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# The Little Flower at School

By

One of her teachers

*Further Memories of St. Thérèse as a Pupil of the Benedictine Nuns in Lisieux. . . Written for The Far East by a Member of the Community*

## II

We are now going to let little Thérèse herself speak. Here is what she tells us in the *Story of a Soul*, chapter III.

“I was eight and a half when Léonie left school and I took her place at the Abbey.” Then she adds: “I was put in a class of pupils who were all bigger than I.”

This was the *classe verte*, the “Green Class.” I should explain that there were five classes, each having two or three divisions according to the number of pupils, who usually remained for two years in a class. Belts of different colors, worn with the uniforms, distinguished the various classes; red for lowest class, the fifth; green for the fourth (preparatory), violet for the third (elementary), orange for the second, (intermediate), blue for the first (higher), and white for the students who had won their first diploma and were continuing their studies.

### Her Classwork

. Thérèse never wore the red belt and had the green for only one year. Thanks to the attentive care of her “Little Mother” [her sister, Pauline], our new pupil was in no way backward. Does she not also say in her autobiography that from the beginning success fell to her, bringing encouragement and rejoicing? Our industrious pupil held this gain of a year until she left the school. She was intelligent and fond of study, but her spirit of faith was too strong to let her take things easily just because the Lord had endowed her with natural gifts. Thérèse brought a serious and sustained application to her work. The high marks and first places she won in the weekly tests were the reward of her diligence. Undoubtedly she had to strive hard to withstand the competition of class mates who were older than she and not less gifted nor less studious.

It has seemed surprising to us that Thérèse has written: “I had very great difficulty in learning anything by heart.” Quite the contrary the Mistresses are agreed in testifying that she showed

excellent powers of memory, doing well in the subjects that demanded these more particularly, such as history and geography. She could recite by heart stories and long passages of poetry with delightful grace and naturalness. At one of the little literary and musical entertainments with which each term ended, she put so much spirit and feeling into her recitation of the poem entitled “Le Pain de Chez Nous” – a touching story of a little Breton boy, sick in Paris, who in order to get well asked his father for “a piece of bread from home” – that the whole audience was moved by it. And when she said:

*In Heaven, our home and our fair fatherland,  
There is life-giving Bread, bestowed by God’s hand,  
‘Tis the wheat of the elect that is ground for our need,  
‘Tis the remedy divine, it is Jesus indeed!*

all her own ardent love for the Blessed Eucharist came out in her gestures and in the accent of her young voice.

It would not be correct, however, to think that Thérèse had no difficulty with her studies. No, for despite her good will she met with a lack of success in French and in arithmetic that she felt keenly. The dear child did not become angry, and she did not lose courage, but she shed an abundance of tears which showed an excessive sensitiveness. She blamed herself greatly for this and later she was to master it. It is the only fault – and a very light one – that we observed in our lovable pupil. We were upset on seeing her give herself up to such grief. We could not console her when her marks or her place in the tests did not come up to her desires.

It would be a great mistake to think that these tears of Thérèse came from self-love or ambition. She fancied that God would be less pleased with her and that she would grieve her good father, who manifested a certain disappointment when her marks went as low as 3 (out of 6) and, on the other hand, seemed so happy when his daughters brought him reports showing high marks and first places. The day-boarders could bring work with them to do at home in the evenings. M.



**St. Thérèse in 1883**

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Martin and the older girls took the greatest interest in the studies and progress of the children. The truth is, the, that the tears shed by Thérèse came from her delicacy of conscience and her extreme goodness of heart.

### **Petty Persecution**

In the class there was one pupil of limited intelligence, very backward and mortified at finding herself with little girls much younger than she. It is not surprising that she became jealous of the successes of her youngest companion and of the affectionate regard in which this companion was held among the nuns. Thérèse, laden as she was with every gift of nature and of grace, immediately aroused hostility in this girl. These are some of the difficulties that occur in every educational institution. This gave rise to various forms of teasing, not at all serious in themselves but very hard on a child who had been treated so affectionately at home and who, because of her natural timidity, could not rise sufficiently above the unpleasant situation. It must also be said that because of her very active imagination this hardship, real as it was, was magnified for her. Thus Providence was preparing the young schoolgirl for the truly great and painful trials that she was to meet later on.

In outlining briefly the day of a pupil at the Abbey of Notre Dame du Pré, we shall follow little Thérèse step by step.

A little handbell announces all the exercises by loud ringing or by a slight tinkle as the case might be. Every week a “réglementaire” or time-keeper took up duty. This was not regarded by any means as an arduous task but rather as a mark of trust, merited by good conduct. Accordingly, Thérèse had the honor pretty often of ringing the bell.

For the older boarders rising was at 5:55 a. m. The mistress gave the signal by reciting the words of the sign of the cross quite loudly followed by the short, customary offering: “My God, I give You my heart. . .” At 6:40 morning prayer was said – a pupil saying it aloud. Then came *le petit déjeuner* [the light French breakfast]. Pupils who intended to receive Holy Communion went directly to the chapel to have a quarter-hour’s preparation before Mass, at which all assisted.

At 8 a. m. the pupils go into study, which opens with the “*Veni, Sancte Spiritus.*” As we have said [see *The Far East* for March], the day-boarders must be here between 8 and 8:30. From 9 to noon there are various classes. At 10 there is a recess – a short recreation – of ten minutes. This recreation is taken in the playground when weather permits.

During dinner, when everyone has been served, a pupil reads for a few minutes from the lives of the saints. The recreation which follows ends at 1:15 p. m.

## **Eucharistic Visit**

Ten minutes before the signal for going in, the girls who wished were permitted to go to the chapel for a little visit to the Blessed Sacrament. At the age of nine to twelve years, one requires a certain amount of courage and real piety to stop playing immediately, in the middle of a game of croquet or the like. Little Thérèse never failed to throw down whatever she held in her hand as soon as the mistress would approach the different groups and say: “It is time to go to chapel.” And her example would bring along others who were dallying hesitantly.

## **At Recreation**

In connection with recreation, we read in the autobiography: “I was no good at games... I did not care for games, especially noisy ones.” That is true, but as Thérèse was above all faithful to duty, she took part in the general games: pupils were not permitted to go off on their own. Let



**Pupils of the Abbey School at recreation**

*(From a photo taken about 1885, when St. Thérèse was attending the school)*

us hear some of her companions:

“Thérèse loved to gather some of the smallest pupils around her and to tell them children’s stories, and her young audience, enthralled by her words, forgot about playing. So the mistress one day made this remark to us: ‘Children, I prefer to see you running around than talking.’

“Sometimes Thérèse would leave the games of the bigger girls and would turn to see the fun of the little ones. When she spied someone up to mischief, she would come, all smiles, in the middle of the happy flock and would take the little rogue gently by the hands to make her confess her tricks. With her deep, penetrating gaze she seemed to plumb the depth of these little souls.”

Thérèse, we see, had already a liking for the apostolate.

“I take pride, in a supernatural sense, in having been the little companion of Thérèse and in having shared her games. With her I buried little birds under the lime-trees or at the foot of the pear-tree that was growing along the trellis. Our cemetery was there in the corner formed by the chapel, close to the entrance to the cellar. We were very much afraid when passing that dark opening... But one day it was forbidden to go beyond certain bounds, on account of the difficulties of supervision. Hence, in order not to disobey, we had no more funerals of birds in that spot.”

One concluding point will show how, even amid games, the little one’s mind was directed towards the supernatural.

“Thérèse was, I think, nine years old. She was a member of the Sodality of the Holy Angels. According to the custom of the school, the young children who had some little troubles could go and confide them to the girl who filled the office of President in one of the sodalities (of the Holy Angels or the Children of Mary). One day Thérèse said to me: ‘Marguerite, I would like to ask you something.’ ‘Yes, Thérèse, I will talk to you at recreation.’

“When the time came, I drew the child aside and as we walked along together, I said, ‘Well Thérèse, what’s the matter?’

“‘I wish you would teach me how to make a meditation.’

“Quite surprised, I told her to go and find the catechism teacher who could advise her much better than I. Thérèse then confided to me how she practised recollection beside her cot, and said to me ‘*I think.*’

“Without knowing, the little girl was already very expert in the science of prayer.”

Recreation in bad weather, was spent on the terrace, which was spacious and had a southern



Recreation on the Terrace  
(From an old photograph)

exposure. There the children could have their fun and enjoy the fresh air in shelter. But to get there, one had to go through part of the monastery and therefore observe the silence of the cloister. The mistresses obtained this easily, as it was not without awe that the light-hearted throng passed beneath the bare vaulted roof of the old cloister with its outlined arches, ancient and still imposing. There, at the end, stands a fine crucifix. The devout

child, slipping out of the ranks, would climb the three steps of Calvary and standing on tiptoe would lovingly kiss the bleeding wounds of the Saviour.

On the reopening of the school, in October, 1882, Thérèse entered the “Violet Class.” Although there again she found pupils older than herself, it was without difficulty that the newcomer followed the course. She competed successfully with her companions. One of these – now a grandmother – likes to recall these youthful but highly spirited contests in which, beaten by a single mark, she found it hard to forgive the victory of her young rival.

### **In Religion Class**

The time for First Communion always came when the pupil was in this class and the program of studies was arranged so as to give a preponderating place to religious instruction.

The zeal of little Thérèse for religious instruction was wonderful. We shall have occasion to enlarge on this subject and on the extremely edifying way in which she prepared for her First Communion.

The chaplain bore witness, not without pride, that at the customary examination he had deliberately tried to puzzle Thérèse but that he had not succeeded. So he called her his “little Doctor of Theology” and one can foresee perhaps that these words may soon be shown to have been prophetic.

The mistress of catechism at that time, Mother St. Francis de Sales, who died a very saintly death, at the venerable age of eighty, on February 25, 1933, wrote: “Thérèse in catechism class listened to the explanations with close and unflinching attention. Her clear eyes became animated and shone with interest. She seemed to drink in the words of the priest with a devout avidity. She always had the required lesson off by heart.” At this age her zeal for souls was already showing itself by some rather complex and deep questions about the destiny of the unbaptized and the infidels.

An old pupil, today a nursing Sister, wrote to us recently: “Have you still got the crucifix before which Thérèse shed tears of grief while the



**The crucifix in the cloister**  
*Thérèse, standing on tiptoe on the third step, would kiss the wounded feet.*

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mistress was speaking about venial sin? Her little face revealed profound sorrow at the thought of the offense and injury offered to God.” This precious crucifix is to be seen in the Oratory of the Souvenirs.

### **Trials and a Great Favor**

At this period our little Thérèse had to undergo two great trials, but she also received an extraordinary grace. On January 2, 1883, she reached the age of ten when children were then admitted to the Holy Table. Alas, a diocesan synod had just been held and had decreed that henceforth children should have completed their tenth year before the first of January! So Thérèse was two days short. What a sacrifice for this little soul that wished so ardently to be united to Our Lord!

In spite of her resignation, she retained a sense of keen sorrow in the depths of her heart. One may ask if this had not something to do with the continual headaches that afflicted her at the end of 1882.

At Easter these became extremely severe, and then began that strange and mysterious illness that she describes in detail in her autobiography. The bitter trial was ended, as we know, on May 13, 1883 by that indescribable grace of the “Smile of the Blessed Virgin” – the fiftieth anniversary of which has just [1933] been celebrated at the Carmel.

Her cure was complete. Two months remained before the school year would be finished. Thérèse did not resume her studies but came occasionally to let us see that her health was restored. It was admirable how this privileged child of Mary never said a word to anyone about the great favor that she had received; and the same silence was observed by all the members of her family.

When the school reopened in October, Thérèse continued to be the simple, frank schoolgirl of old, but she was more and more edifying. For was not this to be for her the great year. A few months more and the longed-for day would dawn!

Her state of health now allowed her to follow the regular course of studies. She resumed her work with enthusiasm, while giving pride of place to religious instruction, even more markedly than before.

*(To be continued)*

(Editor’s Note: The longed-for day was that of the Little Flower’s First Communion, May 8, 1884. Next month the Golden Jubilee of this event will be celebrated solemnly in the Benedictine Sisters’ Abbey where St. Thérèse first received the Blessed Eucharist, and also in the Carmelite monastery where her life as a religious was lived. Our May issue will give the Benedictine Sisters’ recollections of this notable event in the life of the patroness of foreign missions and the greatest of modern saints.)