

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – AT SCHOOL

Therese was now eight and a half, and it was decided that she was old enough to go to school at the Benedictine Convent in Lisieux, where Leonie had just completed her studies.

Being advanced for her age, she was put in a class with children who were all older than herself. This gave her a certain standing with her companions, and often during recreation they would gather round her to listen to the stories she told them. One of the mistresses put a stop to this because recreation was the time to run about and play.

As Therese was always the first in the class, some of her classmates were jealous of her success, and paid her out by teasing her on every possible occasion. The poor little girl, who had been used to so much kindness at home, found it difficult to settle down at school, and such behavior on the part of her companions was not likely to make her feel happier. We might have thought that she would have appealed for protection to Celine, "the fearless," as she was called by her father. And Celine would certainly have stood up for her little sister. But Therese would never tell tales. She preferred to bear her troubles alone, and only cried when she was sure no one could see her, that her companions might not be scolded on her account.

We have seen that Therese had never known anything but the greatest tenderness and love at home. But she was never spoiled. On the contrary, she was brought up very strictly. She and her sisters had always before them the example of their father, who was absolutely self-forgetful. His coolness and courage were invaluable in any crisis. On one occasion, when a house was on fire, he risked his life in saving people from the flames. Another time he rescued some young men from drowning, and once he was nearly drowned himself whilst saving the life of a man who was being sucked into a whirlpool. More than once, he interfered to stop a street-brawl in which knives were being freely used. In short, he was always the first to bring help where help was needed. An ardent patriot, it was a great sorrow that he had not been able to enlist during the war of 1870, though when the Prussians approached Alencon he went out several nights with the soldiers, at the imminent risk of being shot had he been taken by the enemy.

With such a father, there could be no fear that Therese would be brought up too indulgently.

Pauline had trained Therese not to be nervous. She used to send her at night to fetch something from the garden or from a distant room, and would take no excuses. After putting her to bed, she left her alone in the dark, though Therese slept in a big room some way from the others. The children had chocolate every morning for breakfast when they were little; but as they grew older they had soup instead, and chocolate only appeared on Sundays and feast-days. Marie used to give them lunch to take to school, but they had to make it last a certain number of days, or they went without. Other little girls brought cakes

and sweets to eat during the morning, but Celine and Therese had to be content with a piece of dry bread till dinner-time.

If they did not get good marks at school, or if they were found fault with, it was never the mistresses who were blamed. Their authority was always upheld against their pupils. Nor did Therese always have her sisters on her side in her little difficulties. It once happened that she showed vexation because her nurse had teased her. Victoire was clearly in the wrong, yet it was Therese who had to beg pardon, that she might learn to behave respectfully towards servants.

In spite of this strict training, Therese once gave way to a very natural desire of being noticed. Her cousin, Marie Guerin, was always complaining of headaches, and on such occasions Marie's mother petted and coddled her. Now Therese often had a headache, but she never told anyone. Once, however, she thought she would make a fuss like Marie in order to get her share of sympathy. Accordingly she curled herself up in an armchair in the corner of her aunt's drawing-room, whimpering:

"I've got such a headache!"

Everyone gathered round her, but it was so unlike her to complain that no one would believe she was only crying because of a headache, and instead of being comforted she was accused of telling stories, and of hiding the real cause of her tears. That was all Therese got for her pains, and she firmly resolved never to copy anyone again.