

Lady of the Waters

Sue Oxley | A novel about Saint Bernadette

Selected extract from pages 105-107

This time she didn't appear on the ledge, but inside the cave, and after we had started our Rosary together, me speaking the Aves and her joining in for the Pater, she looked at me so sadly and so seriously that I became very worried indeed.

Her eyes were so desolate that they seemed to contain all the grief in the world. Her robe and veil started to change, the white became dull and the mountains and animals that moved and ran and disappeared within her robe became still and flat, as in a painting or picture. The light around her dimmed. She looked stopped looking at me and her gaze rose up to move around the people who had followed me and her eyes were full of pain.

She asked me, 'Would you be so kind as to get down on your knees and kiss the ground in penance for sinners?'

Whenever she asked anything of me, she who was so wonderfully gracious, it made me want to cry for the loveliness of her words.

I looked into her eyes, the colour of the deepest blue sky over the mountains, and I couldn't bear to see her terrible sadness. I stopped being afraid and felt an echoing, powerful sorrow at the suffering and hurt that the evil actions of people had caused in the world. She must have seen my pity because she said kindly,

'Would that bother you?'

How could I be bothered by anything this Wonder asked me to do, especially as she cared so much for us all?

'Oh no,' I cried, terrified that she thought I didn't understand and would refuse to carry out a penance, 'I will, with all my heart.'

The ground was filthy, covered with animal mess and rubbish from the river but I didn't see it or let it worry me. I bowed my forehead to the ground in front of Aquero and thought of the wrong things I had done, and the wrong things done to me.

Then I crawled on my knees through the dirt and kissed the ground before her with joy and overwhelming love filling my heart.

Then somehow, we were outside, with Aquero again on the ledge, and she raised her head from watching me and stared again across the crowd. 'Penitencia', she said, 'Penitencia', then looked around, especially at all the rich and powerful and educated people that stood in front of that filthy cave, whipped in their furs by the icy winds from the mountains.

She turned to me again, 'Pray to God. Pray to God for the conversion of sinners.'