

***J.-K.
HUYSMANS***

THE CATHEDRAL



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The Cathedral

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CHAPTER I.

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At Chartres, as you turn out of the little market-place, which is swept in all weathers by the surly wind from the flats, a mild air as of a cellar, made heavy by a soft, almost smothered scent of oil, puffs in your face on entering the solemn gloom of the sheltering forest.

Durtal knew it well, and the delightful moment when he could take breath, still half-stunned by the sudden change from a stinging north wind to a velvety airy caress. At five every morning he left his rooms, and to reach the covert of that strange forest he had to cross the square; the same figures were always to be seen at the turnings from the same streets; nuns with bowed heads, leaning forward, the borders of their caps blown back and flapping like wings, the wind whirling in their skirts, which they could hardly hold down; and shrunken women, in garments they hugged round them, struggling forward with bent shoulders lashed by the gusts.

Never at that hour had he seen anybody walking boldly upright, without straining her neck and bowing her head; and these scattered women gathered by degrees into two long lines, one of them turning to the left, to vanish under a lighted porch opening to a lower level than the square; the other going straight on, to be swallowed up in the darkness by an invisible wall.

Closing the procession came a few belated priests, hurrying on, with one hand gathering up the gown that ballooned behind them, and with the other clutching their

hats, or snatching at the breviary that was slipping from under one arm, their faces hidden on their breast, to plough through the wind with the back of their neck; with red ears, eyes blinded with tears, clinging desperately, when it rained, to umbrellas that swayed above them, threatening to lift them from the ground and dragging them in every direction.

The passage had been more than usually stormy this morning; the squalls that tear across the district of La Beauce, where nothing can check them, had been bellowing for hours; there had been rain, and the puddles splashed under foot. It was difficult to see, and Durtal had begun to think that he should never succeed in getting past the dim mass of the wall that shut in the square, by pushing open the door behind which lay that weird forest, redolent of the night-lamp and the tomb, and protected from the gale.

He sighed with satisfaction, and followed the wide path that led through the gloom. Though he knew his way, he walked cautiously in this alley, bordered by enormous trunks, their crowns lost in shadow. He could have fancied himself in a hothouse roofed with black glass, for there were flagstones under foot, and no sky could be seen, no breeze could stir overhead. The few stars whose glimmer twinkled from afar belonged to our firmament; they quivered almost on the ground, and were, in fact, earth-born.

In this obscurity nothing was to be heard but the fall of quiet feet, nothing to be seen but silent shades visible against the twilight like shapes of deeper darkness.

Durtal presently turned into another wide walk crossing that he had left. There he found a bench backed by the

trunk of a tree, and on this he leaned, waiting till the Mother should awake, and the sweet interview interrupted yesterday by the close of the day should begin again.

He thought of the Virgin, whose watchful care had so often preserved him from unexpected risk, easy slips, or greater falls. Was not She the bottomless Well of goodness, the Bestower of the gifts of good Patience, the Opener of dry and obdurate hearts? Was She not, above all, the living and thrice Blessed Mother?

Bending for ever over the squalid bed of the soul, she washed the sores, dressed the wounds, strengthened the fainting weakness of converts. Through all the ages She was the eternal supplicant, eternally entreated; at once merciful and thankful; merciful to the woes She alleviated, and thankful to them too. She was indeed our debtor for our sins, since, but for the wickedness of man, Jesus would never have been born under the corrupt semblance of our image, and She would not have been the immaculate Mother of God. Thus our woe was the first cause of Her joy; and this supremest good resulting from the very excess of Evil, this touching though superfluous bond, linking us to Her, was indeed the most bewildering of mysteries; for Her gratitude would seem unneeded, since Her inexhaustible mercy was enough to attach Her to us for ever.

Thenceforth, in Her immense humility, She had at various times condescended to the masses; She had appeared in the most remote spots, sometimes seeming to rise from the earth, sometimes floating over the abyss, descending on solitary mountain peaks, bringing multitudes to Her feet, and working cures; then, as if weary of wandering to be

adored, She wished—so it had seemed—to fix the worship in one place, and had deserted Her ancient haunts in favour of Lourdes.

That town was the second stage of Her progress through France in the nineteenth century. Her first visit was to La Salette.

This was years ago. On the 19th of September, 1846, the Virgin had appeared to two children on a hill; it was a Saturday, the day dedicated to Her, which, that year, was a fast day by reason of the Ember week. By another coincidence, this Saturday was the eve of the Festival of Our Lady of Seven Dolours, and the first vespers were being chanted when Mary appeared as from a shell of glory just above the ground.

And she appeared as Our Lady of Tears in that desert landscape of stubborn rocks and dismal hills. Weeping bitterly, She had uttered reproofs and threats; and a spring, which never in the memory of man had flowed excepting at the melting of the snows, had never since been dried up.

The fame of this event spread far and wide; frantic thousands scrambled up fearful paths to a spot so high that trees could not grow there. Caravans of the sick and dying were conveyed, God knows how, across ravines to drink the water; and maimed limbs recovered, and tumours melted away to the chanting of canticles.

Then, by degrees, after the sordid debates of a contemptible lawsuit, the reputation of La Salette dwindled to nothing; pilgrims were few, miracles were less often proclaimed. The Virgin, it would seem, was gone; She had ceased to care for this spring of piety and these mountains.

At the present day few persons climb to La Salette but the natives of Dauphiné, tourists wandering through the Alps, or invalids following the cure at the neighbouring mineral springs of La Mothe. Conversions and spiritual graces still abound there, but bodily healing there is next to none.

"In fact," said Durtal to himself, "the vision at La Salette became famous without its ever being known exactly why. It may be supposed to have grown up as follows: the report, confined at first to the village of Corps at the foot of the mountain, spread first throughout the department, was taken up by the adjacent provinces, filtered over all France, overflowed the frontier, trickled through Europe, and at last crossed the seas to land in the New World which, in its turn, felt the throb, and also came to this wilderness to hail the Virgin.

"And the circumstances attending these pilgrimages were such as might have daunted the determination of the most persevering. To reach the little inn, perched on high near the church, the lazy rumbling of slow trains must be endured for hours, and constant changes at stations; days must be spent in the diligence, and nights in breeding-places of fleas at country inns; and after flaying your back on the carding-combs of impossible beds, you must rise at daybreak to start on a giddy climb, on foot or riding a mule, up zig-zag bridle-paths above precipices; and at last, when you are there, there are no fir trees, no beeches, no pastures, no torrents; nothing—nothing but total solitude, and silence unbroken even by the cry of a bird, for at that height no bird is to be found.

"What a scene!" thought Durtal, calling up the memories of a journey he had made with the Abbé Gévresin and his housekeeper, since leaving La Trappe. He remembered the horrors of a spot he had passed between Saint Georges de Commiers and La Mure, and his alarm in the carriage as the train slowly travelled across the abyss. Beneath was darkness increasing in spirals down to the vasty deeps; above, as far as the eye could reach, piles of mountains invaded the sky.

The train toiled up, snorting and turning round and round like a top; then, going into a tunnel, was swallowed by the earth; it seemed to be pushing the light of day away in front, till it suddenly came out into a clearing full of sunshine; presently, as if it were retracing its road, it rushed into another burrow, and emerged with the strident yell of a steam whistle and deafening clatter of wheels, to fly up the winding ribbon of road cut in the living rock.

Suddenly the peaks parted, a wide opening brought the train out into broad daylight; the scene lay clear before them, terrible on all sides.

"Le Drac!" exclaimed the Abbé Gévresin, pointing to a sort of liquid serpent at the bottom of the precipice, writhing and tossing between rocks in the very jaws of the pit.

For now and again the reptile flung itself up on points of stone that rent it as it passed; the waters changed as though poisoned by these fangs; they lost their steely hue, and whitened with foam like a bran bath; then the Drac hurried on faster, faster, flinging itself into the shadowy gorge; lingered again on gravelly reaches, wallowing in the sun; presently it gathered up its scattered rivulets and went

on its way, scaly with scum like the iridescent dross on boiling lead, till, far away, the rippling rings spread and vanished, skinned and leaving behind them on the banks a white granulated cuticle of pebbles, a hide of dry sand.

Durtal, as he leaned out of the carriage window, looked straight down into the gulf; on this narrow way with only one line of rails, the train on one side was close to the towering hewn rock, and on the other was the void. Great God! if it should run off the rails! "What a hash!" thought he.

And what was not less overwhelming than the appalling depth of the abyss was, as he looked up, the sight of the furious, frenzied assault of the peaks. Thus, in that carriage, he was literally between the earth and sky, and the ground over which it was moving was invisible, being covered for its whole width by the body of the train.

On they went, suspended in mid-air at a giddy height, along interminable balconies without parapets; and below, the cliffs dropped avalanche-like, fell straight, bare, without a patch of vegetation or a tree. In places they looked as if they had been split down by the blows of an axe—huge growths of petrified wood; in others they seemed sawn through shaley layers of slate.

And all round lay a wide amphitheatre of endless mountains, hiding the heavens, piled one above another, barring the way to the travelling clouds, stopping the onward march of the sky.

Some made a good show with their jagged grey crests, huge masses of oyster shells; others, with scorched summits, like burnt pyramids of coke, were green half-way up. These bristled with pine woods to the very edge of the

precipices, and they were scarred too with white crosses—the high roads, dotted in places with Nuremberg dogs, red-roofed hamlets, sheepfolds that seemed on the verge of tumbling headlong, clinging on—how, it was impossible to guess, and flung here and there on patches of green carpet glued on to the steep hill-sides; while other peaks towered higher still, like vast calcined hay-cocks, with doubtfully dead craters still brooding internal fires, and trailing smoky clouds which, as they blew off, really seemed to be coming out of their summits.

The landscape was ominous; the sight of it was strangely discomfiting; perhaps because it impugned the sense of the infinite that lurks within us. The firmament was no more than a detail, cast aside like needless rubbish on the desert peaks of the hills. The abyss was the all-important fact; it made the sky look small and trivial, substituting the magnificence of its depths for the grandeur of eternal space.

The eye, in fact, turned away with disappointment from the sky, which had lost its infinitude of depth, its immeasurable breadth, for the mountains seemed to touch it, pierce it, and uphold it; they cut it up, sawing it with the jagged teeth of their pinnacles, showing mere tattered skirts of blue and rags of cloud.

The eye was involuntarily attracted to the ravines, and the head swam at the sight of those, vast pits of blackness. This immensity in the wrong place, stolen from above and cast into the depths, was horrible.

The Abbé had said that the Drac was one of the most formidable torrents in France; at the moment it was dormant, almost dry; but when the season of snows and

storms comes it wakes up and flashes like a tide of silver, hisses and tosses, foams and leaps, and can in an instant swallow up villages and dams.

"It is hideous," thought Durtal. "That bilious flood must carry fevers with it; it is accursed and rotten with its soapy foam-flakes, its metallic hues, its scrap of rainbow-colour stranded in the mud."

Durtal now thought over all these details; as he closed his eyes he could see the Drac and La Salette.

"Ah!" thought he, "they may well be proud of the pilgrims who venture to those desolate regions to pray where the vision actually appeared, for when once they are there they are packed on a little plot of ground no bigger than the Place Saint Sulpice, hemmed in on one side by a church of rough stone daubed with cement of the colour of Valbonnais mustard, and on the other by a graveyard. The horizon is a circle of cones, of dry scoriæ, like pumice, or covered with short grass; above them, the glassy slope of perpetual ice and snow; to walk on, a scanty growth of grass moth-eaten by sand. In two words, to sum up the scene, it was nature's scab, the leprosy of the earth.

"From the artistic point of view, on this microscopic grand parade, close to the spring whose waters are caught in pipes with taps, three bronze statues stand in different spots. One, a Virgin, in the most preposterous garments, her headgear a sort of pastry-mould, a Mohican's bonnet, is on her knees weeping, with her face hidden in her hands. Then the same Woman, standing up, her hands ecclesiastically shrouded in her sleeves, looks at the two children to whom she is speaking; Maximin, with hair curled like a poodle,

twirling a cap like a raised pie, in his hand; Mélanie buried in a cap with deep frills and accompanied by a dog like a paper-weight—all in bronze. Finally the same Person, once more alone, standing on tip-toe, her eyes raised to heaven with a melodramatic expression.

"Never has the frightful appetite for the hideous that disgraces the Church in our day been so resolutely displayed as on this spot; and if the soul suffered in the presence of the obtrusive outrage of this degrading work—perpetrated by one Barrême of Angers and cast in the steam foundries of Le Creusot—the body too had something to endure on this plateau under the crushing mass of hills that shut in the view.

"And yet it was hither that thousands of sick creatures had had themselves hauled up to face the cruel climate, where in summer the sun burns you to a cinder while, two yards away, in the shade of the church, you are frozen.

"The first and greatest miracle accomplished at La Salette was that of bringing such an invasion to this precipitous spot in the Alps, for everything combines to forbid it.

"But crowds came there year after year, till Lourdes took possession of them; for it is since the apparition of the Virgin there that La Salette has fallen into disrepute.

"Twelve years after the vision at La Salette, the Virgin showed herself again, not in Dauphiné this time, but in the depths of Gascony. After the Mother of Tears, Our Lady of Seven Dolours, it was Our Lady of Smiles, of the Immaculate Conception, the Sovereign Lady of Joy in Glory, who

appeared; and here again it was to a shepherdess that she revealed the existence of a spring that healed diseases.

"And here it is that consternation begins. Lourdes may be described as the exact opposite to La Salette; the scenery is magnificent, the hills in the foreground are covered with verdure, the tamed mountains permit access to their heights; on all sides there are shady avenues, fine trees, living waters, gentle slopes, broad roads devoid of danger and accessible to all; instead of a wilderness, a town, where every requirement of the sick is provided for. Lourdes may be reached without adventures in warrens of vermin, without enduring nights in country inns, or days of jolting in wretched vehicles, without creeping along the face of a precipice; and the traveller is at his destination when he gets out of the train.

"This town then was so admirably chosen for the resort of crowds, that it did not seem necessary that Providence should intervene with such strong measures to attract them.

"But God, who forced La Salette on the world without availing Himself of the means of fashionable notoriety, now changed His tactics; with Lourdes, advertisement appeared on the scene.

"This it is that confounds the mind: Jesus condescending to make use of the wretched arts of human commerce; adopting the repulsive tricks which we employ to float a manufacture or a business.

"And we wonder whether this may not be the sternest lesson in humility ever given to man, as well as the most vehement reproof hurled at the American abominations of our day—God reduced to lowering Himself once more to our

level, to speaking our language, to using our own devices that He may make Himself heard and obeyed; God no longer even trying to make us understand His purpose through Himself, or to uplift us to that height.

"In point of fact, the way in which the Lord set to work to promulgate the mercies peculiar to Lourdes is astounding. To make them known He is no longer content to spread the report of its miracles by word of mouth; no, and it might be supposed that in His eyes Lourdes is harder to magnify than La Salette—He adopted strong measures from the first. He raised up a man whose book, translated into every language, carried the news of the vision to the most distant lands, and certified the truth of the cures effected at Lourdes.

"To the end that this work should stir up the masses, it was necessary that the writer destined to the task should be a clever organizer, and at the same time a man devoid of individuality of style and of any novel ideas. In a word, what was needed was a man devoid of talent; and that is quite intelligible, since from the point of view of appreciating art the Catholic public is still a hundred feet beneath the profane public. And our Lord did the thing well; he selected Henri Lasserre.

"Consequently the mine exploded as required, rending souls and bringing crowds out on to the road to Lourdes.

"Years went by. The fame of the sanctuary is an established fact. Indisputable cures are effected by supernatural means and certified by clinical authorities, whose good faith and scientific skill are above suspicion. Lourdes has its fill; and yet, little by little, in the long run,

though pilgrims do not cease to flow thither, the commotion about the Grotto is diminishing. It is dying out, if not in the religious world, at any rate in the wider world of the careless or the doubting, who must be convinced. And our Lord thinks it desirable to revive attention to the benefits dispensed by His Mother.

"Lasserre was not such an instrument as could renew the half-exhausted vogue enjoyed by Lourdes. The public was soaked in his book; it had swallowed it in every vehicle and in every form; the end was achieved; this budding-knife of miracles was a tool that might now be laid aside.

"What was now wanted was a book entirely unlike his; a book that would influence the vaster public, whom his homely prosiness would never reach. Lourdes must make its way through denser and less malleable strata, to a public of higher class, and harder to please. It was requisite, therefore, that this new book should be written by a man of talent, whose style nevertheless should not be so transcendental as to scare folks. And it was an advantage that the writer should be very well known, so that his enormous editions might counterpoise those of Lasserre.

"Now in all the realm of literature there was but one man who could fulfil these imperative conditions: Émile Zola. In vain should we seek another. He alone with his battering push, his enormous sale, his blatant advertisement, could launch Lourdes once more.

"It mattered little that he would deny supernatural agency and endeavour to explain inexplicable cures by the meanest hypotheses; it mattered little that he mixed mortar of the medical muck of a Charcot to make his wretched

theory hold together; the great thing was that noisy debates should arise about the book of which more than a hundred and fifty thousand copies proclaimed the name of Lourdes throughout the world.

"And then the very disorder of his arguments, the poor resort to a 'breath that heals the people,' invented in contradiction to all the data of positive science on which he prided himself, with the purpose of making these extraordinary cures intelligible—cures which he had seen, and of which he dared not deny the reality or the frequency—were admirable means of persuading unprejudiced and candid inquirers of the authenticity of the recoveries effected year after year at Lourdes.

"This avowed testimony to such amazing facts was enough to give a fresh impetus to the masses. It must be remarked, too, that the book betrays no hostility to the Virgin, of whom it speaks only in respectful terms on the whole; so is it not very credible that the scandal to which this work gave rise was profitable?

"To sum up: it may be asserted that Lasserre and Zola were both useful instruments; one devoid of talent, and for that very reason penetrating to the very lowest strata of the Catholic methodists; the other, on the contrary, making himself welcome to a more intelligent and cultivated public, by those splendid passages where the flaming multitude of processions moves on, and amid a cyclone of anguish, the triumphant faith of the white ranks is exultant.

"Oh, yes! She is fond of Her Lourdes, is Our Lady, and pets it. She seems to have centred all Her powers there, all

Her favours; Her other sanctuaries are perishing that this one may live!

"Why?

"Why, above all, have created La Salette and then sacrificed it, as it were?

"That She should have appeared there is quite intelligible," thought Durtal, answering himself. "The Virgin is more highly venerated in Dauphiné than in any other province; chapels dedicated to Her worship swarm in those parts, and She meant perhaps to reward their zeal by Her gracious presence.

"On the other hand, She appeared there with a special and very definite end in view: to preach repentance to mankind, and especially to priests. She ratified by certain miracles the evidence of this mission which She confided to Mélanie, and then, that being accomplished, She could desert the spot where She had, no doubt, never intended to remain.

"And after all," he went on, after a moment's reflection, "may we not admit an even simpler solution, namely, this:—

"Mary vouchsafes to appear under various aspects to satisfy the tastes and cravings of each soul. At La Salette, where She descended in a distressful spot, all in tears, She revealed Herself no doubt to certain persons, more especially to the souls in love with sorrow, the mystical souls that delight in reviving the anguish of the Passion and following the Mother in Her heart-breaking way to the Cross. She would thus seem less attractive to the vulgar who do not love woe or weeping; it may be added that they still less love reproof and threats. The Virgin of La Salette could not

become popular, by reason of Her aspect and address, while She of Lourdes, who appeared smiling, and prophesied no catastrophes, was easy of access to the hopes and gladness of the crowd.

"She was, in short, in that sanctuary, the Virgin of the world at large, not the Virgin of mystics and artists, the Virgin of the few, as at La Salette.

"What a mystery is this direct intervention of the Christ's Mother on earth!" thought Durtal.

And he went on: "It is clear, on reflection, that the churches founded by Her may be classed in two very distinct groups.

"One group where She has revealed Herself to certain persons, where waters spring and bodily ills are healed: La Salette and Lourdes.

"The other, where She has never been gazed on by human beings, or where Her appearance occurred in immemorial times, in forgotten centuries, the dead ages. In those chapels prayer alone is in force, and Mary answers it without the help of any waters. Indeed, She effects more moral than physical cures. Notre Dame de Fourvières at Lyon, Notre Dame de Sous-Terre at Chartres, Notre Dame des Victoires at Paris, to mention only three.

"Wherefore this difference? None can understand, and probably none will ever know. At most may we suppose that in compassion for the everlasting craving of our hapless souls wearied with prayer without sight, She would fain confirm our faith and help to gather in the flock by showing Herself.

"In all this obscurity," Durtal went on, "is it at least possible to discern some dim landmarks, some vague law?"

"As we gaze into the darkness, two spots of light appear," he replied to himself.

"In the first place, this: She appears to none but the poor and humble; She addresses the simple souls who have in a way handed down the primitive occupation, the biblical function of the Patriarchs; She unveils herself to the children of the soil, to the shepherds, to girls as they watch the flock. Both at La Salette and at Lourdes She chose little pastors for Her confidants, and this is intelligible, since, by acting thus, she confirms the known will of Her Son; the first to behold the infant Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem were in fact shepherds, and it was from among men of the lowest class that Christ chose His apostles.

"And is not the water that serves as a medium of cure prefigured in the Sacred Books—in the Old Testament by the River Jordan, which cleansed Naaman of his leprosy; and in the New by the probationary pool stirred by an angel?"

"Another law seems no less probable. The Virgin is, as far as possible, considerate of the temperament and individual character of the persons She appears to. She places Herself on the level of their intellect, is incarnate in the only material form that they can conceive of. She assumes the simple aspect these poor creatures love, accepting the blue and white robes, the crown and wreaths of roses, the trinkets and garlands and frippery of a first Communion, the ugliest garb.

"There is not indeed a single case where the shepherd maids who saw Her described Her otherwise than as a

'beautiful lady' with the features of the Virgin of a village altar, a Madonna of the Saint-Sulpice shops, a street-corner Queen.

"These two rules are more or less universal," said Durtal to himself. "As to the Son, it would seem that He never now will reveal Himself in human form to the masses. Since His appearance to the Blessed Mary Margaret, whom He employed as a mouthpiece to address the people, He has been silent. He keeps in the background, giving precedence to His Mother.

"He, it is true, reserves for Himself a dwelling in the secret places, the hidden regions, the strongholds of the soul, as Saint Theresa calls them; but His presence is unseen and His words spoken within us, and generally not apprehended by means of the senses."

Durtal ceased speaking, confessing to himself how inane were these reflections, how powerless the human reason to investigate the inconceivable purposes of the Almighty; and again his thoughts turned to that journey to Dauphiné which haunted his memory.

"Ah! but the chain of the High Alps and the peaks of La Salette," said he to himself; "that huge white hotel, that church coloured with dirty yellow lime-wash, vaguely Byzantine and vaguely Romanesque in its architecture, and that little cell with the plaster Christ nailed to a flat black wooden Cross—that tiny Sanctuary plainly white-washed, and so small that one could step across it in any direction—they were pregnant with her presence, all the same!"

"Surely She revisited that spot, in spite of Her apparent desertion, to comfort all comers; She seemed so close at

hand, so attentive and so grieving, in the evening as one sat alone by the light of a candle, that the soul seemed to burst open like a pod shedding the fruit of sin, the seeds of evil deeds; and repentance, that had been so tardily evolved, and sometimes so indefinite, became so suddenly despotic and unmistakable that the penitent dropped on his knees by the bed, and buried his head sobbing in the sheets. Ah, those were evenings of mortal dulness and yet sweetly sad! The soul was rent, its very fibres laid bare, but was not the Virgin at hand, so pitiful, so motherly, that after, the worst was over She took the bleeding soul in her arms and rocked it to sleep like a sick child.

"Then, during the day, the church afforded a refuge from the frenzy of giddiness that came over one; the eye, bewildered by the precipices on every side, distracted by the sight of the clouds that suddenly gathered below and steamed off in white fleece from the sides of the rocks, found rest under the shelter of those walls.

"And finally, to make up for the horrors of the scene and of the statues, to mitigate the grotesqueness of the inn-servants, who had beards like sappers and clothes like little boys—the caps, and holland blouses with belts, and shiny black breeches, like cast iron, of the children at the Saint Nicolas school in Paris—extraordinary characters, souls of divine simplicity expanded there."

And Durtal recollected the admirable scene he had watched there one morning.

He was sitting on the little plateau, in the icy shade of the church, gazing before him at the graveyard and the motionless swell of mountain tops. Far away, in the very sky,

a string of beads moved on, one by one, on the ribbon of path that edged the precipice. And by degrees these specks, at first merely dark, assumed the bright hues of dresses, assumed the form of coloured bells surmounted by white knobs, and at last took shape as a line of peasant women wearing white caps.

And still in single file they came down the square.

After crossing themselves as they passed the cemetery, they went each to drink a cup of water at the spring and then turned round; and Durtal, who was watching them, saw this:

At their head walked an old woman of at least a hundred, very tall and still upright, her head covered by a sort of hood from which her stiff, wavy hair escaped in tangled grey locks like iron wire. Her face was shrivelled like the peel of an onion, and so thin that, looking at her in profile, daylight could be seen through her skin.

She knelt down at the foot of the first statue, and behind her, her companions, girls of about eighteen for the most part, clasped their hands and shut their eyes; and slowly a change came over them.

Under the breath of prayer, the soul, buried under the ashes of worldly cares, flamed up, and the air that fanned it made it glow like an inward fire, lighting up the thick cheeks, the stolid, heavy features. It smoothed out the crackled surface of wrinkles, softened in the younger women the vulgarity of chapped red lips, gave colour to the dull brown flesh, overflowed in the smile on lips half parted in silent prayer, in timid kisses offered with simple good faith, and returned no doubt in an ineffable thrill by the Holy

Child they had cherished from His birth, who, since the martyrdom of Calvary, had grown to be the Spouse of Sorrows.

They felt, perhaps, something of the raptures of the Blessed Virgin who is Mother and Wife and at the same time the beatified Handmaid of God.

And in the silence a voice as from the remotest ages arose, and the ancestress said, "*Pater Noster*," and they all repeated the prayer, and then dragged themselves on their knees up the steps of the way of crosses, where the fourteen upright posts, each with its cast metal bas-relief, bordered a serpentine path, dividing the statues from the groups. Thus they went forward, stopping long enough to recite an *Ave* on each step they climbed, and then, helping themselves with their hands, they mounted to the next. And when the rosary was ended the old woman rose, and they solemnly followed her into the church, where they all prayed a long time, prostrate before the altar; and the grandmother stood up, gave each holy water at the door, led her flock to the spring where they all drank again, and then they went away, without speaking a word, one after another up the narrow path, ending as black specks just as they had come, and vanishing on the horizon.

"Those women have been two days and two nights crossing the mountains," said a priest, coming up to Durtal. "They started from the depths of Savoy, and have travelled almost without rest to spend a few minutes here; they will sleep to night in a cow-house or a cave, as chance may direct, and to-morrow by daybreak they will start again on their weariful way."

Durtal was overpowered by the radiant splendour of such faith.

It was possible, then, to find souls ever young, souls ever new, souls as of undying children, watching where absolute solitude was not, outside cloister walls, in the waste places of these peaks and gorges, and amid this race of stern and rugged peasants. Here were women who, without knowing it even, lived the contemplative life in union with God, while they dug the barren slopes of a little plot at some prodigious elevation. They were Leah and Rachel, Martha and Mary in one; and these women believed guilelessly, entirely, as man believed in the middle ages. These beings, with their rough-hewn feelings, their shapeless ideas, hardly able to express themselves, hardly knowing how to read, wept with love in the presence of the Inaccessible, whom they compelled by their humility and single-heartedness to appear, to become actual to their mind.

"Yes, it was but just that the Virgin should cherish them and choose them above all others to be Her vessels of election.

"Yes. For they are unburdened with the dreadful weight of doubt, they are endowed with almost total ignorance of evil.

"And yet are there not some souls too experienced, alas! in the culture of wrong-doing, who nevertheless find mercy at Her feet? Has not the Virgin other sanctuaries less frequented, less well known, which yet have outlived the wear of time, the various caprice of the ages; very ancient churches where She welcomes you if you love Her in solitude and silence?"

And Durtal, coming back to Chartres once more, looked about him at the persons who were waiting in the warm shade of the indefinite forest till the Virgin should awake, to worship Her.

With dawn, now beginning to break, this forest of the church under whose shade he was sitting became absolutely unintelligible. The shapes, faintly sketched, were transformed in the gloom which blurred every outline as it slowly faded. Below, in the vanishing mist, rose the immemorial trunks of fabulous white trees, planted as it seemed in wells that held them tightly in the rigid circle of their margin; and the night, now almost diaphanous on the level of the ground, was thicker as it rose, cutting them off at the spring of the branches, which were still invisible.

Durtal, as he raised his head, gazed into deep obscurity unlighted by moon or star.

Looking up still, but straight before him, he saw in the air, through the hazy twilight, sword-blades already bright, gigantic blades without hilts or handles, thinner towards the point; and these blades, standing on end at an immense height, appeared in the gloom they cut, to be patterned with vague intaglios or in ill-defined relief.

As he peered into space to the right and left, he was aware of a gigantic panoply on each side at a vast height, resting on blocks of darkness, and consisting of a colossal shield riddled with holes, hanging above five broader swords, without hilts, but damascened on their flat blades with indefinite designs of bewildering niello.

Little by little the tentative sun of a doubtful winter's day pierced the fog, which vanished in blueness; the shield that

hung to the left of Durtal, the north, was the first to come to life; rosy fires and the lurid flames of punch gleamed in its hollows, while below, in the middle blade, there started forth in the steel-grey arch, the gigantic image of a negress robed in green with a brown mantle. Her head, wrapped in a blue kerchief, was set in a golden glory, and she stared out, hieratic and wild-looking, with white, wide-open eyes.

And this enigmatical Ethiop had on her knees a black infant whose eyes, in the same way, stood out like snowballs from the dusky face.

All about her, very gradually, the other swords, still so dim, began to glow, blood rippling from their crimsoned points as if from recent slaughter; and this trickling red formed a setting for the shapes of beings come, no doubt, from the distant shores of Ganges: on one side a king playing on a golden harp; on the other a monarch wielding a sceptre ending in the turquoise-blue petals of a fabulous lily.

Then, to the left of the royal musician there was another man, bearded, with a walnut-stained face, the eye-sockets vacant and covered by round spectacles; on his head were a diadem and a tiara, in his hands a chalice and a paten, a censer and a loaf; while to the right of the other sovereign who held the sceptre, a still more harassing shape came forth against the blue background of the sword—a sort of oriental brigand, escaped perhaps from the prison cells of Persepolis or Susa, a bandit as it seemed, wearing a little scarlet cap edged with yellow, in shape like an inverted jam-pot, and a tan-coloured gown with white stripes on the skirt; and this clumsy and ferocious personage bore a green palm and a book.

Durtal turned away to sound the depths of darkness, and before him, at a giddy height on the horizon, more sword-blades gleamed. The scrawls which might have been mistaken in the darkness for patterns embossed or incised on the surface of the steel, developed into figures draped in long, straight, pleated robes; and at the highest point of the firmament there hovered amid a sparkle of rubies and sapphires a woman crowned, pale of face, dressed like the Moorish mother of the northern side in Carmelite-brown and green; and she too held an infant, a child, like herself, of the white race, clasping a globe in one hand, and extending the other in benediction.

Last of all, the still dark side, the late side, to Durtal's right hand and further south, till now wrapped in the half-dispelled morning haze, was lighted up; the shield opposite to that on the north caught the blaze, and below it, against the polished metal of the broad blade facing that which presented the negress queen, appeared a woman of somewhat olive hue, in raiment like the others, of myrtle-green and brown, holding a sceptre, and with her, too, there was a child. And round her again emerged images of men piled up one above the other, shouldering each other in the narrow field they filled.

For a quarter of an hour nothing was clearly defined; then the real things asserted themselves. In the middle of the swords, which were in fact mosaic of glass, the figures stood out in broad daylight. In the field of each window with its pointed arch bearded faces took form, motionless in the midst of fire; and on all sides, in the thicket of flames, as it were the burning bush of Horeb where God showed His glory

to Moses, the Virgin was seen in an unchangeable attitude of imperious sweetness and pensive grace, mute and still, and crowned with gold.

She was, indeed, many; She came down from the empyrean to lower levels, to be closer to Her flock, and at last found a place where they might almost kiss Her feet, at the corner of an aisle that was always in gloom; but there She wore a different aspect.

She stood forth in the middle of a window, like a tall, blue plant, and the garnet-red foliage was supported by black iron rods.

Her colour was slightly coppery, almost Chinese, with a long nose and rather narrow eyes; on the head there was a black coif, and She looked steadily before Her, while the lower part of the face with its short chin, the mouth rather drawn by two grave lines, gave it an expression of suffering that was even a little morose. And here again, under the immemorial name of Notre Dame de la belle Verrière, she held an infant in a dress of raisin-purple, a child barely visible in the mixture of dark hues all about it.

In short, She to whom all appealed was there; everywhere under the forest roof of this cathedral the Virgin was present. She seemed to have come from all the ends of the earth, under the semblance of every race known in the Middle Ages: black as an African, tawny as a Mongolian, pale coffee colour as a half-caste, and white as an European, thus declaring that, as mediator for the whole human race, She was everything to each, everything to all; and promising by the presence of Her Son, whose features bore

the character of each race, that the Messiah had come to redeem all men without distinction.

And it seemed as though the sun, as it mounted higher, followed the growth of the Virgin, taking its birth in the window where She was still a babe in that northern transept where Saint Anne, her mother, of the black face, sat between David, the king of the golden harp, and Solomon, the bearer of the blue-lilied sceptre, each against a background of purple, to prefigure the royal birth of the Son; between Melchizedec, the mitred patriarch, holding the censer, and Aaron, in the curious red cap bordered with lemon yellow, representing prophetically the Priesthood of Christ.

And at the end of the apse, quite high up, there was another Mary—triumphant, looking down the sacred grove, supported by figures from the Old Testament and by Saint Peter. It was She again who in the south transept faced Saint Anne, She, now a woman and herself a mother, amid four enormous men bearing pick-a-back on their shoulders four smaller figures; these were the four Greater Prophets who had foretold the coming of the Messiah—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel, bearing the four Evangelists, and thus artlessly expressing the parallelism of the Old and New Testaments, and the support given by the Old Covenant to the New.

And then, as though Her presence were not fully ubiquitous, as though She desired that, turn where they might, Her worshippers should ever see Her, the Virgin was to be found on a smaller scale in less important positions; enthroned in the centre of the shields, in the heart of the