Therese — 'Saint Of The Little Way'

By FRANCES PARKINSON KEYES

Installment XVI

THE MEANING OF HEAVEN

That Therese's prayers had always been powerful, no one can possibly doubt. She had prayed, as a child, for the repentance of a hardened criminal, Pranzini; on the very steps of the scaffold he had made his peace with God. She had prayed for the vocation of her sister Celine; their father had no sooner breathed his last than Celine had come knocking at the door of Carmel.

She had prayed for small things as well as great ones, such as snow on the day that she entered the convent: out of a mild and shining sky, flakes had begun to fall. Her prayers were doubly sanctified now, but her thoughts, as these have been revealed to us, had a mystic meaning, too.

Her life up to this time had been curiously free from what, for lack of better words, we call "supernatural experiences." Many persons whose senses are attuned to the infinite in a way to which the multitudes are oblivious could confess to a greater number if they cared—or dared—to be candid on the subject.

But it is one which is usually veiled in silence. This is partly because the innate reticence of the refined precludes them from the discussion of any topic of such intimate and personal character, except with their nearest and dearest. And partly because a sensitive nature instinctively shrinks from the ridicule and incredulity with which, unfortunately, such disclosures are usually met.

We are surrounded, every day of our lives, by the twin miracles of birth and death, which none of us can explain, but which all of us unquestioningly accept; yet when some other miracle, far less complex, is presented to us, we scoff at it. We willingly acknowledge that some human beings can, for instance, paint pictures, while others cannot draw a straight line; that some can build bridges and steer ships and sing songs with ease, while others are entirely inept when they attempt to do the same thing; yet we rebel at the idea that some human being can see and hear phenomena to which others are blind and deaf.

DEBT TO DR. CARREL

It is a curiously inconsistent attitude and one which does no credit to the individual who holds it, but it is singularly widespread, though there are signs that its prevalence is passing and it is no longer universally defended by science. The thinking world owes a great debt of gratitude to Dr. Alexis Carrel for the chapter on miracles which he has included in his eminent work, "Man the Unknown," and, in passing, it is well worth while to note that more than fifty years before this powerful book was written, the Martins' own family physician, Dr. Notta, a comparatively obscure provincial practitioner, had been moved to exclaim, "Science is powerless before phenomena; there is nothing it can do in the face of them."

The occasion for this exclamation was that of a vision which had appeared to Therese when, as a child of ten, she had been dangerously ill: the statue of the Vierge du Sourire—the Smiling Virgin—which had belonged to her mother and which had been placed before her own bed at Les Buissonnets, had suddenly seemed to her animated. The smile which she saw became at one and the same time vital and celestial, the being which it graced, a radiant realty. Her sisters who were in the room with her when it occurred were also sensible of super-natural forces at work, though their eyes were sealed to the exact nature of these. And even the most skeptical, listening to a recital of the occurrence afterwards, were forced to admit the truth of one incontestable fact the dying child had recovered.

As a little girl, she had been granted only one other vision: her father had gone to Alencon on business, when she saw a figure resembling his emerging from the "little thickets" at Les Buissonnets. But it was bent and feeble and shaking, whereas her father was erect and strong and steady of carriage, and its face was covered. She screamed for her sisters, convinced that her "king" must have returned unexpectedly and that some evil must have befallen him, but the figure vanished before they could join her and, shortly afterwards, her father came back from Alencon in the best of health.

This apparition appeared in broad daylight, in the middle of a bright afternoon, when she herself was entirely healthy and happy; so it cannot be explained away as an illusion of the darkness or as a fantasy of a fevered mind. It was so vivid, that she never forgot it, though after a time she was able to dismiss the horror of it from her thoughts. Years later, it was poignantly recalled to her and all her family when Louis-Joseph Martin, stricken with paralysis, frail, tremulous, and broken in mind as well as in body, persisted in covering his quivering features with anything on which he could lay his palsied hands.

Indubitably, the vision had been prophetic Why it had been revealed to a child who had she understood its true meaning would have been shattered by grief is incomprehensible: she says so herself But the fact that it occurred is incontestable It had no connection with her other vision either in time or in character, and she had no more like it In fact she had no more of any kind until early in the course of her last illness, and then the revelation took the form of a dream, which she has vividly described herself.

A CLEAR VISION

"The tenth of May, just about dawn, I seemed to find myself, during my sleep, in a gallery where I was walking alone with our Reverend Mother. Suddenly without knowing how they had entered, I saw three Carmelites garmented in their mantles and great veils, and I understood that they had come from heaven. 'Oh, how happy I should be,' I thought, 'if I could see the face of one of those Carmelites!' As if my wish had been heard, the taller of the saints advanced toward me, and I feel on my knees. To my great joy, she lifted her veil and covered me with it.

"Without any hesitation, I recognized the Venerable Mother Anne of Jesus, founder of Carmel in France. Her face had an ethereal beauty; no aspect of it escaped me, and although the heavy veil now enveloped us both, I saw that her celestial expression was ineffably illumined by a soft light which seemed to radiate herself

"She caressed me gently, and, having been so tenderly received, I ventured to say to her: 'Mother I beg you, tell me if God will leave me much longer on earth? Will He send for me soon?' She smiled benignly and answered, 'Yes, soon, very soon I promise you.' 'Mother' I added, 'tell me also if God requires more of me than I have been able to do? Is He content?'

"At this moment the face of the Venerable Mother became more resplendent than ever, and her expression seemed to me incomparably tender 'God asks nothing more of you,' she said 'He is entirely content' Then, taking my head between her hands, she caressed me in a way that was inconceivably tender My heart was filled with joy. But I remembered my sisters and wished to ask some favors for them, also. Alas! at that moment I awakened."

As a little child, Therese once dreamed that she saw small demons scampering across the lawn of the garden in Alencon; and after the death of Mere Genevieve de Ste. Therese, this venerable mother appeared to her in her sleep, saying "To you dear child, I leave my heart" There is no record of other dreams of any significance, and these, like the visions, were wholly unrelated.

It is doubtful, for two reasons if there were others All of Therese's writing was done for her sisters and her superior with no plan either on her part or on theirs, until the very end of her life, that this writing should be revealed to the public. Therefore, she wrote freely and without reserve, and she would no more have hesitated to express herself fully on some further phenomenon than she had on those which had already occurred. Moreover, the Norman is not, like the Italian and the Spaniard, intrinsically a mystic.

Mysticism is, in a certain sense, alien to his practical and powerful nature, and Therese was essentially a Norman, with the limitations no less than the gifts of her birthright. The quality that ran through every fiber of being in Francis of Assisi, in Catherine of Siena, and in Teresa of Avila, was not a predominant element in the being of Therese The mystic way, devoutly pursued, is one of shining grace, but it is not the only way of beautitude and it was not primarily here. She had her own.

THERESE'S PROMISES

However, as she lay on her white-curtained bed, between the coarse, clean sheets growing steadily weaker and weaker suffering more and more all the time alone with her prayers and her thoughts for endless weary hours a change was steadily taking place in her inner consciousness no less than in her racked and shrunken form The present, with its pressure and its pain, was fading into insignificance; the future with its grandeur and its mystery and its glory was taking form and substance The fear that in the sight of God her life and calling would seem meaningless had left Therese altogether, she had begun to glimpse the mission she had reserved for her

"You will look down on us from heaven will you not Soeur Therese?" the Sister who was watching beside her asked her one night.

"No. I shall come down . . .

"To think they are still waiting for you in Indochina."

"I shall be there, presently"

There was no self-consciousness, no self pride in the statement, only conviction of manifest destiny, only confidence in divine will. Her belief in these was revealed more and more strongly as the time went on.

"You will not be unhappy after my death. I shall send you a rain of roses to comfort you

"The meaning of heaven for me will be to do good upon earth .

"I feel that my mission is just about to begin the mission to make God loved as I love Him myself, to show my own small way to small souls "

"What is the way that you wish to teach?" Mere Agnes de Jesus, who was watching beside her asked her tenderly

"Mother it is the way of spiritual childhood, of complete confidence and self-abandonment I wish to reveal ... that there is only one thing necessary here on earth to offer to Jesus the gift of small sacrifices and the oblation of loving acts. That is all that I have been able to do and only think how I have been rewarded

A STORY OF LOVE

It was in the same spirit that she talked about her book, the book which at first had been merely an intimate, familiar record, but which now without arrogance, but with illumined assurance she had begun to see in a different light. Mere Agnes, aware of her sister's extreme diffidence, had hesitated to speak of her half formulated intention to have the book read aloud, in community, and then to offer it for publication. She was intensely astonished to find that Therese in no way desired to oppose this public appearance, but, on the contrary to hasten it. "Mother after I am dead, please do not talk about my manuscript to any one until it has been published," she said earnestly "If you do otherwise, if you delay this publication, a trap may be set to hinder a very important work"

She had written one of the greatest books of all time, and she knew it what writer could ask for more? She knew, too with that innate sensitivity even now no less unerring than her creative prophetic vision that a book, like a baby is a personal creation, with which no alien hand should tamper, until the time when its divine and its earthly authors are ready to present it to the world If l'Histoire d'une Ame had been read in community there would have been a dozen different opinions as to how it could best be edited; its freshness its spontaneity its candor, its directness all these might have been irreparably impaired

If its publication had been postponed a dozen technicalities might have delayed this indefinitely indeed it had hardly been brought out when the averted imminence of these became apparent Instead It has been translated into every major language. It has penetrated into every part of the world It has been the joy and inspiration of untold multitudes If Soeur Therese had never been anything else her place in history would be secure because she was the author of l'Histoire d'une Ame. But then if she had not been anything else she could not have been herself

DEATH IS SO SLOW

"I feel that all the world is going to love me" she said with touching confidence to Mere Agnes, as she spoke of those who would read her book and she spoke the truth But there were many days now when she hardly spoke at all, when the effort of speech, like the effort of movement, was beyond her waning strength. She was shaken by such unspeakable pains, she had wasted away to such utter tenuity that it seemed as if the tiny thread of life which she still held in her frail fingers might snap at any moment She said good-by to her sisters, she received the last rites of the Church, and still she lingered, unreleased from suffering, month after month after month

"Mother, will it be today?"

"Yes, my child."

But it was not. Night came another night of horror. Then still another morning, more dreadful than any before — another noon . another evening

"Mother, is this not the agony of death?"

"Yes my child But our Lord may keep you here still a little longer"

"His will not mine"

Only Mere Agnes de Jesus, her own 'petite mere' was with her now And as this beloved sister sat at twilight, her heart wrung with compassion, in silent vigil beside the small white bed she was suddenly conscious that a subtle change was taking place in the pale face and still shape before her With a quick quiet gesture she gave the order to ring the great bell which proclaimed to the convent that a soul was escaping its narrow confines for the wider spaces of heaven Noiselessly the community assembled, noiselessly it entered the infirmary

Soeur Therese opened her eyes and smiled at the sisters surrounding her at the crucifix confronting her Then the struggle began again The Angelus rang out, and Soeur Therese opened her eyes once more looking this time toward the statue of the Smiling Virgin which long before had semed so mercifully to bring her life would it now mercifully bring her death? Another hour went by and still there was no sign that it would The community at a second sign from the Prioress withdrew

Mother is this not yet the agony of death not yet?"

She fixed her eyes on the crucifix again Her breath hardly stirred, but for all that her words came clearly and unflinchingly still

(To be concluded)

Children's Book Club Gets New Management

The Catholic Children's Book Club, formerly under the sponsorship of America Press of New York, has been acquired and will henceforth be operated by the Catechetical Guild Educational Society of St. Paul, Minnesota

In announcing the acquisition, Father Louis A. Gales of the Catechetical Guild makes this declaration of policy "The book club under Guild management will continue to serve individual Catholic child readers and their parents by selecting for them from month to month the best in juvenile fiction Books

"Our principal activity in the months ahead will be to make the book club an agency of service to school and parish libraries, in helping them choose their additions" June selections of the club are **The Fiddler Crab and the Sand Dollar** by Mary Ellen Henle **The Radio Imp** by Archie Binns **The Wild Treck** by Jim Kjelgaard and **The Captain's Daughter** by Elizabeth Coatsworth

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D-Day

June 6, 1944. Feast of St. Norbert. The only Norbert we ever knew had been a Seminary roommate. Now an exemplary priest, he was a Chaplain with the Eighth Air Force, based in England. We offered our Mass for him and his "boys" of the "Eighth" that morning. It was just a gesture of friendship. After Mass and breakfast we turned on the radio . . . and said a fervent prayer of thanks for the inspiration of friendship. The "boys in the Eighth" certainly needed all the prayers they could get. That was the night they started flying everything except kites to cover the Normandy invasion. Others have better reason than we to remember St. Norbert's day, 1944. Some remember that day for the grief of loss, some for the grace of survival. Perhaps there is someone who might want to make the memory lasting in a little chapel in honor of St. Norbert. $1,500 would be a start.

MAN IN OVERALLS

. . . or perhaps he works in a dinner jacket. But whatever he wears when he works, Dad works, and works hard to keep something more tasty and nourishing than a coat of varnish on the dining room table. Why not a banquet for him on Father's Day, a very special banquet, the Eucharistic Banquet of Holy Mass? A GIFT CARD telling him of a Mass, or a Novena of Masses will make him happy.

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DAREDEVIL TRIO

Andrea, Celine and Leonee. Sounds like a "Sister Act" of aerialists under the "Big Top," doesn't it? It's a Sister Act, but of another sort. These are three novices of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. They've dared to turn their backs on life and embrace the hardships of living wholly for others. At this point they suggest the "tightrope walker". Two years . . . and $300 for support during that time . . . stands between each of them and their profession. And their balance is precarious. We're trying to get the $300 each to get them off the "tightrope." Any help?

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BIRTHSTONE

That's what an altar is, Christ's Birthstone. Each time Mass is celebrated on the altar, Christ is born again into the world in His Eucharistic Presence. Thursday, June 7, is the feast of Corpus Christi, the very special feast of the Blessed Eucharist. There are mission chapels lacking altars. Perhaps you might like to give one of these "birthstones" in honor of the Blessed Eucharist. $100 will supply an altar for some little chapel where Christ can be born again.

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LOVING CUP

Makes you think of horse races, golf tournaments, roller derbies and all that sort of thing doesn't it? But the one place you see a real loving cup is at Mass. The chalice, with the Precious Blood of Christ, raised for your veneration at the Consecration, is a genuine loving cup. The Precious Blood therein was shed because Christ so loved us that he died for us. In honor of the Sacred Heart Which so loved us it might be nice to donate a chalice this month of June to some needy mission. $50 will get a fitting chalice.

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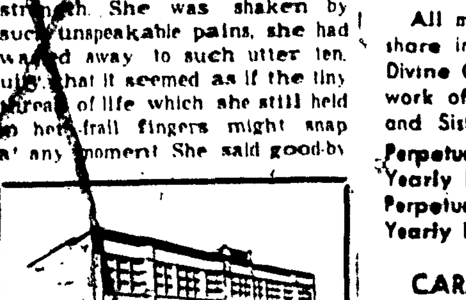
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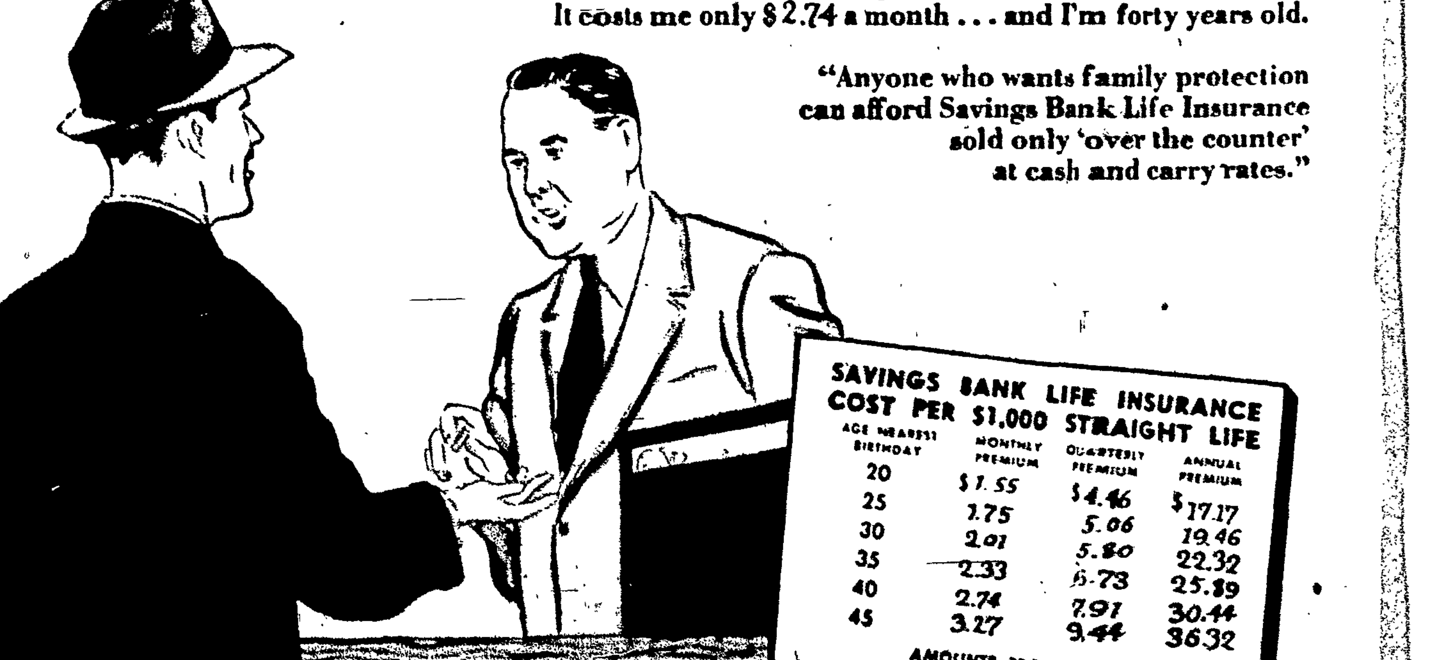

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