

## CHILD OF CHINA

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S EARLY as the thirteenth century China opened her gates to Christian missionaries. Since then, twenty-one *Beati*, all of them martyrs, have given proof of Chinese fidelity to Christ. But here we are not concerned with these stalwart soldiers of the Lord. Our story concerns itself with one of their little sisters in Christ, who, in her comeliness and her beauty, yielded her virgin soul to God after less than three years of her Catholic life, who was martyr only in desire but whose soul was as strong in faith as were those of her heroic brethren.

Not quite twenty-two years ago on the first of April, in the year 1917, a Chinese girl by the name of Ta-jun was born at Peiping in the North of China. Her early years were passed in uneventful happiness in the home of her parents, who were pagans. While she was still very young, Ta-jun lost her beloved mother. As her father, Mr. Wang, was a merchant, engaged in business away from home most of the time, she was brought up under the kind and motherly care of her aunt. Ta-jun and her two younger sisters were sent to a nearby public school. Revealing even at this early age the unusual keenness of her mind, she made rapid progress in her studies. Sundays and holidays she would spend with her sisters enjoying the beautiful parks of Peiping, playing children's games with the other girls of their age.

At the early age of eleven, Ta-jun finished her studies in the elementary school. Though her father could well have afforded to give his bright young child the advantage of further education, her state of health was unfortunately such that it was necessary to send her to a hospital rather than to school. An infection of the lungs had been discovered. Her family decided to send her to St. Michael's Hospital in Peiping for a complete rest. In February, 1929, she was received by the Sisters of Charity who were in charge there. From the very beginning, her curiosity was aroused by these strange women, who were

so kind to her and so patient, and the sound of whose prayers carried from the chapel to her room. Her "amah" or Chinese nurse, Catherine, though she had been baptized now for many years, was hard put to answer her little patient's continual stream of questions. One led to another: "To whom do the Sisters pray? Who is God? Who is the Blessed Virgin? What is Communion? What is Baptism?"<sup>1</sup> Catherine's theology held out well until it became necessary to explain the Trinity. Then crying, "You make my head ache with your many questions," she called in the theological help of a visiting missionary to satisfy the persistent little pagan. After that, events moved rapidly. There was little doubt left as to where this eager interest would lead. When she had learned its simple prayers, Ta-jun took the greatest delight in using her newly-acquired Rosary beads. Her desire to learn was so great that within two months of the time she began to take instructions, she was judged ready to receive Baptism. Soon there was only one thing left to be done; she must ask her father's consent. Her father was not entirely unwilling, but he thought it would be better to wait until she was much older—until she was twenty at least. But she knocked once again on the door of her father's heart, her most forceful argument being, "Am I certain that my health will hold out until my twentieth year?"<sup>2</sup> Her second letter won the day.

At last on April 21, 1929, the Holy Ghost took possession of this child's heart to make there His everlasting abode. Her devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to the Little Flower moved her to take the name Marie-Thérèse. On the following day, Thérèse received her First Communion in the Hospital of St. Michael during the community Mass. From that time on, she advanced rapidly in the life of grace and in the love of her Divine Redeemer. One day soon after that First Communion, one of the kindly Sisters offered the neophyte this helpful advice: "My child, during your thanksgiving I never see you open your missal. Why don't you use the wonderful prayers that are found there? They serve admirably to foster piety." The child's reply was as unexpected as it was remarkable. "That's true," answered Thérèse, "but after Communion

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Castel, Rev. E., C.M., *Rose of China*, trans. by the Rev. Basil Stegmann, O.S.B., (New York, 1934), p. 25. This and succeeding quotations are made with the permission of the publisher, Benziger Bros.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

I do not make use of my missal. Then books are a distraction to me. . . . And besides, I have so many things to tell Him.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly this was no ordinary child.

Her stay in the Hospital had done much for Marie-Thérèse's body as well as for her soul. On the advice of her physician she was sent to the sanatorium of Wen-Ch'uan, where she might benefit by mountain air. But the fervent young convert found Wen-Ch'uan little to her liking, in spite of the beautiful climate. Here she was separated from her family and her friends except for her faithful “amah,” Catherine. Moreover there was no church or even a chapel to which she might go. She did not complain, but when her family saw that the change had not improved her condition, they sent her back to St. Michael's once again. Soon her health was so much better that she could enjoy walking with her aunt. Her father also came from Shanghai to see her at this time. Though he refused the permission she asked to convert her two younger sisters, he was really delighted when he saw how improved she had become and how happy she was in her new Faith.

It was at this time that Marie-Thérèse made known her ardent desire to become a member of the religious community she had learned to love. Her tender years and her frail health made such a desire impossible of fulfillment as yet. But this was no mere childish whim, as we shall see later. At any rate she obtained the promise of the Superiors that her request would be considered when she reached the age of fifteen.

The Winter of 1929-30 Ta-jun spent with her aunt at her father's house in Shanghai. When she returned home in the Spring of 1930, she attempted in vain to take up her school work once more. Though she did not go back to the Hospital as patient, she made frequent visits there to pray in the chapel and to see her friends, the Sisters. In September, 1931, she received the Sacrament of Confirmation. By this time she had little doubt that it would not be long before she was to leave this world for ever. Her strength failed rapidly. Shortly after the beginning of the New Year she was again confined to a hospital bed in St. Michael's. From this time on she was to suffer much, but with remarkable patience. She so impressed a Trappist abbot who came to see her one day that he made his visit a daily practice, for he was greatly delighted and edified to find in her, “the simplicity of a child, patience, and above all a certain

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 46.

Christian sense, admirable in a neophyte."<sup>4</sup> It was he who suggested to her the vow of virginity which another distinguished visitor, His Excellency, Archbishop Constantini, the Apostolic Delegate to China, gave her full permission to pronounce. Marie-Thérèse gave this idea the full deliberation such a step demanded. A few days of serious reflection brought her to a decision. "I feel that the good God will soon take me to Himself. . . . I am ready to pronounce the vow of chastity."<sup>5</sup> Not long after this she consecrated her virginity to God forever.

Now Marie-Thérèse had little time left to spend in this world. Her sufferings increased day by day; the humiliation of being treated as a mere infant added to the torture of her last weeks in St. Michael's. But she accepted it with as much resignation as possible. She dreaded suffering, she was not anxious to die; this she freely admitted. But she was not afraid either to suffer or to die. "If I had a choice, I should prefer to live—but God's will be done. All I desire is that I reach heaven."<sup>6</sup> The burial-place for her body, she was delighted to learn, would be in the same enclosure with the deceased Daughters of Charity. This particular problem had troubled her for some time, but the ecclesiastical superiors to whose jurisdiction this matter pertained willingly granted the exceptional permission and her father did not refuse her request.

In spite of her grievous sufferings, which increased until her last hour, Marie-Thérèse retained her senses fully until the very end. She prayed continually, but the torments were such that they wrung from her the cry, "I can suffer no more."<sup>7</sup> On February 24, late in the afternoon, her final agony commenced. For more than two hours she lingered till at last with a heavenly smile her arms spread out as on a cross and she passed to her reward.

A simple, uneventful, unimportant life, one might say. But the fact that favors are being attributed to the intercession of Marie-Thérèse must change that decision. Those who knew her best are unanimous in their declaration that she was marked as a favored child of God. They do not deny that she had her faults and human frailties; but they affirm without fear of contradiction the strength of character, the deep piety, the humble

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

submission to the divine will that characterized her short Catholic life. Especially in the trying days just before her death did these virtues stand out. Moreover, the mildness and docility that conquered her naturally irascible temperament were, after Baptism, noticeably in contrast with her previous dispositions.

We do not claim for Marie-Thérèse the titles that the Church sometimes bestows officially on men, women, and children of heroic virtues. We only wish to show what marvels were wrought in the life of a little Chinese convert who lived for thirty-three months in the fold of Christ and by His grace became indeed a beautiful ornament of the Church in China.