

ABOUT the end of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th, that is to say, from the year 1080 until 1140, a strange malady, known under the name of the "Feu Ardent", devastated all the cities of Europe. It ran through Italy, Germany, Flanders and England. Nothing can be more dreadful than a picture painted by writers of that time. On account of this plague the sick, meeting around the cathedrals, claimed the protection of the Holy Virgin, and pleaded for miracles to be performed.

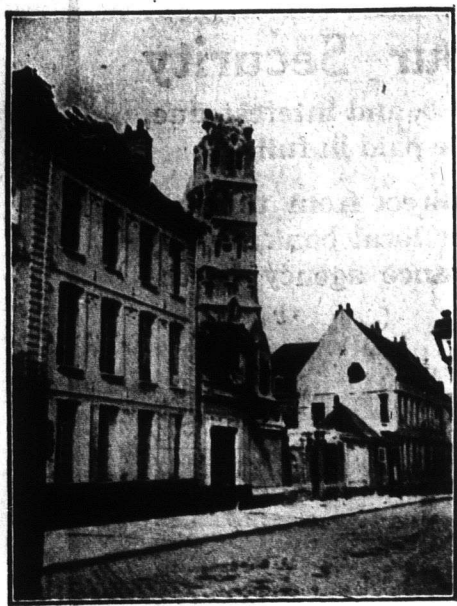
Several of these miracles are recorded in ecclesiastical annals. There is one which happened in Paris in the year 1131, when the Bishop Etienne, so justly called the Father of the Poor, was so touched with compassion at the sight of so much suffering from this disease, that he asked of Heaven a remedy for the evil. A large and solemn procession was formed, headed by the shrine of St. Genevieve, and had only touched the doorsteps of the Notre Dame Cathedral when all but three were cured of the malady. To preserve the memory of this blessing, the Pope, Innocent II, who was in Paris the following year, ordered the celebration of a feast on November 26th in honor of "St. Genevieve des Ardents," and a church was built from the offerings of pilgrims, named after this saint, and which remained until the middle of last century.

Then there is the miracle which came to the town of Arras in the year 1105. A chart, dated 1201, with various seals, and registered in 1482, serves as a guide to this story.

During the time of Lambert, first Bishop of Arras, after the re-establishment of the seat, the "Feu Ardent" came to exercise its ravages in this part of the country. Not a town, not a village, not even a small hamlet escaped. The chart from which these details are recorded tells us that similar to a malignant fire the horrible evil burned the body which it attacked. The part struck with one of its sparks became black like carbon, the hand fell from the arm, the foot from the leg. It corroded the neck, the lips, the gums, the ears and the stomach. The inflammation spread from one member of the body to another. There was safety only in the amputation of the member attacked. Sometimes even this extreme means did not stop the circulation of this infernal poison.

The medicine men had nothing in the way of remedy for the fearful evil, and one was forced to believe it was the finger of God. Bishop Lambert, witness of so much suffering, was filled with anguish, but could only implore Divine help. But one must marvel at the strange way in which his prayers were answered.

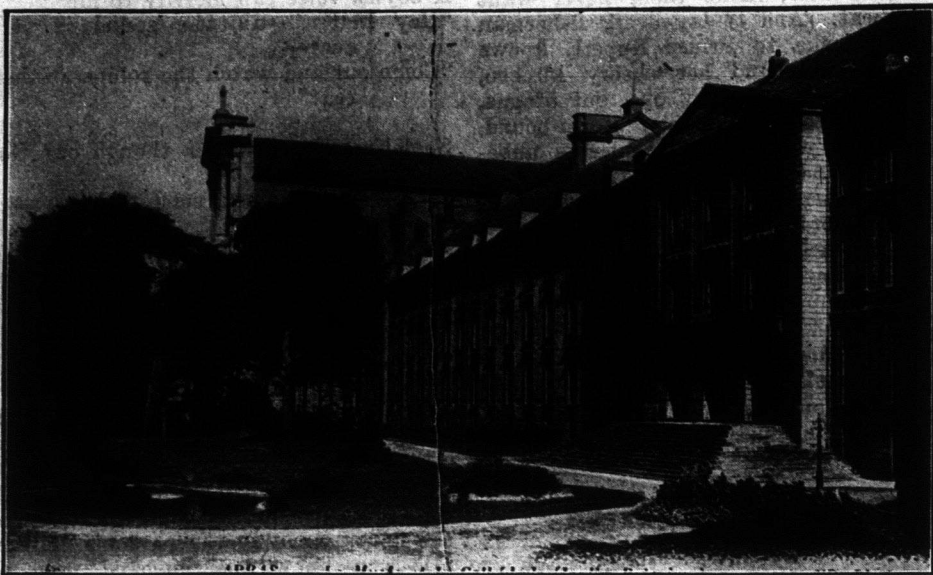
There existed at that time two minstrels of some celebrity, both devout men. One called Itier, living in Brabant, and the other, Pierre Norman, living in the Chateau of St. Pol in Ternois. Norman in sudden rage had killed Itier's brother, and Itier was only waiting to avenge his brother's death. Yet it was these two who were chosen as instruments to relieve the suffering from the "Feu Ardent."



"Eglise des Ursulines Tower, an exact reproduction of the tower which was destroyed during the revolution. Almost entirely demolished during the Great War."

Stories of the City of Arras The Holy Candle

By Major E. E. ERB



The Arras Cathedral, entirely destroyed during the late war, was built shortly after the revolution, replacing the old cathedral destroyed, along with other religious institutions by the revolutionists. The highest portion of the cathedral was used as an observation post during the war. The German front line could plainly be seen from this position.

On the night of May 21st, 1105, Norman, was favored with a vision of the Virgin Mary. "You sleep," she said to him, "while others are suffering cruelly. Listen to what I say to you. Rise and go to the Holy Zion of Arras, sacred place where hundreds of sick are sighing with the burning fire. When you have arrived there, I will make apparent the means of communicating my intentions to Lambert who governs the diocese of Arras. You will instruct him from me to watch all the night from Saturday to Sunday and visit the sick who are in and around the church. You will let him know also that, at the first cock crow a woman dressed as I am will descend from the choir loft holding in her hand a candle which she will give you. After having lit it you will distill some drops in vases of water, which you will give to the sick to drink. You will also put some on the wounds. Those who receive this remedy with faith will be cured. Those, on the contrary, who refuse will lose their lives. You will associate for this purpose with Itier, against whom you nourish a mortal hatred. He will meet you on the Saturday that I have indicated, and after you have become reconciled to him, you will take him for the third party to visit the sick."

During that same night the Blessed Virgin, dressed similarly, presented herself to Itier, and spoke in the same manner to him, adding that he would have for his companion his enemy, to whom he would reconcile himself. Itier arose and went to the church and there, humbly kneeling before a crucifix, prayed earnestly to God that he might know His holy will, and asked for grace that he might execute it.

The following night the vision again appeared to both of them. But this time the Blessed Virgin declared that if they did not start instantly that they themselves would be struck with the "Feu Ardent."

Norman took his way with haste towards Arras, where he arrived on Friday. Fatigued with his journey he took advantage of the night to rest. Itier, on his part, had also started, but having much further to come, did not arrive the same day.

On Saturday, early in the morning, Norman presented himself before the Bishop and related to him his story. Lambeth thinking him an impostor sent him away.

Itier then appeared before the Bishop, relating his experience. The two stories so similar in detail convinced Lambert of their Divine origin. Then Norman was sent for and the reconciliation took place, the three spending the rest of the day in prayer.

That night Lambert joined Itier and Norman before the altar. At the first cock crow, they saw the Virgin Mary

descend from the roof of the choir of the cathedral. A divine flame shone in her hand. "Approach," she said to the minstrels, "here is a candle which I confide to your care and which will henceforth be a pledge of my mercy. All sick persons who are touched with what is called the "Feu Ardent" will only have to distil a few drops from this candle in water and sprinkle their wounds and the malignant fire will be extinguished. Those who believe will recover their health, but those who do not believe will be struck to death." She spoke and disappeared. They immediately filled three vases and mingled amongst the sick, administering to them all that night and the next morning. Arriving at the last unfortunate they presented to him, as to the others, the saving drink. He drank, but not having faith died. All the others immediately recovered from the "Feu Ardent."

The miraculous candle was placed in the parish church of St. Aubert, near to the Hospital Saint-Jacques, where Itier and Norman had established themselves. Their first care was to form an order for the guarding of the celestial candle. To Itier and Norman, principal trustees, and to Lambert, first associate, came to be joined year after year Robert, Canon of Arras, successor of Lambert; Erkembald, Abbot of St. Waast; Gauthier, Canon of Arras; Nicolas d'Augrenon, Chevalier, Lord of Baillieu; Jean d'Ocoche, Chevalier, Baillie of Arras; Philippe d'Acheville, Echerin d'Arras and Jean de Wancourt, Lord of Wancourt.

The Holy Candle, as it was now known, did not remain longer in the church of St. Aubert than four years. In 1109 Itier and Norman left the Hospital Saint-Jacques and moved into St. Nicolas, a house founded for the care of the sick during the "Feu Ardent," known later as St. Nicolas des Ardents, or the house of the Ardents of Notre Dame.

The town of Arras was not the only victim of the malady "Feu Ardent." The scourge spread not only in Artois but also in the neighboring provinces. For that reason the people asked Lambert to allow them to participate in the remedy which he had received from Heaven. The town of Lille was the first to receive a candle made from drops of the Holy Candle of Arras, and was exposed for the veneration of the faithful in a chapel adjacent to the church of St. Etienne.

Almost at the same time Eustache III, Count of Boulogne, came in person to Arras to demand some drops of the Holy Candle for the cure of the people of Boulogne. These drops of wax produced the marvellous candle which was worshipped in the parish church of Desvres.

Lambert also gave to the Abbey of Ruissauville drops of wax, of which was made the candle that was preserved in

the church of that ancient monastery. The Abbey of Blendecques, near St. Omer, obtained the same favor.

The Bishop of Arras also gave to the monastery of Notre Dame du Joyel a morsel of the blessed wax, which partly formed the two candles which had drawn such crowds of pilgrims in worship.

The Holy Candle was soon famous in all the country. It became the object of many frequent pilgrimages because of the many cures which continued to take place in the Chapel of St. Nicolas.

St. Bernard passed through Arras about the year 1131 on his way to St. Omer. Such was his veneration on being shown the Holy Candle that he caused to be erected in its honor a sandstone cross, which remained standing until 1477, and then was replaced by a brass cross on a sandstone pedestal against the wall of the enclosure on the Place de la Madeline.

About 1140 the Counts of Flanders, who always regarded Arras as their capital, made a donation to the Confraternity of Notre Dame des Ardents of a considerable piece of ground, called since, the Close of the Ardents, to construct a chapel and other buildings. The necessity for all these constructions could be understood if a just idea were formed of the immense number of pilgrims who at certain periods came from all directions to venerate the Holy Candle. Under these circumstances the Counts and the Bishop were charged to prevent disorder and to help the Confraternity.

During the thirteenth century pilgrimages became less frequent, the zeal of the people did not slacken, however, as a proof of this there was erected on the Petite Place, near the famous Hotel de Ville, a monument of the most delicate work and in which was placed the Holy Candle, where it remained until 1791.

In the year 1233 lightning struck the Church of St. Gery, and the fire became so violent that the large quantities of water from the wells near by could not exterminate it, until by the advice of some pious person some drops of the wax from the Holy Candle were mixed with the water, which extinguished the flames.

In 1422 Jean Saguespée, Chevalier, Lord of Beaudumont, and Councillor of the Duke of Bourgogne, had built a small chapel at the side of the monument, in which he founded a daily Mass.

It is not necessary to dwell upon all the miraculous things attributed to the Holy Candle except to state that another fire in 1513 was extinguished in the same way as that in the year 1233. On all occasions of public calamity the people of Arras turned for protection to this gift of the Holy Virgin.

The Holy Candle was lighted on special circumstances for the sending away of great troubles, like the siege of Arras by Louis XI. in 1477, or to thank God for some great mercy such as the declaration of peace between France and Spain at the end of the sixteenth century, when the Archduke Albert and the infant Claire-Eugenie made their entry into Arras on February 13th, 1600. (Contd. on page 53)



A portion of the cathedral, showing the damage done after a bombardment.