blackness of the rock. To this my eyes strayed as Mlle. Deschamps talked to me. To this they always returned in the pauses of that warm and eager voice.

She told me first a tragic story which concerned herself. She gave it to me without any effort to explain it. Here it is as she told it to me.

The Abbé Belleney runs a Catholic cinema at Lourdes, where a film of the Apparitions is shown. At the same time, he gives some account of the chief events in the history of Lourdes. On one occasion he had in the audience a number of rough work-girls from Paris, the majority of them either slack Catholics or without faith. They had been persuaded to come to Lourdes as part of a holiday jaunt, in the hope that at least some of them, touched by what they saw there, might be converted. The Abbé Belleney described the case of Mlle. Deschamps to them, and perceived he had made an impression.

On the following day they made an excursion to Pau, and they began talking of Mlle. Deschamps' cure in the train. A man in the corner of the compartment listened for a time. Then he leant forward and joined in the discussion.

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‘Pooh!’ he said. ‘Stuff and nonsense! They fill you with lies down there. I’m from Perigueux, too, and I live near Mlle. Deschamps. At least I should, if she were still alive, but she’s dead and buried years ago.’

The girls believed what he said, and reported their belief when they got back to Lourdes. The Abbé Belleney’s distress can be imagined. Mlle. Deschamps was in Lourdes at the time, and the Abbé sent for her; but though she was searched for everywhere, no one could find her until it was too late, and the girls had returned to Paris, scoffing at what they had seen and heard.

On another occasion things went better. Mlle. Deschamps was at the railway station, waiting with a friend for the train which would take them back to Perigueux, when they noticed a priest walking up and down the platform in a state of agitation. By an inspiration, Mlle. Deschamps’ friend seized her and pushed her before the priest.

‘This is a great *miraculée*,’ she said, and was beginning to recount her case when the priest exclaimed, ‘Splendid! you come at the right moment. I have just been talking to a man who swears that there are no miracles. He is in that compartment. Come with me.’

Unfortunately at that instant the train began to move, and Mlle. Deschamps had to fly to her own place. At the first stop, however, she got down and mounted into the compartment of the man who didn’t believe in miracles. She found it full.

‘I have been told that a gentleman here denies the miracles of Lourdes,’ she said. ‘I have come to prove him mistaken.’

A man started up from the corner white with rage—literally foaming at the mouth. For a moment she thought he would strike her. Had they been alone

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she believed he would have been glad to kill her. But she calmly recounted the history of her cure and then withdrew.

These two stories are typical of the hatred of Catholicism which exists in the French atheist. Perhaps only those with long experience of France can have any idea of the love of God on the one hand, of detestation of things sacred on the other, which can exist side by side in that nation prone to extremes. Sanctity or the reverse, nothing by halves, is the keynote of French spiritual life; but the greatest sinners may become the greatest saints.

'Tell me now,' I begged, 'something of the sick you have tended, of the spiritual cures of which you spoke to me.'

She thought for a moment.

'One of the most touching little incidents I have ever come across occurred during this last French National Pilgrimage,' she said.

'It is the custom with some *infirmières* to attach themselves definitely to a chosen patient or group of patients. They care for these specially, praying above all for these. For myself, I have always preferred to make no distinction between the various sick people in my room, and I try to serve them with equal attention. Last thing at night, just before leaving them, I make the round of the beds to make sure they are all as comfortable as may be. I take my time, so that they may see I am at their service; and this is the moment when they open their hearts.

'One night a blind girl talked to me.

'I had noticed her as specially devout, and as I smoothed her pillow and tucked the bed-clothes about her, I said to her, "To-morrow we'll pray specially hard that *you* may be cured.'

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‘ She cried out at once, with a sort of horror in her voice, “ Don’t do that, Mademoiselle! I beg you not to do that! ”

‘ I was astounded.

‘ “ But why not, my child? ” I asked her. “ You want to be cured, don’t you? Surely that is why you came to Lourdes? ’

‘ “ Oh! no, Mademoiselle, ” she answered me. “ Never for that. Don’t you see that now I belong altogether to the good God. There’s nothing now that can distract me from Him. I’m all His. If I could see, I should be distracted all day long. I should be compelled to think of so many other things. But now nothing can take me away from Him. ”

‘ “ But, my child, ” I protested. “ Don’t you at least want to be cured so that you may work for your living? ”—for I could see that she was poor.

‘ “ But I do work, ” she replied proudly.

‘ “ What do you do? ” I asked her, marvelling the more.

‘ “ I take care of the little ones in an orphanage. ” was the answer. “ I sleep in the dormitory with them, and I assure you I take the greatest care of them. ”

‘ “ But how do you manage that when you can’t see them? ” was my next question.

‘ “ I listen, ” she said triumphantly. “ That’s much better than seeing. If I had my eyes, I could only look one way at a time, but now I can hear all over the place, and no one makes the least movement without my knowing what they’re up to . . . ” and she bade me good-night quite happily, and went to sleep perfectly content.

‘ Another night I offered to pray specially for a woman dying of consumption, but again, like the blind girl, she refused to think of her cure. She explained to me that she had brothers and sisters who had lost their faith, that they belonged to an intellec-

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tual set that was entirely sceptical, and that no miracle would avail to convert them, for they would only explain it away. "But," she added, with divine wisdom, "if I go on suffering for them, if I offer my life for them, God may give them graces which they will hardly be able to resist."

Mlle. Deschamps ceased speaking, and I looked through the open window at the Grotto. A hundred, a thousand candles were added to those at the shrine, for the pilgrims were gathering for the torchlight procession, and the night glowed with the myriad golden flames. Each added its little tongue of praise and prayer, as the worshippers came in from every side under the arches and over them, from the *Boulevard* and the *Rue de la Grotte*, and down the zig-zag path to the west of the Basilica.

Mademoiselle spoke again, and the candle flames were woven like golden threads through the stories she told me, symbols now of sacrifice, as the radiance about the Grotto was the symbol of grace received. I looked at the statue of Mary. Its immobility suggested that she was listening, too.

'Last summer that is to say, in the year 1928 a woman came for the third and last time to Lourdes. I had noticed her at her first visit for, unlike the other pilgrims, she wept pitifully and almost continually, and seemed to be in a state bordering on despair. She told me her story. She had married and had a child, and then it was found that she was consumptive. Her husband, whom she worshipped, abandoned her, but she clung for a time to the child. Then one day the grandparents came to her.

"Give us the child," they said. "We will bring him up carefully, and we promise you that he shall be happy. But you must make over all your rights in him to us and swear never to see him again. If, on the other hand, you prefer to keep him with you, you

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know the probable end . . . you will sow the seeds of your disease in him, and he will die as you are sure to die. Choose now." So she gave up the child from very love.

'She came a second time to Lourdes, and that in itself is unusual, for the sick who are brought by the French National Pilgrimage are only allowed to come once. There are so many clamouring to come.

'The second visit was like the first . . . despair and tears and the same prayer repeated continually: "Hear me, O God. Give me back my husband! O Mother of God, give me back my baby!"

'She came once more, and still she wept hopelessly. Then one day, as I was going to the Grotto, I met her being wheeled away from it. For a moment, I hardly recognised her. Her face was radiant. The light shining in her eyes was such as I had never seen or imagined. She saw me and stretched out her hands to me.

"O Mademoiselle," she said. "If I could only tell you what has happened to me . . . what grace has been given to me . . . Nothing can ever make me unhappy again. I am quite content now . . . never to see my husband and baby again . . . never to get any better. Thank God, thank God, for the overwhelming grace He has given to me!"

'She remained in the same state of perfect happiness till the pilgrimage left. I never saw her again. She died during the following winter.

'Ave, Ave, Ave Maria! Ave, Ave, Ave Maria!' sang the pilgrims at the Grotto. The torchlight procession had begun.

'I knew a girl,' said Mlle. Deschamps, 'who offered her life at the Grotto that her married sister, who was childless, might have a baby. Next year the baby was born, and the girl was brought dying to Lourdes.'

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She was silent for a moment. Then she answered my unspoken question.

'She was not cured,' she said.

'I once witnessed a heroic scene,' she continued, 'in a corner of my ward in the *Sept Douleurs* hospital here.

'I went in late one night to make sure that all was well, and I noticed a little group in the corner. I went over and found a dying child. His father, a mechanic from Avignon, knelt at the bedside. The mother was there too. I asked them if I could do anything, but they answered "Nothing."

'Then the father got up and bent over his son.

'"Darling!" he said; and the child turned his eyes and looked at him.

'"Darling!" he said again. "You remember before you were ill, you said you would be a priest and belong to God. I'm going to tell you something important. Soon you will die and go to God, so that you may belong to Him in Heaven. Say this after me, darling: 'Jesus! I give my life for the priests.'"

'The child obediently repeated the words, "Jesus! I give my life for the priests." Then he turned to his father.

'"Father! Why must I die?" he asked.

'The father did not flinch.

'"Because it is God's will," he answered.

'"Oh!" said the child, as if in acquiescence; and he lay quite still.

'The father bent over him once more. "Darling," he called again. "Say, Thy will be done on earth as it is done in Heaven. O Jesus! I give my life for France."

'Again the child repeated the words, but his voice was only a whisper.

'"Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. O Jesus! I give my life for France."

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‘ And so it went on through the night, the father beating down his own grief, in a superhuman effort to help his little son to die. The mother knelt on at the bedside, hardly speaking. When at last the child died in the early hours of the morning, the father sang . . . his voice shaken by the tears he would not permit himself to let fall . . . the hymn to Our Lady beloved by all French pilgrims—

“ *J’irai la voir un jour,
Au ciel dans ma patrie,
J’irai voir Marie,
Au céleste séjour !* ”

‘ Next day, as he was watching beside his dead, he realised that it was half-past four, the hour when the Blessed Sacrament leaves the Grotto for the Blessing of the Sick.

“ “What am I doing here, bewailing my dead?” he almost shouted. “Am I not a pilgrim?” And he went to find his God, to lead Him down the lines of suffering bodies, where lately his own son had had a place, and to pray with the rest that others at least might be cured.

‘ CREDO IN UNUM DEUM ! ’ The chanting soared from the hidden square, where the sick are blessed, where some find healing, and all find comfort at last. We moved to the window and looked out at that tiny section of the vast crowd which could be seen through the arches of the *Rampe*. The rest were hidden, but from the invisible multitude the singing rose, a steady tide, till it seemed to beat, wave after wave, at the very gates of Heaven.

QUI PROPTER NOS HOMINES ET PROPTER NOSTRAM
SALUTEM DESCENDIT DE COELIS.

God was here now, for He had remained on earth. He was living in the convent chapel a few paces away. He was in those three churches on the other side of

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the river. He was listening to the singing of those thousands of souls ranked in the arena before Him. His Mother listened from the cave.

ET EXPECTO RESURRECTIONEM MORTUORUM ET VITAM VENTURI SAECULI. AMEN.

The blessing was given and the crowds dispersed. Gradually the pilgrims' candles died out and the Grotto was quiet under the stars. Only the trees moved sombrely, leaning to the gentle wind. Only the candles in the Grotto whispered and stirred. The few worshippers kneeling at the railings were still, the soul of each content beyond its deepest aspiration. And I, too, as I took my way home across the tranquil fields.

AILEEN MARY CLEGG.