

By FRANCES PARKINSON KEYES

Therese — 'Saint Of The Little Way'

Installation XII

How is it possible to interpret the beatitude of a convent to those who have found it impenetrable? To the student who stands outside, it presents a facade which is cold and blank. It is not unnatural that the average passer-by should be chilled and repelled by this, or that the guarded entrance and the impenetrable grille should antagonize those who have not the habit of recognizing their significance.

What such persons do not realize is that this blankness and this inflexibility are the indispensable safeguards of the seclusion essential for the contemplative life.

The locks and keys are not designed to accentuate the incarceration of cloistered orders; this has been eagerly sought, ardently extended, deliberately perpetuated. The locks and keys are to keep intruders out, not to keep a community in. A convent is not a jail—it is a haven.

For within the barricades there is infinite beauty—the beauty of simplicity, of spotlessness, of spaciousness. The stairways and corridors of a convent are cool and clean. Their high pale walls, their well-waxed woodwork, their smooth-floored floors, contribute to that universal sense of order and repose which finds still more complete expression in the quiet compartments to which they lead.

A constant system, a constant tranquility, unites these compartments, and each cell is distinctive. Its very barrenness facilitates the impression which the character of the individual occupant makes upon it and the awareness of the omnipresence of God.

SKILL WITH FLOWERS

Beyond the corridors and the cells are the colonnades, and beyond the colonnades is the garden. Even the convent sequestered in the heart of a city provides for some sort of a flowering plot. Saint Therese of Avila was meticulous in her recommendation that the sites chosen for the nurseries—which she founded should be pleasing. Her admonition is heeded to this day by the Carmelites.

The care lavished upon the flower beds sheltered by convent walls, which in their turn encircle the cross, the everlasting emblem of suffering and salvation, must be skillful no less than loving. The blossoms that grow in them should suit their surroundings and serve to brighten the hallway, to adorn the altar, hence there may be no blighted upon them.

But it is the human growth, the human beauty, that is after all the greatest glory of a convent. The casual conception of a nun as a cold and rigid creature, pale and wan of aspect, bound by dogma, obsessed by cult, is an intelligent and superficial as the conception of a convent as a prison.

"However preserve us from frowning brows!" Therese of Avila was wont to exclaim; but if there are frowning brows from whom one might well pray to be preserved, I have yet to meet them. They are usually the personification of good cheer. Laughter comes easily to their lips; understanding shines in their faces. Their mode of living being simple and regular, they are also apt to be the personification of health.

Composure of mind and body is part of their code. The educational requirements of their profession are extremely high; and this being the case, an exceptional degree of intelligence and scholarship may be taken for granted. Coupled with their physical strength and their mental attainment, there is usually considerable social charm, and all these qualities are crowned by the spiritual graces that are the dominant essentials of the true servant of God.

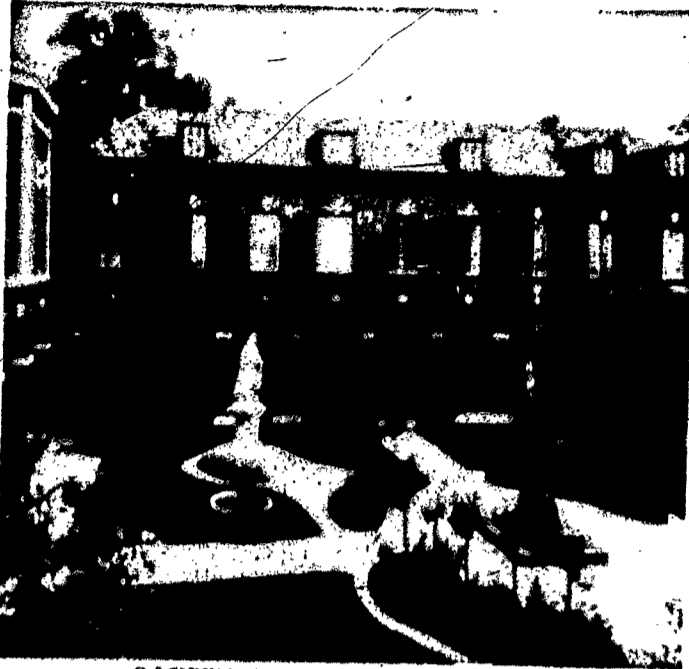
In the entire course of my life, I have never seen a nun whose face was harsh, whose eyes were dull, whose bearing was vulgar, or whose expression was unilluminated by faith.

This could not be so if their purpose were shallow or selfish; but their isolation is not one of egotism. True, they have sought seclusion, they have cleared away all clutter from their lives. Solitude is their watchword, contemplation their pursuit, prayer their calling. But they do not withdraw and pray primarily for themselves; their actions embrace the universe.

BEHIND THE DOOR

It was into surroundings such as I have tried to describe that Therese Maria entered on April 29. She had risen at daybreak putting on a dress of soft blue wool; then she had gone from room to room in Les Buissonnets, looking with lingering gaze the familiar objects on which her eyes were lighting for the last time. Afterwards, she had gone into the garden, still fresh with early morning dew, and had walked slowly across the lawn and along the garden path.

The flowers closed in around her the great trees overspread their wings. Therese Maria moved down the path which led to the little garden, and she passed the fountain, the little bridge, the Oratoire, and the little house where she had lived for so long. She was alone at last, she sat with folded hands, gazing out toward the garden which rose from her heart.



GARDEN AT CARMEL OF LISIEUX

when her family joined her interested in the face of such great gifts.

It was then a small and simple building, blessed behind the altar by the grille which separated the sections used by the nuns themselves from the space open to the general public. It was in this public part that Therese knelt, her family and friends about her. Above the chanting of the priests, as the Mass progressed, she could hear the sound of stifled sobs.

But her own eyes, which for so long had overflowed so easily, were dry. Her heart was beating so hard that she could not have wept if she had. It would have broken with mingled joy and sorrow, for both were super-strong at this high moment. As the service came to an end, she rose and moved with dignity through the sacristy toward the great door rearing itself beyond, embedded in solid wall. She kissed her cousins and her sisters, then knelt again—not before God this time, but before her father.

As he finished blessing her, the great impenetrable door swung mysteriously open and she passed through it, leaving her family overwhelmed by the irrevocable separation which it represented. But to her it seemed a portal of light leading into a cloistered garden, where Marie and Pauline—Soeur Marie de Sacre Coeur and Soeur Agnes de Jesus—were waiting to receive her, together with the Mere Priore and all the members of the community.

CHAPLAIN'S SHARP WORDS
Marie and Pauline were her sisters in the spirit now as well as in the flesh. They embraced her and so did all the members of the community. But confronting the Mere Priore, whose presence seemed more dominating than ever before, was the somber figure of Canon Delatrouste, casting a dark shadow against the lambent light of the morning.

He did not so much as speak to the postulant herself. She had won and he had lost, as he intuitively feared might be the case from the beginning. But at least he would have his moment of revenge and dim the ecstasy of her triumph. He addressed himself curtly to Mere Marie de Gonzague.

"Sing a Te Deum, Reverend Mother, if you can." As the Bishop's representative, I present to you this fifteen-year-old child, on whose entry here you have been set. I hope that she will not fail to come up to your expectations. But lest she should, let me remind you now that you will have only yourselves to thank. I have taken no responsibility in the matter!"

It is a great tribute to Therese's own serenity of spirit that she did not permit herself to be upset by such an outburst. For nothing is so conducive to success as encouragement. The chaplain's sharp words must still have been ringing in her ears as she was shown to her cell and installed there, but she gave no sign of having been carried herself with dignity as well as composure. She expressed herself as being charmed with everything she saw. Her glance fell curiously on each detail of the habitation which was to be her own: the bare, clean floor; the narrow windows; the hard, low cot; the earthen bowl and pitcher; the wooden bench; the lantern; the workbasket; the hourglass. When she was left alone at last, she sat with folded hands, gazing out toward the garden which rose from her heart.

"Now I am here for always"

The period of her postulantcy as she herself afterwards confessed, was strewn with thorns rather than with roses. The mental attitude with which she was surrounded was in itself extremely trying. The community had, to be sure, succumbed to the grace which she had revealed, against heavy odds upon her entry, but afterwards it stood itself against this A current of subconscious jealousy flowed against her, women older than she was, less lovely, less spiritual found it hard to remain dis-

she was later to find herself. But the Jesuit mistook her ardor for arrogance.

"What pride! What presumption!" he exclaimed. "Content yourself by correcting your faults by giving God no offense, by making some progress every day, and by moderating the boldness of your ambition."

"But Father, I do not understand why you should think me bold. Our Lord Himself said, 'Be thou perfect, even as thy father in Heaven is perfect.' Should we then not strive to do this?" Nor did Therese escape that universal impulsion to the cry of anguish which has so often risen from the stricken heart to the trembling lips of Christians throughout the ages. "Lord, I believe help Thou mine unbelief!" She wrote to her sister Céline at one of these moments of deep depression, pouring out her soul. "It is painful to begin a day of labor, above all when Christ seems hidden from us. Where is He? Does He not see our sufferings and the burdens that bear down upon us? If He does, why does He not come to console us?"

And later when she was making the final retreat preparatory to taking the habit she cried out again: "I strive to find Christ and I find nothing but aridity emptiness! But when I have nothing to offer Him as I ought, then at least I can still strive to give Him. I know that He prefers to leave me in the shadows rather than to send me a false light that does not come from Him."

BRIDAL WHITE AND LILIES

There was no night so dark that some inner radiance of her own did not illumine it. It would be hard to her own fortune could not have it. The admission might be wrong from her that she could find no consolation anywhere either on the side of heaven or on the side of earth, but afterwards she could add: "Nevertheless, in the midst of the waters of tribulation through which I was called to pass, I was happy." It was the qualities within herself which sister's lesser spirits have lacked that made these utterances possible and that were to sustain her faith to the end. They sustained her as the period of her postulantcy drew to its end.

It has been prolonged past the usual length of time, due to the relentless opposition still un-abated of Abbe Delatrouste. But she had proven herself intelligent, obedient, discreet and devoted. At the end of nine months even he could find no excuse for putting off any longer the moment when she should take the habit.

The occasion had a magnificent form. Her father desired that on this, his day of triumph, he should reveal to the full his pride in her, his conviction of her ultimate vocation. "If I had anything better to give to God, I would present it!" he had exclaimed, speaking from the depths of his heart. And it was fitting that this splendor of soul should be reflected in the raiment he bestowed upon his daughter.

For nine months, she had worn the straight cut dress, the black bonnet and black pelerine of the postulant. On the morning she would be clad in the brown serge and coarse sandals of the novice. But on this day of days, she was clothed as became the most beautiful of brides. Her dress was white velvet, her veil fine lace, her crown fragrant lilies, as she started up the aisle on her father's arm.

Radiance seemed to stream all about her unconsciously, the Bishop began to chant the Te Deum. A priest moved toward him and whispered respectfully, reminding him that this was reserved for professors. The Bishop motioned him away and went on. He needed no reminder of fabric to feel that on this occasion, only the Te Deum would suffice as a song of triumph.

Inside, the chapel was a blaze of glory. But outside, the ground was covered with snow. It was on such a night as this that Therese had come into the world still, white, consecrated. Now, enveloped in the same transcendent purity, she left it.

(To be continued)

Nuns Found First Moroccan Community

Paris — (RNS) — Three Little Sisters of Jesus, followers of a Rule set down by Father Charles de Foucauld, famed French desert monk who was mysteriously slain in 1916, have arrived in Casablanca to found their first Moroccan community. In accordance with the Rule, which stipulates that its followers must support themselves and always choose the most humble tasks, one of the sisters has undertaken manual work in a jam factory. The second is making carpets with the natives, while the third does the domestic chores for the community. In their spare time, the sisters organize catechism classes and prayer meetings, visit the sick and help the needy.

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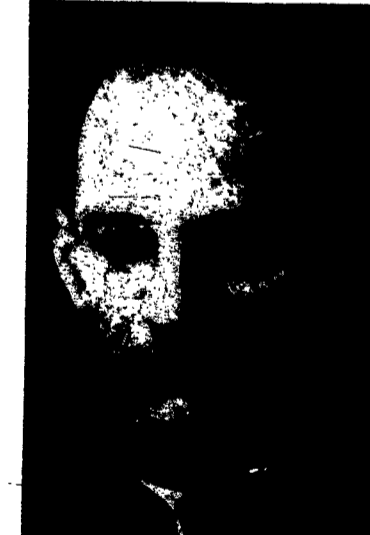
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