

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

Malingering and Miracles

A case has just been heard at the Paris Assizes which is extremely interesting to the physician, the theologian, and the criminologist. It is that of a man who for some five years or more deceived the greatest physicians in Paris, including Charcot, into believing that he had connecting locomotor ataxy. After having been cauterised and "suspended," neither of which treatments he liked, he eventually arrived at Lourdes, where he was miraculously "cured." In 1891 he robbed the Lourdes fathers of 400 francs, and returning to Paris was admitted to an asylum as suffering from persecution mania, and from this institution he stole some 2000 francs. Being arrested, it was discovered that he was a malingerer of "astounding skill," and was sentenced to four years' imprisonment and ten years' police surveillance. The whole question of modern

miracles is an exceedingly difficult one. We should be the last to maintain that they cannot happen, but whether they do is, we believe, queried by Roman Catholic theologians as well as by others. This case of locomotor ataxy may be catalogued along with those which are cured by a certain patent medicine—i.e., the disease never existed; but in this age of unbelief it is a pity when anything occurs to sap the religious element in man. These kind of failures react in a very harmful way upon the hysterical paraplegics who are really ill, if only functionally, and who, if they can only be induced to believe they will be cured, are so, at Lourdes or any other place which has the requisite mystical qualities.

Reference

Lancet, August 1895, 419.

Researched by Henry Rollin, Emeritus Consultant Psychiatrist, Horton Hospital, Epsom, Surrey