

THE LIFE OF ST. TERESA

1515-1582

By

F. A. FORBES

Nihil Obstat

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He who in the heights is the Lord,
in the depths is the Beloved;
above the stars He reigns;
among the lilies He loves.

St. Bernard

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About the Author

F. A. Forbes (16 March 1869 – 1936) was the nom de plume of Mother Frances Alice Monica Forbes, RSCJ, a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart from Scotland and a religious author.

She was born in 1869 as Alice Forbes into a Presbyterian family. Her mother died when she was a child. In 1900 she became a Roman Catholic. Only a few months later, she entered the Society of the Sacred Heart, as a 31-year-old postulant.

She wrote numerous books, including brief biographies of Saint Ignatius Loyola, Saint John Bosco, Saint Teresa of Ávila, Saint Columba, Saint Monica, Saint Athanasius, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Benedict, Saint Hugh of Lincoln, Saint Vincent de Paul, and, most famously, Pope Saint Pius X. She died in 1936.

Chapter 1

GIRLHOOD

He who loves Thee, O my God, travels safely by the open and royal road, far from the precipice; he has scarcely stumbled at all when Thou stretchest forth Thy hand to save him.

St. Teresa

“It was the little girl who made me do it,” pleaded Rodrigo de Cepeda, and although he did not know it, the excuse was as old as the world.

The “little girl” in question was Rodrigo’s seven-year-old sister Teresa, who had been seized with a burning desire for martyrdom. She wanted to see God, she passionately assured her brother, and as it was necessary to die first, martyrdom was obviously the only means to her end. Rodrigo himself had not seen the matter quite in the same light, but as Teresa was his own particular friend and playmate, and they had always done everything together, he had considered himself bound to enter into her views.

The two had set forth hand in hand at an early hour in the morning to seek the desired martyrdom in the country of the Moors, but fate had been against them. Scarcely had the children left the town of Avila when they fell into the hands of an uncle, who was returning from the country. Untouched by their tears and prayers, he promptly took them home, to the relief of the anxious mother, who was

searching everywhere for the missing pair. Rodrigo's excuse has already been given. Teresa with earnest eyes repeated her assertion: "I wanted to go to God, and one cannot do that unless one dies first."

Doña Beatriz de Ahumada was a wise and saintly woman. She explained gently to her little daughter that, for most people the road to God lies through a life spent faithfully in His service. Such a life, especially if one tried one's best to please God in everything one did, and was careful to avoid offending Him, might be quite as meritorious as the shorter way of martyrdom, which was, moreover, only for the few.

It was hard to give up all one's dreams. Teresa consulted the Lives of the Saints, and decided that the most desirable thing, after a martyr's death, was a hermit's life. Assisted by the faithful Rodrigo, she set to work to build a hermitage in the garden, but, as cement had not entered into their plans, the stones fell down as fast as they built them up. Teresa was at last obliged to admit sorrowfully that there seemed no more prospect of a hermit's life than of a martyr's death, and it was in this moment of discouragement that her mother's words came back to her. To do one's best to please God and not to offend Him seemed possible for anybody; she determined, therefore, to try this simple plan, and with her usual energy set to work at once. She had not very much pocket-money, but what she had she gave to the poor; she tried to say her prayers as devoutly as possible, and resolved to do a kind action or say a kind word to everyone she met. It sounds a simple programme, but it took the little girl all her time and cost her many acts of self-denial—how many,

those who practise it will soon discover. But she brought sunshine with her wherever she went, and she began to be supremely happy, for there is no joy like that of giving joy to others.

Doña Beatriz de Ahumada, Teresa's sweet young mother, did her utmost to bring up her large family in the fear and the love of God. Gentle, pure, and devout, she was herself their best example. Of the three sisters and nine brothers who made up the merry family party in the big house at Avila, not one in after life lost the strong faith and fervour that had been so firmly rooted in their childish hearts. Don Alonso de Cepeda, her husband, was a man whom all respected. Truthful, charitable, and chivalrous, he was loved as well as obeyed by all his children. St. Teresa herself tells us that she never knew her father or mother to respect anything but goodness, and that all the children in mind and heart took after their parents. "All, that is," she adds in her humility, "but myself."

The happy family life was soon to be broken up. When Teresa was between twelve and thirteen years old, Doña Beatriz died. In the anguish of loneliness that followed the loss of the mother to whom she had confided all her joys and sorrows, the child flung herself on her knees before the Blessed Virgin, begging her to be her mother now that she had no longer one on earth.

Of all the family, Teresa was perhaps the one who missed Doña Beatriz the most sorely, and who needed her guiding hand the most! Maria, her elder sister, was already grown up, Juana, the younger, scarcely more than a baby; Teresa,

beautiful, brilliant and lovable, was just growing from childhood into girl hood. Her brothers adored her, and amongst the troop of young cousins who frequented the house she ruled as a little queen. There was no danger in this as long as Teresa carried out her childish resolution of pleasing God and never offending Him; but time wore on, and she who had inspired that resolution was no longer at hand to encourage and advise.

There was one amongst Teresa's cousins a good deal older than herself, whose conversation, she tells us, did her much harm. She was a shallow and frivolous girl, who thought of nothing but pleasure and amusement. By the time that Teresa was fourteen, she seemed to have forgotten all her old desires of being a Saint. Whatever time could be spared from the reading of romances was spent in setting off her girlish beauty to the best advantage and enjoying the admiration that she received from all within the little home circle.

But the Blessed Virgin did not forget the child who had thrown herself at her feet on the day of her mother's death. Though Teresa was her father's darling, he was not so blinded by affection for his young daughter as not to notice the change in her behaviour. He was the first to see that her prayers were more hurried, her visits to the church fewer; that she thought more of herself and less of others. He noticed with distress the unworthy friendship that was doing all the mischief. He noticed, too, that in spite of all her amusements, Teresa was less joyous than of old, when she had set her childish steps to "go to God." He took counsel with his eldest daughter Maria, who had also remarked the

change in her sister and was grieving over it in silence. She herself was soon to be married, and it was this that helped them to come to a decision, for when Maria was established in a house of her own, Teresa could not very well remain at home alone with her brothers. It was decided to send her to the Augustinian Convent to complete her education, and no sooner was the wedding over than the plan was carried out.

After the first week or two of homesickness Teresa was heartily glad. She was already tired of the life she had been leading, and the old desires were tugging at her heart strings. Maria Briceño, the nun who had chief charge of the children, was both wise and holy, and it was not long before she had won Teresa's heart.

"How well she used to speak of God," wrote the Saint in later years, "and with what delight I used to listen!" It must be beautiful to be so good, she thought, and to belong wholly to God; and yet she would shiver at the thought of becoming a nun, and hope that God would never ask such a thing of her. Her life at the convent was a happy one, for Teresa had the gift of making friends, and all the nuns loved her. It gave her joy to see how good they were, she says, and to live amongst them.

At the end of a year and a half, however, Teresa fell ill, and returned to her father's house. As soon as she was well enough to travel they went down to the country to the home of her married sister. When, under Maria's loving care, she had grown strong again, and Don Alonso proposed to return to Avila, Maria begged to keep Teresa with her, but her father would not hear of parting with his treasure,

from whom he had been separated, he thought, quite long enough. On the way home they were to stay for a few days at Hortigosa with Don Pedro Sanchez, Teresa's uncle, a holy old man who lived the life of a recluse and a saint. Don Alonso's stay could only be short, as he was obliged to return home on business; but Don Pedro was so delighted with Teresa that he begged his brother to leave her with him until he could come back and fetch her home himself a week or two later.

Hortigosa seemed a little dull to Teresa after the happy life she had led with her sister, until Don Pedro, the greater part of whose time was passed in prayer and study, proposed one day that his niece should read aloud to him in her spare moments. Teresa, always ready to give pleasure to others, set herself bravely to a task which she did not expect to enjoy. To her surprise, however, the Epistles of St. Jerome and the writings of St. Augustine and St. Gregory, which were what her uncle chiefly preferred, turned out to be less dry than she had expected. Her quick intelligence and love of all that was noble and beautiful soon made her almost as eager for the hour of reading as Don Pedro himself, and many were the happy moments spent in the old Spanish garden at Hortigosa.

As the time went on, Don Pedro and his young niece found that they had much in common. They talked now over the daily reading, while the old desire to seek and to find God arose more strongly than ever in Teresa's heart, with a deeper understanding of the means to be taken. Already she had discovered that earthly pleasures were unsatisfying.

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