

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – THE ZEAL OF THERESE FOR SOULS

NOW that she was free from scruples and had conquered her chief failing, Therese's mind rapidly developed. A great zeal for souls sprang up in her heart, together with a desire to forget herself, and from that moment she was completely happy. She longed to love Our Lord more and to make others love Him, and she missed no opportunity of speaking about Him to those who did not know Him.

In her eagerness to help souls, she took charge of two little beggar children. They knew nothing about God when they came to her, but she taught them so well that in a short time they were quite changed. She did not promise them happiness in this world, but she told them about the eternal reward which Our Lord keeps in heaven to give to those who are good. It was a great delight to her when she saw her little charges anxious make "acts" that they might store up the heavenly treasures of which they heard her speak. But her zeal did not stop here. She would slip medals of Our Lady into the coat pockets of workmen, and she even wanted to help the dying that she might convert them.

It would take too long to tell all she did, but an account of the conversion of a famous murderer must not be omitted. The man's name was Pranzini. He was born at Alexandria, and was brought up a good Catholic by his pious mother. He had been well educated and could speak eight languages fluently, so that he easily obtained a post as interpreter. Unfortunately, however, he fell into bad ways, gradually squandered all his savings, and finally landed in France utterly destitute. He made his way to Paris, where he went from bad to worse, until he ended by murdering three people in order to get their money. One of his victims was a child of eleven. The whole of France was shocked by the terrible crime. The murderer was tracked to Marseilles, where he was arrested as he was about to embark for Alexandria. While in prison in Paris, he spent all his leisure translating bad books into different languages. He always denied his crime, and only consented to see the prison chaplain in the hope of getting some tobacco, or because he wanted to while away the time. Strange to say, though utterly indifferent to religion, Pranzini still honored Our Lady. When the Feast of the Assumption came, he expressed a desire to hear Mass. He told the priest that he had never given up the practice of going to church to salute Our Lady's "statue, and that formerly, in Alexandria, he had looked upon it as the greatest honor to carry her banner in processions. This was his only avowal.

Therese had heard his sad history, and was so distressed at the thought of his dying unrepentant that he undertook to convert him. But how was she to do? She could not go to Paris and visit him in his cell, but she took a far simpler and more efficacious means. She multiplied her "acts" and did her utmost to invent new ones, in order to save his soul from hell. Still, realizing that all she could possibly do was too little to obtain so great a favor, she had Mass said for her intention and prayed her hardest.

Meanwhile the news of Pranzini became more and more depressing. Yet the faith of Therese never wavered. She said to Our Lord: "I am sure, my God, that You will pardon poor Pranzini because I am asking You with such confidence. I would be certain even if he shows no outward sign of repentance before he dies, but I beg You dear Lord, to give me the consolation of an outward sign."

She waited anxiously day after day.

The execution was to take place at dawn on August 31, 1887.

When the day came, more than 30,000 spectators assembled outside the prison to see the death sentence carried out.

Pranzini stood before the fatal guillotine, bound hand and foot. To the very last he had refused the help of the priest, had cursed his judges, and sworn that he was innocent. The executioners were about to lead him to the block when, moved by a sudden inspiration, he turned round and cried to the priest:

"The crucifix—give it to me quickly!"

It was held to his lips, and as he kissed Our Lord's sacred Feet he gasped out, in a voice broken with sorrow: "I have sinned."

The priest answered in God's name: "I absolve thee." A few seconds later the knife fell and severed the head from the body. It was the end, but an end like that of the Good Thief.

When Therese heard the news, she was so overcome with wonder and delight that she had to run away and hide lest others should see her intense joy and question her. She thanked Our Lord for giving her this wonderful proof of the power of prayer, and resolved to continue the hidden Apostolate which He had shown to be so fruitful.