

UNDER ANGEL WINGS

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SISTER MARIA ANTONIA

RELIGIOUS OF THE SISTERS OF ST. FRANCIS OF PENANCE AND
CHRISTIAN CHARITY
1900-1939

FROM THE ORIGINAL PORTUGUESE EDITED BY
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This is the story of a privileged Brazilian girl, born in 1900, who was led to high sanctity under the continual guidance, protection and inspiration of her Guardian Angel, whom she called her “New Friend.” However, in accordance with the decrees of Urban VIII, the account of the supernatural gifts and revelations of Sister Maria Antonia (Cecy Cony) is to be accepted only on human faith, and everything in this book is submitted to the infallible judgment of the holy Catholic Church.

See that you despise not one of these little ones:
for I say to you, that their angels in heaven al-
ways see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 18:10

For he hath given his angels charge over thee;
to keep thee in all thy ways. In their hands they
shall bear thee up, lest thou dash thy foot against
a stone.

Psalms 90:11-12

Behold I will send my angel, who shall go before
thee, and keep thee in thy journey, and bring
thee into the place that I have prepared. . .

Exodus 23:20-22



Cecy Cony as a child

Some pages have been removed here from this preview..

Contents

Translator's Preface	i
1. My Father in Heaven.	1
My Heavenly Father Is Happy	2
The Crucified and His Holy Mother	4
My Soul's First Great Sorrow	6
The Attraction of the Bureau	7
The Angel.	9
The Secret of the Little Basket	12
2. First Confession and First Communion . . .	15
The Little White Host.	17
Hatred of Sin	19
The Temptation of the Peaches	20
The Broken Glass	21
Modesty, the Handmaid of Purity	23
A Bouquet of White Roses for Our Lady	25
First Confession	30
First Communion and the Sensible Presence of Jesus	33
The Oath of Fidelity.	35

3. Learning How to Say the Rosary	39
“My Friend Cyprian”	42
Cyprian’s Baptism.	47
The Rosary in the Arbor	55
The Box of Bonbons.	56
4. The Year of My Confirmation	59
The Open Basket of Sugar-Cane Cakes	61
The Doll Which Lost Its Eyes	64
5. Some Incidents of the Year 1908	67
At the Merry-Go-Round	69
The Circus	71
The Lost Brooch	74
6. Holy Week of the Year 1908	77
7. The Street Urchin	83
8. “My Automobile”	89
9. Confirmation Sponsor for the First Time . .	95
10. Learning to Make Sacrifices	101
11. Angelic Censorship.	107
The Extended Wings	109
At the Movies	110
12. The Spouse of Jesus.	115
13. The Annual School Picnic	123

14. Sacrifices for Our Lady	129
My New School Kit	129
A Pair of Skates	131
15. The Beggarwoman	135
16. Another Sacrifice for Our Lady	143
A Broken Bottle of Kerosene	144
17. The Feast of the Most Holy Spirit	147
18. The Black Domino	155
19. Studies and Examinations	161
History: The Trojan War.	162
The Magic Pillow	164
20. Threefold Censorship	171
At the Theater	171
A Rule for Drinking.	173
An Improper Book	176
21. My Father and I Saved from Dangers	179
A Fire at Night	179
A Drunken Visitor.	182
Miguel	185
22. The Temptation of Beauty	191
23. A Dance in the Country.	197
24. The Call to the Religious Life	201

A. Sister Maria Antonia's Life in the Convent .	205
As a Postulant	207
As a Novice and as a Professed Sister	209
Victim of Divine Love	211
The Mystical Espousals.	213
Mission Completed	215

Translator's Preface

One day in Rio de Janeiro when I was looking through the books in the shop conducted by Vozes, the Franciscan publishing house, I came upon a book entitled *Devo Narrar Minha Vida*, with the picture of a young Sister on the cover. I included it among the books I was buying, because biographies and autobiographies have always had a special appeal for me. Not long afterward a letter reached me from Mother M. Clarissa, Assistant General of the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity. Mother Clarissa was seeking an English translator for this autobiography. Mother mentioned in her letter that translations were being prepared in Dutch and German, and that a Dutch Franciscan had been instrumental in introducing Sister Maria Antonia's cause in Rome. After examining the book I was glad to accept the task of translating it into English. Now that this work is finished, I consider it a great privilege to bring to English readers knowledge of this favored soul, so innocent, so childlike, so marvelously protected by her Guardian Angel, whom she calls her New Friend.

Sister Maria Antonia was the daughter of João Ludgero de Aguiar Cony, a captain in the Brazilian army, and his wife, Antonia Soares Cony. Born in 1900, she was baptized Cecy, a name which is probably a derivative of Cecilia. In the intimate circle of her family and friends, she was known by the nickname Dédé.

The autobiography of Sister Maria Antonia was first published in 1949 by the Franciscan Press of Petropolis, Brazil. This book became so popular that the first edition was soon exhausted, and a second edition was issued in 1950. The editor of the autobiography was Father John Baptist Reus, S.J., who had been Sister Maria Antonia's spiritual director during the closing years of her life. In his introduction Father Reus tells us how the autobiography came to be written:

Obliged by obedience, Sister Maria Antonia wrote the recollections of her life, with a certain repugnance and after asking the special help of Our Lord. According as she finished each of the six notebooks of which the autobiography consists, she handed them in to her superiors, and did not ask anything further about them. She died before she could finish her autobiography, which describes her life only up to her twenty-first year.

Sister Maria Antonia was able to appear before Our Lord in all the radiant beauty of her baptismal innocence. The manuscript was read by several persons, who found it so appealing that they asked to have it published so that others might draw inspiration from it. The facts narrated in this autobiography deserve the belief of any prudent person who is versed in these matters. Sister Maria Antonia was intelligent and well educated. In her classes, she was usually in first or second place. In the exercise of her profession her superiors testify that she was an excellent teacher.

Humble, singularly sincere and innocent, she never lied in her life. She never offended her Divine Master deliberately [*por querer*]. This phrase gives us the key by which we can judge correctly certain external faults noted in her by certain persons. She was incapable of inventing mystical occurrences. Neither from books nor in any other ordinary way could she have become acquainted with the supernatural phenomena that she describes so clearly. When she learned toward the end of her life that there were souls who never experienced the sensible presence of Our Lord at Holy Communion, she asked with surprise: "Not even on the day of their First Holy Communion?" When she received an answer in the negative, she wept bitterly, exclaiming: "Those souls never came to know Our Lord in this life."

The late Father Francis X. Zartmann, S.J., had a deep admiration for the life of Sister Maria Antonia. His opinion is of great value to us, because for many years he was Provincial of the Southern Brazilian Province of the Society of Jesus. He had been director of Jesuit priests during their year of tertianship. He was an experienced spiritual director and retreat master for priests and religious, a man of calm and sound judgment, a deep student of mystical phenomena.

It was necessary to omit certain passages from the manuscript which referred to the interior life or to persons who could be identified. Knowledge of her life

in the convent was drawn from Sisters who enjoyed the friendship and confidence of Sister Maria Antonia.

Father Reus's introduction is written in the careful, restrained language of the professor of theology. Along more lyrical lines, another tribute to Sister Maria Antonia comes from the eloquent pen of His Excellency Dom Frei Henrique Golland Trindade, O.F.M., who wrote the Preface to the Portuguese work. Dom Henrique says:

Along with the familiarity which this holy Franciscan Sister enjoyed with her Guardian Angel, the most profound impression that we received from reading this autobiography was the simplicity, the ingenuousness, of the whole narration. For us this is one of the proofs of its truthfulness. One cannot imitate such a style. It is written in the language of the Fioretti of St. Francis. It is like a humble and unpretentious stream flowing through the fields and the woods, murmuring:

Whoever wishes to seek me,
 Let him do so!
 Whoever wishes to approach and contemplate me,
 Let him do so!
 Whoever wishes to drink from my waters,
 Let him do so!
 Whoever wishes to believe in me,
 Let him do so!
 I am nothing but a stream flowing along,
 Touched by the Angels,
 Illuminated by the sun in God's Heaven.

How wonderful it is to read pages such as these, pages capable of raising the level of our spiritual life, which is so weak, so earthly! We must convince ourselves that Our Lord is still generous with His gifts, that He has not yet closed His sacred hands and heart. He still seeks souls who will listen to Him. He is still the Eternal Beggar, knocking, knocking at the door of our hearts, with His hair wet with dew from the long nights when He has been spurned by His creatures who do not love Him, who do not want Him. Yet He continues to knock and to wait.

Not only in the convents but in every place where human beings dwell, He knocks: in homes, factories, colleges, business houses. In every place there can exist souls living a true mystical life, living in intimate union with Our Lord. To cite examples: mothers and wives like Anna Maria Taigi and Elizabeth Leseur; workers like Matt Talbot; university professors like Contardo Ferrini; business people like Marie Guyard before her entrance into the Ursulines; seamstresses like Marie Eustelle...

In the ranks of these and of many others, Sister Maria Antonia now takes her place. Teacher, Franciscan Sister, native of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, she lived in our own day. Let us rejoice! Let us also be convinced that the mystical life, with all its graces, surrounds us in every place. Only let our souls be pure, humble, recollected! Let us open the door of our souls to the knocking of divine love, and our Divine

Master and Spouse will enter and will sup with us! Then the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit will make our souls their dwelling place.

The world, weighed down and saturated with crimes and sins, lies sunken in a tremendous abyss. Only mystical souls, souls of the Cross, souls of divine love, can balance the scales of divine justice. The world, proud and opinionated, binds itself in a maze of complications. Only the simplicity of the Gospel, the way of spiritual childhood which St. Therese of Lisieux taught and Sister Maria Antonia lived—only this can save the world. Visible and invisible devils fill the cities and the country, homes and schools, workshops and mansions. Only the Angels of God, so ignored and forgotten, can triumph over them.

This, then, seems to be the threefold mission of Sister Maria Antonia: first, to encourage us to enter the mystical way of prayer and self-immolation without fear, for only there will we come to know and enjoy God; secondly, to teach us the simplicity of faith; thirdly, to stir up in our hearts a great love for our invisible friends our Guardian Angels.

We offer this autobiography to English readers with the weighty recommendations of these two eminent priests and scholars: John Baptist Reus, S.J., who died in 1947, a one-time professor of theology at the Seminario Central (a regional seminary) in São Leopoldo, state of Rio Grande do Sul; and His Excellency Dom Frei Henrique Golland

Trindade, O.F.M., Bishop of Botucatu, famous preacher and author of several books for spiritual reading.

We believe that readers will find this autobiography interesting, timely, enlightening, edifying and even humorous. When they have finished, let them thank God for this innocent soul who grew up in our own age, subject to all the evil influences of this century, who was yet guided through it all, safe and unharmed, even as was the younger Tobias, by the Angel of the Lord! Let them also turn their eyes upon the many benefits they have received from day to day from their own Guardian Angels; and let them thank sincerely these invisible, protecting and inspiring friends of ours!

FR. CONALL O'LEARY, O.F.M.

Sister Maria Antonia did not identify by name some of the companions and friends who enter into her life story. Names have been supplied in these cases by the translator of the autobiography in English. These designations include: Lucy, in Chapter 5; Laila, Chapter 5; Inácia, Chapter 6; Zita, Chapter 8; Dona Nayá, Chapter 11; Alice, Chapters 16 and 19; Elena, Chapter 19; Sarah, Chapter 22. With the exception of the aforementioned, all other names are those supplied by the author of the original manuscript.

Sister Maria Antonia's manuscript was divided into sections and given headings by the editor of the original Portuguese, Fr. John Baptist Reus, S.J. The division into chapters in the English version is that of the translator.

Chapter 1

MY FATHER IN HEAVEN

My good Jesus, I want to fulfill Thy most holy Will. May I, the least of all Thy creatures, glorify Thy name! Remembering everything that Thou hast done for me, O my God, may I love Thee still more! I must narrate everything that I recall about my life. I shall write it as it comes from my heart.

I consider my life as two chains intertwined: one being Divine Grace, and the other the misery of a creature. I was born on the fourth of April in the year 1900, and I remember the years of my childhood from the age of four. I remember so well the town where I was born, Santa Vitória do Palmar, with its extensive groves of palm trees. I remember also my home and the children with whom I played. My memory goes back even to the afternoon of 2 February 1904, when, as I was sitting on the steps that led out to the yard and playing with a little toy bear, I heard my father calling to me: “Dédé, come and see the baby which we found in the basket that the big stork carried in his beak to Mother.” This was my brother Jandir.

I recall also that even at that time I already had some idea of the good God. I remember the crucifix on the pedestal that was always on top of the high bureau. To see this I had to be lifted up by Acácia, the good nursemaid who took care of me until I was ten or eleven years old. Likewise I remember

the big picture representing the Most Holy Trinity, just as I recall the holy water font in honor of the Immaculate Conception. This is all.

I knew the good God by the name “Father of Heaven,” and I remember that it was my own father who spoke to me of my heavenly Father.

My Heavenly Father Is Happy

One day there was a great storm, and my father was sitting in his comfortable armchair, reading something. The thunder and the lightning succeeded each other. Frightened, I ran to the protecting arms of my father, hiding myself between his knees. It was there that my father said to me:

“Are you listening? That is our Father in Heaven, who is angry with those children and grownups who do not want to be good. But when little children are good, our Heavenly Father is very happy and He commands the sun to shine.”

Thus it was that I arrived at an idea of the good God. And from that day until I was six years old, every day as soon as I woke up my first interest was to see whether the sun was shining or whether it was raining. If it was raining, but without thunder, then I imagined that my heavenly Father was sad because of me, but without being angry. And nearly always, if not always, I discovered in myself the reason why my Heavenly Father was sad. Perhaps I had not allowed Acácia to put ringlets in my hair, or I had called her ugly. Or I had cried in anger because I wanted to see

the soldier¹ bathe Congo, the big horse that my father rode. Or I had pretended to eat and had thrown the food on the ground. On that day when in my anger I threw the food on the ground, it rained and thundered.

But always after these tantrums I felt a great disgust with myself for having offended the good God. Then I would run to my mother's bedroom and, looking at the big picture representing the Eternal Father with a long white beard, I would gaze intently at His holy face to see whether He was still sad or angry with me. But never, never, during the three years when this was my custom did I find that the holy face of my Heavenly Father appeared still angry.

Thus it was that I began to love the good God and to desire to please Him, as I thought to myself: "My Heavenly Father is so good, and He wants to do good things for me. When I am bad, He does not like it; but when I tell Him that I will not do such a bad thing any more, then my Heavenly Father is my friend once more."

I never spoke to anyone about this daily custom of mine. Only a few times did I hear anyone speaking about God. I did not know how to pray until I was five years old. This I learned at school. However, I knew that the good God lived in Heaven and that everything which was beautiful and good had been made by Him.

¹ Cecy's father was a captain in the Brazilian army. The soldier was in the service of the Cony family.

The Crucified and His Holy Mother

Up to this time I had known only about the Father of Heaven with the long beard that was as white as cotton. I had heard no one speak about the meaning of the crucifix on the bureau. In my ignorance I did not like to look at it, because I felt a kind of horror and sorrow for that “unknown Man.”

At that time [1904] there resided in Santa Vitória the Reis family. Dona Glória Reis, the last living member of that family today, had opened a private school there. My older sisters were enrolled in this school, and this was the beginning of a close friendship between my parents and the Reis family. One day Dona Mimosa Reis, the mother of Dona Glória, came to our house. My little brother, Jandir, who was only a few months old, was sick; and so Dona Mimosa was taken to my mother’s bedroom. I liked this lady very much. As soon as I knew that she was present in the house I would run to her and stay with her as long as she remained. Thus it happened on that day. Hearing the voice of Dona Mimosa, I ran to be with her. Leaning against her knees, I remained with her.

Dona Mimosa was sitting in front of the big bureau, where one could see, in the center, the black crucifix with the white corpus of Christ. Standing up and holding me in her arms, she went to the bureau. Taking down the crucifix, she asked me: “Dédé, do you know who this is?” I did not know what to answer. Then, taking the holy water font representing Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, she asked the same question, and again I did not know the answer. But when

she pointed to the picture of the Most Holy Trinity—ah, then I knew: yes, it was the great Father of Heaven, whom I already loved so much. I remember perfectly, as if it were today, that first simple lesson which I received at the age of four from that good and pious lady, whose image has always remained in my memory. May the good God give her a just reward for the immense good she did for my soul!

When I said to her that the Eternal Father was the Father of Heaven, Dona Mimosa pointed to the crucifix and said:

“*He* also lives in Heaven. He is the Son of the good Father of Heaven. Your name is Cecy, and His name is Jesus. Jesus lives in Heaven, a very beautiful place, which He made. And here on earth, where you live, the Father of Heaven made everything for those who live here. And the Father of Heaven said: ‘Those who are good I will take to my beautiful Heaven to live with Me.’ But most of the people did not want to be good; and so instead of going to the beautiful Heaven, they would have been sent for punishment to the depths of the earth, which is filled with fire, and which is where the wicked devil lives.”

“But the Father of Heaven, being so good, had pity on these bad people. So He sent His Son Jesus to live here on earth, that He might ask all the people to be good and to do only what His Father in Heaven wanted them to do. But many people did not like the good Jesus. They beat Him; they mocked Him; and they sent the soldiers to seize Him. Then they made a cross like this one, but much bigger. And using a great hammer and long nails, they fastened the good Jesus

to that great big cross. Jesus died. Afterward, He came to life again and went back to Heaven.”

“But Jesus is so good, and He loved those bad people so much that He said to them: ‘Do not do bad things! Everyone, even children like Cecy who want to be good, I shall bring to the beautiful Heaven, which is filled with angels who fly like the butterflies.’ ”

Then, taking the holy water font, Dona Mimosa continued the lesson, saying: “This beautiful woman is the Mother of the good Jesus. She is good like her Son, and went with Him to Heaven.” This was the end of the lesson, a most important lesson, which sank into my childish soul and served as my guide for three years.

My Soul’s First Great Sorrow

When Dona Mimosa, still holding me, wished to return to the place where she had been sitting, I threw my arms around her neck and began to cry convulsively. My mother and Dona Mimosa were frightened, not knowing the cause of my tears. Then Acácia came and led me away to see Congo, the big horse that I liked so much.

This was the first great sorrow of my soul during my childhood. I felt a great pity for the good Father of Heaven, whom I loved much more from that day forward and whom I always desired to please, even though I might commit thousands and thousands of faults, because not one of those faults was voluntary, especially from the day I received that holy lesson.

The “poor Jesus,” nailed on that black cross, had from that time forward a great attraction for and influence over me. I loved God much more now; and many times during the day, but especially when it began to get dark, I would post myself at the foot of that bureau so that Jesus would not be alone and would not be afraid of the soldiers who treated Him so cruelly.

Often Acácia took me away, surprised at my attraction for that bureau, not knowing the true cause for this. That bureau attracted me in spite of the great dread that filled me when the room became dark and silent (since at that hour all were usually out on the veranda). On one occasion, as I shall explain, I was unjustly accused because of being at my favorite post.

The Attraction of the Bureau

In 1905 my father journeyed to Rio de Janeiro. On his return he brought back big boxes of candied fruits. How I loved to eat these as I sat on the little seat of the swing. There I would receive from my father a big banana covered with sugar or perhaps a big piece of orange. When one piece delighted me more than the others, or when I came upon a new fruit, I thought in my innocence that it was the Mother of Heaven who had made these and sent them down to the little children on earth by means of the beautiful Angels, who could fly like butterflies. (In the home of Captain Bezerra² I

² Apparently a friend of the family.

had already seen a picture which showed a Guardian Angel crossing a bridge with two little children.)

My mother kept these boxes of fruit on top of that big bureau. Before my father had returned with these boxes, I had been accustomed to drag over to the bureau the high chair which I used at table and which was usually in the room next to Mother's bedroom. I could then climb on it and get a close view of the hands and feet of Jesus, with those big nails that caused Him so much pain. Now one evening as it began to grow dark, I started to climb on the chair, as was my custom, without ever thinking of the boxes of fruit. Just then Acácia entered the room and, seeing me, became very angry. Taking me with one hand and the chair in the other, she brought me to my father, at the same time saying to me: "Little glutton, you would take some of that fruit, and then either I or Conceição [the other servant] would get the blame! I will tell all about this."

My father looked at me sorrowfully and said: "Now I know that my little girl is like the little mice, who love to take away what they can find." I could not say a word. Up to now I had not known what a lie or an injustice was, and my limited intelligence could not conceive how Acácia could accuse me of something that I had not done. Of course, she had been deceived by appearances. Shortly afterward, however, I forgot about this incident, and I continued faithfully to keep watch before the Crucified, whom I never forgot, even in the midst of my playing.

How many times I hid behind the door and wept profoundly out of pity for Jesus nailed to that big cross on which He died!

My parents were accustomed to make social visits in the summertime, and nearly always we children accompanied them. However, I never felt happy visiting others, although generally I had other children to play with. Always in my mind was the thought that Jesus was alone and that He would certainly be afraid of those evil soldiers.

The Angel

In the year 1905 the time for the carnival approached. At that season my mother would deck us out in fancy dress. Then, accompanied by Acácia and Conceição, my sisters and I would go with the other little ones to the town square. I had a great dread of those who disguised themselves in those horrible masks. I thought the masks were their real faces, and I believed that those persons were supernatural beings who lived in the depths of the earth, surrounded by fire, in that place about which Dona Mimosa had spoken.

I believe that this was the first year that I accompanied my sisters. All the confusion and noise of the square frightened me. The multitude of masked people, big and small, jumping around and beating the ground with those big balloons tied at the end of a stick—all this filled me with such terror that I might have died if the good God had not come to my aid. I was with the other children, who were enjoying themselves; but Acácia and Conceição, conversing with other servants, were not paying any attention to me.

Thus, filled with terror and with no one to comfort me, I conceived the idea of getting away from there and returning

home. I did not know the way, but I resolved to leave by the big gate. This was all I knew. I did not think of anything else. I left the group of children, and immediately I was swallowed up in that small square, which to me was like a world without end. I did not cry. My great fear had frozen my tears.

In my terror I remembered the good Jesus, whom I had left behind alone, and I felt a great sorrow for not having brought Him with me. But I knew that my Father in Heaven sees and knows everything, and that He certainly saw me there alone. Just then a big man, wearing a horrible mask and with flashing eyes that I can still see in my imagination, approached me and took me by the hand. At that moment I could have died of fright.

I had walked a few steps, held prisoner in his big hand, when I sensed, at my side, without actually seeing anything—knew to be present just as truly as I knew the presence of the big masked man on my other side—the Angel whom I had seen in the picture at the home of Captain Bezerra. My Father in Heaven had sent this angel to stay with me and take me home. I was aware of his presence without seeing him, but it was as if I had seen him. I had the absolute certainty that he was at my side, on the side opposite the masked man. Then the masked man freed me with a push and I did not see him anymore. He disappeared into the crowd.

All my terror now left me, and my soul was filled with a sweet tranquillity because of the confidence I felt in my “New Friend.” I had come in sight of the gate leading out of the square when I saw Acácia running toward me. If I had

seen her before the arrival of my “New Friend,” I should certainly have run toward her with the same anxiety with which she was hastening toward me. But my calmness no doubt quieted Acácia’s anxiety; and neither she, nor my father, nor my mother, ever knew of this incident of the Angel, for this is the first time that I have related it.

From that day in February or March of 1905 my “New Friend” accompanied me always and everywhere. He stood guard with me at the foot of the big bureau as we watched before the Crucified Jesus. From that time I had no more fear of the semi-darkness of that room, for I felt the sweet, protecting presence of my “New Friend.” That is the name I gave him and called him by until I was six years old, when I learned that he was my holy Guardian Angel. I understood him perfectly when he spoke to me, although I never heard his holy voice.



O faithful Guardian of my childhood and girlhood, how great is my longing to see you, my New Friend! Permit me to weep; it will not do any harm. These tears I offer you, my faithful Guardian, as a proof of my great love and my great desire to see you. After thirty years, why have you hidden yourself from your little sister and friend? But you are still with me, I know, even though I have not been aware of your holy company and presence since last year, 1935. As I recall all that you have done for me, I desire to love you still more. If it were not for you, my holy Guide, who knows but that I

might have offended my good God voluntarily and gravely, thousands of times! How many, many times, given up to my own caprices and inclinations, I was ready to do evil, when your holy warning arrived, always on time, to hinder me from falling!

The Secret of the Little Basket

Soon after the carnival I heard my father saying one day that we were going to take our vacation at the sea. On the following day I saw Acácia, Conceição and my mother busily preparing clothes and packages. We were going to the sea! This thought delighted me. My New Friend would go also. This I knew. Every member of the household was going, even the good Abelino, the soldier who bathed Congo. Abelino would drive the carriage. However, my father could not go. During our absence he would have to live in the barracks, as our house would be closed up. I was thinking about all this while I was arranging, in a little basket that Dona Mimosa had given me, the teddy bear and also the big doll, which could get into the basket only by sitting down.

Suddenly my great joy was changed into bitter sorrow as I remembered Someone. Even the little teddy bear would go; only my beloved Crucified Jesus would remain alone. He who had sent my New Friend to protect me from the masked man, He would have to remain in the dark, closed-up room. I would willingly have remained with Him, but I knew very well that my mother would not allow this. Ah, but—then the thought came to me—supposing, in place of the doll and

the teddy bear, I should take along the crucifix. Acácia had given me the little basket for the doll and the teddy bear, but instead I would take the crucifix without my mother or Acácia knowing anything about it.

I went to the bedroom. Having placed the high chair near the bureau, I was able to reach my Great Friend and place Him in my lap. Then, going to the wardrobe, I took out a small cape and wrapped up that crucifix which I liked so much. It was thus that the crucifix went also to the sea. During the journey I kept the basket with me all the time. When we arrived at the sea, I guarded it at the foot of my little bed. We stayed many days at the seaside, but the crucifix remained always in the little basket. I brought it back to the city and placed it on top of the bureau without my mother or Acácia knowing.

The rest of the pages have been removed from this preview..