

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – PAULINE ENTERS CARMEL

THERESE was soon to be separated from the "little mother" to whose tender guidance she owed so much. One day Marie and Pauline were talking quietly together at the far end of the room in which Therese was doing her lessons, when all at once Marie unconsciously raised her voice, and Therese caught these startling words:

"Oh, darling, we have never been separated from each other before! What shall I do without you when you have gone to Carmel?"

"Don't talk like that," replied Pauline; "you will break my heart! You know that it is only for Our Lord's sake that I am going away. I should never, never, have courage to leave you all if I were not going to be a nun. You will have to console Baby," she added in a lower voice, with a glance at Therese; "she will feel it dreadfully, she is so affectionate!"

There was a short silence, then Pauline went on: "I have just seen Mother Prioress and probably I shall enter next month." At these words, Therese threw down her pen and, burying her face in her hands, burst into a storm of sobs.

Realizing that she had heard everything, Pauline took her on her lap to try and comfort her. The child put her arms round her sister's neck and said through her tears:

"Oh, Pauline, you know you promised to wait for me, and to take me with you into a desert when I was grown up!"

From the time Therese was three years old, she had often heard people saying that Pauline would be a nun some day, and without understanding very well what it meant she had said to herself: "I will be a nun too."

Pauline had practically promised to wait till her "little girl" was old enough to go with her, and now she was going without even having told her! When the two were left alone, Pauline began to explain what the life was like in Carmel. She said that nowadays people could no longer go away into the wilderness to become hermits, but that in the Church there was an Order whose members could live a hermit's life in the midst of the world. Strictly enclosed convents had taken the place of deserts. No stranger was ever admitted within their walls, and even the nuns' relations could only see them through an iron grille. Each nun had her own little cell, in which she lived alone, working and praying. Her bed was a straw mattress on hard boards; two little wooden benches served as chair and table; a water-jug and a lantern completed the furniture of this strange room. The food of the Carmelites was in keeping with this austere dwelling. They never ate meat, but had vegetables instead. The description fired Therese with enthusiasm. This, she thought, was all we could want; the less we have, the happier we must be. The conversation made a deep impression on her, and a few days afterwards, when thinking over what Pauline had said, it flashed upon her

that Carmel was the desert where God wanted her to go, and she made up her mind to be a Carmelite. She told Pauline her desire, and Pauline promised to take her to see Mother Prioress, to whom she could confide her secret. But to her great disappointment, Mother Prioress said that postulants of nine were rather too young to be received, and that Therese would have to wait till she was at least sixteen.

The dreaded day at last came when she was to part from her beloved Pauline. It was the second of October, 1882. While Monsieur Martin, accompanied by Marie and his brother-in-law, took Pauline to the convent, Therese, with Leonie, Celine, and her cousins, went to Mass with Madame Guerin. They were all crying so bitterly that everyone in the Church looked at them in astonishment. But that did not stop Therese's tears. Her grief was so great that she wondered how the sun could go on shining and how the birds could sing!

In the afternoon she went to see her "little mother," now Sister Agnes of Jesus. Her sorrow became still more intense when she realized that she could only speak to her sister through the grille! She had been accustomed to spend long hours alone with her beloved Pauline, telling her all her most precious secrets, how much she loved Our Lord, and how many "acts" she had made for Him. Now she understood that those happy times were gone for ever, and that Pauline would no longer be able to listen to her little confidences. In spite of the very deep suffering she endured, Therese tried hard to be sweet-tempered and good with everyone.

The strain told on her health. She began to suffer from a continuous headache, which she bore for several months without complaining. But it happened that while her father and elder sister were away from home, the pain in her head became very violent, and her uncle and aunt, with whom she was staying, telegraphed to Monsieur Martin to return. He came at once, to find his dear little Queen so ill that he thought she was dying. It was with great difficulty that they were able to take her home to "Les Buissonnets." For a long time she lay between life and death, and the doctors declared she could never recover.

Meanwhile, the time drew near when Sister Agnes of Jesus was to be clothed in the Carmelite habit. The family avoided talking of this event before the little invalid for fear of exciting her, for they took for granted she would not be able to go. But Therese was sure that God would allow her to see her darling Pauline on that great day. And contrary to all expectations, she was actually well enough to go to the ceremony. She not only saw her "little mother" in her beautiful bridal dress; she was allowed to sit on her knee to be kissed and given attention in the old way.

But on the very next day she had a serious relapse. All possible remedies were tried, with no effect. Marie nursed her with the most tender devotion, and rarely left her side. Leonie and Celine used to spend long hours with her, trying to amuse her, but nothing could rouse or interest Therese. It seemed as if a miracle alone could save her.