

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – THE LITTLE HERMITS

THE holidays were not all spent fishing. The children had to see something of their relations, and Madame Guerin, their kind aunt, who felt herself responsible for her nieces as well as for her own little girls, did her best to make them happy. She used often to take them to a beautiful park, called the Jardin de l'Etoile, a favorite playground for children.

Therese loved running about in the thickets picking flowers, and she always returned with a big bunch. She and her favorite cousin, Marie, had invented an original game called "Hermits." They had heard from their parents stories of the Saints who went to live in the desert, and they were fired with the desire of imitating them. So they made themselves a cell in a quiet corner of the garden, and while one hermit knelt and prayed the other worked, pretending to plant and water the vegetables, of which their diet was supposed to consist. When he was tired of working, and his brother of praying, they changed places.

But one of the little anchorites was always inclined to prolong the time of prayer. This was Therese. She did not only pretend, she really did pray, and spent many happy moments talking to Our Lord and listening to His answers.

The two children kept silence like real monks, and when they had anything to say to each other, they expressed themselves by signs. They put on a very solemn expression, and walked about with downcast eyes. The make-believe continued even in the street. They said the rosary as they went along, using their fingers to count on.

One day, on the way home from school, Therese thought she would imitate the recollection of the hermits. "Lead me," she said to Marie;

"I am going to shut my eyes." Marie immediately wanted to copy her.

"So am I," came the answer.

They were on the pavement, where there was no danger of their being run over, and for a time all went well. Suddenly a loud crash made Jeanne, who was walking in front with Celine, turn hastily round. To her amazement, she saw that the two children had fallen over and upset some boxes standing at a shop door, and the angry shopkeeper was hurrying out to pick up his goods. Needless to say, the hermits opened their eyes wide enough to scramble to their feet and run away, not only from the shopman, but also from the well-deserved scolding which Jeanne had in store for them.

In spite of her taste for the life of a solitary, Therese was overjoyed when one day her father proposed a visit to Trouville, by the sea. From that moment she lived in a dream of eager anticipation, but the reality far exceeded her most glowing expectations. It was the first time she had ever seen the sea, and she sat gazing at it in silent wonder. She enjoyed

picking up the pretty colored shells with which the beach was strewn, and at each fresh find she would give little shrieks of delight. The elder girls used to go for long walks, and Therese generally went with them on their expeditions. Their favorite walk was to the "Black Rocks." One day while her sisters were filling their fishing-baskets with shells, Therese sat there apart with Pauline.

It was evening, just when the sun seems to sink into the wide waters, leaving behind it a golden track of light, an image, Pauline said, of the path of faithful souls, lit up by grace. Therese pictured her own soul as a tiny white-sailed boat floating in the midst of that shining way, and she determined that Jesus should always be its pilot, to steer it swiftly and peacefully to the heavenly shore.