

the money now, but up to the present it has been impossible for us to get the ore. We are given some hope at the moment, and we shall probably be able to buy the necessary stock which was refused us before. The manufacture will therefore develop. But if you only knew how much time, patience and money must be spent to extract this tiny amount of radium from several tons of matter!

Such were Marie's preoccupations thirteen days after the awarding of the Nobel Prize. In the course of these thirteen days the whole world had, in its turn, made a discovery: the Curies. A "great couple"! But Pierre and Marie did not get inside the skin of these new characters.

Pierre Curie to Georges Gouy, January 22, 1904:

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I wanted to write to you a long time ago; excuse me if I didn't; it is because of the stupid life I am leading just now.

You have seen this sudden fad for radium. This has brought us all the advantages of a moment of popularity; we have been pursued by the journalists and photographers of every country on earth; they have even gone so far as to reproduce my daughter's conversation with her nurse and to describe the black-and-white cat we have at home. Then we have received letters and visits from all the eccentrics, from all the unappreciated inventors . . . We have had a large number of requests for money. Last of all, collectors of autographs, snobs, society people and sometimes even scientists come to see us in the magnificent establishment in the Rue Lhomond which you know. With all this, there is not a moment of tranquillity in the laboratory, and a voluminous correspondence to be sent off every night. On this regime I can feel myself being overwhelmed by brute stupidity. . . .

The Curies, who had supported poverty, overwork and even the injustice of mankind without a complaint, now for the first time betrayed a strange nervousness. As their renown increased, this nervousness grew in proportion.

Pierre Curie to Georges Gouy, March 20, 1902:

. . . As you have been able to observe, fortune favors us at the moment; but the favors of fortune do not come without numerous worries. Never have we been less at peace. There are days when we

have hardly the time to breathe. And to think that we had dreamed of living like wild people, far from human beings!

Pierre Curie to Charles Edouard Guillaume:

. . . We are asked for articles and lectures, and when several years have passed, the very people who are asking us for them would be astonished to see that we have done no work. . . .

Pierre Curie to Charles Edouard Guillaume, January 15, 1904:

MY DEAR FRIEND,

My lecture will take place on February 18; the newspapers were misinformed. To this piece of false news I owe 200 requests for tickets, to which I have given up replying.

Absolute and *invincible* inertia regarding Flammarion's lecture. I long for calmer days passed in a quiet place, where lectures will be forbidden and newspapermen persecuted.

Marie Curie to Joseph Skłodowski, February 14, 1904:

. . . Always a hubbub. People are keeping us from work as much as they can. Now I have decided to be brave and I receive no visitors—but they disturb me just the same. Our life has been altogether spoiled by honors and fame.

Marie Curie to Joseph Skłodowski, March 19, 1904:

DEAR JOSEPH,

I send you my most affectionate greetings for your birthday. I wish you good health and success for all your family—and also that you may never be submerged by such a correspondence as inundates us at this moment, or by the assaults to which we are subjected.

I regret a little that I threw away the letters we received; they were instructive enough. There were sonnets and poems on radium, letters from various inventors, letters from spirits, philosophical letters. Yesterday an American wrote to ask if I would allow him to baptize a race horse with my name. And then, naturally, hundreds of requests for autographs and photographs. I hardly reply to these letters, but I lose time by reading them.

Marie Curie to her cousin Henrietta, spring of 1904:

Our peaceful and laborious existence is completely disorganized: I do not know if it will ever regain its equilibrium.

The irritation, the pessimism, and I might almost say the bitterness of these letters are not misleading: the scientists had lost their inner peace.

The fatigue resulting from an effort which surpassed our strength, and which had been imposed upon us by the unsatisfactory physical conditions of our work, was increased by the invasion of publicity [Marie was to write later]. The shattering of our voluntary isolation was a cause of real suffering to us and had all the effects of a disaster.

In compensation, fame should have brought the Curies certain advantages: the chair, the laboratory, the collaborators and the credits so long desired. But when would these benefactions come? Their anxious waiting was prolonged. . . .

Here we touch upon one of the essential causes of Pierre's and Marie's bitterness. France was the country where their worth had been recognized last, and nothing less than the Davy Medal and the Nobel Prize were required before the University of Paris bothered to create a chair in physics for Pierre Curie. The two scientists were saddened by this. The compensations which came from abroad underlined the desolate conditions under which they had successfully pursued the great discovery—conditions which did not seem likely to change soon.

Pierre thought of the positions which had been refused him for the past four years, and made it a point of honor to pay public homage to the only institution which had encouraged and supported his efforts within the poor means at its disposal: the School of Physics and Chemistry. In a lecture delivered at the Sorbonne before a large audience he was to say, as he recalled the bareness and magic of the old shed:

I wish to point out here that we made all our researches at the School of Physics and Chemistry of the City of Paris.

In all scientific production the influence of the surroundings in which work is done has a very great importance, and part of the results obtained is due to this influence. For more than twenty years I have been working at the School of Physics. Schutzenberger, the first director of this school, was an eminent man of science. I remember

with gratitude that he procured the means of work for me when I was only an assistant; later on, he permitted Mme Curie to come and work with me, an authorization which, at that time, was an innovation far out of the ordinary. The present directors, MM. Lauth and Gariel, have kept up the same kindliness toward me.

The professors of the school and the pupils who have finished their studies constitute a benevolent and productive circle which was very useful to me. It is among the former pupils of the school that we found our collaborators and friends, and I am happy to be able to thank them all here.

The aversion which celebrity inspired in the Curies had still other sources besides their passion for work or their fright at the loss of time.

With Pierre, who was naturally detached, the attack of popularity encountered the resistance of principles he had always held. He hated hierarchies and classifications. He found it absurd that there should be "firsts" in a class, and the decorations which grown persons coveted seemed to him as superfluous as the medals awarded children in school. This attitude, which had made him refuse the Legion of Honor, was equally his in the realm of science. He was devoid of all spirit of competition, and in the "race for discoveries" he was able to endure being beaten by his colleagues without annoyance. "What difference does it make if I didn't publish such-and-such a work," he had the habit of saying, "since somebody else has published it?"

This almost inhuman indifference had had a deep influence on Marie. But when she fled before the evidences of admiration it was not in order to imitate her husband and not to obey him. The war against fame was not a principle with her: it was an instinct. An irresistible timidity, a painful shrinking congealed her as soon as curious glances were fastened upon her, and even provoked disturbances which brought on dizziness and physical discomfort.

Also, her existence was too crowded with obligations for her to squander a single atom of energy uselessly. Carrying the full weight of her work, of her household, of motherhood and teaching all at once, Mme Curie advanced on her difficult road like

an acrobat. Only one more "part" to play, and the equilibrium was gone: she fell from the tight rope. Wife, mother, scientist, teacher, Marie had not one second of time available for playing the part of the celebrated woman.

By differing routes, Pierre and Marie thus arrived at the same position of refusal. One might imagine that creatures who had accomplished a great work together might receive fame in different ways. Pierre might have been distant, Marie vain . . . Nothing of the sort occurred. The two souls, like the two brains, were of equal quality. After all their trials the couple traversed this one too, victoriously, and in their withdrawal from honors they remained united.

I must confess that I have sought with passion for some disobedience to a law which I found cruel. I should have liked to feel that such prodigious success, a scientific reputation without precedent for a woman, had brought my mother some moments of happiness. That this unique adventure should have made its heroine suffer constantly seemed to me too unjust, and I should have given a great deal to find at the end of a letter, in the midst of a confidence, some movement of selfish pride, a cry or a sigh of victory.

It was a childish hope. Marie, promoted to the rank of "the celebrated Mme Curie," was still to be happy at times, but only in the silence of her laboratory or the intimacy of her home. Day after day, she made herself dimmer, more effaced, more anonymous, in order to escape from those who would have dragged her onto the stage, to avoid being the "star" in whom she could never have recognized herself. For many long years, to unknown persons who came up to her, asking with insistence, "Aren't you Madame Curie?" she was to reply in a neutral voice, dominating a little spasm of fear and condemning herself to impassibility, "No, you are mistaken."

In the presence of her admirers, or of the potentates of the day, who now treated her like a sovereign, she—like her husband—showed only astonishment, lassitude, an impatience more or less covered over and, above all, boredom: the crushing, mortal

boredom which dragged her down when people rambled on about her discovery and her genius.

One anecdote out of a thousand sums up beautifully the response of the Curies to what Pierre called "the favors of fortune." The couple were dining at the Elysée Palace with President Loubet. In the course of the evening a lady came up to Marie and asked:

"Would you like me to present you to the King of Greece?"

Marie, innocently and politely, replied in her gentle voice, all too sincere:

"I don't see the utility of it."

She perceived the lady's stupefaction—and also, with horror, perceived that the lady, whom she had not recognized, was in fact Mme Loubet. She blushed, caught herself up, and said precipitately:

"But—but—naturally, I shall do whatever you please. Just as you please."

The Curies, who had always liked to "live like wild people," now had another reason for seeking solitude: they were fleeing from the curious. More than ever they haunted isolated villages, and if they had to pass the night in a country inn they registered there under a false name.

But their best disguise was still their natural appearance. To look at this tall, ungainly man, carelessly dressed, leading his bicycle along some hollow road in Brittany, and the young woman who accompanied him, accoutered like a peasant girl, who could imagine them to be the laureates of the Nobel Prize?

Even the most knowing had difficulty in recognizing them. An American journalist, having cleverly followed the trail of the physicists and found them at Le Pouldu, stopped, perplexed, in front of their fisherman's cottage. His newspaper had sent him to interview Mme Curie, the illustrious scientist. Where could she be? He would have to find out from somebody . . . From this woman, for instance, who was sitting barefoot on the stone steps at the door, shaking the sand out of her bathing shoes.

The woman lifted her head, fixed her ash-gray eyes on the

intruder . . . and all at once she resembled a hundred or a thousand photographs that had appeared in the press. It was she! The reporter was stunned for a moment, and then dropped down beside Marie and drew out his notebook.

Seeing that flight was impossible, she resigned herself, and answered her interlocutor's questions by short phrases. Yes, Pierre Curie and she had discovered radium. Yes, they were continuing their work.

Meanwhile she brandished her sandals, beat them against the stone to empty them thoroughly, and then put them back on her fine bare feet scratched by rocks and brambles. Magnificent occasion for a journalist! A scene of "intimacy" sketched from life, by the luckiest of chances. . . . Quickly the good reporter took advantage of it and posed some questions of a less general nature. If he could get some confidences about Marie's youth, her methods of work, or the psychology of a woman devoted to research . . .

But at that moment the surprising face was turned from him. In one single sentence which she was to repeat often as a sort of motto, which depicted character, existence and vocation—a sentence which tells more than a whole book—Marie put an end to the conversation:

"In science we must be interested in things, not in persons."