

WHERE THERE IS DARKNESS

By Paul Jenkins SJ

The Story of Mother St Mathilde Raclot and her companions, Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus, pioneer Missionary Sister in MALAYA and JAPAN.

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Infant Jesus Sisters

Contents

Prologue.....	2
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	9
Chapter 3.....	13
Chapter 4.....	18
Chapter 5.....	22
Chapter 6.....	26
Chapter 7.....	28
Chapter 8.....	32
Chapter 9.....	36
Chapter 10.....	41
Chapter 11.....	46
Chapter 12.....	48
Chapter 13.....	51
Chapter 14.....	57
Chapter 15.....	61
Chapter 16.....	64
Chapter 17.....	68
Chapter 18.....	73
Chapter 19.....	79
Chapter 20.....	84
Chapter 21.....	89
Chapter 22.....	95
Chapter 23.....	100
Chapter 24.....	104
Chapter 25.....	108
Epilogue.....	110

PROLOGUE

September, 1852

Shadows of rope and rigging were etched black against the white deck of the S.S. Bentinck, outward bound from Southampton to the eastern waters. The sun, though not yet so hot as it would be later in the voyage, was warm enough to give new life to the passengers who were only now recovering from the battering they had endured in the Bay of Biscay.

In the shade of an awning rigged on the boat-deck, two nuns sat together in companionable silence, broken only by the quiet hissing of the sea past the side of the ship, and occasional bursts of laughter from further along the deck.

Sister St. Appollinaire quietly laid down her English grammar and remarked: "Everyone sounds a lot more lively than when we were in the Bay of Biscay!"

Taller than average, and inclined to plumpness, Sister St. Appollinaire was reserved by nature, yet there was a hint of humour in the corners of her eyes.

"They are not the only ones who were not very lively then." answered Mother St. Mathilde wryly. "If I'd seen a piece of solid earth the size of a saucer, I think I would have swum for it."

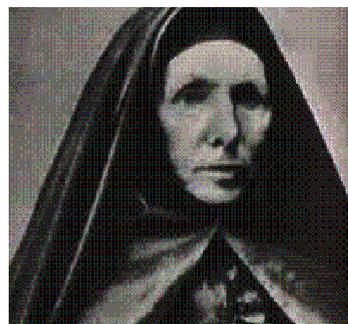
Sister St. Appollinaire studied the thin, finely-drawn profile of her new Superior turned towards the French coast not far away.

Mother St. Mathilde was now about forty years old, ten years older than herself, and had been chosen as the new Superior of the Mission in Malaya. Before sailing, there had been little opportunity for the four nuns in the party to become well acquainted with one another, and as yet Mother St. Mathilde was something of an enigma. Sister St. Appollinaire felt sure of one thing—the new Superior would be very competent. She knew a good deal of the disastrous first attempt to found the Mission in Malaya and the difficulties lying ahead. Mother General would not have taken any chances this time.

Mother St. Mathilde continued gazing at the flat French coast. A little behind the shore stretched long lagoons, interconnected with one another to form a system of canals behind farm barges and vineyards, so that from the S.S. Bentinck it looked as if barges with sails spread to catch the wind were sailing over the fields.

Suddenly she stood up.

"Look, Sister. Sete!"



Both nuns moved to the rail and Mother St. Mathilde pointed to a hill, which, small in itself, stood out against the flat coast on either side of it. On top of the hill was Sete, a dark little town, nothing colourful or picturesque to recommend it.

Sister St. Appollinaire looked at it in silence for a moment, and then at Mother St. Mathilde.

"Did it mean so much to you?" she asked.

Mother St. Mathilde continued to gaze at the town as it slowly slid astern and faded out of sight in the summer haze.

Yes, it had meant a great deal to her. The years she had spent it in the Convent at Sete had not always been easy, but they brought her a maturity and self-confidence she had thought would never be hers. Now she had been given a mission which would demand every ounce of talent for government and diplomacy. She was under no illusions. Mixed with her sorrow at leaving her native land and the joy of seeing the fulfilment of her childhood dreams of becoming a missionary was the fear of not being equal to the task which had been given to her.

The first party of Sisters had arrived in Malaya some six months earlier after a voyage full of hardship. The Superior, Mother St. Pauline, had died almost at the end of the voyage and another had fallen seriously ill. The survivors were too young and inexperienced to manage by themselves, and it was up to Mother St. Mathilde to organise their work. Being a missionary, for her at least, was going to involve more than riding out on bullock-carts to catechise children.

She remembered her own childhood in the old farmhouse among the rolling green hills of Lorraine, the evenings when her father told her stories of her great countrywoman, Joan of Arc. How she had wished fervently to be like Joan, instead of being so timid and shy! Now, so many years later, she was able to look back gently on the little girl she had been, and recognise, without bitterness, what had caused the timidity she had overcome with so much effort.

The hills slope gently around the village of Suriauville where Marie-Justine Raclot was born, and are covered with rich grass, so that the farmers have always been proud of their good milk and rich cheese. Mother St. Mathilde smiled broadly as she thought how odd it was that her first distinct childhood memory should be a piece of Monsieur Lamirelle's best cheese...

CHAPTER ONE Early Years

Slowly two round blue eyes rose to the level of the table and gazed longingly on the rows of creamy cheeses. The dairy was dark and cool—and deserted. Justine and the cheeses were alone. Slowly, ever so slowly, a plump finger traced a line across the top of the nearest cheese, returned to the mouth. Justine sucked thoughtfully. With growing confidence her finger dug yet another furrow in the cheese—this time, more deeply.

Half an hour went by unnoticed, until suddenly the sight of so many trenches and whorls on top of the cheese brought her back to earth with a thud. Her digestive juices dried up at the thought of what would happen if Grandpa Lamirelle guessed who had been at his cheeses, and, worst of all, told her mother! With a sense of impending doom she left the shelter of the dairy, a leaden ball of cheese in her tummy testifying to her guilt.

Grandpa Lamirelle spent most evenings with the Raclot family since his wife died, and usually Justine loved to listen to his stories until bedtime. But this evening was different. Justine sat, chewing her food listlessly, waiting for the moment when her crime would be revealed. So far, Grandpa Raclot had said nothing, but then, he never did say anything very much until supper was over.

At last the meal was ended and Monsieur Lamirelle made his way purposefully to his armchair by the fire. He was a short, stubby man, brown as a nut, a thin fringe of gingery hair circling his glistening bald head, and a great favourite with all his grandchildren, not only on

account of his stories, but because his childlike innocence established a bond of understanding with them.

With a satisfied grunt he settled back into his chair, filled up his villainous looking-pipe and said to his son-in-law: "You know, Francois, I'm thinking of getting my dairy exorcised. Either there are devils in the place or the mice have been going to college."

Francois, Justine's father, smiled. He knew Monsieur Lamirelle needed no encouragement to tell a story.

"I've never seen anything so crazy in my life." he went on.

"You know that it's rare enough for mice to get into my dairy, but today they not only got in, but they had the almighty cheek to nibble DESIGNS on my cheese. What do you make of that, hey? And all my mouse-traps empty! You'd think somebody had been training them. What can you do against mice like that?"

Monsieur Raclot grinned and his wife looked faintly puzzled as she bent over her knitting, while Justine racked her brains for some means of distracting their attention into safer channels: she knew her mother hated mysteries and was uncomfortably sharp in solving them. Only one expedient suggested itself to her. Yawning elaborately, but politely enough to avoid her mother's displeasure, she rose and said: "I'm very tired. Please may I go to bed?"

Monsieur Raclot raised his eyebrows in surprise, then his eyes twinkled as he suddenly saw the connection between the mystery of the cheese and Justine's unusual request to go to bed early. He said nothing but

looked on with amusement as Justine said goodnight and mounted the stairs like a weary old lady.

Once she had left the room old Monsieur Lamirelle forgot all about his spoiled cheese — he had only spoken about it to try and amuse Justine in any case. For a few minutes he fiddled with his pipe, tamping down the tobacco and going through an elaborate ritual of lighting it, glancing furtively all the while at Madame Raclot. He was not exactly afraid of her, but in common with many other people he found her something of a formidable personality — and she would be even more formidable when she heard what he wanted to say.

Once his pipe was drawing well, he rubbed his bristly chin, assembling in his mind the best words to use. Abruptly he spoke directly to his daughter: 'You're going to tell me to mind my own business. Francois is too polite to do that, and in any case he probably agrees with what I'm going to say. I'm too old to mind my own business, so don't bother telling me.'

Madame Raclot looked across at him impassively. She was a handsome woman with a hard, determined jaw, with more than a fair share of the human conviction that she was always right.

"You probably don't realise it yourself, Charlotte," he went on, peering across to where she sat at the other side of the fire, "But ever since young Joseph was born, Justine has always taken second place as far as you are concerned. Don't think she hasn't noticed how all of a sudden she can't do anything right — she's scared to death of you, do you realise that?"

"All right, all right," he growled, as Madame Raclot moved impatiently, "I know by heart everything you're going to say. But for a change think over what I've just said."

Later, after Francois had returned from seeing his father-in-law home, his wife asked him quietly: "I suppose you take my father's part?"

Francois did not reply immediately but gazed thoughtfully at the fire. He was a big man, slow-moving, deliberate in action and in thought. Though he hated arguments and had found silence to be the most effective way of avoiding them, he was uncompromising in his regard for the truth when he was obliged to speak. Now, choosing his words carefully, he said: "It is not a question of taking sides. I know you were disappointed when our first child was a girl, so I am not surprised that young Joseph is your favourite."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps one can't avoid having favourites among one's children, but I am sure that if you let them see that you love one more than the other, then it will hurt not only Justine, but Joseph perhaps even more in the long run."

Madame Raclot was not deliberately unjust, though inclined to be proud and unbending. Finally she answered grudgingly: "Perhaps I've been a little hard on her now and again."

Francois remained silent. It was an achievement to have drawn even that admission from her.

For several days afterwards Justine could not understand her mother's unusual patience, but she tried to keep the peace as long as possible by keeping out of her mother's way, but a mother and small daughter are

bound to be together a good deal of the time and within less than a week Justine's habit of walking cautiously around as though her mother were an unexploded bomb had worn down Madame Raclot's patience.

One day, nervous under her mother's eye, Justine dropped and smashed a glass. The next instant a loud smack almost lifted her off her feet and set her trotting out tearfully to her refuge in the garden. Things were back to normal.

The garden was, for Justine at this age, a port after stormy seas. Like lonely children of all countries and times she invented imaginary playmates and held long, fascinating conversations. But unlike other children her favourite playmates were nuns! Not that she had ever met one in the flesh, but had a vague idea from her father and grandmother that they were rather nice people who taught. If she could not enter a Convent, she could do the next best thing and found a religious order herself. Little by little, without drawing attention to herself she scavenged the neighbourhood for dolls ancient and modern and dressed them up in what she fondly believed to be religious habits. Sometimes she would lead her nuns in singing the Office with words and music of her own composition, but the pastime closest to her heart was to lead them out on missionary journeys, their progress marked out by a thin trail of sawdust from the eldest nun.

Justine sensed that it would be dangerous to let her mother know what she was up to, and so she was always careful to keep her Sisters in religion well hidden in the woodshed behind a great pile of firewood. But she was still too young to realise what was bound to happen sooner or later.

One day when Baptiste, their ancient family servant, slow in moving and even more slow of wit, came to remove the last of the firewood, he found himself face to face with a community of miniature nuns sitting up against the wall. He gaped stupidly at them, wondering if he were seeing things, but however much he scratched his head in bewilderment, they refused to go away. Finally, inspiration came to him: he would go to Madame Raclot, who always knew what to do no matter what happened.

Back he trudged up the garden, knocked at the door and announced: "I've found a lot of dolls in the woodshed, Madame."

"What on earth are you blabbering about, Baptiste?" asked Madame Raclot, hardly bothering to look up from the steaming pots.

When she did look up, her eyes were glued to the collection of dolls in Baptiste's arms while he explained how and where he came to find them.

It was not such a great mystery to Madame Raclot as it was for the old man. As soon as he had finished his story, she rapped out: "Fetch Justine here right away."

When she was brought into the kitchen, the first thing Justine saw was her budding religious order laid along the floor, arms and legs stuck out awkwardly. Her secret was out and she almost fainted from the shock.

"Now let's have the truth about this," her mother ordered, "These are your dolls, aren't they? What was the idea of dressing them up as nuns?"

In a panic she cried out: "No, no! They're not mine; never saw them before in my life!" And that was all they could get out of her.

It was an incident Mother St. Mathilde never forgot, even in her old age. What she remembered above all was that she had told a lie. That she had been only five years old at the time and had been frightened into a lie did not seem to her to be much of an excuse. Understanding and forgiving towards others, her own conscience was always hyper-sensitive.

It was as much a relief to Madame Raclot as to Justine when the time came for her to start school. At first she attended classes given by an old lady in a nearby village where she learned the elements of reading and writing, but by the end of the year the old lady had run completely out of knowledge to pass on to her pupil.

By that time classes had started in her own village, so at the age of seven she joined Monsieur Pultier's school.

In the small pond of Suriauville Monsieur Pultier was a very big fish. School-teacher, businessman, sacristan, private secretary to the parish priest, there seemed to be no limit to what he could do. He was a faintly pompous little man, but was well liked and trusted by the farming population of the district. At the time there were no government standards to meet in building village schools, so the school was, in fact, Monsieur Pultier's own house. The village children sat in one room, while the "aristocracy" sat in the other room which served as living-room, kitchen and dining-room for Monsieur Pultier outside of school hours.

As Monsieur Pultier was the only teacher and the children no more angelic than you would expect, he had his work cut out, keeping order in both rooms at once. Justine was thoroughly frightened when she saw him rush from one room to the other, brandishing a cane and uttering colourful threats of punishment, until she realised that his cane was more for show than for use.

In any case at that time Justine was too timid to do anything to attract Monsieur Pultier's harmless thunder and lightning, though one day she found herself in a very difficult situation, when he was called away and left Mademoiselle Victoire, his elderly servant, in charge of the two classes.

Earlier he had set his pupils the task of writing a letter as an exercise in style, and had composed a model and read it out to the class to give them an idea of how to set about it. All this went completely over Justine's head, as she had been lost in a day-dream. While the others were scratching away with their pens, Justine stared blankly at her sheet of paper, too nervous to think of a single thing to write down. She looked up despairingly at Mademoiselle Victoire and then stiffened with surprise as the old lady without any change of expression, dropped one eyelid in an enormous wink and nodded for her to come out.

As Justine came to her, Mademoiselle Victoire without moving her lips, whispered out of the side of her mouth like a convict: "The model letter is in Monsieur Pultier's coat, hanging up there. Take a quick look, and then put it back!"

Justine did what she was told, returned to her place and wrote out what proved to be an excellent letter.

When Monsieur Pultier finished marking the exercises, he was astonished by Justine's talent and read her version out to the class, remarking how proud he was to have a pupil like her in his school, and that he was sure she would continue to bring honour to her parents, to her village, and, last but not least, to Monsieur Pultier.

Justine had not counted on such success, and sat through Monsieur Pultier's hymn of praise scarlet with shame. As soon as she could, she went to make her confession to the parish priest, knowing that her conscience would give her no peace until she had done so.

The parish priest of Suriauville was a very old friend of the family, but with the passing of the years the old man had become crotchety and even quarrelled with his best friends, As a result old Monsieur Raclot one day remarked in front of Justine that the parish priest had become "a real old grouser". For some reason this word struck Justine as being intensely comical, and she lost no time in repeating it to all her schoolmates. Most of them were as entranced by the expression as Justine, but one of them solemnly told her that she had committed a mortal sin in repeating such an expression about the parish priest. Justine was aghast. She would have to mention this in confession to the parish priest himself.

In the church Justine waited her turn like a criminal awaiting execution. All too soon she found herself kneeling in the confessional. She raised her head to speak but the words would not come. The parish priest realizing her nervousness tried to put her at ease: "Come now, my little one, you have nothing to be afraid of!"

A gulp beyond the grille and: "Father, I said ..." Her voice trailed away to nothing.

"What did you say?" asked the priest gently.

With an immense effort Justine poured it all out in one breath: "Father, I said that you had become an old grouser!"

For a moment there was silence on the priest's side, and then he said: "Now I'm sure you didn't think that up all by yourself; You must have heard someone say it."

"Yes, Father," answered Justine innocently, "It was Grandpa Raclot!"

When Grandpa Raclot heard the story from Justine he nearly died of mortification, but it appears that the parish priest stopped being "an old grouser" at least for a while ...

At this impressionable time of her life Justine could hardly avoid being affected by the Jansenist spirit, which was still strong in France. It was a spirit of the fear rather than the love of God, according to which God was a merciless judge and man radically evil. Under the influence of this spirit many excellent Catholics were afraid of receiving Holy Communion often, and Justine herself was going on for twelve years of age without there being any sign that the parish priest was ready to allow her to make her first Holy Communion.

It was this which finally decided Francois Raclot to send his daughter away to a convent school to finish her studies—and to make her first Holy Communion as soon as possible. Over eighty years later she still

thanked God for this, which was, as she described it: "The beginning of my happiness."

CHAPTER TWO Boarding School

As soon as the question arose of sending Justine to boarding-school, there was one obvious choice. All the Raclots and Lamirelles had been very impressed by the boarding school of the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus in Langres and the success they had had with young Octavie Lamirelle, Justine's cousin.

Octavie had enough charm to bring down the birds from the trees, so it was inevitable she should be outrageously spoiled by the whole family. Suddenly realising this, her parents decided to send her to the boarding school in Langres. Within a surprisingly short time she had changed so much for the better that the family could hardly believe the evidence of their eyes. Octavie retained all her energy and love of life, but had gained poise and good sense.

It is only a few miles by road from Suriauville to Langres but the quiet country village and the boarding school were different worlds. Justine's courage had oozed away by the time she arrived at the convent. The only nuns she had ever known were the ones she had manufactured — real, live nuns might not be so easy to get along with.

Yet, oddly enough in view of her timidity, she felt at home almost as soon as the great door opened for her for the first time.

The training the girls received was far more spartan than it is today, but Justine fell into the routine without great difficulty.

She had arrived too late to make her first Holy Communion that year and it was not until the following year, 1827, when she was thirteen

years of age that she was allowed to do so. Her preparation was serious and devout, but she was guilty of one failure in obedience which remained on her mind for a long time.

Each boarder had a handbag to carry the odds and ends she was likely to need during the day. One day Justine was walking casually down the corridor to join her friends in recreation when she suddenly remembered she had left her handbag in the dormitory. At once she turned round and scurried back to get it, but skidded to a halt just in front of a statue of Our Lady, as she realised she had not bothered to get the necessary permission to go up to the dormitory. Justine felt, as she stood there hesitating, that the eyes of the Blessed Virgin were fixed upon her reproachfully. Making herself as small as she could to get out of the line of the accusing gaze, she crept past the statue, hoping against hope that the Blessed Virgin wouldn't pay any attention this time. In vain. Her lively conscience cost her some sleepless hours that night.

Even when she was much younger Justine had felt attracted towards the religious life, and as she came to know the Sisters better, the attraction grew stronger: she was resolved one day to consecrate herself to God in the religious life, and it was during this time that she came to realise that the greater part of her life would be spent as a missionary in the Far East.

Sister St. Marie, the librarian, became intrigued with Justine's choice of reading and one day came and stood behind her as she was engrossed in a bulky travel book. After a few moments she asked teasingly: "Why are you always reading about Japan, Justine? It's no use thinking of going to live there! Don't you know that no foreigners are allowed in?"

Justine smiled non-committally and replied politely: "Perhaps. But I'd like to go there some day. It seems an interesting country."

She was not prepared yet to tell the Sister, or anyone else, that she was firmly convinced that one day she would go to Japan as a missionary, for she had heard a voice within her saying: "There will come a time when you will go there to win souls for God."

The prophecy was realized when, fifty years later, describing her arrival in Japan, she wrote: "At last I saw this country which I loved so much, the object of my dreams as a child."

For the time being Justine wisely kept the secret to herself though she longed for someone in whom she could confide and who could give her advice but it was only in her last year at Langres that she found such a person.

One day in that year at the beginning of class the girls guessed that there was something afoot as soon as their teacher entered the classroom. After the morning prayers were over, she turned around smiling: "Next week we will have a new Reverend Mother, and when you hear who it is, you ought to feel very honoured. But on second thoughts, perhaps I'd better not tell you just yet; your heads might start swelling."

A storm of protest arose. Sister St. Therese raised her hand and as the girls subsided, she pretended to think it over for a moment or two and then, with the air of one making a great concession said: "Well, since you have not been so very badly behaved this term, I'll tell you. Our Reverend Mother General, Mother Liegault has just finished her term

of office and is coming to Langres. It's a sad thing it takes a Mother-General to reform you!"

The class buzzed. Justine's neighbour, Jeanne, sensed an opportunity to put off class-work a little longer and put up her hand hastily before the Sister thought of something else.

"I've heard my parents talk about Mother Liegault," she said demurely. "Don't you think it would be a good idea for you to tell us all something more about her before she arrives?"

Sister St. Therese looked at Jeanne long enough to let her understand that she was not deceived by this sudden interest in the new Superior and said dryly: "As Mother Liegault was born here and had something to do with this school, you might as well know about her."

The Sister captured their interest as she told them how at the beginning of the French Revolution Mother Liegault, then a young nun, was expelled from Bordeaux and made her way over hundreds of miles to Langres, her home town. Her health was weakened by the journey and though she had no money left, she was determined to be faithful to her vocation to teach the children of the poor. In a tiny room in one of the poorest quarters of the town she gathered around her as many slum children as possible. She was a gifted teacher, and besides teaching the children the elements she succeeded in the far more difficult task of winning their affection.

It was little wonder that within a short time she was known in Langres from that time on until her death as "Mama" Liegault. As her reputation spread, wealthy families begged her to educate their

daughters, or at least to prepare them for their first Holy Communion. As the head of a flourishing school, Mother Liegault devoted all the money she could to helping the unfortunate, and in the following years took care of many priests who were hunted down like animals by the Revolutionary Government. Not being stupid, the officials realised that Mother Liegault was sheltering priests in her house and was having Mass said there regularly, so they stationed a sentry at her front door. Her ingenuity was more than enough to overcome this obstacle, and still Mass was often celebrated while a sentry kept guard over them. One of the soldiers was a loyal Catholic at heart and kept Mother Liegault well informed of his superior officers' plans. You can't win against a determined woman.

Bringing priests to visit the sick and dying was one of the most dangerous of Mother Liegault's activities, but her disguises were never penetrated by the revolutionary agents. On one occasion she dressed the priest up as a raggedy old hawker selling matches and passed herself off as his daughter, wearing a huge tricolour cockade in her bonnet as a true daughter of the Revolution! Such was the life Mother Liegault led until the end of the "Terror": part school-teacher, and part leader of the Christian "underground".

When peace was finally restored to the Church Mother Liegault continued to direct her school in Langres until in 1823 she was elected Mother General of the Order.

Now that she was returning to them after an absence of six years, the excitement was intense, especially in the school, and during the following week the girls spent a great part of their recreation discussing what the new Reverend Mother would be like: one who had risked the

guillotine so many times and who had built such a school from nothing would surely be an out of the ordinary nun.

Justine, impressed deeply by Sister St. Therese's stories, had her own private image of Mother Liegault as a six-foot goddess with flashing eyes and the voice of a sergeant-major.

On the day of Mother Liegault's arrival the atmosphere was tense with interest as the senior girls gathered in the hall to meet her. They all experienced a shock of disappointment, when an elderly nun, just a little over medium height with a pleasant, square face walked in, followed by the community. This then was the famous `Mama' Liegault!

However, as she began to speak to them, the girls forgot their initial disappointment, for although she spoke quietly and without emphasis, each girl had the impression that Mother Liegault was speaking to her personally. When she had finished speaking and had left the hall, promising to see each one of the girls within the week, the senior girls broke up into small groups in unusual silence. Even the irrepressable Jeanne Boudier was quiet for a few moments before she turned to Justine, her neighbour, and whispered, only half in fun: "Do you know, I think I wouldn't even mind going to confession to her!"

Deep in thought, Justine replied with complete seriousness: "I know. I think I could, too!"

At last she felt she had found someone to whom she could talk freely about her vocation. But her habit of keeping silence about herself was

so deeply ingrained that she did not find it so easy to unburden herself when her turn came to be interviewed by Mother Liegault.

Wise in the ways of the young, Mother Liegault chatted casually about unimportant things to the thin, fair-haired girl who sat opposite to her, face still, only her hands betraying nervousness. Obviously, Justine Raclot had something of importance she wanted to tell her and needed a little prompting ... she said quietly: "Now, Justine, you really want to talk about something serious, don't you? Is it anything to do with your life after you leave school?"

The sympathy in Mother Liegault's voice broke the dam of Justine's reserve. Hesitatingly at first, but with growing confidence Justine told her everything she had kept secret for so long: how she wanted to be a Sister of the Holy Infant Jesus, and yet did not know how she would ever find the courage to tell even her father, let alone her mother.

"When I am on my own," she told Mother Liegault, almost in despair, "I am ready to undergo anything if only I can become a Sister. But people make me so nervous and tongue-tied that all my courage seems to melt away when I am with them. And there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it!"

"Oh yes there is," Mother Liegault took her up briskly, "You know, of course that I shall always be happy to help you, but you have enough intelligence to realise that in the next year or two things are going to be difficult for you, but you will always have God's strength to support you. If you are faithful in praying to Him, He will help you to overcome your timidity, you will see!"

As Mother Liegault went on to tell her how she must force herself gradually out of her shell to mix with people much more, no matter how shy she felt, Justine began to feel the first stirrings of hope that she could indeed, with God's help, overcome all those difficulties which up to then had seemed so formidable.

In the months that followed, Mother Liegault took a special interest in Justine, giving her advice and encouragement, so that when Justine came to see her for the last time before leaving the school, she was as ready as she could be for the trials that lay ahead.

"Don't forget, Justine," were Mother Liegault's parting words, "God is in Suriauville, as well as in Langres. He will help you!"

CHAPTER THREE A Friend in Need

Francois Raclot cupped his hands and shouted: "All right, everyone. Take a break for breakfast!"

He smiled at the look of relief which appeared magically on the sun-tanned face of Joseph, who was working a few yards away from him; harvest-time put an edge on young appetites. Joseph, catching his eyes, grinned back at his father, clutched at his waist though dying of hunger, and ran across the field to the hedge where the women were already unpacking the food-baskets. The sun was already high in the sky and they had been working for several hours, so he was ready to eat a horse without salt or pepper.

As he drew near the hedges, he saw his sister waving and pointing to the basket she was carrying. Immediately he began to amble like an old man and stretched out a hand to her whining piteously: "Got a bite to eat, lady? Haven't had anything to eat for least three hours."

"I'll never understand how you manage to eat all you do and still be able to work," his sister observed dispassionately.

"It's sheer will-power that does it!" and then, uncertainly he went on: "Uh, Justine, there's something I want to say to you. Look, come over and sit down by that tree where we can talk!"

Justine looked at her younger brother quizzically; it was not often that this tall, muscular young man who resembled her father so much found himself uncertain about anything, so she allowed him to lead her to the foot of the tree where he plonked himself down with relief and began rummaging in the basket.

"First things first, though", he said, "Let's see what there to eat".

When he had arranged his breakfast to his satisfaction, shyness descended on him again.

"Justine," he began awkwardly, "you know that we're going to have a bit of a dance in the village next Saturday evening. Why don't you come along with us? It'll be a lot of fun," he went on eagerly, "there'll be a very nice bunch of fellows there. You know them all. There's Michel Leroy, for example, he's just home on holiday. How about it?"

He bit deeply into his salt-pork sandwich, his eyes peering at her enquiringly over the wall of white bread.

She looked at him with dawning amusement: "So my little brother is turning into a match-maker!"

"Look Justine," Joseph continued doggedly, "It's all very well to laugh, but really you haven't been leading a very normal life since you came back from school. I mean, I know you've been doing the farm work just like everybody else, which must be a lot different from anything you had to do at school."

"Ah, but Joseph," interrupted Justine, "I like working on the farm; I really enjoy it; it's no hardship to me!"

"Yes, but I don't mean that," said Joseph, "Let's get back to the point. The thing is that you keep to yourself so much; you never come to any of our dances or anything like that. You know," he went on suspiciously, "I'm beginning to think that you never did really give up the idea of becoming a nun, did you?"

Justine flushed and looked down. "No," she admitted, "It's true. I still want to become a nun and always will, but I don't see how I can ever manage it."

Joseph was silent for a few moments, then said: "I wish you didn't feel that way, but if that is the only thing that will make you happy, I'll do anything I can to help. But you know how it is," he went on, moodily scuffing the grass with his heavy boot, "nobody ever takes me seriously at home. Mother's the worst! If ever I try to be serious, she just laughs and says I'm only a baby. I can never think how to answer that. Anyway, if you like, I'll mention it to them and try to soften them up a bit ...?" His voice trailed off dubiously.

"No Joseph," Justine answered gently. "It wouldn't do any good. Every time you stick up for me to mother it only makes things worse in the end. I'll think of something one of these days."

"I suppose you're right," he said, consoling himself with the remains of the breakfast and the bottle of wine. "Oh well, back to work," he grunted, getting to his feet and wiping his hands.

"Don't forget Justine," he spoke more seriously, "If ever I can help in any way, just let me know, won't you?"

"Thank you, Joseph. I'll not forget."

Justine turned homewards and was half-way across the field when she heard her father calling her. As she came up to him she saw he was smiling broadly.

"Pity you're not a boy," he greeted her teasingly, "we could make a fine doctor out of you!"

"What's happened now," Justine asked, smiling.

"It's what you're done to old Jean Guibert. I'd like you to look in on him at the barn when you get home."

"Oh?" she cried in surprise, "Is there anything wrong with him? I thought his leg was healing nicely."

"Healing nicely?" returned her father, "By the looks of it he'll be able to get back to work within a few days, and when I first saw that wound in his leg I wasn't sure that he would ever be able to walk again. What did you do? Use magic spells and what-not? Anyway he's overflowing with gratitude for his young nurse, so you'd better call in and see him."

Justine went on her way, warm with pleasure. Monsieur Francois Raclot was well known in the district for his kindness to the poor and the sick, and there were always a few of them comfortably bedded down in a large, airy barn, not far from the farmhouse.

Even before she had left school, during her holidays Justine gladly helped her father in this work, especially in nursing the sick. No one was more surprised than Justine to find she was an excellent nurse. Besides her natural nervousness, she had had to muster up her courage at first to wash and bandage the wounds and sores, but she was soon a very competent nurse, dressing wounds swiftly and neatly and always finding just the right words to cheer up the unfortunates who came for help. No one before had ever needed her, and as Justine saw how the

sick and poor trusted themselves to her care, her self-confidence began to increase.

Farm work did not leave Justine much leisure, but she had an occasional day off. Madame Raclot sometimes wondered where her daughter disappeared to: had she ever followed her she would have been completely mystified.

On her day off Justine would slip out early after breakfast, through the back door across the field towards the hills. No one was ever about so early and the woods were always deserted as she climbed upwards. After walking steadily for half an hour she turned off on a barely visible track. Only a few hundred yards further along she emerged from the shade into sunlight and looked down into what she thought of as her private sanctuary. At her feet the ground fell away gently to form a tiny valley, almost entirely enclosed by the hills, and as peaceful as though no human being had ever discovered it. Nothing broke the silence but the gurgling of a small brook.

It was here that she spent some of her happiest hours. Here she felt that God was close to her, and nowhere else could she satisfy her need for prayer so fully. Sometimes it seemed impossible that she would ever be able to realise her ambition and become a nun: prayer alone gave her the determination to persevere.

Justine had been fascinated by a book called "The Desert Fathers" which Mother Liegault had given her, and felt she had a lot in common with those early Christians who left the great towns of North Africa to do penance for the sins of the pagan world and sought union with God through prayer and penance.

On one occasion she learned that it is dangerous to copy anyone blindly. Reading that the Desert Fathers sprinkled their food with bitter herbs, which did not seem to be available at the farm, she substituted wild roots growing in the valley. The volcanic tummy-ache which followed decided her to be more choosy in the future about her penances. From then on she contented herself with eating dry bread soaked in the brook.

Though Madame Raclot knew nothing about these excursions, she had a definite suspicion that Justine was still thinking of the religious life, as appeared one evening that summer.

While they were sitting outside in the garden after supper, quietly enjoying the fine summer evening, Monsieur Raclot suddenly broke the silence, "A penny for your thoughts, Joseph!"

Joseph jerked back to earth and smiled sheepishly. "Make it a few shillings and I'll think about it," he retorted. "As a matter of fact I could do with a few shillings," he went on, "I was thinking of the dance next week."

"And also what sort of a figure you'll cut with the so beautiful Rose," his mother added slyly.

Joseph blushed brilliantly. "Mother, you really are the limit! What makes you think I'm interested in her?"

Madame Raclot laughed. "Don't worry, Joseph. There's nothing wrong in it. One day you'll get married and your father and I are looking forward to being grandparents."

Joseph's scarlet face assumed an even more alarming hue. "Mother! The things you say!"

Glancing across at Justine, Madame Raclot's voice changed its tone. "In fact, Justine, I was hoping that you would begin to lead a more normal, social life. Why don't you go to the dance with Joseph?" As she spoke, she eyed Justine narrowly. Here was an opportunity to see whether or not Justine had given up the idea of becoming a nun.

"I'd really prefer not, this time. In any case Joseph will be too busy with Rose to want me along as well, " she replied apologetically.

Madame Raclot's needle jabbed viciously into the seat of a pair of trousers. Just another confirmation of her suspicions! "Very well," she said, with a burst of irritation, "But you'll only have yourself to blame if you end up as an old maid, knee deep in cats!"

Taken by surprise Joseph shouted with laughter, and even Justine giggled helplessly at the picture her mother had conjured up. After a brief struggle Madame Raclot, too, smiled unwillingly.

"Better strike while the iron's hot," thought Joseph to himself, and asked, "Do you think Justine and I could have the day off a week next Sunday? The parish is making a pilgrimage to St. Peter Fourier's Church in Mattaincourt. That is a bit more in Justine's line, and you never know, le bon Pere de Mattaincourt might find her a handsome upstanding man like me for a husband!"

"I don't see why not," Monsieur Raclot replied. "There'll probably be a lot of people there, you know. I've heard that pilgrimages are going to be made on that Sunday from all over Lorraine."

On the day of the pilgrimage the young people of the parish set off in high spirits, covering the first few kilometres on foot, saying the rosary and singing their favourite hymns before climbing aboard the three horse-drawn carriages which accompanied them. In this way, sometimes walking, sometimes riding, it took them a couple of hours to arrive at Mattaincourt. As soon as they came to the village they realised that Monsieur Raclot had not exaggerated the numbers going there on pilgrimage.

The narrow streets were full of people jostling their way, hot and tired, to the parish church. Every table in every inn and restaurant seemed to be occupied by burly countrymen, wiping their faces ineffectually with enormous handkerchieves, while their wives tried to feed their children, many of them already wailing and crotchety with tiredness.

As they forced their way down the street, Joseph held on tightly to Justine's arm to prevent them from being separated and said to her: "I think the best thing for us to do is go straight to the parish church, if we can get in, and then after that scoot out to the carriages where we can have a meal in peace. What do you think?"

Justine nodded her agreement.

"Oh no!" gasped Joseph, as they rounded the corner and came into the church square. Here the crowd was even worse than it had been in the town. A long procession had snaked its way around the building into one door of the church and out through the other.

"Justine, it'll take us ages to get into church and even then we'll only have a minute or so to venerate the relics. Are you sure you want to stay?"

"Oh yes!" Justine answered vehemently, "I have a very special intention to pray for. I don't care how long we have to wait."

"All right," sighed Joseph, "but if you faint, I'll look pretty silly hoisting you over my shoulder to carry you home!"

Justine smiled, then clutched at Joseph's arm as she noticed a familiar figure a little way ahead in the queue.

"Look, Joseph, I'm sure that's Victor!"

"Hey, Victor," he shouted lustily, waving his hat in the air, unconscious of the disapproval of the other pilgrims.

Ahead, a tall young man with thin intelligent features and merry dark eyes turned, and smiled delightedly. He waved back, then, pointing to the crowd around him, threw up his hands in mock despair and shrugged his shoulders; it was impossible for him to make his way to them.

It seemed ages to Victor Lamirelle before he passed through the church and found himself at the exit door. Glancing back into the semi-darkness of the church, he saw Justine's face outlined by candle light. As she bent slowly forward to kiss the relics, her face took on such an expression of longing that Victor was unconscious of the crowds pressing him against the wall as he fought to keep his position. As he was forced outside he repeated to himself again and again: "I'm sure

that Justine wants to become a nun!" and then on the heels of that came another thought, "No wonder she is looking so strained, I'm sure she hasn't found the courage to mention it to her parents."

He remained unusually silent all the way back home. After the evening meal, as it was still light, he asked his sister, Octavie, to come for a walk. As soon as they were out of the house, walking under the trees in the garden, Victor asked abruptly: "Octavie, has Justine ever said anything to you about becoming a nun?"

"Well no," answered Octavie with surprise, "but then, she isn't one to talk to anyone about a thing like that. Mind you," she went on thoughtfully, "I can more easily imagine her as a nun than as anything else. But why do you ask, Victor? Just because I'm entering the novitiate in October, it doesn't mean that all the other girls in the family are going to as well."

Victor told her briefly what had happened that afternoon. "You and I," he continued, "we don't mind telling the whole world what we want. But Justine is different. Can you imagine her ever working up her courage to tell her mother she wants to enter the novitiate? She'd never do it!"

"Perhaps not," admitted Octavie, "But there's nothing we can do about it, is there?"

"Oh yes there is," retorted her brother, "I'm not going to stand by and let Justine go on eating her heart out if I can help it. If I can do nothing else, at least I can do all the talking she needs. You just wait till tomorrow," he concluded, as they returned to the house.

CHAPTER FOUR Victor to the Rescue

Justine stared with surprise at the figure hurrying towards her along the path.

"Victor!" she exclaimed, as he drew near, "What on earth are you doing here so early in the morning? It has been ages since you came to see us, and now you have to come when we are all up to our necks in work!"

Victor Lamirelle took the basket from her, put it on the ground, and took both her hands in his before speaking. "Justine, I have a question to ask you," he said quietly, "Isn't it true that you want to become a nun? And isn't it also true that you are afraid to say anything about it to Uncle Francois?"

Too full of emotion to say anything, Justine nodded her head. Victor smiled, pressed her hands reassuringly. "Well, don't worry. I'll tell him for you, if you like. I'll come back this evening when Uncle Francois has finished work and tell him then. Everything will turn out all right—you'll see!"

All that day Justine felt more light hearted than she had for a long time. At last the question of her vocation was going to come out into the open. It might cause her more suffering in the next few days, or weeks, or months, but at least it would be settled one way or another.

That evening as the Raclot family sat in the garden as usual, it seemed to Justine that a century had passed before she heard the garden gate squeak open. Looking at her father, Justine saw his eyes widen with surprise and pleasure as Victor Lamirelle came walking up the path.

"Victor!" he greeted him warmly, "It has been too long since you last came to see us. Come and sit down and give us all the news of the family."

"Hello, uncle; Hello, auntie; how are you Justine?" Victor greeted them casually, then grinned suddenly at Joseph. "Have you completely recovered from your exercise of piety yesterday, Joseph? You were looking a bit worn around the edges to me."

"You didn't look so fresh either," Joseph rejoined cheerfully. Soon they were all busy exchanging family gossip, all except Justine, who was waiting tensely for the moment when Victor would come to the point, but no one noticed her silence. After an hour or so when all the news had been exhausted, Victor turned to Monsieur Raclot. "Uncle Francois, if you have some time to spare, I have something I would like to talk over with you," he said, Concealing his surprise, Monsieur Raclot agreed. Victor rarely needed advice from anyone.

As soon as the two men disappeared into the house, Justine began praying silently with all her heart that her father would receive Victor's news well. Mechanically she continued knitting, the conversation between her brother and mother an unmeaning mumble in the background.

When the two men returned to the garden, Justine looked up to them, half-fearfully, half-hopefully and then thanked God when she saw that at least her father was not angry about the news. Rather, he appeared thoughtful and withdrawn, rousing himself out of his silence only to say goodbye to Victor when he left shortly afterwards.

Monsieur Raclot did not leave Justine long in suspense.

The next morning, just as he was about to leave the house, he called Justine aside and, filling his pipe carefully, he said: "So it is true, what Victor tells me? That you want to enter religious life?"

"Yes, father, very much," answered Justine.

Monsieur Raclot was silent for a moment. Looking down at his daughter, he then said: "Let it be so, then, since you wish it. Follow the way that God has marked out for you. I have neither the right nor the power to prevent you doing that, although I shall suffer very much being separated from you."

Justine could make no other answer but to press her father's arm affectionately.

"And now," he went on, ruefully, "I'll have to think up some way of convincing your mother as well—and something tells me we are all in for a hard time in the next few days."

The atmosphere at dinner that evening was electric. By that time, Joseph too, had learned what had happened and kept his nose well down like a ship before the approaching typhoon. In the intervening hours Madame Raclot had been nursing her anger until it was now white-hot, as could be seen from the barely suppressed violence of her movements. The meal dragged on in miserable silence punctuated only by Madame Raclot rustling in and out of the room and banging each new course under their noses as if daring them to eat it, until finally she could contain herself no longer. She clapped her hand down on the

table and burst out angrily to Justine, who was sitting next to her, white and silent.

"It is a fine thing, now we have brought you up to this age and given you a good education, that you want to leave us, because of this crazy idea you have of becoming a nun. Don't you think you have a duty to your family?"

"But, mother, that's not fair," muttered Joseph unhappily, "If God wants Justine ..."

"Be quiet, Joseph," Madame Raclot turned on him bitterly "You've done enough damage already, encouraging her in her silly ideas!"

Joseph, scarlet with anger, jumped up from the table and slammed the door behind him.

After a pause Madame Raclot continued: "One thing is sure, you'll never have my permission to enter a convent, nor any dowry." With that she swept out of the room as though the last word had been said, leaving father and daughter together.

Monsieur Raclot sighed heavily and forced a smile. "Never mind, Justine," he said softly, patting her shoulder, "It's probably just the shock; she'll get over it after a while. Just have patience, pray, and you'll see everything will come out all right."

The days went by and Madame Raclot remained unyielding. It was an unhappy time for everyone, as she became remote and stiff not only with Justine but also with Monsieur Raclot and Joseph. But a strange thing had happened to Justine: she had lost her childish fear of her

mother ever since her mother had come to know for certain that she wanted to become a nun. Realizing that nothing could be gained by letting things go on as they were, Justine waited one day until she and her mother were alone in the kitchen. As calmly as though she was talking about the weather, she said: "If you are so much against my entering the convent as a choir-Sister, then let me ask to be admitted as a lay-Sister. I shall belong to the same Lord and I shall vow myself to His Service as a maidservant in His House, and I shall be only too happy to have such an honour."

Madame Raclot stared across at her daughter unbelievably. "I really think you would do just that, wouldn't you?" Madame Raclot's sense of family pride rebelled at the mere thought.

"Yes, mother, I really would," replied Justine steadily.

Madame Raclot sat heavily in the armchair by the fireplace. "All right," she said wearily, "I give in. Go to the Convent if you want to go, but now leave me alone. Leave me alone for a while."

Justine crossed the room and kissed her mother, who remained unresponsive, left the house and ran across the fields to tell her father and brother the good news.

Arrangements were made that Justine would go as a postulant to her old school at Langres on the 15th October, 1832, where she would spend some months before going to the novitiate in Paris. She received a list of all the clothes and other things that would be needed and up to her departure she was furiously busy assembling them all. Yet it did

not escape her that although Madame Raclot had given her permission, she was still stubbornly opposed to Justine becoming a nun.

The morning of 15th October, the feast of St. Teresa of Avila, dawned cold and clear, and Justine was lying awake in bed long before her father knocked on the door to wake her up. Excited at the thought that this day was the beginning of a new life for her, there was yet some sadness mingled with her happiness: sadness at leaving her family and all the familiar places and people of Suriauville. During breakfast the carriage ordered by Monsieur Raclot arrived at the front of the house and soon afterwards the men began loading Justine's portmanteaux and an over-night bag for Monsieur Raclot who was to take Justine to Langres.

At last, all was ready, and it was only then that Justine noticed that her mother was not there.

"Just wait a minute please," she asked hurriedly, "I have to say goodbye to mother."

"I'll come with you" chimed in Joseph.

As they reached the door Joseph called out to his mother, but there was no answer and brother and sister looked at each other for a moment, puzzled.

"Justine, you go and look upstairs," decided Joseph, "I'll have a look in the kitchen and outside."

But Justine realized already what had happened, as she climbed slowly up the stairs with heavy heart. She knew that her mother had not really

changed her mind. She was going to make her daughter suffer by refusing to see her before she left for the convent. Justine soon found, as she had expected, that there was no one in the house, and waited in the living-room until Joseph returned.

"I've looked everywhere," he announced, "and she seems to have disappeared into thin air." Then, as his eyes became more accustomed to the indoor gloom, he was taken aback by his sister's appearance. White and rigid, she looked as if she might faint at any moment. Quickly he crossed to her side and made her sit down.

"Justine," he said slowly and distinctly, as if to a child, "It may not be what you think it is. Perhaps mother just can't bear to see you leave us and that is why she's gone. Anyway, do try to pull yourself together; we don't want to make father more unhappy than he already is, do we?"

"Of course not," she smiled weakly. "Don't worry about me, I'll be all right in a minute."

"That's the spirit, and anyway, even if mother is still angry about you going to the convent, I'll get to work on her and fix things up later."

As Joseph swung out of the room, Justine's eyes travelled all around, resting on the familiar pieces of furniture, pieces of wood and metal which in these last moments seemed indescribably dear to her now that she was about to leave them. And even more dear to her were father, mother and brother. But she had no illusions about her mother; she felt unhappily sure that her mother would never forgive her for becoming a nun. In fact, Madame Raclot died three years later, still unreconciled with her daughter.

Once more Justine looked around the room, trying to impress every detail of it on her memory, before she rose and left the house for the last time. A new life awaited her.

CHAPTER FIVE Justine Grows Up

Justine was in for a few surprises. She knew that the Dames de Saint-Maur were a "contemplative-active congregation", which means on the face of it, that the Sisters divided their time between prayer and work.

She soon discovered that it was not an equal division and that the bell called to work more often than to prayer. Accepting this with good will, she came to find it easier as time went by to go from the classroom to prayer without letting one activity interfere with the other. On the contrary the time she spent in prayer calmed her mind against the worries of the day.

As a postulant, she had two duties: to help the Sisters in their teaching, and also to catch up on her own studies. As Justine was always willing to help, it naturally happened that the Sisters gave her more and more to do until she had no time left for her own studies, and that was to land her in trouble before long.

After she had been a few months in Langres she came to hear that she was due to go to Paris soon to begin her novitiate. In her enthusiasm she wrote to her father a long letter about it, bubbling over with joy.

Unfortunately for Justine, the Reverend Mother (a truly "formidable" woman in the French sense of the word) took advantage of this opportunity to try the young postulant's mettle. Summoning Justine to her office, she asked her in a deceptively mild tone, why she was so sure of going to Paris so soon. Then she told Justine to fetch her study-books for inspection. Justine did as she was told and waited for a few agonising minutes as the Reverend Mother leafed through the books in

dead silence, her face growing ever sterner, though she knew perfectly well that Justine had been left little time for study. On her side, Justine was too overawed to defend herself. Finally the Reverend Mother closed the last exercise book and told her coldly that since her studies had been so neglected she might have to wait a long time in Langres before going on to Paris.

Once outside the office the tears began to flow and Justine blindly collided into "Mama" Liegault, who was now retired but still very active in spite of her age. There and then she dragged the whole story out of Justine, clucking sympathetically at the appropriate places. At the end of the tearful story she laughed away Justine's fears, and explained that the real reason for the delay was that the Sister who was to replace her had fallen ill. Obviously the Reverend Mother had taken the opportunity of testing Justine's character.

At last the time came for her to leave Langres. For the following two years in the novitiate in Paris she merged unnoticed into the background. This was particularly easy because at the time there were several colourful characters in the novitiate, one of whom was to become Mother General in later years. Then there was Miss Ford, an English girl. Finding the French breakfast of rolls and coffee far from satisfying, in all innocence she came to an arrangement with a friend outside by which she would be regularly supplied with chocolate to help her out at breakfast.

Although Justine's excellent memory and sharp eye for the absurd spiced her conversation in later years, she never mentioned anything about what happened to her in the novitiate. Had she any difficulties in adapting herself to her new life? Had she ever any doubts about her

vocation? Nothing is known. All that is known is that she emerged from the novitiate a much stronger character who had at last conquered her shyness and was more intensely devoted than ever to prayer.

Soon after her religious profession in March, 1835, she was sent to Bagnols in the South of France. She felt at first as if she were in a foreign country. She found herself among a people whose ideas, ways of speech, were very different from those of her own part of the country. Her own people of the Vosges, in northeast France, were normally calm, stolid, unexcitable, often stubborn, and not very talkative. Now she found herself among people who seemed to be the exact opposite. These southerners felt things intensely and made no bones about letting others know just how they felt, whether it was joy or sorrow made no difference. They looked upon conversation as an art in itself, which they thoroughly enjoyed, and not just as a means of communication. As a result their talk was often droll and picturesque. They were a people, too, who could love and hate with equal intensity.

It was in the south that Sister St. Mathilde was to spend the next seventeen years, and though the southerners never failed to amuse her and, on occasion, surprise her, she came to appreciate their good qualities and knew how to cope with their weaknesses.

Her first adventure in the Midi came on the first Sunday after her arrival in Bagnols when she took some of the girls to Mass in the parish church. All went well until the sermon. The parish priest was not the best of preachers, and Sister St. Mathilde was settling down resignedly to a long session when suddenly she noticed the preacher shooting furious glances in her direction! He was beginning to look apoplectic,

and Sister St. Mathilde felt herself turn hot and cold with embarrassment, as she twisted her head to see what mischief the girls were up to. Just as she was sure the parish priest was going to have a stroke, he yelled out at them: "Rascals, scoundrels, brigands!"

Sister St. Mathilde, cheeks burning with shame, lost no time in getting her flock out of the church and it was only when she got back to the convent that she found out what was the trouble. Some of the men of the parish had been in a bench directly behind her, and instead of listening to the sermon they had been passing the time by playing cards! It was an early initiation for Sister St. Mathilde into what she might expect in her appointed field of labour.

Bagnols was a happy place, and it played an important part in preparing her for work in the foreign missions. Mother Bichat, the Superior, had lived through the French Revolution and in those hard years had had to learn to find God with little help from anyone else so quite naturally she expected her own community to do the same.

It was a poor house, so poor in fact that the community had to use the same room as chapel, dining-room and parlour, and as that room could barely hold six Sisters at a time, the two youngest— Sister St. Mathilde and Sister Ju'ie—had to go elsewhere to make their meditation. Up in the top of the house in the attic they used to make their retreat, sitting on bundles of firewood, perspiring in the stuffy heat where no breath of air reached during the summer and chilled to the bone during the winter. Sister St. Mathilde knew the meaning of poverty long before she became a missionary. Her superiors were quick to realise that the young nun was a born teacher. Her authority over the children was firm, and while she was sensitive to their needs, she was also perceptive

enough to find ways to help them in their difficulties. Ironically, it was on account of these qualities that she was taken from Bagnols where she had been leading a quiet, contented life, and sent to take over the "premiere classe" at Beziers, a job which would have made a lion-tamer turn pale.

The young ladies of that particular class prided themselves on being hard-boiled. It was their boast that only an angel or a devil could keep them in order, and for a time it looked as if it were more a statement of fact than a boast, as they broke down teacher after teacher.

When Sister St. Mathilde faced them that first Monday morning, she did not betray any of the nervousness she must have been feeling, but oddly enough the girls were quite well-behaved. For the time being they were content to take their time studying their new enemy and making up their minds at leisure on the plan of attack. They had already broken the nerve of several mistresses; they had no doubt they would soon dispose of this one. She certainly did not look particularly big and strong.

The campaign opened quietly on Thursday morning. At the back of the class one of the girls put up her hand: "Madame, please may I leave the room?" she asked demurely.

Sister St. Mathilde nodded unsuspectingly.

Two minutes later another girl asked to be excused. Again permission was granted. But when, only a little later, another made the same request, Sister St. Mathilde began to understand. One after another the

girls asked permission to leave the room until Sister St. Mathilde was left alone.

Quietly, she followed the last girl to the refuge where she guessed the others had hidden and slipped in to the room unseen, as it was in complete darkness. Already the girls were giggling over their triumph.

"Did you see her face when I asked if I could leave the room? She was like an iceberg!"

"It was all right for you, you were one of the first, but it was no joke waiting to the end, I can tell you."

"Oh this one will be as easy as the rest. We'll soon have her running!"

In the darkness Sister St. Mathilde listened for a while, then lit the candle she had brought in with her. By its glow she looked steadily at her startled pupils who were struck suddenly dumb. She let a full minute go by in silence, then ordered them back to the classroom. Sister St. Mathilde never told anyone what she had said to the girls on that occasion, but there was a magical and permanent change in the toughs of the "premiere classe".

When all was in order in Beziers she was transferred to Sete to take charge of the boarding school and help the ailing Reverend Mother in governing the house.

The ten years which followed were not easy. Sister St. Bernard, her assistant, believed in running the boarding school like a military barracks, so that Sister St. Mathilde had to try to make things easier for the girls, while at the same time not giving offence to her assistant.

Later on the situation was reversed and Sister St. Mathilde was given an assistant who was too kind-hearted and incapable of keeping order in class, so that whereas before Sister St. Mathilde had been looked up to as a "refuge of sinners", now she had to tighten up the discipline.

In spite of this her pupils realised that she genuinely loved them and they were particularly impressed by her seemingly infinite patience. It was severely tested one day when one of the girls tried her hand at a piece of embroidery in silk and gold on which Sister St. Mathilde had spent a great deal of time and care. By the time the girl had finished, it was beyond repair, yet Sister St. Mathilde uttered no word of blame but gently excused the guilty one.

Although she was kept very busy during these years, Sister St. Mathilde had not forgotten her life-long ambition to become a missionary. When the news came that the Congregation was going to make a foundation in Malaya, she prayed with all her heart that she might be chosen for this venture. All through the years she had remained confident that sooner or later she would become a missionary, and now she began preparing herself in her own practical way by learning English in what little spare time she had and accustoming herself to the heat that could be expected in the tropics by sleeping with her windows closed and covered with blankets in the hot summer weather.

When the names of the missionaries were announced and she was not included, she was very disappointed. However her disappointment did not last long and she regained her confidence that some day, somehow, she would be a missionary.

CHAPTER SIX The Summons

"Drop everything and come at once!"

Sister St. Mathilde stared unbelievably at the message which had come from the Mother General in Paris. It was the end of term and she was surrounded with litter, wrapping-paper and ribbons as she sat in her room preparing the prizes for Speech-Day. Someone else would have to finish the work now.

She could not imagine why she was required in Paris so immediately, but there was no mistaking the urgency of the message, and Mother de Faudoas was not a person to get excited over nothing. Within a few hours she had packed her bags, said goodbye to the Community, and was on her way to Paris by coach.

No one yet knew that a second party of Sisters was going to be sent to Malaya. The first expedition had been a failure, and this time Mother de Faudoas was determined to send out a Sister of mature years who could take on the responsibility for the new foundation but she had not yet made up her mind finally between Sister St. Mathilde and the Superior of the Convent at Bailleul.

In December 1851 five nuns had been sent to Malaya by the long sea route round the Cape of Good Hope. The Superior of the party Mother St. Pauline fell sick very soon after the boat left Antwerp and after much suffering died and was buried at sea near Christmas Island, not far from Singapore. Not long before her death she had said to one of the Sisters: "Write to Mother de Faudoas and tell her that I am resigned to my death. I will pray for her and for the Institute, and

especially for our dear Mission of Malaya." The breath of life of missionary work is sacrifice and Mother St. Pauline made the ultimate sacrifice without even seeing the land for which she had set out in high hopes only months before.

When the remainder arrived in Singapore, one of the Sisters left the Congregation. Another who had been ill during the long sea voyage and had suffered even more from the passage aboard a little coastal steamer from Singapore to Penang fell dangerously ill with brain-fever. Although she made a partial recovery, she remained a semi-invalid until her death a few years later at the age of thirty-three.

That left only two Sisters in good health: a young Sister only twenty-two years of age and a lay-Sister. Clearly reinforcements had to be sent as soon as possible.

Sister St. Mathilde found the journey to Paris long and wearisome and felt relieved when she finally turned into the narrow alley of the Rue de l'Abbe Gregoire which leads to the Mother-House.

Just as she was about to ring the bell, Mother de Faudoas came out of the house. Evidently she was in a great hurry. "Go to the chapel and pray," she told Sister St. Mathilde, "and when I get back I'll send for you."

All through the bone-shaking journey to Paris Sister St. Mathilde had had to repress the thought that she was being sent for because another expedition to Malaya was being planned, but though she tried to banish the idea from her mind it would bob up again a few minutes later. And now there was something in the Mother General's manner which

strengthened her suspicions. As she knelt in the chapel it took all her force of will not to beg the Lord to send her to the Mission. Instead she fought with herself until she was able to pray sincerely that His will, not hers, be done. If he wanted her to be a missionary, certainly it would fulfil her heart's desire: but if He decided otherwise, if she was destined to remain in France the rest of her life working as a teacher or in any other capacity, then He knew what would be best.

When we pray our attention is divided between Our Lord and the pain in our knees or the noises and murmurs from outside. Sister St. Mathilde had learned through long years of effort in bad times as well as good to pay no attention to outside things when she prayed; nothing was allowed to interfere. Once a mouse ran up her skirt and into her pocket as she knelt in prayer; calmly she fastened the pocket with a safety-pin, waited until her time of prayer was over and then released her little prisoner - the only recorded case of a mouse making a Holy Hour.

Now when there was so much to pray about, the hours passed by without her noticing it, so that although the Mother General was not able to return until several hours later than she had expected, she found Sister St. Mathilde still at prayer in the chapel when she got back. Almost certainly it was this which made up Mother de Faudoas' mind. She already knew that Sister St. Mathilde was talented and efficient, but now she also knew that she was a woman of prayer, one who understood that without Christ she could do nothing.

Within a short time Sister St. Mathilde was called to Mother de Faudoas' office. As she entered, Mother de Faudoas did not look up but continued to gaze at a crucifix which she was holding in her hands.

After a few moments she motioned to Sister St. Mathilde to sit down near her and then gently placed the crucifix in her hands and said: "My child, you have been appointed to the Mission in Malaya -- as Superior."

It had never entered Sister St. Mathilde's mind that she would be given the task of guiding the Mission through its early, difficult years. To be a missionary, yes! But to be the Superior of the Mission was a different thing altogether. She pleaded with Mother de Faudoas to choose someone else who would be more likely to succeed, but it was a waste of time. Mother de Faudoas had already made up her mind who was most likely to succeed!

In the whirl of preparations time was too short for the newly-appointed Reverend Mother to brood upon her new responsibilities. Two days after arriving in Paris she and her companions together with Mother de Faudoas, the Mistress of Novices, and a young English novice who was to act as interpreter, were sailing from Le Havre to Southampton. During the short crossing Mother St. Mathilde fell victim to sea-sickness, and Mother de Faudoas who had neither seen nor experienced this kind of sickness was shocked by her weakness. So far from being sympathetic Mother de Faudoas kept repeating: "How on earth can you have so little courage? If you have so little courage yourself, how can you expect to give courage to the Sisters in Malaya?" And in the depths of her sickness Mother St. Mathilde thought feebly to herself: "Just wait! Just wait a little while ..." (Sure enough, when Mother de Faudoas sailed back to France retribution overtook her, and as she hung over the side of the boat as it tossed and rolled in the grey waters

of the Channel, she groaned from time to time: "Oh how I pity our poor Sisters! Oh the poor things! To be like this for WEEKS!")

They only had one day in Southampton before embarkation. While there they made friends with an English sailor who had been nursed in France by the Sisters of Charity, and consequently looked upon all French nuns with something akin to idol-worship. At Mother St. Mathilde's request he bought a number of catechism books in English for them and was horrified at the thought of accepting payment for them, although he was a poor man.

The time came to say goodbye to Mother de Faudoas and her companions. As the S.S. Bentinck swung out into mid-channel at the beginning of her maiden voyage to Alexandria and the tiny figures of Mother de Faudoas and the others blurred and merged into the shadows on the jetty, the missionaries felt sad and empty. They had broken for ever the last links which bound them with home. None of the four ever expected to see their homes again or the families they had left behind and who, even now, did not know they were on their way to Malaya.

CHAPTER SEVEN The Voyage

The Sisters had no sooner finished unpacking their bags than the bell rang for dinner. A Babel of loud conversation and laughter greeted them as they entered the dining-room which was already crowded with passengers engaged in making friends at the beginning of what was, for most of them, a new and exciting experience. In those days the opportunity to travel to Egypt and perhaps even further was given to very few people.

Mother St. Mathilde looked about for a moment until she saw Father Pernot rise from one of the tables at the other end of the dining-room and signal her that he had reserved places for the sisters. He too was travelling to Malaya and had agreed to take charge of the party. When they had settled down in their places he smiled slightly at Mother St. Mathilde and observed: "I'm afraid you won't find meals as quiet as in the Convent."

"Of course everyone is excited this evening, but I expect it will wear off," she answered.

Just then the S.S. Bentinck was entering the Channel and began to roll sluggishly from side to side, rising up and falling rhythmically in the face of the oncoming seas. From table to table the conversation faltered and died out. One by one the diners, who only a short while before had been so gay, murmured excuses to their companions and pall idly but determinedly weaved their way out of the dining-room.

Father Pernot, happily immune to seasickness, was mildly perplexed. Noticing that Mother St. Mathilde had relapsed into gloomy silence and

was only toying with her food, he turned to her hospitably: "Do have some more of this excellent ham, Reverend Mother! You too, Sister!"

The effect was instantaneous, and, completely unexpected. Mother St. Mathilde turned a sickly green, covered her mouth with a handkerchief and left hurriedly, followed in short order by the three Sisters, leaving Father Pernot bewildered but well supplied with food.

For the next six days as the S.S. Bentinck ploughed through the Channel and the Bay of Biscay the Sisters spent most of their time lying on their bunks, weak with seasickness, but as soon as they passed Gibraltar the weather changed for the better. Until they reached Alexandria it was like a pleasure-cruise. Sitting on deck, sheltered from the glare of the sun by a broad canvas awning they spent their time in prayer, studying English, and, what was also important, in getting to know one another. Occasionally Father Pernot would join them and talk about life in Malaya, trying as best he could to answer all their questions. As he admitted to Mother St. Mathilde he had resigned himself before the voyage to the unenviable job of escorting a bunch of tearful women half-way across the world, and he was pleasantly surprised to find them so cheerful and apparently not suffering from homesickness in the least.

When the S.S. Bentinck docked at Alexandria the four nuns were fascinated by their first glimpse of the East. Down below on the jetty, Negro, Egyptian and Arab labourers swarmed around the luggage and cargo as it was unloaded, but despite confusion and noise the work was somehow completed and soon it was time for those who were going to travel further East to board a small government boat which would take

them down the Nile as far as Cairo, just over a hundred miles further south.

It was not until twelve years later that the Suez Canal was completed and anyone wanting to go further than Egypt was obliged to make an overland journey as far as Port Suez.

It was not a comfortable journey. Most of the space on the deck of the river-boat was taken up by luggage and crates stacked in no particular order and the male passengers made the best they could of what space was left while the women were crowded into a small cabin bare of all furniture except for a few wooden benches. By morning the Sisters were stiff and aching in every joint, but perked up interest later in the day as they saw the Pyramids in the distance. Naturally they hoped to be in Cairo before long. However it was already dark before they arrived, to find everything in a state of confusion. Carriages were drawn up to take the passengers to different hotels and the Egyptian drivers, anxious to get extra customers, pulled the Sisters this way and that until Mother St. Mathilde made her presence felt. Eventually she managed to find out that she, the Sisters and Father Pernot were to leave for Suez at midnight by caravan, which barely gave them time for a couple of hours' sleep before their carriage, resembling a wild west stagecoach, arrived at the hotel.

Still heavy with sleep, Father Pernot, the four nuns and a young French girl boarded the coach and were soon well outside the city where the bright full moon turned the desert into an unearthly landscape of jet black and white waves.

They stopped several times at way-stations to change horses and at one such station they encountered a caravan travelling in the opposite direction. As they drew up, Father Pernot craned his head out of the window and at the same time a thick-set priest with a luxuriant black beard who had been stretching his legs during the halt turned abruptly and headed towards them.

Father Pernot grinned delightedly and waved. "It's Father Bigandet, pro-vicar for Malaya", he told the Sisters.

"Anyone there for Penang?" The newcomer barked.

"Yes," replied Father Pernot, "Four Sisters."

"Are they English?"

"No, French!"

"Ah zut!" growled Father Bigandet, wagging his hand in disgust and turning his back on them. "I'm off!"

The Sisters looked at one another in dead silence, while Father Pernot studied the roof in embarrassment.

After a moment he attempted awkwardly to reassure the Sisters: "Look," he began hesitantly, "You mustn't take that too much to heart. Father Bigandet is really a very kind person. It's just that he is very impulsive and you see, he was hoping very much to have native English-speaking Sisters for the school, that's why he blew up. But with him it is always all over in a short time and you will find that the next time you see him, he won't remember what's just happened. I know him!"

(Father Bigandet and Mother St. Mathilde later became great friends. Whenever they disagreed, she only had to reproduce the gesture of disgust with which he had first greeted the Sisters to make him rumble with laughter. But all that was in the future and was no consolation to the Sisters right then.)

Mother St. Mathilde forced herself to smile and reassured Father Pernot: "Of course, Father, we understand perfectly."

But as the coach rattled onwards over the uneven sandy road and the others dozed fitfully, Mother St. Mathilde was wide-awake. Was this a foretaste of what they were going to meet in Penang? Well, it was foolish to worry when worry could change nothing, but since she could not sleep now, she prayed through the night hours until the dawn, when one by one her companions roused themselves, rubbing their eyes wearily.

Sister St. Damian wiped her face with a handkerchief and inspected it closely. Looking up at the others, she laughed and said ruefully: "It's sand everywhere—in my clothes, my shoes, even in my teeth! It'll be a relief when we get to the hotel."

Father Pernot, who had made the journey several times, put in a word of warning: "It's not exactly a luxury hotel. I'm afraid all four of you will have to share the same room and there will be only two beds for you. As for the beds, well, there is no mattress, just matting and two pillows. Then you'll find it a bit noisy, too, because camel caravans carrying the luggage will be turning up at intervals all through the night. But never mind," he added consolingly, "We'll be able to get some sleep the following night, once we're on board the 'Indostan'."

"Well," replied Sister St. Damian with resignation, "I always wanted to be a missionary—I might just as well get used to it here as wait until we get to Penang."

They found it as difficult to sleep as Father Pernot had forecast, and were glad to board the "Indostan" the following afternoon.

Sister St. Gregory, the youngest of the group and the only Irish Sister, excused herself early in the evening. After a few minutes she reappeared on deck in a state of great excitement. In her imperfect French she tried to explain that she had seen an immense "beast" hopping all over the cabin.

Sister St. Damian, as usual, took the lead in teasing her. "Poor Sister," she said gravely, "Perhaps the sun was too much for you. Don't you think she ought to see the doctor, Reverend Mother?"

"Well, she does look rather flushed," admitted Mother St. Mathilde, which was true enough as Sister St. Gregory reddened with mortification.

Adroitly Sister St. Appollinaire changed the subject, to Sister St. Gregory's heartfelt relief, and it was forgotten until they went to bed.

Then, with amusement Mother St. Mathilde noticed that the young Sister was still not convinced. As she lay down on her bed her eyes darted vigilantly over the cabin which was dimly lit by a small candle. Just as Mother St. Mathilde was drifting off to sleep, she was awakened by a loud crash.

Sister St. Gregory was on her knees by her bed, banging the deck furiously with her slipper and crying out triumphantly in her primitive French: "Mother! Not to be afraid! Me killed him! Me give him great whack!"

Then she displayed her victim, a badly battered cockroach an inch and a half long, or as Mother St. Mathilde herself puts it "un infortune 'cockrosh'!" Sister St. Gregory was quite cast down when she realised that her "big, black beast" was far from rare nor even dangerous as she had imagined, that in fact the boat was swarming with them.

While they were still in the Mediterranean, Mother St. Mathilde had noticed one of the male passengers eyeing them curiously from time to time, and hastily looking away whenever he thought he was observed.

Striking up an acquaintance with Father Pernot, he introduced himself as Mr. Cassette and in the course of conversation Father Pernot understood that he was a rich American with business interests in Penang. He admitted frankly to the priest that he could not make head or tail out of the nuns and couldn't imagine why on earth they had chosen what amounted to life-long exile away from their native country. Father Pernot tried to explain but at the end of it Mr. Cassette was none the wiser, partly because he knew so little French.

Finally he plucked up the courage to approach the nuns themselves—which Mother St. Mathilde had been expecting for some time, and in abominable French he asked her bluntly: "You French ladies, how faces so happy and gay, and dresses so sad?"

In spite of the language difficulty Mother St. Mathilde succeeded in explaining things to his satisfaction so well that he began to study the Catholic faith with the aid of a small Catechism in English. This encounter was to have a curious sequel.

On 28th October 1852 their boat rounded the northern side of the island of Penang. Even though Mr. Cassette who knew it well had described it for them, the Sisters were unprepared after so long at sea, for the sudden beauty of green hills rising steeply almost from the water's edge up to a peak 2,500 feet high. As the boat steamed past the innumerable nooks and coves of dazzling white sand indenting the shoreline, they could see attap thatched cottages almost hidden by the palm-trees. Along some of the beaches fishing-nets were drying on poles and naked, golden-brown children playing among the fishing-boats on the beach and splashing about in the shallows waved enthusiastically to them.

Soon they were opposite the town. Mr. Cassette pointed out to them the Chinese junks with eyes painted on their bows, Malay schooners, bulky Indian cargo-boats—all the many different boats which put in at Penang from everywhere in South-East Asia.

Their six weeks' journey was over. What awaited them?

CHAPTER EIGHT A Difficult Decision

Mother St. Mathilde lay rigidly awake. Under the dim white mesh of the mosquito-net she felt as though she were suffocating and knew with dismal certainty that sleep was impossible while her mind kept returning to her problem like the tongue to an aching tooth.

Slipping quietly out of bed, she dressed and made her way out of the small wooden house where the others were sound asleep, cautiously descending the rickety steps into the garden. All was still in the light of the full moon, not even a palm frond stirring. But there was no peace in Mother St. Mathilde's heart.

Monsignor Boucho and many others were convinced that the Sisters would have to change their way of life if they hoped to live and work effectively in the tropics. No European woman, they maintained, could possibly wear the same heavy clothes, work as intensely, and devote as many hours to prayer in such an enervating climate as she could in Europe—not, at least, unless she wanted to commit suicide.

Perhaps Monsignor Boucho was right? After all, he knew the tropics, and being a man of uncommon physical strength, was not likely to be an alarmist. Yes, Mother St. Mathilde thought worriedly, as she paced slowly up and down, he could be right. And yet she still felt convinced it would be dangerous to change.

Looking back, it seemed a miracle that the Congregation had survived the years of the French Revolution when the Sisters had been forced to scatter and live alone or in twos and threes. Because of this experience

they put a high value on the spirit of unity among their different houses, and Mother St. Mathilde was desperately afraid that any change, even a change in dress might loosen the bonds between the Mission and the Congregation.

Yesterday's interview with Monsignor Boucho had run to pattern, she reflected bleakly. Even before he had entered the house she knew the purpose of his visit. Once again he had warned her with many illustrations and examples that the Sisters would go to early graves if they did not cut down on their prayers and lived a more relaxed life. At the end she replied, without much hope of changing his opinions: "My Lord, perhaps it is true that we shall not live to a ripe old age, but then, not many missionaries do. In any case our work for the mission will only be of value if it is founded on prayer and sacrifice. Our Lord did not save souls by cutting down on his hours of prayer and deciding that crucifixion would be imprudent."

Now, in the garden, she wondered if she could have put her thoughts to him more clearly. At any rate he had not been convinced, and they had finally agreed to write to the Mother General putting their respective points of view.

She shivered suddenly in the early morning chill. What was she to do if Mother de Faudoas sided with Monsignor Boucho? Mother St. Mathilde felt certain that such a decision would ruin their work in Malaya. Warily she made her way back to her room. One way or another the decision would be here within a few months; in the meantime she would go down to Singapore and see about starting the foundation which Father Beurel had been requesting for so long.

Stepping out of the cool darkness of the church into the glare of the sun, Mother St. Mathilde's eyes were momentarily dazzled, and when she turned around on hearing Father Beurel calling her, she did not at first recognise his companion.

"Here's an old friend who is anxious to meet you," Father Beurel said, "And he has some news which may interest you."

"Why, it's Mr. Cassette!" Mother St. Mathilde exclaimed with pleasure. "I thought you still in Penang. What brings you down to Singapore? And what is your special news?"

Mr. Cassette grinned sheepishly as he shook hands with her, and Father Beurel broke in to suggest that as it was a long story they had better get into the presbytery out of the sun.

When they had settled themselves, Mother St. Mathilde looked expectantly towards Mr. Cassette, who cleared his throat nervously as he tried to marshal his thoughts into French which could be understood.

"As for your first question," he began, "I'm down here on business, but my real piece of news is that just a few weeks ago became a Catholic and was baptised by Father Beurel."

Mother St. Mathilde's eyes widened with surprise as well as pleasure. On the voyage to Malaya Mr. Cassette had obviously been on the verge of becoming a Catholic, but after arriving in Penang he had changed his ideas through the influence of sophisticated friends in the European colony, to whom "getting religion" was a breach of good taste.

"What happened was that when I came down here I became very friendly with Captain and Mrs. Wilson, who were staying in the same hotel. You know them, I think, Reverend Mother?" he enquired.

Mother St. Mathilde nodded.

"Well," he continued, "They really did the trick for me. Especially Mrs. Wilson. She doesn't mince her words, that one." He grinned reminiscently. "We used to argue and discuss our way all around the Catholic Church, and I suppose I was really trying to argue myself out of taking the plunge. Anyway, one night after a long session Mrs. Wilson said: "Look! If you really want to be enlightened, then ask God for it with a humble heart! Only He can give you this grace. On your knees, now, and let us make our evening prayers together." Thus, for the first time in his adult life Mr. Cassette knelt down in prayer, too surprised to object.

That night, after dozing uneasily for a while, he was brought fully awake by the sound of a bell, which for some reason reminded him vividly of the Elevation of the Host at a Mass he had once attended.

"Then," he concluded, "I just got out of bed and prayed, and by morning I was completely convinced of the truth, and guess that's all there was to it. But I have to thank you, too, Reverend Mother. It was you and your catechism that started the ball rolling."

When Mother St. Mathilde had congratulated him, he questioned her and Father Beurel about the house which had been bought for the new school. They had already decided it was too small and told him that they were going to look over another house next door to add to it,

whereupon he suggested they should go along in his coach so that he could inspect it, too.

An hour later they stood disappointed in the litter-strewn yard. Abruptly Mr. Cassette blew disgustedly through his moustache and turned decisively to Mother St. Mathilde. "You not to take this little nothing of a house," he said in his peculiar French. "You to have a BIG house. It is better. Me, I will see to it."

Within a few days he came to collect Father Beurel and Mother St. Mathilde to show off the house he had found for them. It was a much better location, but as they continued their tour of inspection Mother St. Mathilde became increasingly worried until at length she found the courage to put into words the question which had been growing in her mind. How much did the owner want?

"Oh, in French money it would be about twenty thousand francs." Mr. Cassette replied casually, then burst out laughing at the horror in Mother St. Mathilde's face. "You don't need to worry about the price," he reassured her, "I'll see to that. The important thing is to get a good situation right at the beginning, so that you don't have to worry about moving elsewhere later on. And besides, perhaps the house will remind you to pray for me and my family now and again."

Garbage swirled by in the muddied waters and Mother St. Mathilde wrinkled her nose in distaste at the odour of sewage ripened by the hot sun as the rusty old freighter churned towards the jetty at Penang—a fitting end to a nightmare voyage. The old boat was a paradise for cockroaches. They had swarmed in her cabin, crawling all over her and making sleep impossible on the journey back from Singapore.

Thankfully she made her way down the gangway, through jostling crowds of Tamil and Chinese dock-labourers. It was only a short distance to the convent and soon she was in her office, gratefully easing her aching limbs and chatting to Sister St. Damian.

During her absence the mail had arrived from Europe. She glanced rapidly through the envelopes, still talking to Sister St. Damian about what had happened in Singapore, until she stopped at an envelope bearing the handwriting of Mother de Fautoas. This was what she had been waiting for.

"This is it," she said quietly to Sister St. Damian. She read through the letter slowly, her features relaxed until she came to the final paragraph. Then she stopped for a moment, sitting unnaturally still. At last she looked up at Sister St. Damian, the ghost of a smile about her mouth. "It's just as well you're here. This letter concerns us both." Sister St. Damian was mildly puzzled but said nothing.

"First of all," Mother St. Mathilde went on, "Mother de Fautoas has decided to adopt my position of keeping to our ordinary way of life for some time so that we can judge if it is possible to do so in this climate. And now prepare yourself for a surprise! You have been appointed Superior of this house and I am to go down to Singapore as soon as possible to see to the establishment of the new foundation there."

Sister St. Damian's jaw dropped. When she recovered her breath she stammered, "There must be some mistake! What's happened?"

Mother St. Mathilde turned away to the window, and while Sister St. Damian stared at her in unbelief, she went on in a low voice, "No, there's no mistake. I was half-expecting something of the sort. The stand I took over changing our habits, cutting clown the hours of prayer and all the rest of it has not made me very popular. I am looked upon now as a possible stumbling-block, a cause of discord here in Penang, and perhaps I am. It is better for all concerned that I should go down to Singapore as soon as possible."

CHAPTER NINE Singapore Welcome

The approach to Singapore by sea was breath-taking that Sunday morning in February, 1854 as the "Hoogly" cut swiftly through the twinkling blue waters past green islands. Further out were the great ocean-going vessels of Europe, busy little tugs, and tiny sampans darting like water-beetles among them, while closer in to the harbour rose a forest of masts of sailing-boats from all over the East. On the island of Singapore the four nuns could see neat white colonial-styled houses belonging to British officials and merchants nestling among tall trees and fronted by soft green lawns.

For Sister St. Gaetan Gervais it was all new; she had arrived from France very recently. A talented musician, she also appreciated the vivid colours of the tropics. Though slight in build and not of robust health, she was to do important work for the Mission as Superior of Singapore and foundress of the first house of the Congregation in England. At present she felt rather like the odd man out, for the other three in the party were comparatively old hands, Mother St. Mathilde and two of her original three companions: Sister St. Appollinaire and Sister St. Gregory.

Suddenly Sister St. Gregory exclaimed: "What on earth are all those doing?"

Looking over the port side they saw a strange procession of boats of all shapes and sizes bobbing up and down but steadily drawing nearer to the "Hoogly", while further back, on the jetty, crowds of people in their Sunday best were waving enthusiastically. In the first boat a figure in

black soutane stood up uncertainly and began waving his arms cautiously in greeting.

"It's Father Beurel," Mother St. Mathilde told the others, laughing. "No wonder he's taking plenty of care standing up. He won't come up smelling of roses if he plops into the harbour."

"They must be coming for us" said Sister St. Gregory with awe.

"Well," remarked Sister St. Appollinaire hopefully, "Perhaps the Father in Malacca was wrong after all?"

During their stop in Malacca a priest had looked them over with interest when he heard they were going to open a school in Singapore and remarked briefly: "In that case you'll need a double-strength, or better still, a triple-strength vocation!" The next few months showed them exactly what he meant.

In triumphal procession the four Sisters were swept off to the Church and seated in places of honour close to the altar among a profusion of flowers. The organ blared majestically for the sung Mass, and the Sisters were almost hidden in blue clouds of incense by a small, enthusiastic thurifer until the ceremony was closed by the congregation loudly singing the "Te Deum."

Eventually the Sisters were taken to their house and left in peace and quiet. Unfortunately in spite of all the pomp and circumstance with which they had been received, no one had thought to offer them even a cup of coffee, so that, having no provisions of their own, they had to remain fasting all day until evening when a parishioner brought them supper. As Mother St. Mathilde remarked drily in a letter to Paris:

"Hymns, flowers and complimentary speeches are all very fine, no doubt, but not very filling."

When they looked to see what furniture they possessed, they found one bed, two mats, two chairs, two stools to share between the four of them.

Just before turning down the oil-lamp Sister St. Gregory remarked half-seriously to Mother St. Mathilde: "Whenever I go with you anywhere, something seems to go wrong. To-day we nearly starve and have to sleep on the floor. What have you got up your sleeve for us tomorrow morning?"

"Coffee flavoured with curry," Mother St. Mathilde replied. "A speciality of the house. If you notice, we have only one sauce-pan to prepare tea, coffee and curry!"

Next morning they made a thorough inspection of the property. There were no doors on their hinges, the floor of the kitchen was covered with rubble and plaster, while the tiles in the bathroom were nearly all broken and the huge earthenware water jar was in fragments.

Mother St. Mathilde and her companions quickly got down to work to such good effect that within ten days they were able to open schools both for fee-paying pupils and for orphans or for those who could not afford to pay anything. At this time there were less than two hundred Europeans living in Singapore, of whom few were Catholics, so on the first day only fourteen fee-paying pupils attended. It was very slowly over the first few years that the number of these pupils increased as the school became better known.

Many more, received without any payment, had been allowed to run wild and did not take kindly to the new discipline; they especially resented the attempts of the Sisters to reform their taste in clothes. By preference the girls wore neither stockings nor shoes nor, often, even underclothes, but considered it very chic to wear muslin frocks edged with ragged lace and large hats decorated with clumps of faded flowers or feathers.

These years were especially hard for Mother St. Mathilde. Just as much as the Sisters, she had her moments of doubt, times of weakness when she wondered whether their self-sacrifice was ever going to achieve anything. For the sake of the others she concealed her own fears and was a picture of complete confidence, None of them in their wildest dreams could have imagined that in less than a hundred years they would have more than sixty thousand pupils in Malaya.

In Penang, Mother St. Damian was now Superior. From the time they had first met she had become very attached to Mother St. Mathilde and looked upon her as a model. She did her best to acquire Mother St. Mathilde's self-control, but as a true southerner found it almost impossible to hide her emotions, particularly as her eyes betrayed her feelings without her knowledge. At one point she was completely successful. Everyone imagined she had a constitution of iron, for she worked hard without respite and was never ill. Only when she was dying did anyone realize that she had worn herself completely out.

During her short life Mother St. Damian's warm heart and loyalty to her friends won over not only her own community but a large number of Catholics and non-Catholics on the island, although her devastating

frankness was not always welcome. Even Mother de Faudoas, far away in Paris did not escape entirely.

When Mother St. Damian was nominated Superior in Penang she bluntly expressed her feelings to the Mother General about Mother St. Mathilde's transfer; "You recommend me in exercising my office as Superior to be calm, patient and charitable. Mother St. Mathilde used these same means to the very greatest extent. If anything, she was too afraid to hurt people. Another, less sensitive, would have suffered much less than she has done. Would she have gained better results? I do not know, but I must say that if, with her experience and wisdom, her union with God, her virtue, and indeed her holiness, she has had to suffer so much to do good, who could flatter herself that she could do more and better than her? More than ever I say today I will do my best to follow in her footsteps." She also remarked pointedly referring to letters which had been written to Paris about Mother St. Mathilde.

"Thousands of miles away it is difficult to judge things exactly especially when you only hear one bell ringing, and that bell doesn't always hit the right note!"

Under her leadership the work in Penang was progressing well, even the Christian laypeople under the influence of Mother St. Damian and the Sisters through their visits outside were coming to help the sick and teach catechism. But there was one great worry—the urgent need for English-speaking Sisters. The Sisters needed to learn both English and Malay and long before they had become fluent they had to struggle desperately to teach catechism in these languages.

Little by little through trial and error they were becoming more fluent, but the need was still felt. Finally in 1856 Mother de Faudoas sent to Penang two young sisters, the former Misses Wathworth, London-born and both converted to the Church at an early age. One of them, Sister St. Zacharie, who had accompanied Mother de Faudoas to Southampton to see Mother St. Mathilde and her companions off as a young postulant was gifted far above the ordinary, perhaps too gifted for the pupils she now had to teach.

Mother St. Damian thought it wise to give her a few hints before the term began. By the time she called Sister St. Zacharie to her office, she felt that she had taken her measure. As she looked at Sister St. Zacharie's thin, intelligent face, high brow and quick eyes, she thought to herself, she's like a racehorse pawing eagerly at the turf before a race, in comparison with us carthorses! I wonder if she has any real idea what she is in for?

"I asked you to come and see me" she began, "Because this school is not exactly what you've been used to. We have only just begun and I'm just a little afraid that you might be discouraged by your first experiences in the classroom."

Sister St. Zacharie's eyes were fastened on her intently, though she said nothing, and Mother St. Damian shifted uneasily, wondering if the young Sister brought the same concentration to bear on everything.

"You must understand," she continued, "that the children you will be teaching were under an English lady who had no idea of discipline and the children learned nothing. They are not going to be very happy about the change, you know. Don't expect too much from them at first

and don't be too discouraged . You need to be ready for a long, slow haul, because, frankly, the children are lazy and we can only hope to change them over a long period."

Sister St. Zacharie smiled and answered: "I think I understand, Reverend Mother. I will do my best to cure that."

Mother St. Damian stared at the door for a long moment as it closed on Sister St. Zacharie and thought gloomily: that's exactly what I'm afraid of, that you'll do your best right from the start and then get discouraged if you don't get results!

In the year and a half that followed, Mother St. Damian watched with concern as Sister St. Zacharie multiplied her efforts to arouse the interest of the children, but the only reaction was resentment against her for committing the unpardonable sin of trying to make them work. They retaliated by using all their considerable cunning to make her life miserable, their efforts reaching a climax at the end of the school year in December 1857. When the term was over, Mother St. Damian breathed a sigh of relief, feeling that the annual retreat and rest would do Sister St. Zacharie a world of good, but on the day after the end of term, Sunday, 20th December, she complained of pains in the head and limbs, and to Mother St. Damian's worried eyes it seemed as if it was only now when the Intolerable strain of the past month had been lifted that the effect on Sister St. Zacharie was becoming visible. Her eyes were sunk into her head and even walking was a great effort. Soon she began to suffer attacks of vomiting, though she insisted on following the retreat which had just begun, and even managed to go to confession.

By Wednesday it was impossible for her to get out of bed, for she was suffering from high fever and, in spite of all that was done, grew progressively weaker. On Sunday morning the doctor became alarmed at her lack of resistance and warned Mother St. Damian that the crisis would come during the night and she would probably become delirious.

Left alone with her patient, Mother St. Damian felt a stab of fear as she looked down at the bloodless face, almost as white as the pillow it rested on. Forcing a smile, she asked her if she would like confession.

Sister St. Zacharie's eyes livened with gratitude. "You're so very good to have thought of doing me that favour," she whispered. "It is so few days since I was at confession that I could not have asked for it again today, and now you have thought of it on your own. Thank you, thank you, Mother".

During the day the Sisters took turns to visit her. She seemed cheerful and told them how she was looking forward to receiving Holy Communion in the morning. When all had gone to bed, Mother St. Damian remained up, fully dressed, spending part of the time talking quietly with Sister St. Zacharie and whenever she seemed more rested, going silently to her own room nearby, returning at intervals to see if everything was all right.

About midnight she noticed that Sister Zacharie's sufferings had become more intense. With an effort she told Mother St. Damian: "I'm afraid I can't go until morning without drinking any water. What a disappointment! I had counted so much on receiving Our Lord!"

Soon afterwards she became delirious and Mother St. Damian sat alone with her by the bedside in the flickering shadows cast by the oil-lamp, doing what she could to ease her. In her delirium she kept repeating distinctly: "Jesus, Mary, Joseph, I love you.....I give you my heart, my soul, my life."

At two o'clock in the morning the delirium subsided, an unmistakable change came over the features of the young Sister and Mother St. Damian knew that nothing more could be done. Still she sat on motionless by the bedside through the long night hours until the grey of early morning, when she sent for the priest.

Even then she remained in the sick room until at two o'clock in the afternoon Sister St. Zacharie died quietly in her sleep.

In the weeks that followed the other Sisters were alarmed at the change in Mother St. Damian, so remarkable in one who was always full of life and energy. She was remote and listless, and it seemed for a time as if Sister St. Zacharie's death had broken her spirit. She had given all her affection to the young Sister and was now torturing herself, wondering whether she had been at fault. If perhaps she had kept her eyes open more, would she have foreseen the danger and been able to avert it? Only Mother de Faudoas and Mother St. Mathilde guessed at her distress of mind, and neither could do much for her.

Only time and hard work helped her. Of hard work there was no lack, for in the time following Sister St. Zacharie's death she was continually occupied in expanding the existing buildings to take in more and more pupils and orphans. Soon she understood and accepted that no one, however well-intentioned she may be, can ever really know fully the

sufferings and needs of another, unless she is told. No one could have guessed to what point of exhaustion Sister St. Zacharie had been driven; she had concealed it too well.

One Sister had died at sea; now the first had died on land. There would be many others; a Mission has to be paid for.

CHAPTER TEN An American Recruit

Mother St. Mathilde rubbed her nose thoughtfully and read once again the letter which had come from Hong Kong with the last mail boat.

"Come in!" she called out as a knock sounded at the door.

Sister St. Gregory entered and said: "Reverend Mother, the Bishop of Hong Kong has just arrived and would like to see you; I've put him in the parlour."

Father Beurel as host for a few days to the Bishop was taking him on a tour of the island and had brought him across to see his convent school.

After talking with them about the progress of the school for a while, Mother St. Mathilde turned to the Bishop and asked him: "My Lord, do you happen to know a Miss Spooner in Hong Kong?"

Looking up, he answered with surprise, "I certainly do, but how have you come across her?"

"Only by letter. She has just written to tell me she would like to enter with us here in Singapore, but I can't understand why she has thought of us when she could just as easily enter a convent in Hong Kong. That is why I was wondering if you knew anything about her."

The Bishop sighed in resignation, carefully replacing cup on saucer, then turning up his hands expressively, said: "All right, I give up! I might as well tell you that I'd been hoping she would be the foundress of a local religious order of nuns in Hong Kong. Ever since she came from America to stay with her brother she has been very active in Catholic affairs and is altogether an outstanding personality. I've been

waiting for someone to turn up who would be suitable to found a religious order of women in the diocese and in her I thought I'd struck lucky, but each time I approached the subject she shied away like a frightened horse. Anyway, you can understand why she doesn't want to enter a novitiate in Hong Kong. She is too well-known there, and I suppose everybody knows that I wanted her to be a foundress, and that might be awkward for her too."

"Yes, I can imagine it might," agreed Mother St. Mathilde, with a suspicion of a smile.

"If she is thinking of coming here," he went on, "You might as well know something of her background, which is really extraordinary."

Miss Spooner belonged to an American family with business interests in Hong Kong, where her brother had been living for a long time. While still quite young she became very attached to one of the servants, a devout Irish Catholic, and spent some time every day with her, learning more and more about the Catholic Church. It never occurred to her to keep it a secret and one day told her mother with the result that the Irish servant was immediately shown the door.

By that time, though, Miss Spooner was already convinced of the truth of the Catholic religion and was determined to become Catholic. Her mother and two sisters did all they could to prevent it, systematically making her life miserable as soon as they saw that words alone were having no effect. Under the strain, she became seriously ill, which badly frightened her family who had had no intention of carrying things so far, and when she had recovered it was decided to send her for a holiday with her brother and his wife in Hong Kong, for her mother

and sister still could not reconcile themselves to her becoming a Catholic.

As soon as she arrived in Hong Kong Miss Spooner began to work tirelessly for the poor and was soon well-known to the missionaries for her charity.

The Bishop's account satisfied Mother St. Mathilde but still, in her reply to Miss Spooner she took care to warn her that life in the Convent in Singapore was not easy.

When Mother St. Mathilde welcomed Miss Spooner to the house, she found herself face to face with a tall, mature woman with steady eyes and a mouth which smiled easily and often. Oddly though, Miss Spooner suddenly appeared ill at ease when Mother St. Mathilde arrived.

Another peculiar thing happened when they came to the chapel. Rising from her knees, Mother St. Mathilde noticed that Miss Spooner had turned very pale. Immediately Mother St. Mathilde urged her to sit down while she sent for a glass of water, but Miss Spooner protested that she was all right. It was only years later that Mother St. Mathilde found out what lay behind it.

Sister St. Joseph, as Miss Spooner was named, was later appointed Mistress of Novices, but during her first days there her complete ignorance of religious life was an endless source of amusement to Mother St. Mathilde and the rest of the community.

It was some time before she understood that when a bell summoned her to some duty or another she was supposed to answer it straight away.

At first she was just as likely to let it go on ringing merrily without paying the slightest attention.

Once when Mother St. Mathilde asked her why she had not gone to her duty immediately, she answered casually: "Oh, I just did not feel inclined!"

Coming from a rich family she took it for granted that everyone, but everyone, had servants, and two days after her arrival went in search of Mother St. Mathilde to ask her innocently who was supposed to make her bed and sweep her room. Very tickled at this, Mother St. Mathilde left a broom in her bedroom that evening with a note explaining how to use it.

Years later Sister St. Joseph told them all why she had been upset the first day she arrived. When she had been dangerously ill in America she had had a dream in which she saw herself taken to a strange country, and then, the dream changing suddenly, she was lying in a coffin in a chapel, surrounded by women dressed in a strange costume she had never seen.

"You can imagine my shock," she concluded, "When you came to the door wearing that very same habit and why I nearly fainted when you showed me the chapel and it was exactly the same in every detail as the chapel I had seen in my dream!" The final detail of her dream came true when twenty five years later she died in Singapore and was laid in her coffin in front of the main altar of the chapel.

Over the years the children in the school had changed very much for the better under the influence of Mother St. Mathilde and the Sisters.

Now that the school seemed to be running smoothly, Mother St. Mathilde felt that she could do what Mgr. Boucho and Father Allard wanted—open a school in Malacca.

The Catholic Church had been established there ever since the Portuguese had occupied the town over two hundred years earlier. St. Francis Xavier, the apostle of the Indies, had spent some time there. But for all its Catholic tradition, Malacca had fallen on bad times and for various reasons the Catholics had been so neglected that many had sunk into immoral and superstitious ways. Father Allard, discouraged with good reason, felt that he was battering his head against a brick wall so long as there was no school to give the children of Malacca a solid Catholic education.

Once again it was the old team which set out from Singapore to Malacca—Mother St. Mathilde, Sister St. Appollinaire and Sister St. Gregory.

The day after their arrival in October, 1859, Mother St. Mathilde was able to buy a piece of land and a house very close to the sea, a beautiful location, but with a certain inconvenience which they only realised when night had fallen. As the evening cooled and the sun went down, the three of them sat outside on the verandah, looking at the sea and the coastline curving gently northwards.

Behind them was the jungle covered mainland, into which few Europeans had penetrated. There were no large towns, only villages dotted along river-banks and occasional tin-mining camps of Chinese coolies who had come to Malaya in the hope of making a modest sum of money and then returning home. Hardly any ever succeeded.

Mother St. Mathilde wondered idly if ever the time would come when they would be able to open schools in the interior, instead of being limited to the coast.

When it had become dark there was nothing else for them to do but unroll their sleeping-mats and settle themselves for the night.

With a start, Mother St. Mathilde sat up, suddenly wide awake. At the same time she felt a sharp pain in her foot, then her hand.

"Mon Dieu, RATS!" screamed Sister St. Appollinaire, "They're all over me!" Leaping to her feet she laid around her frantically with a shoe, frightening the rats almost as much as she was frightened by them.

Shivering with disgust, she didn't feel any happier when she saw both Mother St. Mathilde and Sister St. Gregory laughing helplessly. "What's so funny?" she asked belligerently, still waving her shoe. "I just can't stand rats, they give me the horrors. When I felt them crawling over me and then one of them started gnawing my HAIR, I nearly had a heart attack!"

Neither Mother St. Mathilde nor Sister St. Gregory had seen Sister St. Appollinaire startled out of her calm before. Trembling with indignation, bunching her skirt with one hand and waving a shoe in the other, she had made an unforgettable picture.

Once the new school had been opened by the new Superior, Mother St. Appollinaire, Mother St. Mathilde returned to Singapore where a letter from Mother de Faudoas was awaiting her. It came as a shock. Mgr. Boucho had been urging Mother St. Mathilde for some time to open a

school in Malacca and was overjoyed that she had finally succeeded. Yet now, in this letter, Mother de Faudoas was reproaching her with having gone against the wishes of Mgr. Boucho. She could not understand what had happened. However, just as she had accepted being moved from Penang, so now she accepted this letter calmly enough to all outward signs, but inwardly she must have been very hurt by what must have seemed to her a second instance that no matter what she did, or how much she worked, she was not really trusted.

Only later, and then in painful circumstances for the Mission, did she discover how Mother de Faudoas had been deceived. If perhaps she had defended herself at the time, Mother de Faudoas' eyes might have been opened to the truth of the situation and the foundation in Malacca saved.

Acute though her trials were at this time, Mother St. Mathilde endured them with the spirit which was hers all through her long life - "Allons, courage! You must let yourself be bruised, sacrificed ... virtue always looks for a battlefield ... for the salvation of souls."

Shortly after the foundation of Malacca Mother St. Mathilde fell seriously ill with fever and for a time no one believed she could survive, but when almost on the point of death she rallied and slowly regained her strength. Once again it was Penang, not Singapore, which suffered loss.

First, it was Sister St. Euthyme who had come on the first expedition and never fully recovered from the attacks of brain-fever she had undergone soon after arriving. However, she had refused to leave the Mission, and at the end of June 1861, died at the age of thirty-three.

The influence of the Sisters in Penang under Mother St. Damian had spread far beyond the convent school. Besides receiving orphans, they went out to visit the poor and the sick, catechise, baptise and nurse, not only those who suffered from the usual illnesses, but even lepers whom no one else would approach. Mother St. Damian in particular was known to all the townspeople for her fearlessness in treating the most unpleasant diseases.

Though careful of the health of the Sisters, Mother St. Damian drove herself beyond her strength, although no one realised it, for she never showed the slightest sign of fatigue. Since she had first arrived from France she had changed a lot. Now she no longer laughed as easily or as often as before for she had seen too much poverty and misery, but she had gained new gentleness.

On Friday afternoon before Palm Sunday, 1863, the heat was stifling in her office, which was normal enough for that time of year in Penang. But as she rose from her desk to get ready to go across to the Church for the Way of the Cross, she suddenly felt unsteady. The floor seemed to lurch under her feet and she was overcome with nausea. Sitting down again at her desk, she closed her eyes, fighting against her sickness and supporting her head in her hands, but though this relieved her a little, she felt drained of strength, unable to move.

As though from far away, she heard the voice of Sister St. Jeanne asking anxiously: "Mother, what's the matter?" She must have missed me going across to the Church, thought Mother St. Damian hazily. Aloud she said: "Nothing much, I expect. Only when I try to get up I feel very dizzy. If this goes away, I'll go across to the Church later on ..."

" but her voice trailed away as she suddenly felt herself seized by a convulsion and was violently sick.

For some time a smallpox epidemic had been raging in the island - Mother St. Damian had fallen victim to it.

Her case was clearly serious, so serious that a priest came to give her Holy Communion at one o'clock in the morning. The two Sisters who had volunteered to nurse her in isolation withdrew to the room next door to give her more privacy. The partition between the two rooms was very thin, and they could hear Mother St. Damian's voice distinctly. Believing she was all alone she offered to God the sacrifice of her life.

"My God, I offer myself to You!" they heard her murmur. After a pause, she went on painfully: "Put on to my shoulders now all the sufferings that would come to this house and those within it. Let me be the only victim, don't let this sickness go out of this room."

For the previous few weeks she had been very distressed by the sufferings caused by the epidemic in the island, and now she also begged God that the epidemic would die with her, and the epidemic did, in fact, disappear the day she made this sacrifice of her life.

In her acute suffering she remained as great-hearted as ever, her thoughts not upon herself, but concerned with others, and especially with the poor of Penang; it was of them that she spoke particularly.

"Are you in very much pain?" asked Sister St. Jeanne at one point before she realised what a foolish question it was. Even her eyelids were so swollen that she could hardly open them, but she only answered:

"Well, not as much as Our Lord. And I'm lucky! Whatever have I done to be given the chance of knowing the Lord and to be able to offer my pain and unite it to His? It will be a great reward if all this will help us perhaps to go and work in Cochin-China and Burma." She who was so tender-hearted towards the sick and could be moved even to tears by the needs of the poor, had no concern for herself. Even on her death-bed, the efforts of the Sisters to make her comfortable made her uneasy.

"Really," she expostulated once, "I can't let myself be pampered like that.....do you think it is for that that I came out to the Mission?"

At first the Siamese doctor who had been called in would not believe that this was the first time she had been ill, because when he had examined her he found that she had worn herself out completely and had worked for a long time far beyond what her strength should have allowed, but as he observed her he was impressed with her courage, finally admitting: "If that is how she bears such pain, it's easy to see how she could have worked herself into such a state of exhaustion without anyone realising it."

The end came on Holy Saturday, 30th March, 1863 when Mother St. Damian died, barely forty years of age.

In Penang people of all races and religion mourned her, for they knew that the poor and the sick and the rejected had lost a staunch friend in Mother St. Damian. And indirectly, although Mother St. Mathilde could not know this yet, her death was to have a tragic effect on the foundation of Malacca.

CHAPTER ELEVEN Malacca Tragedy

It was oppressively hot and still. Overhead, storm-clouds moved sluggishly towards the mainland. The dirty old coastal steamer was crowded with passengers on its way from Singapore to Penang, and Mother St. Mathilde was thankful that she would soon be getting off in Malacca, even though she was not looking forward to her business there.

Almost every inch of deck space was occupied by Malays, Tamils and Chinese, squatting on their haunches, philosophically enduring the discomforts of the journey. The Tamils, probably the fastest talkers in the world, were enjoying a noisy debate in their multi-syllabled language, each in turn holding forth at great length like professional politicians, while their young wives, babies straddling their hips, talked and giggled among themselves. Further on, many of the Malay passengers were eating durians, a popular fruit in Malaya, unmistakable for its clinging smell of long neglected drains. Behind her, at a safe distance, a semi-circle of Chinese infants, adorned with a cloth band around their middles, their heads shaved, faces patchily smeared with white powder for coolness, were entranced by the oddly dressed giant in black.

All this barely registered on the edge of Mother St. Mathilde's consciousness as she leaned against the rusty, peeling rails, and looked down at the water eddying past. Her mind was entirely occupied with the troubles she expected to meet in Malacca.

Everything had gone well there up to the time that Mother Appollinaire left to take over as Superior in Penang after the death of Mother St.

Damian, but the new Superior in Malacca, a Mother St. Leonard, had begun to introduce all sorts of changes almost as soon as she arrived, and Mother St. Mathilde had become more and more concerned as time passed and her behaviour grew even more strange. Only recently she had proposed selling the house and grounds which had proved so suitable, in order to buy much, less suitable land elsewhere, even though it would mean borrowing money at 10% interest. This was the immediate reason for Mother St. Mathilde's visit. For some time she had been uneasy about Mother St. Leonard, but had done nothing, because she had received a letter from Paris—which puzzled her—telling her not to interfere in the affairs of the Malacca Convent. All the same this idea of selling the Convent property was taking things too far, and she felt it her duty to see what was happening, for clearly the Mother General was not aware of all that had been going on.

Even after the boat arrived in Malacca it was some time before Mother St. Mathilde could make her way down the gangway and through the jostling crowd on the jetty to where Mother St. Leonard was waiting in a horse-drawn "gharry" to take her to the Convent. In the first few moments of greeting, Mother St. Mathilde could hardly conceal her shock at seeing Mother St. Leonard so wan and haggard. As the gharry jogged along to Bandar Hilir, Mother St. Leonard kept up a stream of questions about the various Sisters in Singapore, almost as though she were afraid of silence.

Mother St. Mathilde answered her questions absently, noticing all the signs of extreme nervous tension in Mother St. Leonard. Her eyes were haunted as though she were in the grip of some overwhelming fear;

worry had grooved deep lines in her face, and she clasped her hands together so tightly that the knuckles showed white. Certainly, there was something seriously wrong.

Later in the afternoon, refreshed by a bath and a much needed change of clothes, Mother St. Mathilde descended the steps of the small wooden Convent and walked a little distance down to the seashore. The first time she had come there she had been captivated by the view of sea and shore curving around to the north, to the town of Malacca. It was a pleasant spot for the Convent, a place of beauty and peace. All very different from the noise and bustle of Singapore, she thought ruefully.

Turning from the sea, she saw Mother St. Leonard hurrying towards her from the Convent. As she drew level with Mother St. Mathilde, she smiled nervously and said: "Reverend Mother, I'm sure that I'll be able to resolve all your doubts about the new property, now that you are on the spot."

Hiding her surprise at this abruptness, Mother St. Mathilde replied dryly: "There's no harm in trying ..."

Mother St. Leonard launched forth into her arguments in favour of the move as they walked up and down. Mother St. Mathilde became slightly, then more seriously alarmed, as her companion's voice grew more and more excited and she lost the thread of her thoughts. Mother St. Mathilde tried vainly to interrupt her, until suddenly, what remained of her self-control broke entirely. Halting in the path, she turned to Mother St. Mathilde, desperate appeal in her eyes, and with tears streaming down her face, cried out: "Reverend Mother, forgive me! I have denounced you to the Inquisition!"

Mother St. Mathilde was too shocked for a moment to move, but quickly recovering herself, put her arm around Mother St. Leonard and said soothingly: "Never mind about that now. You can see it hasn't done me any harm. Let's go back to the house, and then you can lie down and rest." Gently she guided her back to the Convent, signalling to one of the Sisters to help her with the unfortunate Reverend Mother.

For the next few days she stayed for hours at the bedside of Mother St. Leonard. The persecution-mania against which she had been struggling in secret for so long had finally overcome her resistance, yet for long periods her sanity returned, and in those intervals she seemed to find a measure of relief in pouring out her tragic story to Mother St. Mathilde.

One of the first things she confessed was that it was she who was responsible for the way in which Mother St. Mathilde had been so often misjudged and to some extent had lost the confidence of Mother General, for she had several times written to Paris while in the grip of her mania, making misrepresentations against Mother St. Mathilde. And yet she was not really responsible. It was a characteristic of her mental disease that it was those whom she particularly liked and admired when she was in a normal state of mind that she imagined to be bitter enemies when her mind was clouded by the beginnings of insanity.

At first, and for a long time afterwards, she realised that she was suffering from delusions, but was terrified to admit even to herself, and much less to others, that she was gradually losing her mind. Instead, she resolved to conquer her delusions by sheer will power, and for a long time she succeeded so well outwardly that everyone thought of her

as an excellent religious, even if a shade too reserved and tense, never suspecting her agony of mind, which intensified as she felt her self-control being worn away by the disease.

The bitter struggle to keep her secret was over. It had been a mistake, but a very understandable one, to hide her fear of insanity from her Superior, and Mother St. Mathilde felt only deep pity for her, a casualty of the Mission field as surely as those who succumbed to physical illness.

Sadly, she wound up the affairs of the Convent, for there was no one available to replace Mother St. Leonard as Superior, as both the foundations in Penang and Singapore were growing and needed all the staff they could get. The Convent in Malacca had to be abandoned for the time being, but Mother St. Mathilde was determined that one day the Sisters would return to this town where they were needed so much.

CHAPTER TWELVE The Night Club

Sister St. Anselm sighed gustily, straightened her aching back, took off her steel-rimmed spectacles and polished them carefully, as she blinked around at the other Sisters sitting around the large work-table in the community room, all busily engaged in embroidery and chatting quietly among themselves.

It was eleven o'clock at night, not the ideal time for such eye straining work, when moths fluttered and beat their wings against the oil-lamps making the meagre yellow light even more flickering and uncertain, but there was no other time which could be given to it. Sister St. Anselm knew better than anyone else, apart from Mother St. Mathilde, how necessary this work was, for she had been put in charge of the finances of the Convent. Every dollar that could be earned by selling embroidery to the wives of the rich merchants was precious these days. Fortunes were made in Singapore, but the city had, all the same, many unwanted children, many sick and poor, who could look to no one else but to the Sisters for help in their misery. Only a few years previously the great worry had been how few children came to the school, but all that was changed. Now the problem was to find more space for the children, to put up more buildings. There were more orphans to be supported, and the Sisters had even put up a little "hospital" in the corner of the compound to receive sick and elderly women who had nowhere else to go. It all added up to a need for more and more money, more certainly than what was given to them from time to time by their benefactors.

Sister St. Anselm Borneque, squarely built, tireless and efficient, was not an imaginative person, unlike her friend Sister St. Gaetan. If

anything she was remarkably unsentimental, but beneath her business-like air there was a deep compassion for those in need, and she had seen with her own eyes how many looked to the Sisters for help. Looking down at her embroidery, she reflected that even if her hands were not made for artistic work, they were practical, hard-working hands; she could, with her acute business sense, see opportunities for making money where others couldn't. Not a romantic gift, perhaps, but she devoted it tirelessly to helping the unfortunate in body and soul. And at least, she thought to herself, when Mother St. Mathilde gives you a job, like looking after the finance of the house, she lets you alone, and doesn't keep breathing down the back of your neck to see how you are getting along.

But even Sister St. Anselm's ingenuity was hard put to coping with all the demands made by the poor on the Sisters. The others knew this, and every evening from Matins and Lauds at nine o'clock until the clock struck midnight, they worked at embroidery, for every dollar counted. They knew, too, that Mother St. Mathilde never asked of them what she was not ready to do herself. Not long back this had been brought home to them forcibly, Sister St. Anselm remembered with amusement—mixed with a certain shame. Someone had brought to the gates of the Convent a sick woman who had been left unwashed and uncared for over a period of days. Several Sisters had come hurrying forward, but as soon as they came near, stopped, sickened by the smell of corruption which rose from her like a cloud.

Mother St. Mathilde walked past them, and under their horror-stricken eyes gathered the sick woman into her arms. Quietly she roused them from their disgust: "Who is going to help me carry her to

bed? If I could, I would carry her alone. Remember what the Lord said: As long as you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it unto me! This is one of the least of His brethren. We don't have favourites among the poor; God loves them all." Before she had finished speaking, all the Sisters were at her side, trying to help her carry the sick woman to the "hospital" at the other side of the compound, mastering their revulsion as best they could.

When they were tired out, as they so often were during these night hours after a full day's work in the heat of the day, the Sisters did not complain, for Mother St. Mathilde, older than any of them, worked as hard, if not harder, while fasting every day, taking only a little rice and curry at noon and a light meal in the evening. In a pause in the conversation, Sister St. Anselm suddenly remembered something she had been meaning to ask Mother Sr. Mathilde. "Did anything happen to those Chinese girls that the young police officer told you about? You know, the ones he found on board that ship, who were going to be sold here in Singapore." she queried.

Mother St. Mathilde laughed. "I thought all of Singapore must have heard them arriving in the convent today," she replied.

To those who had heard nothing about this Mother Mathilde explained that a young Frenchman, a police officer, had boarded one of the ships in the harbour in the course of his duty and discovered that the captain had nineteen Chinese girls hidden on board whom he intended to sell to houses of vice in the city. The officer released them, took them to the police station and then hurried off to tell Mother St. Mathilde what had happened, for he knew, like everyone else, that she took a special interest in such unfortunate girls and was always prepared to do battle

on their behalf. No one in the colony would have believed that Mother St. Mathilde had been timid as a child, for when the salvation of souls and the protection of the defenceless was concerned, opposing her was like fighting an earthquake. She was so well-known in the courts that the English judges often invited her to sit at their side to discuss things more comfortably, even when the court was in session.

"Well," she continued, "I wrote to the magistrates straight away, and today the seven youngest arrived. You should have heard those children howl when they saw me for the first time! They covered up their eyes and cowered against the wall as though they were trying to burrow their way through it, and nothing I could say seemed to help."

"Luckily one of the amahs could speak their dialect. But even then, it wasn't easy to calm them down. It seems that the captain had told them that they would be whipped every day by the foreign devils and starved of rice if they came to the convent, and I suppose I am severe-looking enough to make them think that there was something in it when they saw me arrive."

"What an introduction to the convent!" sympathised Sister St. Gaetan, "I wonder if they'll settle down all right?"

"Oh, I imagine so," replied Mother St. Mathilde thoughtfully. "It will take some time, of course, but you know, they have known so little kindness up to now that I think it will work marvels."

She was right. All those girls became very good Christians, by their example making the Catholic Faith respected among their own race, and bringing to the Sisters unwanted babies and children who had been

orphaned or abandoned. The young police officer did a better day's work than he knew when he brought them to Mother St. Mathilde.

So the time sped by every evening until midnight, for there was always a lot to talk about in those early days when the poverty and self-sacrifice of the Sisters was beginning to show results. They did not look for more leisure, better food, a more comfortable house: what gave them new heart was that as time went by they were afforded more and more opportunities of doing the work they had come to do—educating children to be true Christians, helping the poor, nursing the sick, giving themselves to those in Penang and Singapore who needed them.

It was now fifteen years since Mother St. Mathilde had arrived with her first companions from France. Recently she had written to Paris, asking for more Sisters to help in the growing apostolate, and in reply the Mother General had asked for her to come back to France first of all, so that they could discuss the needs of the Mission and future developments.

Often during those evenings together Mother St. Mathilde would glance around at the small group, wondering what they would say if they knew what she had in mind. Among them were several Sisters of exceptional quality, who could be trusted to take charge, not only of the house in Singapore, but of new foundations in Malaya as well. There was Sister St. Anselm, stolid and capable, who had already proved herself as a Superior in France for seven years before volunteering to come to the Mission; Sister St. Gaetan, not so robust as Sister St. Anselm, but a person of intense nervous energy. And then there was Sister St. Marcienne Danis, the gentle-hearted, famous for her unconsciously comical sayings, whose single-minded love of God and of

all His children was to win many souls during her long years as Superior in Malacca.

Yes, they could be trusted. As for herself, she had felt for some time now a new field for her labours would soon be offered. In this year, 1867, her thoughts were directed more and more to a country where as yet active missionary work was forbidden, and native converts risked death if they professed their Faith. At school she had often dreamed away the hours, picturing herself following in St. Francis Xavier's footsteps as a missionary, while her teacher droned on about imports and exports. Sooner or later she would go as a missionary — to Japan!

Only a child's day-dream? That particular child, Justine Raclot, had an uncanny knack of translating her day-dreams into reality.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN Back to Paris

It was hot! It had been hot yesterday and hot the day before. No one liked to think how hot it might be tomorrow.

It wasn't the kind of weather which tempts people to sunbathe. It was a leaden airless heat which pressed down like a blanket squeezing out every last drop of strength from the passengers huddled miserably on deck. In Singapore at least there had been plenty of water to drink and wash with; here, four days into the Indian Ocean and even that was rationed. Children, exhausted by the heat, cried and squalled, wearing down the nerves of their parents, while the other passengers looked on moodily, fervently wishing they were already at Marseilles. Mother St. Mathilde's head throbbed. She and her companion had been saving young mothers from hysterics by putting in hours of baby-sitting, and it was a relief to have some time to themselves at last. They moved down the deck towards the stern, away from the other passengers, too tired almost to talk, each occupied with her own thoughts. Suddenly Mother St. Mathilde's ears caught an unusual sound. Laying her hand on Sister St. Esperance's sleeve, she halted her with the words: "Did you hear anything odd then?"

Sister St. Esperance paused, listening, then turned doubtfully to Mother St. Mathilde: "I'm not sure, but I thought there was a sound of someone groaning ...?"

Together they listened again. This time there was no mistaking it. Wondering if there had been an accident, Mother St. Mathilde hurried further towards the stern, threading her way through a labyrinth of crates and packing-cases and coils of rope. When she was almost three-

quarters of the way to the stern she waited a moment to pinpoint the direction from which the groans were coming and turning towards the rail of the ship, discovered a man lying on a stretcher rigged up in the shelter of two crates, shaded from the sun by a strip of tarpaulin. He was only half conscious, tossing and turning feverishly from side to side.

Mother St. Mathilde dropped to her knees by his side and asked him what it was he needed, but he only stared at her uncomprehendingly and muttered a few words rapidly in a language she could not understand. She repeated her question in English, but with no better luck. She put her hand to his forehead, the skin was dry and hot. Hearing Sister St. Esperance arrive, she said: "I'm afraid this poor fellow is in bad shape. He's running a high fever."

"Now I wonder ..." she murmured to herself, quickly and expertly running her hands over the sick man's chest and back. When her hand reached between his shoulder-blades, he groaned loudly and squirmed away. Gently she took off his vest, exposing a large black-rimmed abscess in the middle of his back.

"At least the abscess has burst," she remarked briskly, "But all the same he needs attention with such a fever."

Sister St. Esperance felt sick and miserable. What a pleasure cruise this was turning out to be! She was going back to France after being seriously ill in Singapore and felt emptied of strength. How could she help this sick man when she herself felt near to collapse? For she was under no illusion: Mother St. Mathilde would never dream of leaving anyone in such a state unattended. As if in answer to her thoughts,

Mother St. Mathilde said: "He must have been put here because it is a little cooler on deck, but it's obvious no one has been taking any real care of him. For one thing I don't suppose there is anyone to spare among the crew, so it is up to us ... or rather let us leave it up to me, shall we, because you ought to be taking as much rest as you can. The voyage itself is hard enough on you."

Sister St. Esperance forced a smile. "I can do my resting here just as well as anywhere else, and I can help you out with him."

Mother St. Mathilde rose to her feet and brushed her hands. "We can talk about that later. Just wait here for a while until I come back. I want to get soap and water and other things. I won't be long."

Left alone with the sick man, Sister St. Esperance felt unutterably weary. Her eyes were aching from the unremitting glare of sun and sea, and now as she looked down with pity at the man's thin body, restless in the grip of fever, she felt once again a wave of hopelessness submerge her.

She had had great dreams five years ago when she left France with the other Sisters for the Mission, dreams of working hard for the Lord for the salvation of souls. "The harvest is great, but the labourers are few ..." Had she been presumptuous in volunteering to help with the harvest of souls? Within months her health had begun to fail. For several years she had fought, optimistically at first, then with a growing conviction of failure, against the remorseless advance of her sickness. Then, finally, the doctor's verdict that she would never be strong enough to work in a tropical climate ...

The brushing of skirts behind her aroused her from her dark thoughts. Mother St. Mathilde had returned with one of the crew helping to carry a load of water, utensils, bandages ...

"Here we are!" she announced cheerfully, "All we want for the asking!" Kneeling, she cushioned the sick man's head and gave him to drink.

"I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink..." Sister St. Esperance unconsciously quoted aloud.

Mother St. Mathilde shot her a quick glance and began to wash her patient. After a little while she said quietly: "You find it hard to accept what has happened, that you have not the health to be a missionary, don't you?"

Sister St. Esperance nodded.

"The Lord asks more from you than He does from us, from people like me and Sister St. Anselm, who are strong. It is easy for us to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are important people the Lord can't do without, simply because we can do a lot of work. When your health is poor you can never deceive yourself that you are very important, can you?"

"Not very easily," replied the Sister.

Mother St. Mathilde continued her work in silence, and just when Sister St. Esperance began to think that she had said all she intended saying, she asked her, unexpectedly: "Tell me, what do you think is the most important thing in our lives?"

"The love of God," she answered, surprised.

"And the greatest of these is charity ..." quoted Mother St. Mathilde.

"And what is the greatest love of all? He said that greater love than this no man has, that a man give up his life for his friend. And He gave up His to the Father on the cross. We can't do any better than this."

After a moment, she went on: "Not everyone is strong enough to work as Jesus did, preaching and healing the sick, but everyone can be crucified—you don't need to be healthy for that: When you are ill, helpless, and feel that God has forgotten you, it is exactly then that you are being crucified, don't you understand? Give your life and your sufferings Into God's hands for His sinful children, that is what really counts. Do that, and you will be a missionary after His own Heart, wherever you may be."

"It is a hard thing to accept," answered Sister St. Esperance slowly. "But I'll do what I can. I'll try."

"Yes. Try, and try again. And Sister," she added, "Don't Imagine the worst too soon. Perhaps you will be able to do a lot of work when you are back in a European climate."

Perhaps. And perhaps not. If she were to remain as ill as this all her life long, how could she bear it, she wondered? She feared the future and yet so far from being a burden to everyone, her health soon improved out of all recognition. Appointed Superior within a short time, she was soon asked to take over a Teachers' Training College in Pau, founded a Convent in Burgos In Spain, and died in 1913 at Bordeaux at the age of seventy-one.

While Sister St. Esperance was buried in her thoughts, Mother St. Mathilde finished washing the sick man, and cleaned and bandaged his abscess. Refreshed, and in clean clothes, he gradually became more conscious of his surroundings. He could not take his eyes away from Mother St. Mathilde's face as she continued her ministrations, but at last painfully stretched out his arm to hold Mother St. Mathilde's hand, saying to her, over and over again in broken French, tears in his eyes: "Madame,you good... . you heart... . very much goodthank you. Thank you!"

She smiled back, and told him in a mixture of French and sign language that he had nothing to worry about from now on, that he would be looked after until he was well again.

Day after day Mother St. Mathilde nursed him back to health, talking with him for hours for the most part in sign language. Somehow he managed to explain to her that he was a Flemish-speaking Belgian, returning from work abroad to his wife and children. For years he had not practised his Faith, through laziness more than ill-will, but had always retained affection for the religion he had been brought up in. When help came so unexpectedly to him in the form of a middle-aged nun with penetrating eyes and gentle hands, he told her that he felt as if it were Mother Church herself who had come to look after him in his helplessness and remind him of his neglected duties. In all possible ways he tried to show how grateful he was to Mother St. Mathilde and she listened to him patiently as he told her all that was in his heart during the long voyage back to France—how much he had missed his family and how from now on he was going to practise his Faith as he should, as Mother St. Mathilde had shown him he should.

After four weeks' sailing they drew in to Marseilles, all the passengers crowding the rails for their first glimpse of Notre Dame de la Garde, the church especially dear to seafarers, perched on a steep hill high above the city, welcoming them home again after wanderings and hardships. The Belgian, now fully recovered, said goodbye to Mother St. Mathilde and Sister St. Esperance, repeating again and again: "Madame, thank you, thank you. You.... heart very much good. Thank you!"

Later on Mother St. Mathilde heard that he had kept his promises of reform.

Only one day at Marseilles and then Mother St. Mathilde and Sister St. Esperance travelled to Paris, arriving at the Mother House at midnight. She went straight to the chapel where she had taken her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience so long ago, where, too, on that never-to-be-forgotten day, still unsure whether Mother de Faudoas would send her to Malaya or not, she had spent hours offering herself to God as a missionary..... but .according to His Will, not according to hers. There, in almost complete darkness but for the glow of the sanctuary lamp, her heart overflowed in thanksgiving for her vocation as a religious, as a missionary, and for having been able to share in Christ's work. Later, she wrote: "The pen is powerless to describe how I felt at that moment!"

For days before Mother St. Mathilde arrived, there had been a mood of tense expectancy in the house, especially among the younger Sisters, not entirely due to the fact that they were looking forward to seeing the missionary they had heard so much about and who would surely have interesting stories to tell them about the Mission. It was common

knowledge that four young Sisters chosen from volunteers would actually be returning to Malaya with her, and the suspense grew, for nobody knew which four would be chosen.

In the refectory at lunch-time the following day, Sister St. Norbert Levesque stood at her place at table with the rest of the community, her hands demurely folded together, eyes sliding towards the door, as the Mother General and the Assistants entered and ... the stranger must be Mother St. Mathilde! In one quick glance Sister St. Norbert took in the appearance of Mother St. Mathilde, and she was not the only one ... Grace was said, there was a clattering of chairs and everyone sat down. Almost immediately, Mother de Faudoas rang a handbell and announced there would be talking instead of reading at lunch, in honour of the returning missionaries.

"Did you get a good look at your future Superior?" slyly asked Sister St. Norbert's neighbour.

She flushed and admitted: "Yes. But I don't know whether I'll be chosen to go."

"Oh, you'll go, all right. All the same, I'm not so sure I envy you; she is a little frightening, isn't she? Her face is so thin and lined and I suppose you get that yellowish colour from the tropics."

"She does look rather severe," conceded Sister St. Norbert thoughtfully, "Still, the Sisters in Singapore seem to think a lot of her, and that should be a good guide."

Later that day Sister St. Norbert was told that she would be going to Singapore with Mother St. Mathilde and three others, leaving France

in October—in only four months' time. Until then all four of them were to follow Mother St. Mathilde's instructions, and begin the study of English and Malay. Their preparation for the missionary life was to extend even into the refectory...

Mother St. Mathilde explained to them that in Singapore and Penang there was not enough money for them to eat European food, so for the most part they had to eat rice and curry. As this did not always appeal to European palates they might as well find out what it was like before going.

At lunch the four of them gathered together at the same table, awkwardly conscious they were objects of interest for the whole community. As soon as lunch started, Mother St. Mathilde carried in a huge bowl of steaming rice and, not trusting them to take enough, served generous helpings on to each plate. Then came the curry itself—pieces of meat in thick, yellowish-brown sauce. The young Sisters looked at each other doubtfully but took fairly large helpings, uncomfortably aware that everyone, including the Mother General, had them under observation.

"Well, here we go!" thought Sister St. Norbert, and manfully took a mouthful of the strange mixture. She chewed curiously for a few seconds then stopped, motionless. She was on fire! Her tongue was being roasted! Frantically she began to breathe in and out rapidly with open mouth to try and create a draught, perspiration springing out of her, tears running down her cheeks. In desperation she shot out her hand for a glass of water to put out the fire raging in her mouth, but had only just finished drinking it when Sister St. Gelase, alarmed, and thinking she was choking, struck her smartly on the back.

The result was exactly as if a small bomb had gone off in a goldfish bowl!

By this time, even Mother St. Mathilde was finding it difficult to keep looking sedate and many of the others were nearly as red and shaking from their efforts at self-control as the unfortunate Sister St. Norbert was from the curry.

Mother St. Mathilde had many things to discuss with Mother de Fautoas. The Paris Foreign Mission Fathers had originally come to Malaya from Siam, and it was now becoming quite likely that soon they would ask Mother de Fautoas to begin a foundation in Bangkok. Both Mother de Fautoas and Mother St. Mathilde were in favour of it, as apart from the fact that it was adjoining Malaya and the obvious place to go if they intend to expand their work, there was also the consideration that two hundred years earlier when the first Siamese ambassadors came to the Court of Louis XIV, plans had been drawn up to send Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus to Bangkok. After long negotiations the project was cancelled, much to the disappointment of the Sisters, who even at that early date were anxious to extend their apostolate outside of France. It would be pleasant to be able to fulfil that early missionary ambition and it was agreed that if Monsignor Dupont made the request, the foundation would be made from Malaya.

And Japan ... Mother de Fautoas listened attentively to what Mother St. Mathilde had learned about the country and the people, particularly from the Paris Foreign Mission Fathers passing through Singapore. Without committing herself definitely, Mother de Fautoas promised that if the opportunity arose, she would give it favourable consideration.

Questions and answers and discussions went on for days, and in the course of them Mother St. Mathilde occasionally caught Mother de Fautoas looking at her with a mixture of sadness and affection. She soon understood why when Mother de Fautoas tried to apologise for the misunderstandings which had arisen and for having misjudged Mother St. Mathilde on account very largely of the letters she had received from the unfortunate Sister St. Leonard. Mother St. Mathilde did not take advantage of the opening offered to her, but contented herself with saying that all that was in the past and of no importance.

From that time on Mother de Fautoas trusted Mother St. Mathilde implicitly, relied completely on her judgement, and considered her as the real Foundress of the Holy Infant Jesus Missions in Asia, as did the Mother Generals who succeeded her.

All too soon the day for departure arrived. Mother St. Mathilde and four young Sisters at her side waved goodbye to those who had come to see them off, as the gap widened between jetty and ship.

I know how they feel, Mother St. Mathilde thought. To leave home, perhaps never to see it again. "La douce France!" After a few years they will forget it ... almost—except occasionally on an evening when it is growing cool and they have a few minutes to themselves the memory of their homes will come back to them, unexpectedly vivid. Strange how these touches of homesickness visit the exile in the evening more than at any other time. Perhaps it is better for us never to return, she mused. Then, we would never realise that after so many years away, your home country is no longer your home; the links have broken ... partly. For the missionary there is no home, not on earth: only souls to save and a home we look for beyond this earth.

"Lord," she prayed silently, "Give us all a brave heart, to meet sadness and not to make others sad—to give up our homes and our health and our lives for Your sake, as You gave up Yours for us. Let us have the courage to be the good seed which dies that others may live, so that years from now, a hundred years from now, others may reap what we have sown, when all of us are long dead, myself, Sisters St. Appollinaire, Gregory, Anselm, Gaetan and the others. Send other workers into the harvest. A hundred years from now, 1967! She thought abstractedly, wonder what it will be like then in Malaya? Perhaps a few towns on the mainland, perhaps we will have some houses there too then? I wonder what will they think of us, when we are long gone.....? Smiling in self-derision, she corrected herself—If they ever think about us!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN Japan

Saturday evening, Vigil of the Feast of Pentecost.

In the cool, dark interior of the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, Mother St. Mathilde was finding it hard to focus her mind on prayer. Only a few moments ago the grubby little hand of a messenger-boy had thrust a telegram into hers and now she was full of a hope which refused to be discouraged. Monsignor Petitjean, Superior of the Mission in Japan, wanted the Sisters to come to Yokohama. They would be the first missionary nuns to enter the country but there was one condition: they would have to come by the first Messageries Maritimes ship to leave Singapore, otherwise it would be no use.

As soon as the evening service was over she would send a telegram to Mother de Faudoas—by a happy chance the telegraph service from Singapore to Europe had been opened the day before. There was no time to send a long message, only the bare fact that the opportunity had been offered to them.

In the meantime she prayed in the same spirit that she had prayed years ago, when the question had arisen of her going to Malaya. Much though she wanted to break new ground, she deliberately held in her natural inclinations and prayed only that God's Will be done, difficult though it was for one who all her life long had to fight to control her enthusiasms.

Mother St. Mathilde decided to keep the news to herself until a definite reply came from Paris. She knew very well how excited the Sisters would be at the thought of extending their work to Japan, and it would

be a cruel disappointment if, after all, Mother de Fautoas refused permission. But for Mother St. Mathilde the feast of Pentecost dragged by, as though there were forty-eight, not twenty-four hours in the day. At one point, during the recreation the secret was almost too much to keep to herself:

"I see the Holy Spirit hovering over the house. I don't know what is going to happen to us," she remarked dreamily. There was a moment of blank silence at this remark, then, realising that there was something unusual in the wind, several Sisters volleyed questions at her at the same time: "How do you see Him?"

"Under what form?"

"What is He bringing us?"

But Mother St. Mathilde refused to be drawn any further, which sharpened their curiosity even more.

At last, at eight o'clock on Monday morning the reply came. Mother St. Mathilde describes what happened next: "I was so excited I didn't dare open the envelope containing the telegram ... my heart was beating violently. I ran to the foot of the tabernacle, presenting the answer to God in the Blessed Sacrament, and submitted my will entirely to His, as expressed by our Superiors."

At last she summoned up courage to read the answer, and she continues: "On the Feast-Day of Pentecost, 20th May, 1872, towards mid-day, Mother de Fautoas had written and signed the solemn approval for her daughters in Malaya."

"My joy was great, very great!"

Mother St. Mathilde's first thought was to tell Monsignor Leturdu, a great friend of the Convent, and he came over at once, almost as excited as Mother St. Mathilde herself, and asked to break the news to the Sisters, while they were still at their meal in the dining-room.

Surprised though they were at seeing him come in with Mother St. Mathilde, he quickly had their undivided attention when he read out Monsignor Petitjean's letter, inviting them to come to Japan. In fact, Mother St. Mathilde observed: "Every mouth was open and every eye was fixed upon me. They were trying to read the answer in my eyes: they were almost trembling with suspense, for I made sure not to betray anything. They wanted some sign that I had accepted, but I was in no hurry to give it."

Several Sisters broke out at the same time: "You're going to accept, Mother?"

"You must accept!"

"Did you say yes?"

"You wouldn't refuse, would you?"

Remaining impassive, Mother St. Mathilde replied: "You must understand the conditions Monsignor Petitjean imposed. If we can't leave right away there is no point in thinking any more about it, and how can we give an answer without being authorised by Mother de Fautoas? And how can we get her authorisation within a few days?"

This silenced the Sisters. After a few moments of gloomy silence, Monsignor Leturdu broke in: "What about sending a telegram?"

Immediately the Sisters cried out in relief: "What a good idea!"

"Yes, quick! A telegram!"

There was a flurry to supply Monsignor Leturdu with paper, pen and ink. The telegram was written, Monsignor Leturdu folded it, then seemed to hesitate, to be changing his mind, as the Sisters watched him anxiously.

Suddenly a sheet of paper dropped out of his sleeve. Feigning astonishment, he opened it, and cried out; "It's the answer from Paris! How about that for speed?"

Mother St. Mathilde remarks: "Their bewilderment was only equalled by their curiosity. The circle around the two of us drew closer and closer, and their necks were stretched out to get a glimpse of the reply: they hardly dared breathe. At last they heard the answer and understood; their hearts beat more easily, but they were still full of emotion."

There was still something very important to be settled: who was to go in the first expedition to Japan? Since receiving Monsignor Petitjean's letter Mother St. Mathilde had had time to reflect, and was able to read out the list on the spot.

When Sister St. Norbert heard her name called out as Superior of the new foundation, she turned sheet-white, unable to say a word, torn

between joy at being chosen to go and shock at having been made responsible for the new mission.

Then came the one who had been Mother St. Mathilde's faithful companion in all her ventures—Sister St. Gregory Connolly, who, mightily relieved at hearing her name called out, remarked in her quaint mixture of English and French. "And my not thinking I will go to Japan!"

Sisters St. Ferdinand and St. Gelase completed the party and on 10th June they all sailed from Singapore.

From Singapore to Hong Kong the weather was fine, but after leaving Hong Kong on board the "Volga", a typhoon nearly drove the ship on to the rocks of the Chinese mainland, in the Straits of Formosa, as hour after hour passed by and the waves battered the "Volga" off her course.

After two days, the sea calmed and the steamer took a direct route for Japan, passing by the island of Kyu-Shu, and allowing the Sisters a view of the mountains of Nagasaki far to the North, where so many courageous Japanese Christians had been put to death for the faith, together with their priests. All the following day they skirted the main island of Honshu, its innumerable bays and inlets, each with its tiny fishing village, and hundreds of fishing-boats scattered along the coast, until towards evening they caught sight of Fujiyama, snow-crested and wreathed with ribbons of clouds. At five o'clock the next morning, 28th June, the Vigil of the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the "Volga" moored at Yokohama harbour, and two missionaries came on board to

take them to the Church where Monsignor Petitjean was waiting to say Mass for them.

After Mass and breakfast he ushered them into his study which doubled as a classroom for young French priests learning Japanese. Monsignor Petitjean was a tall, fine-featured man, who had undergone many hardships during the last persecution of the Christians in Japan, and this had stamped him with a certain melancholy. After talking with the Sisters about their voyage, he suddenly announced that he was going to give them their first lesson in Japanese.

"Ame furimasu," he said impressively, "The rain falls." "Kaze fukimasu, the wind blows."

"Now this is how you write them down," he continued, rapidly scribbling a few ideograms on a blackboard, while Sister St. Gregory watched him like a rabbit watching a snake. After giving them several more phrases he said: "Now see if you can remember how to write down the following."

When he had left the room, Sister St. Gregory, with childlike faith that Mother St. Mathilde was equal to anything, began tugging urgently at her sleeve whispering: "Mother, how do you write this? And what does that mean?"

Mother St. Mathilde was no wiser. When they turned for help to a young priest who was also there, studying the language, he simply grinned widely at their embarrassment, pushed out his lower lip and shrugged his shoulders to show his own ignorance, which obviously didn't worry him as much as it did the Sisters.

Within a few minutes Monsignor Petitjean returned, studied their efforts gloomily, and not unexpectedly decided they had learned enough Japanese for one day.

The Sisters were happy enough to be out in the streets again, even though it was half an hour's walk to the house where they were to live for the time being. The main streets, they noticed were broad and well kept, but the side streets were neglected and full of ruts. After the bright colours of Singapore, they were surprised that the Japanese kimonos were so subdued in colour, and the priest who was acting as their guide explained that nowadays brightly-coloured kimonos were only to be seen in the theatre. The bright red petticoats of the little girls were the only splash of colour in the streets.

The Japanese were fascinated by the Sisters. Heads popped rust of doors, withdrew, then popped out again, joined by others, everyone chattering loudly about the strangely dressed foreigners. As they walked along, followed by a procession of curious men, women and children, all talking excitedly, Mother St. Mathilde suddenly asked: "What's making you laugh, Father?"

Hurriedly assuming an air of solemnity, he tried feebly to put her off. "Nothing important really," he replied—then spoiled the effect by grinning reluctantly from ear to ear.

Mother St. Mathilde pressed home her attack. "Now come on Father, don't make me drag it out of you!"

"Well," he said with embarrassment, "It's your habit, you see. They can't make up their minds whether you are men or women!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN First Victim

"Good day, misters! How are you, misters?"

The nuns halted, astonished at this cry sounding almost in their ears as they were walking down the hill towards the Church. The next moment a grinning, wrinkled face poked out from behind the vegetable and fruit stall in front of them and repeated loudly: "Good day, misters!"

Recovering, they smiled at the old lady, and answered her greeting, but she had already exhausted her knowledge of French, for she contented herself with repeating her salutation, bowing and grinning toothily, while her neighbours gathered around, awed by her talent.

"At that, she knew more French than we know Japanese," remarked Mother St. Mathilde at lunch-time the same day.

Sister St. Gelase, the temporary cook, had decided to cook fish for the community, but not knowing the Japanese for "fish" ("sakana"), there remained the problem of explaining to the messenger boy what it was she wanted. At length she hit upon the idea of drawing a fish. Anxious to please, the boy studied her artistic efforts at length, brows drawn together in concentration, and finally his face lit up with understanding. While he was gone Sister St. Gelase busied herself with preparing the rice and vegetables, but became worried as time went on and still there was no sign of him returning from the market. At last, just as the Sisters were going into the dining-room, he walked in with the self-satisfied smile of one who has completed a difficult task, and ceremoniously presented her with a bowl of goldfish!

Sister St. Gelase reluctantly went into the dining-room with the rice and vegetables and explained what had happened. When the laughter had subsided, she put in: "It's all very well laughing at me, but how are we ever to make ourselves understood when we have neither a text-book nor a dictionary?"

"You're right," answered Mother St. Mathilde, becoming serious, "We'll really have to get down to studying the language, but we'll have to get at least a dictionary to start with."

Sister St. Gregory said mournfully, "Even with a dictionary I don't see how I'll ever manage. I'll never be able to read or write all those squiggles, all those tiny little strokes!"

Privately Mother St. Mathilde wondered how she herself would manage. She was nearing sixty years of age, not the ideal age at which to start learning a language as difficult as Japanese, but there was no alternative if she was to enter into contact with the people. For the rest of her life, and there remained nearly forty years of it, she set aside a fixed time each day to study Japanese, less, after a while to get to know the language better, than to make sure of not forgetting what she had already learned. But she replied briskly to Sister St. Gregory: "We'll simply have to learn it, that's all. If there were no obstacles in our way, I would wonder whether we were really doing God's work." She did not, then and there, express all that was in her heart.

She had felt from the first that they would have to pay a far higher price for souls in Japan than the drudgery of language study. Mother St. Pauline, the first of their missionaries to die, had died at sea, not far from Singapore, without even seeing the country for which she had

offered her life. How soon would another such sacrifice be asked of them now in Japan?

After lunch she drew Mother St. Norbert aside and said: "I don't like the look of Sister St. Ferdinand. By now she should have got rid of that cold she caught on the boat."

"I think it is more than just a cold," Mother St. Norbert. replied unhappily. "She's the youngest, and, I thought, the strongest of us all, but the last few days she seems to be completely exhausted. Wouldn't it be a good idea if you took her back with you when you go to Singapore next week? The three of us could manage here on our own, I'm sure."

"Very well, then. We'll get the doctor to see her this afternoon."

When the doctor had examined Sister St. Ferdinand and came slowly up the corridor towards Mother St. Mathilde, she knew by his face that something was wrong. Rubbing his hands together slowly, he looked at her for a moment, then said: "I think that perhaps there is some hope for her, Reverend Mother."

"Some hope!" echoed Mother St. Mathilde incredulously. "But surely it is only a cold, isn't it?"

"No. It's much more serious than that. Her lungs are in a very bad condition."

"Would it help, do you think, if I took her back with me to Singapore next week?"

"Not a chance!" the doctor replied decisively. "She couldn't possibly survive the journey. The best we can do is to keep her here and do what we can. She'll need plenty of care."

"We'll see to that, doctor," Mother St. Mathilde answered wearily.

The Sisters were more shocked by the news than Sister St. Ferdinand. While they clung to the faint hope she would recover, both she and Mother St. Mathilde knew there was really no chance. Mother St. Mathilde would have gladly postponed her voyage to Singapore, had it been possible, but she could not put it off, so she spent as much time as possible with the young Sister in the few remaining days and nights, sleepless nights for both of them.

Shortly after she had left for Singapore, while Sister St. Gdlase was taking her turn to sit up in the sick-room, Sister St. Ferdinand whispered to her distinctly: "I'm happy to make the sacrifice of my life for Japan; may God accept my sufferings for the salvation of the children of this country!"

Mother St. Mathilde was already in Singapore when the news came that Sister St. Ferdinand had died at midnight, 23rd October, 1872. At once, two Sisters of very different characters volunteered to take her place.

Mother St. Mathilde had known Sister St. Wilfrid in Singapore for some years. She had been born in an intellectual but atheistic family, and had never entered a church until at the age of twenty she walked into the Church of Saint-Severin in Paris merely to satisfy her curiosity. There, she heard a sermon which made a deep impression on

her; it was all quite different from what she had expected. From then on she began a serious study of the teachings of the Catholic Church, in spite of the opposition of her family, was received into the Church and later entered the convent of the Holy Infant Jesus.

She was far more cultured and educated than most women of her time, and as she taught literature and history far too well for her pupils in Singapore, she suffered from seeing others, less gifted than herself, meet with greater success in the classroom. But Mother St. Mathilde knew of her other qualities, her courage and perseverance, and was glad to accept Sister St. Wilfrid's offer, little knowing that she would die in Yokohama in less than two years.

The same day thousands of miles away in the convent of Louhans, in France, a cheerful young Sister knocked at the Reverend Mother's door to ask her to forward her application to go to the Japanese Mission to replace Sister St. Ferdinand.

No one likes to lose the hard-working horse who takes on all the unpleasant jobs no one else wants, and the Reverend Mother viewed the letter of application with distaste. Sister St. Marthe Agniel! she thought. An eminently suitable name. She was certainly busy about many things! It was not going to be easy to replace her. Putting down the letter carefully, she sighed and asked without much hope: "I suppose you're absolutely sure you want to go.....?"

"Yes, Reverend Mother. From what we've heard, they'll need somebody there to do the nursing and so on."

"Perhaps I'd better write to Yokohama and tell them to arrange to have plenty of sick people ready and waiting for you. Otherwise you'll be dragging them off to bed, kicking and screaming, when there's nothing wrong with them," observed the Reverend Mother with a touch of malice.

Sister St. Marthe coloured. It was true that she was never happier than when nursing the sick, but she never imagined at the time just how fully her ambitions would be realised. For thirty years she was to be the "Martha" of Yokohama, being the mother of hundreds of poor children, nursing the sick, not so much having the dangers of epidemics as ignoring them, so that a doctor later said about her: "Never have I seen such courage. In dangers which would make anyone else tremble, and surrounded by the most disgusting diseases and odours, she gave her patients the most meticulous care, never for an instant thinking about herself."

But all that lay in the future. At the time Sister St. Marthe was not even sure that she would be accepted, for her health was poor and she had been seriously ill recently. However, within a few days word came from Paris that she was to hold herself in readiness to leave with Mother St. Mathilde and a party of Sisters to Singapore, and to go thence to Japan.

Meanwhile, in Singapore Mother St. Mathilde had received a letter from Mother de Faudoas urging her to come back again to France to discuss business and also to see to certain affairs in Rome. Quite unmoved by the difficulties she met with in Rome, Mother St. Mathilde determined not to leave until she had obtained what she wanted from the Prefect of Propaganda, the peppery Cardinal Barnabo. Worn

down by her persistence, he finally turned on her in a fit of irritation with the remark: "I'd rather have the devil on my heels than a nun!"

Without batting an eyelid, Mother St. Mathilde replied demurely: "Then, your Eminence, you are giving me what I'm asking? Thank you very much!"

In spite of himself, Cardinal Barnabo was impressed by Mother St. Mathilde's energetic character, and took it upon himself to introduce her to Pope Pius IX. As Cardinal Barnabo was very short-sighted, Mother St. Mathilde had the odd experience of hearing him sound her praises to the Pope while they were standing right next to her, until the Pope interrupted him with a smile.

"I know, I know, I can see her for myself!"

For a considerable time they discussed the problem of the schism of certain of the clergy of Goa, which was then causing some trouble in Malacca, and the Pope assured her that with patience the problem would be resolved.

This was to be Mother St. Mathilde's last visit to Europe. On 30th August 1873, with twelve young Sisters, including Sister St. Marthe Agniel, she said goodbye to her native country for the last time, as did a number of those going with her, though they did not know it, for within two years five out of the twelve had found early graves in the mission field.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN Yokohama and Malacca

Father Midon, recently appointed chaplain to the new Holy Infant Jesus Convent in Yokohama, trudged the last few yards up the gravel path and emerged on to a wide, flat space swarming with workmen. Looking back the way he came, he had a magnificent view of Yokohama and the blue waters of Tokyo Bay, while to his right the ground fell away in green slopes to the sea.

Turning towards the building site, his eyes widened as he glanced at a knot of labourers intently watching a figure in black with an apron tied round her waist stirring up a mess of mortar. Putting his hands to his mouth he called out: "Hello there, Mother Free-Mason! Is it a private show, or can anyone watch?"

Mother St. Mathilde looked up, startled, then rose from her knees, brushing her hands against her apron.

"Oh, it's you, Father! I only just realised that none of the workmen here have any idea of how to mix mortar: they never use it for building their little wooden houses, of course, but it never occurred to me before. Still, they're picking it up very quickly."

"And where on earth did you learn so much of the building trade?"

"Oh," replied Mother St. Mathilde casually. "A long time ago when I was in France we had to have repairs done to our convent, so I just watched to see how they set about doing these things. You never know when something like that might come in handy."

"You just watched them?"

"Of course. It's not too hard to learn these things. There are so many useful things you can pick up if you keep your eyes open."

Father Midon nodded. "How many children have come to you so far?" he queried.

"Only fifteen so far, but we're expecting a lot more soon. People are not so afraid to approach us now that the persecution edicts against Christians are no longer published."

"Yes, but you might as well get used to the idea that for a long time to come it's only the poor who will give you their children. And you'll have to adopt them you know. They'll depend on you for everything—you'll have to see to getting them work when they've finished school, marrying them off, everything. It will be a long, long time before the governing classes will have anything to do with us. The Emperor is trying to modernise things a bit, but on the whole the Japanese are still very suspicious of foreigners. Being forced to open up their country to trade with foreigners was a terrible blow to their national pride, and the nobility especially have neither forgotten nor forgiven it."

Mother St. Mathilde replied: "Father, we would like to work for everyone, poor and rich. After all, the rich have souls, just like the poor, and goodness know they are often in greater moral danger than the poor. Still, our congregation was founded in the first place to bring up the children of the poor. They are the ones who most need our help, they cannot buy everything they want, they need us more than anyone else, and as long as there are plenty of the poor for us to look after we'll not be unhappy. God will provide."

"By the way," asked Father Midon, as they walked down the path, "What do you really think of the people here? The European merchants seem to have a poor opinion of them; they say they are ungrateful, dishonest among other things."

Mother St. Mathilde flushed with annoyance.

"European merchants!" she said, shrugging her shoulders. "What do they expect? It's not surprising if the Japanese are dishonest and ungrateful in their dealings with them. What have they to be grateful about, anyway? The merchants have come here for one reason—to make money, and they certainly don't give shining examples of Christian living, that's certain. I wonder how many of them have ever shown a spark of affection for the Japanese? Wasn't it St. John of the Cross who said: 'If you put love in, you will get love out'? It's as simple as that. If you genuinely love people, they will love you; if you hate them, show contempt for them, how do you expect them to feel about you? It's not true that the Japanese have no sense of gratitude. Only the other day Sister St. Marthe was carrying one of our children who had hurt her leg, and the little one whispered in her ear; 'You are carrying me now. Thank you very much. But never mind! When you are little and I am grown up, I'll carry YOU!'"

Father Midon laughed aloud.

"You'd better tell Sister St. Marthe to go on a diet in that case."

Putting so much love in herself, Mother St. Mathilde drew abundant love from the Japanese people.

A Japanese nun, one of the hundreds of children she had adopted, later testified: "She loved the Japanese and the children very much. At one time we were more than three hundred and fifty altogether at Yokohama, and more than a hundred and eighty out at nurse. She used to take such care of our health! When her children left school, she got them a good place, made sure they married well, and always at the right time she used to give them presents, just like a good grandmother. She loved to see them bring their children to her, and every year she held a party for all of them who could come, for she had no greater happiness than to see them around her. She appointed two Japanese Sisters to visit the poor sick people who had come in from the countryside of Yokohama, and always paid for the jinrikishaw so that we wouldn't be tired out from the journey. If the journey was long, she would wait for us to come back, before going to bed, to find out if we had succeeded in our mission to the sick. Our Mother took care of souls and bodies; she gave medicine to the sick, buried the dead. When the salvation of a soul was at stake she would never refuse any thing.

For us Japanese, it doesn't seem too much to say that she was a second St. Francis Xavier. When we went to her in trouble, she would give us courage right away; a word was enough for that: 'Don't be worried! I'll pray for you,' she used to say.

"And then, when she was speaking about us, she didn't say 'the orphans' she always said: 'our children.'"

"For having had before our eyes such a fine example, we shall be eternally grateful to God."

When Father Midon and Mother St. Mathilde reached the gate, he halted and brought up another point which had been on his mind.

"Mother," he said, "The Bishop is very anxious that a school be established in Tokyo. He knows you can't manage it right away, of course, but he would like you to think about it; and let him know if and when you could take on the work."

Mother St. Mathilde thought for a moment, before giving her answer.

"We'll have to get this place going first, naturally, and then it all depends on whether or not I can get Sisters from France. I'd be inclined to say that Mother de Faudoas would listen favourably to the idea, though, particularly as it is only eighteen miles away and just an hour by train. At any rate, I'll let you know later. But the first thing I have to do is to go back to Malaya again and prepare to open a convent in Malacca: Monsignor Leturdu is anxious for me to see to that immediately."

As Father Midon made his way down towards the French Church, Mother St. Mathilde remained on the hill alone, thinking of the future of Malaya and Japan. Only twenty two years since she had come to the Missions and already there were flourishing houses in Singapore and Penang, another one beginning in Yokohama, with two more shortly to be founded in Malacca and Tokyo. God had provided. She had arrived with only a couple of hundred dollars and the grace of God; and it had been enough. Perhaps in a few years' time the Sisters might even be able to penetrate to the interior of the Malayan mainland, perhaps even as far as the tin-mining villages of Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, though it didn't seem very likely. But perhaps one day.....? She sighed and

turned back to the new building, back to the prosaic work of mixing mortar.

Within a few months Mother St. Mathilde was in Singapore, planning the reopening of the convent in Malacca with Sister St. Anselm, who was to be the new Superior, when bad news arrived from Yokohama. Sister St. Wilfred had been found dead in her bed after a short and apparently slight illness, while Mother St. Norbert was to undergo a serious operation.

At first the community in Malacca had to live in a ramshackle wooden house which formerly belonged to the priests, and it was only after Mother St. Marcienne took over from Mother St. Anselm in the latter's appointment to Penang that the rich Chinese who had bought the former Convent agreed to sell it back to the Sisters—not entirely out of the goodness of his heart. Several of his family had died in the house, and conceiving the idea that the God of the Sisters was on his track, he wanted to get out and away before anything happened to him!

Mother St. Mathilde had always had a specially soft spot for little Mother St. Marcienne, as had many others. Tiny, but energetic for the salvation of souls, she was a familiar and well-loved figure in Malacca for the next twenty years, often to be seen trotting about on her errands of mercy, going on foot as much as ten miles from the convent through jungle and bush whenever she heard that a baby was to be sold, returning home late in the evening triumphantly with the child in her arms. Loving God, men and women and children, especially the poorest seemed as effortless to her as breathing, one reason why Mother St. Mathilde nicknamed her "The soul of the Eternal Father." and why so many called her "The Saint of the Mission."

Through Mother St. Marcienne there existed a special bond of charity between the Convent of Malacca and Yokohama, for although the Malacca Convent was poor the Sisters and children somehow managed to send money to the even poorer children of Yokohama.

Mother St. Marcienne lived to the age of seventy-two, still retaining the innocence which led her to talk of God as if she could see and hear Him as easily as though He were a member of the community. She died peacefully on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1899 and was buried in the Convent chapel in Malacca before the main altar.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN Tokyo

Father Marin examined his cigar with disgust. The rainy season in Tokyo spared nothing: not even tobacco was sacred. Wearily he tossed his cigar into the street below where the rain had been drumming down for the last three days without a break. He felt nearly as soggy and limp as the cigar, and in an effort to shake off his depression he began marching up and down the verandah of the Mission house, thirty paces up, thirty paces down.

Tsukiji was a mean, miserable neighbourhood. It was flat, swampy ground which had been reclaimed from the sea some time before, and Father Marin reflected moodily that if the rain kept up much longer they would have to think about reclaiming it all over again, though as far as he was concerned, the sea could have it with his best wishes. Though, he thought, the Japanese government would certainly find some other place to lodge foreigners which would be just as disagreeable. With their deep-rooted distrust of all foreigners they only allowed them to have land in an area as far away as possible from the Court and the homes of the aristocracy; if the area happened to be an unpleasant one, so much the better.

As Father Marin turned around at the end of the gallery for the tenth time, he glanced idly down into the courtyard of the new convent of the Holy Infant Jesus Sisters, which Monsignor Petitjean had established in August 1875, just two months earlier. It was a small house, without gardens, a stone-paved courtyard occupying the central area. For a few minutes he was unable to make out what was going on in the courtyard.

Down below, under his astonished eyes, partly sheltered by an umbrella, a Sister was trying to start a fire in a primitive open brick hearth, another Sister standing by holding a cooking pot, while the rain poured down around them. As he watched, the heap of twigs sparked and sputtered into life and the Sister gingerly set the cooking pot down on the anaemic fire, trying none too successfully to shelter it from the rain.

Father Mann's curiosity was aroused, but he waited until late in the afternoon when the rain had stopped and a watery gleam in the greyness above gave a hint of better weather to come before he slithered rather than walked across the greasy footpath between the Mission house and the convent.

He told Sister St. Agnes what he had seen and concluded: "I thought both of you had gone out of your minds, having a picnic in weather like that."

Sister St. Agnes shrugged. "There's no other place where we can build an open fire," she replied. "Actually, though, as there are only two of us and a handful of children, we don't do any cooking ourselves. The food is sent to us from Yokohama, but by the time it gets here we have to heat it up again. Of course, when it's raining as it was today you can't tell whether you're drinking soup or rainwater. We just make an act of faith."

"But there's no need for that," Father Marin protested. "Our cook could prepare your food in our house. It would still have to cross the street, but it's better than having it sent all the way from Yokohama, and you wouldn't need to re-heat it."

"That would be a tremendous help, Father," she said gratefully. Candidly she added: "To tell you the truth, the food sometimes never arrives here at all! It's a relief to have that problem off my mind. Right now both of us have plenty to think about without that—cleaning and preparing the house to receive pupils and orphans. We'll only have a small number of European children as paying pupils at first, of course, because the well-to-do Japanese will need time to get used to us, but I expect we'll have quite a lot of orphans on our hands very soon." She paused, then added, "And I'm very worried about Mother St. Norbert in Yokohama. She's going downhill rapidly after that operation, but she doesn't seem to realise it herself. I only wish Mother St. Mathilde were back from Singapore!"

"Don't you think it could be just a temporary relapse?" asked Father Marin.

Sister St. Agnes shook her head decisively. "No. I'm sure it's only a matter of time."

Mother St. Norbert stayed at work until the last possible moment: there was so much to be seen to at Yokohama, and particularly in the new foundation at Tokyo, but by 10th December she could do no more and died two days later.

Mother St. Mathilde was discussing business with Sister St. Gaetan now in charge of the Singapore convent since Mother St. Anselm had taken charge in Malacca, when a Sister brought her the telegram announcing Mother St. Norbert's death. She read and re-read the message as though by doing so she could change it. Finally she looked up at Sister St. Gaetan and for once lost her composure. Her deeply set

eyes burning, she burst out passionately: "What keeps so many poor girls in France and in the whole world? They don't know what to do with their time, and they could do so much good, bringing so many souls to heaven! If only I had a thousand lives to give to God!"

Then as though ashamed of her sudden outburst, she reached across and touched Sister St. Gaetan's hand. "I'm sorry, Sister," she went on more quietly. "But Mother St. Norbert has died and I'll have to go back by the next boat. I can't leave them alone there."

Mother St. Mathilde walked to the chapel, genuflected and knelt stiffly upright in her prie-dieu. Her mind was in a turmoil. The time for mourning Mother St. Norbert would come later, she knew. But right now she felt sick at heart with the knowledge of so much work to be done, and how few Sisters there were to do it. If only the girls back home understood! The thought that there were so few to bring the love of Christ to so many was like a knife at her heart.

Sister St. Gaetan and Sister St. Marcienne and several others were certainly capable enough to take the place of Mother St. Norbert, but they had spent too long in the damp heat of Singapore and Penang; they might not be able to adapt themselves to the changeable Japanese climate. The more she thought about the problem the more she was convinced that the best solution would be to take Mother St. Norbert's place herself and have Sister St. Gaetan appointed Superior in Singapore. But she would say nothing about it until she arrived back in Yokohama, for she knew there would be strong opposition in Singapore against the idea of her leaving for good. Mother St. Mathilde was humble, but not stupid, and she knew what her reputation was in the city.

A resident of Singapore said about her: "Wretchedness of all kinds found help in her. Everyone who knocked at the door of her heart found access to it: foreigners, travellers, the sick and dying, no matter what their religion was, she welcomed them all. She made herself all things to all men in order to gain them for Jesus Christ. On account of all that the government and the whole city of Singapore held her in high esteem, even veneration. She was the angel of the city."

As soon as she had said her farewells to the Sisters who still suspected nothing and when the boat had cleared Singapore harbour, Mother St. Mathilde, heavy with the knowledge that she was uprooting herself from the city and the people she had come to love over the past twenty years, went to her cabin. Once alone, she could not keep back her tears any longer. She was sixty-two years of age now, and yet parting from people she loved seemed to be just as hard as ever. She knew she would visit Singapore again, but it would never be quite the same as it had been in the past. Those days were gone for ever, days when they had known poverty and brutally hard work, but days which she knew now, as she looked back, had been full of happiness too, when they had worked and suffered together, all with one heart and one mind.

When the room grew dark, she roused herself, washed her face carefully, and sat down at her table to write to Sister St. Gaetan. After the first few sentences, explaining her decision, her pen went swiftly across the paper, unconsciously giving a self-portrait in the advice she passed on to Sister St. Gaetan.

"What Superiors in the Mission must do is love their Sisters and make themselves loved by them, so that they will find strength and comfort in their Superiors and not be tempted to look for it elsewhere ... Always

give a lot of love to the children God has entrusted to you: you will have to give an account of them to Him some day ... you need much patience and courage, for you must CARRY THEM IN YOUR ARMS to virtue and a sense of duty, rather than make them MARCH. If you punish the children too much, you grow harsh, and you embitter them. Personally, I do not like harshness and I'm sure you don't either." The minutes sped by as she wrote on, until she reached the end of the letter. She hesitated, then added a few lines: "Let us climb the ladder to heaven courageously: it will be so good `up there'. What can you desire here, below? Nothing, no place, no work could satisfy a heart which God created for Himself alone. Never look at what you have left behind, nor what remains to be done to win your crown. A Sister should be a Host, not only consecrated, but sacrificed: that is what we must attain to—a complete renunciation of ourselves. I desire it for you my daughter; ask for it for me ... "

Quickly she signed her name, folded the letter into the envelope. With an effort she thrust out of her mind the thoughts of what she was leaving behind, and began to plan out her work for the next months in Japan.

When Mother St. Mathilde arrived in Japan, there was enough to occupy her in building alone, as the number of children coming to her schools and orphanages increased and fire, earthquakes and typhoons made frequent repairs necessary.

As most of the Japanese houses were made of cedarwood, they were as inflammable as boxes of matches; the slightest accident was often enough to start a city-wide blaze.

One day in 1878 Mother St. Mathilde happened to be visiting the Tokyo convent when the alarm sounded. Going into the street, she could feel a hot wind fanning her cheek as homeless refugees streamed past carrying whatever small possessions they had managed to salvage. She could hear the fire roaring as it advanced steadily only two blocks away, almost drowning the shouts of the fire-fighters. Fiery embers whirled into the sky, to be carried along by a strong wind and showered down on to roofs where they smouldered and burst into flame.

Mother St. Mathilde ran back quickly into the convent courtyard to see what could be done about this last danger. Looking up anxiously, she caught her breath in fear as she saw that her little boys, ten to twelve years old, already had the matter in hand. Clambering about the roofs, they were searching out every place where the burning sparks had landed and beating them out before they could take hold.

She caught the sleeve of a Sister who was hurrying past and asked her sharply: "Who told the boys to go up on the roof? They could break their necks!"

The Sister shook her head. "No one told them, Mother! They climbed up there before we knew what they were up to." She smiled fleetingly. "I suppose they thought it was a job for men, not for women."

Meanwhile, deaf to the noise of cracking timbers and roaring flames, and smoke eddying through the window, Sister St. Emmanuel was sedately kneeling on the sacristy floor, packing a case full of her treasures for decorating the altar.

One of the Paris Foreign Mission Fathers clattered up the stairs and looked in hurriedly on his way to check up that everyone was out of the house. When he saw Sister St. Emmanuel, he stopped abruptly and ran into the room. "What on earth are you doing?" he barked hoarsely, red-rimmed eyes peering at her from a face smeared with soot.

"Collecting the chapel ornaments, Father," she replied, picking up a wreath of white roses.

The Father turned purple. Unable to speak, he snatched the wreath from her, threw it to the floor, grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her out of the house.

The fire was now dangerously close, and muttering to himself in Army French, he pushed the bewildered Sister into the church next door.

All alone in the church, Sister St. Emmanuel soon became restive, wondering what had happened to the others. After a while she decided to leave, especially as the fire now seemed to be much closer than before. But to her horror, though she tugged and tugged at the church door with all her strength, she could not budge it; someone had come along and locked it, not knowing she was there. Really alarmed now, she ran to one window after another, only to find them locked as well, and just as she was on the verge of panic at the thought of being caught in a fire-trap, she managed to prise one of them open.

Captain Bousquet of the French Military Mission, and a friend of the convent, was walking along quickly towards the convent to see if he could be of any assistance when a loud shout stopped him in his tracks.

"Monsieur le Capitaine! Monsieur le Capitaine! I'm up here!"

He looked up, and his jaw dropped as he saw Sister St. Emmanuel, red-faced and dishevelled, stuck half-way through the church window.

"Monsieur le Capitaine, would you please help me down? I'm locked in," she said plaintively.

"Ma Soeur," he pointed out politely, "It would be easier if you tried coming out backwards."

Obediently Sister St. Emmanuel disappeared from the window, then backed out cautiously.

Captain Bousquet sighed as he positioned himself against the wall, took her weight, and lowered her carefully to the ground.

Sister St. Emmanuel thanked him as they both went quickly to the convent. By now the danger was over, however, and as they entered the courtyard, they saw Mother St. Mathilde surrounded by a semi-circle of little boys, black from head to foot after their adventures on the roofs.

Looking up, Mother St. Mathilde beckoned to the captain. "Monsieur le Capitaine," she said with a twinkle in her eye, 'I want you to meet our own brigade of fire-fighters who performed so manfully today.'" As she told him how they had gone up on to the roofs to fight the flames, the small figures stood erect, expressionless, but their eyes shining with pride.

"And now," she concluded practically, "We'd better see about getting you cleaned up."

Turning to Captain Bousquet, she went on quietly, "Thank heavens the house was spared. If that building next door hadn't collapsed when it did, it would have been all up with us."

She broke off suddenly, her attention caught by Sister St. Emmanuel who had vanished into the house a moment or two before and now reappeared, smiling broadly.

"Why the rejoicing, Sister?" she asked.

"My wreath of white roses wasn't damaged after all, Reverend Mother," she replied happily.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN Last Voyages to Malaya (1880-1881)

Mildly puzzled, Mother St. Mathilde's eyes rested for a moment on the tiny patch of green Sister St. Gregory was wearing. Of course! It was St. Patrick's Day, and in the place of shamrock Sister St. Gregory had done her best with a little piece of green cloth.

When breakfast was over Mother St. Mathilde made a point of lingering outside the refectory until Sister St. Gregory emerged, and then with bland innocence asked her: "Why are you wearing that piece of watercress, Sister?"

Sister St. Gregory looked at her, shocked to the depths of her Hibernian soul. "WATERCRESS! MOTHER! It's supposed to be a shamrock I'm wearing. It's St. Patrick's Day!"

"Ah yes, I remember now," Mother St. Mathilde said gravely, "St. Patrick used it to explain the seven sacraments to the Irish, didn't he?"

Sister St. Gregory went bright pink, and almost squealed with indignation. "THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS! NOT AT ALL! Mother, you know perf...." Her voice trailed into silence as suspicion was born in her mind, and she looked up in time to catch a twinkle in Mother St. Mathilde's eye.

"I do wish you wouldn't look so serious when you're teasing people," she complained, a little ruffled, "It's so confusing."

Mother St. Mathilde refrained from pointing out that that was the main idea. Instead she replied placatingly: "Never mind. I wanted to wish you a very happy Feast-Day, and I thought perhaps you would

like to come up with me to tell Sister St. Margaret everything is arranged for her to take VOWS the day after tomorrow."

"Of course," agreed Sister St. Gregory, her good humour restored. Then, as they began to climb the stairs, she asked: "She is dying, isn't she? Is that why she is taking her vows?"

"She took the habit exactly two years ago, 19th March 1878, so she is due for her vows in any case," replied Mother St. Mathilde. In a different tone she went on: "Yes, she is dying. Perhaps I ought to feel sad because she is so young, but somehow I always feel happier when I've been to see her. She is so happy herself. Anyone can see that she is of the same stock as the martyrs of Nagasaki who went to their deaths singing the 'Laudate'".

Sister St. Gregory had heard a lot of the last persecution of Christians which had taken place not long before the Holy Infant Jesus Sisters had come to Japan.

Everyone had taken it for granted that the Catholic faith had been wiped out by mass executions hundreds of years earlier, but then the Japanese government discovered with anger that there were still many people, even whole villages, especially around Nagasaki, who had kept the Christian faith doggedly, handing it down from generation to generation although deprived of priests and all outside help.

Mary-Agatha Fuku (now Sister Margaret) and her family were thrown into prison, where she and her mother and sister saw both her father and brother die through ill-treatment and their bodies left unburied. They, too, would have died, if the Emperor had not annulled the edicts

of persecution. As it was, when they returned to Nagasaki, they found that all their property had been confiscated by the government, and they had no one to turn to, except the missionaries.

Mary-Agatha was received in Yokohama by Mother St. Mathilde. Her health had been destroyed by her three years' imprisonment, three years of hunger, exposure to cold in winter and heat in summer, but when she asked to be received into the congregation of the Holy Infant Jesus, Mother St. Mathilde had no hesitation in accepting her, although it was obvious she could not live long.

Sister Margaret's face lit up when her two visitors entered. "Happy St. Patrick's Day!" she greeted them, with a special smile for Sister St. Gregory.

"Thank you dear! And the day after tomorrow will be your feast-day. Mother St. Mathilde has arranged for you to take your vows."

Sister Margaret's eyes turned slowly, gratefully, to Mother St. Mathilde. "Thank you very much indeed, Mother. Could my mother come? She would be very happy, because she knows I am going to die soon," she said in a matter of fact tone.

Mother St. Mathilde smiled faintly. There was no need to soften things for Christians like the Fuku family, evidently. "That is all taken care of. I wrote to your mother, and she will be coming. She also enclosed a note for you. Would you like me to read it out?"

Sister Margaret nodded.

Mother St. Mathilde began reading the note. Towards the end she paused, then read aloud more slowly:

"My daughter, I am happy about the suffering you undergo. Jesus is giving you a share of his chalice; drink it with love. Pray with me, not that it may be less bitter, but that you may appreciate it. You are a Sister, and it is my joy! Be a religious with your whole heart, knowing how to suffer and die for the salvation of souls."

Sister Margaret looked at her two visitors, the shadow of a smile touching her pale, oval face. "It IS a great honour, isn't it?" she asked diffidently.

"There is no greater honour, my dear," Mother St. Mathilde answered, pressing her hand gently and leaving the letter with her.

Meanwhile, in the ground-floor office Sister St. Martha began once again to riffle through a pile of banknotes, her face pink with worry. "Come to the exotic Orient and enjoy the adventurous life of a missionary," she muttered to herself. "Lead a romantic life, bathing, dressing, feeding and teaching little boys and girls. Lots of unequalled opportunities for nursing the sick and lepers ... " But her face softened and a smile spread over her face. This was the work she lived for. If only she didn't have to worry so much about money!

Mother St. Mathilde, recognising Sister St. Martha as a born business-woman, had put her in charge of finances, but even she was hard-put to it sometimes to see to all the needs of the convent, the orphans, and the small hospice for the sick. The responsibility of finding the money necessary to feed and clothe everyone lay very heavily on her shoulders.

The Society of the Holy Childhood helped out, it was true, but Sister St. Martha was kept busy, scraping up money wherever she could, for rice was dear and the children had good appetites. Even to pay for the material to clothe the six to seven hundred children they had in Yokohama and Tokyo was a nightmare, although the clothes were of the simplest kind, the children making do with straw sandals and wearing no stockings, even in winter. Counting the money in hand didn't seem to do any good: there was certainly not enough to pay even the more pressing bills.

At that, Mother St. Mathilde and Sister St. Gregory entered the office. A quick glance told Mother St. Mathilde that Sister St. Martha was very worried.

"What's wrong, Sister?" she asked, solicitously. "You don't look very well. Why don't you make yourself a cup of tea, there's ..."

"There's nothing better for you than a cup of tea!" Sister St. Martha and Sister St. Gregory chorused together, and burst out laughing, for Mother St. Mathilde's invariable prescription for ill ills, from a bad headache to an earthquake was known by heart throughout Malaya and Japan.

"Two comedians," Mother St. Mathilde observed. "All right, now what's the trouble?"

"Nothing that a cup of tea can help," replied Sister St. Martha. "We simply haven't got enough to pay the bills." Turning quizzically to Sister St. Gregory she added: "Unless, of course you have something from your rich friends to give us?"

Although inclined to be shy by nature, Sister St. Gregory's mind worked along direct lines. If the orphans, the sick and the poor were in need, she went straight to the people most able to help: the richest and most important people in the city. It never occurred to her to do otherwise.

"Why yes," she answered innocently. "Mr. `X' has agreed to pay for clothes for all the children in the convent here. I thought it was about time they had some new clothes."

Sister St. Martha expelled her breath slowly and glanced with amusement at Mother St. Mathilde. "Just like that!" she said drily. "I'd love to hear what sort of sermons you preach to our benefactors."

Mr. `X' was the best known Protestant minister in the city ...

"Oh, it was quite easy," explained Sister St. Gregory. "I just told him what a wonderful act of charity it is to look after orphans and he became very interested."

Sister St. Martha looked at her for a long moment, and said finally: "That's really a wonderful piece of news, but still, I'm afraid I haven't enough money to pay for our rice."

Mother St. Mathilde silently reached for the banknotes and began counting them.

After a couple of minutes she looked across the table, eyebrows raised. "What's the fuss about?" she asked. "You have exactly the right amount."

Sister St. Martha stared at her in astonishment and quickly checked, to find it was exactly as Mother St. Mathilde had said. But she couldn't have been mistaken: she had been especially careful in counting! Then she remembered other things: how one day in Singapore when everyone was convinced there was no rice in the house Mother St. Mathilde had mysteriously been able to find a store of it in a room which everyone else had been certain was empty. She remembered what had happened in Yokohama itself.

During the heat of the summer there had been no water available for mixing mortar for the building in progress, but Mother St. Mathilde had calmly set about digging out a well which had not given water for a long time, telling the Sisters to pray, and then, every evening the dried-up well filled with enough water for the next day as long as was necessary.

She remembered all this, but forgot how much Mother St. Mathilde hated anyone talking about it. Unguardedly, she stuttered: "But it's a miracle!"

Mother St. Mathilde immediately turned scarlet. "Mail taisez-vous done!" she snapped. "Be quiet! God –doesn't need to perform miracles to look after us. You could live made a mistake, couldn't you?"

"Y-e-e-e-s ... "

"Well, then!"

"But I'm sure I didn't!" Sister St. Martha insisted, while Sister St. Gregory looked on, open-mouthed.

Mother St. Mathilde sighed with exasperation. "Anyway, don't worry too much about money. If we give ourselves entirely to God, He will always give us what we want. Incidentally," she added, changing the subject dexterously, "I'm very much afraid I'll have to make another trip to Malaya. Mother St. Gaetan is on her way to England and Ireland to see if any girls there would like to join us on the Mission. She is desperately in need of English-speaking Sisters for the schools, and Mother General wants me to go down to Singapore and examine any she might bring back, as they intend starting a novitiate there—with Sister St. Joseph Spooner as Mistress of Novices ... " She smiled, remembering how Sister St. Joseph in her first days of religious life had expected to have a servant sweep out her room. She had come a long way since that day!

"But couldn't they get someone else to examine the postulants?" Sister St. Martha asked. "All that travelling can't be good for you, and ... "

"And I'm sixty-six years old now," Mother St. Mathilde finished for her. "This will be the twelfth time for me to do the voyage, and I can't say I enjoy it very much any more, but it has to be done, as I've also got to install Mother St. Anselm as Superior in Penang, and we have a lot of business to discuss."

Mother St. Appollinaire, the Superior of Penang, and one of Mother St. Mathilde's three original companions, had died of cholera the day after arriving in France from Singapore. Mother St. Reine, who had been her companion and who had nursed her devotedly during the voyage, had then been appointed Superior of Penang, but within months she too had died.

Sister St. Martha and Sister St. Gregory exchanged glances, but both of them knew better than to press her any further, although they wished with all their hearts that she need not go. She was getting old, and no longer fit to stand the change from Japan to the muggy heat of Singapore. And then, it was almost impossible for her ever to rest—her mind was too active, and she drove herself mercilessly for the sake of the Mission. Sister St. Martha shrugged her shoulders philosophically.

Mother St. Mathilde was convinced, underneath it all, that she was stronger than any of the Sisters, although most of them were young enough to be her daughters, so there was not much point in arguing.

Almost as soon as she arrived in Singapore, Mother St. Mathilde was busy day and night. Everyone took it for granted that she would find the answer to all their problems—she always had, and presumably she always would.

Even Mother St. Anselm, stout and competent as ever, turned to her for help in solving the unenviable collection of problems in construction that she had inherited in Penang.

There after hours of exhausting consultations, Mother St. Mathilde was gradually worn down, but Mother St. Anselm who was as strong as a carthorse and built on similar lines, naturally saw nothing amiss. True, Mother St. Mathilde seemed quieter than usual; one did not see her face suddenly become solemn quite as often as in days gone by—the infallible signal for one of her flashes of humour—but no one attached any particular importance to that.

Only when the pressure of work was removed and Mother St. Mathilde found herself once again on board ship, waving goodbye to the Sisters in Singapore (for the last time, though she did not know it) did her overworked body take its revenge. Holding *grimly* to the rail, she smiled rigidly towards the dock-side, as wave after wave of dizziness swept over her. Long after the ship had left the harbour, she still clung to the rail, afraid to trust her strength. When, after ages, the dizziness seemed to have left her for the time being, she made her way to her cabin and lay down on her bed, but her head still felt as muzzy as though it were stuffed with hot cotton-wool, and pain streaked up her arms and legs.

When the ship arrived in Hong Kong it was clear that she could travel no further. Whenever any of the Holy Infant Jesus Sisters stopped in Hong Kong on their way to or from Japan, they were always warmly welcomed at the Convent of the Sisters of Charity of St. Paul de Chartres, and especially by the Reverend Mother, who for many years ruled benevolently in Wanchai. She seems to have looked upon everyone she met, not only as the child of God, but more personally as her own child, with the result that she was widely known by the title given to her by a grateful Chinese—"The Mother of God"!

Mother St. Mathilde felt more dead than alive by the time she came under the care of "The Mother of God", and was hardly conscious of being tucked between crisp white sheets. For days she burned with fever, but whenever she regained consciousness, she was faintly aware of a rustle of starched linen as a blurred white figure bent over her and a cool, dry hand rested on her forehead.

At last, the fever broke, and one morning Mother St. Mathilde awoke, clear-headed, though weak, to see the sunshine streaming through the window and the Reverend Mother looking down at her, smiling with relief.

"You gave us a bad fright, but you will be all right now," she said.

Mother St. Mathilde opened her mouth to speak, but only uttered a weak croak.

"Don't try to talk now! You're out of danger, but you need a long rest and you won't be able to go on to Japan for some time, so don't think about it," concluded the Reverend Mother.

A fortnight later, Mother St. Mathilde was limping painfully towards her favourite bench in the convent compound. The following day she was to leave for Japan, in spite of the disapproval of the Reverend Mother. Mother St. Mathilde, herself, would have liked to stay longer. It was so peaceful in the garden, especially now at twilight when the hills were darkening against the red sky. But she felt guilty, doing nothing, when there was so much to be done in Yokohama and Tokyo. She was anxious to be back.

She raised her hands from her lap and carefully flexed her swollen fingers, wincing with pain. As she laid her hands down again tenderly upon her knees, a grey mood of depression descended on her. How could she continue to do everything that everyone expected of her, she wondered when she could only limp along with difficulty and could hardly bear anything even brushing lightly against her hands? She had no illusions. It had been easy to see through the doctor's vaguely

encouraging words to the truth behind them: there was little or no hope that her arms and legs would ever improve very much. Somehow she must carry on.

Alone in the gathering darkness, as points of yellow light illumined the convent windows one by one, she turned to God in wordless prayer for strength.

CHAPTER NINETEEN Sick Visitor

The old man listened, his brown wrinkled face intent, as the Japanese Sister explained that if he took the powder she gave him three times a day, it would relieve his rheumatism.

He bowed his thanks and said: "Sayonara, yama no o isha!" ('Goodbye, great doctor of the mountain!')

Sister Helen was used to the flattering title. She had, in any case, little time to think about it while she was attending to her out-patients, but occasionally she felt uneasy, and then for a few days she would point out sharply to everyone that she was only giving simple medicines to the poor. She had had great success in curing, with the result that the poor now always called her "the great doctor of the mountain" and she knew that she was fighting a losing battle, trying to persuade them to use her real name.

"O hayo, yama no o isha", a voice came from behind her.

"And good morning to you, Mother!" she answered, turning around.

"Just carry on, Sister, I'm only making my daily rounds."

Sister Helen smiled. The sick couldn't complain of being neglected by Mother St. Mathilde, she thought. Almost every day she made her round of the hospice and the General Hospital. From the time she had arrived in Japan, she and the Sisters had been busy visiting the hospitals and the homes of the poor to nurse them, especially during cholera and smallpox epidemics, but this was not enough.

One of the Sisters had said that Mother St. Mathilde would have liked to be able to shelter within her convents all the poor and the elderly who had been left without anyone to look after them, all the sick and the dying. Hard as nails towards herself, she could not rest until she had built hospices in the convents in Yokohama and Tokyo, where at any rate some of these unfortunates could find shelter and comfort. They were not impressive buildings—simple Japanese-styled houses roofed with thin slats and paper walls and partitions, with room for between twenty and thirty patients at a time. But, humble though they were, Mother St. Mathilde dearly loved those little wooden buildings. Within them, her patients had the best care she could give them. They were nursed devotedly night and day by the Sisters and the "tertiaries", former pupils of her schools, who had no vocation to the religious life but who wanted to help the Sisters in their work. Yet, even now, it hurt her to be able to take in only the most wretched cases and the most sick, and have to turn away so many others. There were never enough Sisters, never enough money...

Sister Helen turned to watch Mother St. Mathilde limp awkwardly into the hospice. Who would think, she mused, before turning to the next patient, that such a fragile old lady was the driving spirit behind so much good?

Mother St. Mathilde, treading softly, looked into the first room where one of her converts, now close to death, was lying motionless on the mat. She could see by the movement of his head that he had noticed her. In the dim interior she sensed rather than saw that he was troubled.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"All my life I have beaten the drums outside the temples to get people to come in and make offerings to the gods," he whispered. "Now I'm dying. What shall I say to God?"

Mother St. Mathilde patted his hand. "You must not worry. I know that God has forgiven you your sins," she said simply but with reassuring authority. "And then," with a glimmer of a smile, "You can always say that you will help St. Peter in your old job, beating the drum to bring people into heaven ..."

He relaxed, tension gone.

"Now I must go on to visit Matthew," she continued. "I know you will not worry any longer."

Matthew was another "must" on Mother St. Mathilde's list of visits, for he too was near death. Although, she smiled at the thought, it was he who often cheered up his visitors. She had never met anyone quite like Matthew, so anxious to learn all he could of the Christian faith. Since his baptism he seemed to be the happiest man in Yokohama, and had become so apostolic that he was giving a course of instruction to his politely bewildered doctor.

Hearing sounds of weeping coming from his room, she quickened her step and found, as she had expected, Matthew's wife and child kneeling by his side. Mother St. Mathilde crossed the tiny room, knelt on the wooden floor near where Matthew was lying, and put her arm around his wife, feeling her thin shoulders trembling under the kimono as she struggled to control her grief.

"Do not cry!" Matthew was urging them persuasively. "I am so happy! I am going to God. All I want is for you to become Christians. Death doesn't matter, because it will bring me to heaven."

He looked up at Mother St. Mathilde, mutely asking for help. With her years of experience, not only in nursing the sick, but in comforting those who grieve, she soon pacified them, as much by the tone of her voice as by what she said. Then, she quietly withdrew, watching for a moment with pity the grey head of Matthew's wife bent as though in submission, while speaking quietly and with long pauses he tried to prepare his wife and daughter for his approaching death.

As soon as she had exchanged a few words with each of the patients, Mother St. Mathilde went on to the General Hospital next door to the convent. She could no longer walk very far, so she left the other hospitals in the city to be visited by the younger Sisters, who were always made welcome, especially because of the help they gave during epidemics of cholera and other infectious diseases.

Of them all, none was better known nor more loved than Mother St. Mathilde. The patients soon learned to listen for her limping step, for she left no one out of her visits, neither rich nor poor, nor officer nor ordinary seaman. Because of her age and because it was so clear that she was genuinely concerned with them, they found themselves telling her things that they would have told no one else, and listening to her words of advice, sometimes even to her scoldings in a way they would have listened to no one else; she was as privileged as a respected mother—or a grandmother.

As she went up the steps to the hospital, Mother St. Mathilde was thinking of a letter which had come only the day before from the mother and sisters of a young French cadet whom she had visited and looked after throughout his illness up to his death some time before. Even in their grief—and he had been the only son and the youngest in the family—they could not find words enough to express their thanks to Mother St. Mathilde for taking the place of his mother during his last illness. "If being so far from your native country is hard for missionaries, yet it must be a great consolation for you to know that because of it you have been able to do so much good to the soul of my son, and of my daughters, and to my own soul," his mother had finished.

Mother St. Mathilde had long ago given up wondering whether she would ever get hardened to suffering and grief. Instead, as the years went by, she seemed to be growing more sensitive to it, feeling ever more urgently a need within herself to help all the unfortunates of this world in every way she could, and was surprised and dismayed to find others less concerned than she was.

Still, she thought to herself, Christ never said: "Blessed are those who never allow themselves to be hurt." Pain is the other side of the coin of loving your neighbour as yourself. Through love you touch just a little of the happiness of heaven—but you can be hurt far more than those who do not know that happiness. How can you avoid suffering with your neighbour, if you really love him as yourself? And that, she thought, had been easy enough in the case of the young cadet. In all simplicity he had shown *her son's* affection from the first moment, or perhaps a grandson's affection would be nearer the mark.

The first room she came to was occupied by a young Japanese about twenty-five years of age, who introduced himself as Mr. Okoutchi. After the usual exchange of greetings, he asked Mother St. Mathilde suspiciously: "Are you Russian?"

She shook her head and told him she was French. Feelings between Russia and Japan were not friendly at the time.

Much to her surprise the young man continued his questions in fluent French. "You are a Catholic, then?"

"Good!" he beamed with relief when she nodded. "I've been wanting to become a Catholic for a long time, and you can help me, can't you?"

She agreed that she could, but first of all she was interested to find out what had made him think of becoming a Christian and where he had learned to speak French so well. Mr. Okoutchi was, she could see, seriously ill. The deep shadows under his eyes and cheekbones spoke of exhaustion, but now, talking about himself to a sympathetic listener, he was reanimated.

"I was chosen by the government with a number of other students to go to France to learn European professions," he told her. "Monsieur Dury who used to be the French consul here took me under his wing. We all respect him very much, so we became interested in the Catholic Church as well, since he is such a good Catholic, and we learned what we could of it while we were in France."

"It was only through laziness and carelessness that I didn't take the trouble to be baptised," he went on with a *sideways* glance at Mother

St. Mathilde. "I'm sorry about that now, of course, and I would really like to be baptised. Could you do something about it?"

Monsieur Dury had been one of Mother St. Mathilde's good friends, so that when she heard that he had seen to the instruction of the young Japanese, she realised that he would not need much preparation for baptism, and within a short time he was baptised "Raphael".

From then on Raphael made up for his former carelessness. He was taken away from the General Hospital and some of his family did their best to get him to renounce his faith, but he held firm under the pressure. Not long before his death he wrote to Mother St. Mathilde, sending her a photograph of himself, signed "Raphael the Archangel", under the impression that the title belonged to him as well as the name.

Through the morning Mother St. Mathilde went from room to room, sometimes spending a few minutes, sometimes a good deal longer with each one according to his needs, sometimes even washing and tidying the patients. Many younger people would have found the routine she had set herself too tiring, but over the years she had so hardened herself in self-denial that there seldom passed a day when she was unable to carry out all her duties, even though she suffered pain in her limbs and hands since her illness in Hong Kong.

That evening she remained in her room, waiting for the two Sisters who had been sent out that day to visit the sick. She always liked to hear how they had succeeded, and she was particularly interested this evening, as they had been told to try and locate two lepers who were rumoured to be near a village outside Yokohama. It was the first

experience of this kind of work for one of the Sisters, and Mother St. Mathilde was anxious to see how she had managed.

Leprosy was not at all uncommon in Japan at that time, and the Japanese were naturally frightened of it, because often it could develop undetected and be passed on to others before its dreadful effects on the body became marked. As a result, in Japan as in many other countries, the leper was driven away from contact with other people.

Mother St. Mathilde remembered how she had felt the first time she had nursed a leper so many years before in Singapore. Inexperienced in leprosy then, she had at first not recognised its unmistakable musty odour, but as she bent over the sick man a glance was enough to tell her that he was a leper. His hands and fingers, what were left of them, were drawn up like claws, and as she undid the filthy rags of bandages she felt perspiration break out on her forehead and sourness rise in her mouth as she looked at the ulcerous patches oozing pus. Straightening up, she had deliberately blanked out her mind for a moment or two, staring in front of her as though trying to remember something, so that the leper would not sense the disgust she was fighting to overcome.

She washed him and cleaned his wounds, feeling all the time a dull anger against herself. He is a leper, an outcast, an object of horror, she told herself. And if he is, then he is certainly the "least" of all Christ's brethren, and all the more reason to treat him as I would treat the Lord himself. Do I really believe it, she needled herself, or is it just an empty form of words for me? There was one way of finding out, one way of treating this man as she would treat Christ himself. Slowly she bent over him again. Carefully and reverently she kissed the leper's misshapen feet.

Hearing a gasp she looked up to see Sister St. Gaetan a few yards away, looking sick and as white as a sheet. It had to be Sister St. Gaetan who stumbled on to this, she thought wryly but not without amusement. The most sensitive of us all! Well, perhaps she will not say anything about it; even thinking about it won't help her appetite. But she was wrong; everyone knew the story, but no one dared to make an allusion to it in front of Mother St. Mathilde.

A tap at the door aroused her from her thoughts of the past, and soon she was absorbed in the account the two Sisters gave of their day's work.

"We found the first leper you told us about without any difficulty." Sister Jeanne, the older of the two, reported. "He was in a very bad state. We found him in a valley without any shelter against the sun, lying on some rotten straw. Naturally he was infested with lice, so all in all it took us quite a time to fix him up properly."

As she listened to Sister Jeanne's unemotional recital, Mother St. Mathilde was covertly examining the younger nun. She was pale and tired out, but seemed to have weathered her experiences very well.

"The other one was more difficult to find," Sister Jeanne went on. "He was in a little hut, if you can call it that. Well, anyway, it was a kind of shelter made up by throwing a few pieces of plank together on three sides, but with the remaining side completely open to the wind. We'll have to do something about that before the winter sets in, of course. Just like the other one he lives on a little rice and water."

Mother St. Mathilde turned to the younger Sister. "I hope you are not tired out?"

Sister Elizabeth woke up out of a reverie and stared at her. "Tired, Mother?" she repeated, and paused. "I suppose I am tired, but I wasn't really thinking of that." She began again. "It's terrible to think of human beings having to live like that, alone in such a misery. I keep thinking of them alone now, at night, in the fields with no one to look after them."

Mother St. Mathilde looked at her approvingly; better that her mind be occupied with the needs of the lepers than with the hardships of nursing them. Besides, she always felt the sensitive ones, those who felt things strongly, were capable of great things, as long as they kept their feelings under control and their spirit unbroken by disappointment. That was the trouble, they were more quickly disillusioned and discouraged than the others, and needed more careful handling.

She answered: "We would like to gather them together in one place, but it is not possible at present. If we had enough Sisters and enough money, it might be a different story."

"Don't brood about it," she added. "Make plans to help people, do what you can to relieve all their sufferings, but try not to take all the troubles of the world to bed with you. You are not Divine Providence, you know. Those unfortunate lepers have no one with them tonight—but they do have God. Don't imagine He has no care of them. Every human being is lonely at times; the important thing is how we handle our loneliness - by sharing it with God, or not."

Sister Elizabeth was listening attentively, but her eyelids were drooping. Mother St. Mathilde smiled faintly. "All right, it's time for bed. There'll always be plenty of work for us all in the morning!"

CHAPTER TWENTY Typhoon

The little Japanese, bent almost double under his load, shuffled into the store-room and with a twist of his shoulders sent the last sack of rice thudding to the floor in line with the others. Everything was now under cover from the typhoon he felt sure was going to hit Yokohama soon.

Pausing only to wipe his face and arms clean with a cotton rag, he trotted to the highest point of ground in the convent to where Sister St. Martha was gazing down anxiously over Tokyo Bay. As he approached, she smiled down at him. Although he was not much bigger than a child, his brown thick-set body was hard and muscular. Not only because he was resourceful in building, but especially on account of his devotion to the convent, Mother St. Mathilde had placed him in charge of all the workmen and he was very conscious of his responsibilities, particularly today, since Mother St. Mathilde had gone to Tokyo the day before and had not yet returned.

"Is everything under control. Takai?" she asked.

Some typhoons spent themselves at sea, but occasionally one of these gigantic whirlwinds would smash along the Japanese coastline, causing untold damage, especially to buildings which, like the Yokohama convent, were exposed on a height.

"I think we've done just about everything we can do, Sister. Everything loose has been battened down and we've put up reinforcing struts inside the old orphanage to support the walls."

As a few gusts broke the stillness, he added: "That wind is the first sign, Sister. From now on it will just blow harder and harder."

A dirty mass of olive-green cloud was slowly spreading ragged ribbons over the sea and steamers were turning their noses into the direction of the wind. Sister St. Martha looked worriedly across to the new chapel beneath them.

"It will be awful if anything happens to the chapel, Takai, when we've only just finished building it."

Immediately Takai responded with an agonised yelp and struck himself on the forehead. "Ai-yah! I remember now that last night those carpenters left a hole uncovered just under the roof. If it is left like that the typhoon is bound to get under and blow the whole roof off!"

Sister opened her mouth, but Takai was already running, head down, towards the new building. Quickly he picked up hammer, nails and a suitable length of boarding. Looking around the litter he selected a long scaffolding pole, slid it under the wall until it was just under the hole in the roof, and wedged it into position as securely as he could. There was no time to waste, for already the wind was increasing in strength. Just as Sister St. Martha arrived, he went swarming up the pole and when he got to the top, wrapped his legs around the pole while he hammered the boarding into place.

Far below Sister looked up in horror at the tiny figure, certain that at any moment she would see him whirled from his perch and dashed to the ground by the wind. She opened her mouth to shout to him to come down, but her words were whipped away in the rising wind, so she

clung heavily to the pole so as to steady it as much as possible for Takai. After what seemed an eternity in time, the pole shuddered, and shuddered again as he came clambering down, until he jumped the last couple of yards, bouncing to his feet with a triumphant grin on his face like a mischievous small boy.

By now the wind was shrilling at an ever-increasingly higher pitch, and as they looked down briefly towards the town they could see roofs of houses, even uprooted trees, turning end over end in the air, brushing aside the flimsy wooden houses which were collapsing everywhere as though they were houses of cards. It was decidedly not safe in the open. Running and stumbling, the two of them made their way towards the old orphanage.

As the wind tore furiously at her habit Sister St. Martha clamped both hands on her head, determined not to lose her coif, and with the wind ballooning her skirts she had a vision for one mad moment of herself taking off into the air, zooming and banking like a great black crow, but even as she giggled breathlessly at the thought they were at the orphanage door.

Inside, all forty of the boys together with the Sisters were straining hard against the wall, bracing it against the growing onslaught of the typhoon, and without a word both Sister St. Martha and Takai added their weight, still panting for breath, their eyes streaming with tears from the wind. At first it felt as though a giant hand was pushing at their backs, trying to force the whole house aside, but Takai worked tirelessly through the hours to wedge the wall more securely with supports.

When finally the danger had passed and they were able to emerge, blinking into the daylight, they could see that although most of the tiles had been blown off the chapel roof, the roof itself was intact.

"Well, thank goodness for that—and thank you, too, Takai," she added, looking down at her small companion.

"But," she went on, "Don't ever do a thing like that again unless you want to give me a heart-attack! It's a wonder you didn't break your neck! What were you thinking of, to try such a crazy thing?"

Takai grinned, lowered his eyes shyly and scuffed the ground for a moment before answering. Then he looked into the Sister's eyes and said solemnly: "For Reverend Mother and for all of you who love my country, I would do anything at all!"

Next morning everyone set to work under the direction of Sister St. Martha and Sister St. Gregory. To the table which they had set up in the shadow of the new chapel to serve as temporary General Headquarters came messengers in search of instructions and fresh jobs of work.

After an hour of touring the grounds and directing working teams Sister St. Martha plumped herself down at the table, her habit torn and smeared with dust, and remarked with some satisfaction: "That's every team at work now on the more immediate jobs. They have enough to keep them occupied for a while."

After a moment's rest, she looked across at Sister St. Gregory who had not lifted her eyes at her approach but was still writing busily.

"I've got all the major damage listed," Sister St. Gregory murmured as her pen continued to squeak over the paper, "But I want to make the list as complete as possible, and there are little bits of damage all over the place—nothing of great importance but which will have to be repaired all the same."

"So this is what you do to my beautiful buildings when I leave the two of you together alone for a couple of days!"

Both Sisters jumped to their feet as they heard Mother St. Mathilde's voice. In spite of the humour in Mother St. Mathilde's words, Sister St. Martha noticed that her face was drawn with f'atigue and the shadows under her eyes were deep this morning; she seemed to have grown older by several years since she had left for Tokyo only two days earlier.

"What was it like in Tokyo, Mother?" Sister St. Martha asked tentatively.

"The chapel has gone completely," Mother St. Mathilde answered flatly. "That's about the worst there is."

As the two Sisters exclaimed aloud, she went on unemotionally: "The trouble was that we had got so far in building that the walls were almost completed, but there was no roof. I thought we might have had a chance, even then, but right at the end of the typhoon there came two or three powerful gusts, there was a tremendous crash, a huge cloud of dust, and there was nothing left of the walls. We'll simply have to start all over again."

"At least I can see that our new chapel here is not so very badly damaged," she continued, nodding towards it. "Let's make a tour of inspection and you can tell me exactly what happened."

As they skirted the piles of rubble, they paused briefly at the new chapel while Sister St. Martha told of Takai's exploit on the roof.

"I am certain that if it were not for him the damage would have been a lot worse. As it is, we have lost about half of the tiles off the roof, and all the windows were blown out, of course. Someone told me she had found the remnants of the windows fifty yards away, but you'd better not report that little item to Paris, otherwise they may think you were guilty of pious exaggeration ..."

Mother St. Mathilde smiled faintly and turned to Sister St. Gregory for a report on the rest of the damage.

"The gallery in the convent has been completely blown away," she said, "And the roof and one of the walls of the new orphanage have gone as well. I was in there myself when it happened," she went on feelingly, "And we were all rattled about inside like dice in a dice-box."

"That is about all, I think," she concluded. "It will not take so long to have everything cleaned up, but I don't know where all the money is coming from for all the repairs that will be necessary."

She stopped and waited with the others as she saw one of the Sisters with a small bundle in her arms picking her way carefully through the wreckage towards them.

As she came up to them the Sister said apologetically to Mother St. Mathilde: "I didn't want to break in on you while you were busy, Mother, but a man just came to say he had found this baby in the street. I wasn't sure whether you would accept the baby now that there is all this trouble."

Sister St. Martha caught Sister St. Gregory's eye and shrugged her shoulders with amusement; they both knew what the answer would be.

Unhesitatingly Mother St. Mathilde answered: "Just carry on as if nothing had happened, Sister. God has treated us as He treated Job: He has taken from us a part of what He Himself gave us. If He wants to give it back to us again, He has the means to do it. Of course we'll take in the child!"

As though to lend point to Mother St. Mathilde's words, they now saw the familiar figure of M. Rosseler, one of their benefactors, hurrying across towards them.

Apparently an unimportant little man with shiny bald head and rimless glasses, he was in fact a jurist of international reputation who had been forced to leave Germany on account of Bismarck's "Kulturkampf" and oppression of Catholics, and had settled down in Japan with his English wife and three children, all of whom had been instructed in the Faith by Mother St. Mathilde. Although he drew a good salary from the Japanese government for helping them to set up a legal code, he and his family lived very modestly, so that they could contribute a handsome sum of money each year to the convent. He had pointed out to Mother St. Mathilde that if he himself found it impossible to do any apostolic work, at least he and his family could

share in the work of the Sisters by giving them as much material help as possible.

After greeting the three nuns and sympathising with them, M. Rosseler hesitated awkwardly, then offered Mother St. Mathilde a slip of paper.

"Perhaps this will help better than words alone, Mother."

Mother St. Mathilde took the paper from him, slightly surprised, glanced at it, and exclaimed: "But M. Rosseler this is a cheque for 1,500 francs and you've already given us 6,500 francs this year. I'm very grateful but can you really afford to give us so much?"

M. Rosseler replied hurriedly, "There's no need to be grateful Reverend Mother. This is the result of a promise I made to God some time ago in order to obtain a special grace. The only thing is, please don't expect me to give as much each year. It is not possible, as I have no private income and I have to educate my children, you understand."

Mother St. Mathilde smiled warmly and assured him that they would by no means expect so much from him every year. As it was he led such a life of poverty for the benefit of the Mission, always going about on foot and economising wherever he could, that Europeans in Tokyo despised him as a miser.

After he had left, Mother St. Mathilde turned to the others. "Well, there's a start," she observed.

"That's just about all we ever seem to be doing—starting, and then starting again," Sister St. Martha added, her normally good spirits subdued for once.

"At least we can thank God that this time no one has been killed or seriously injured," Mother St. Mathilde replied reasonably,

"Besides, does it really matter so very much when it is only the buildings which have been damaged? They are only material things. All that is less important than a single sin, or even, if it comes to that, a voluntary imperfection. As long as we're all doing God's Will, I'll be perfectly happy, and it so happens to be God's Will right now that we set about repairing the damage. If all the buildings had been flattened, it would be His Will that we simply put them up again. All that matters is that we do our best: God will see to it then that our work is brought to the perfection He has always planned, so let's not grumble about the way God has seen fit to arrange things."

Glancing at her two companions who were walking along in silence beside her, she went on gravely, "It might well be that that is just what we will have to do in future years: build, build and build, and then see our efforts brought to nothing through earthquakes, typhoons and fires. And then? Well, without looking back on all the work we have done, we must start working all over again."

Her words were prophetic. Again and again the Sisters in Japan have seen their buildings destroyed, right up to 1945 when four of their six convents were razed to the ground: Tokyo, Yokohama, Shizuoka, Fukuoka. Yet each time they have rebuilt, and today the schools stand once more on the same sites, with nearly eleven thousand pupils.

But the Sisters suffered their worst losses on Saturday, 1st September, 1923, the day of the Great Kanto Earthquake.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE Two Minutes to Twelve

It was only a few minutes from noon as the Sisters in Yokohama moved towards the front of the tribune. Just like every other day, the Sisters were free to go anywhere they liked to make their examination of conscience before Sister St. Theophane went out to ring the Angelus.

Alone in her room, Sister St. Mary was kneeling in prayer. During the last few years, since she had begun to suffer so much from rheumatism, she had been often unable to attend community duties, but she could always count on frequent visits, especially from her younger sister, Sister St. Dunstan. There was an unusually strong bond of affection between the sisters.

Many years ago in the tiny village of Rathaspick in Ireland, fifteen year old Annie Keegan had taken almost complete charge of her baby sister, Lizzie. They had always been inseparable, and lately, since Sister St. Mary's health had begun to deteriorate, Sister St. Dunstan had often been heard to say that she would like to die on the same day as her elder sister. Her wish was soon to be granted.

As her mind went quietly over the past morning searching for faults she might have committed, Sister St. Mary had no inkling that she and so many of the Sisters were within minutes of eternity.

Sister St. Dunstan, quick and energetic as a sparrow, in spite of her poor health, had already left the tribune and gone down the stairs to the ground floor of the chapel, while most of the other Sisters remained upstairs at the rear of the tribune.

A few miles away to the north the Sisters in Tokyo were on the last day of their annual retreat. After singing Office, most of them, by a lucky chance, remained in the wooden building which housed the community room. Only Sister St. Dominic, followed by two other Sisters, had gone down as far as the chapel door as the minute hand approached 11.58 a.m.

As all over Tokyo and Yokohama housewives were busy fanning fires in thousands of charcoal stoves to cook the mid-day rice, deep underneath the waters of Sagami Bay, fifty-seven miles south of Tokyo, the sea-bed heaved and split open with an explosion of unimaginable magnitude, sending shock-waves tearing through the earth in all directions.

Within a minute the shock hit the mainland.

It was exactly 11.58 a.m. by the clock in the chapel in Yokohama when the floor suddenly bucked and rippled in waves under the Sisters with a terrible roar, and lumps of plaster came crashing down among them. Instinctively most of the Sisters ran towards the door, hoping to find shelter on the stairs. It was a fatal move. At that instant a more violent shock sent them sprawling into a heap, and the exit was sealed off by falling blocks of masonry. Several were killed instantly, and others pinned down under huge timbers.

In Tokyo Sister St. Dominic was dipping her finger into the holy water when the first shock came. Thinking at first it would not be violent, she hurried forward to secure the sanctuary lamp, but had only taken a few paces when she was flung down underneath the tribune. As she struggled vainly to regain her feet, the roof began to crumple in and

wide cracks appeared in the rear walls. Resigning herself to death, she looked helplessly up at the statue of St. Michael as it bowed forward and arched lazily outwards, to smash into fragments two yards away from her. Shaken, but unhurt, Sister St. Dominic was able to make her way out of the chapel after ten minutes, and rejoined the Sisters in the courtyard. By a miracle, none of the others had suffered serious injury either.

In the chapel in Yokohama, Sister St. Eugene at the front of the tribune felt herself lifted up and slammed down with savage force as the floor collapsed underneath her, and in the split second before the roof came down, she looked up incredulously to see wide cracks running rapidly along the ceiling, pillars rolling drunkenly inwards and breaking up, as though in slow motion. Even as she raised an arm to protect her head the roof crashed down, blotting out the daylight.

In the darkness she tried to move her body and found that she had not been pinned down by the falling beams, though her coif and skirts were caught inextricably under the wreckage. Behind her head her hands met the keyboard of the harmonium. She and two other Sisters, whom she could hear groaning in pain underneath her, had been hurled against it and protected by it from the worst of the falling bricks and masonry.

Light faintly illuminated the dust-laden air above her face. There was a small hole just within reach, and carefully she began to dislodge rubble from around it until it was just large enough to crawl through. Awkwardly ridding herself of coif and outer habit, she slowly groped her way upwards.

Once outside, Sister St. Eugene rose shakily to her feet, looking around to see if anyone else had escaped, but in the yellow fog of brick-dust nothing was to be seen, but a dead landscape of piled up wreckage. She tried to cry for help, but only managed a harsh croak. As she coughed to clear her throat, choked with dust, the Marianist Brothers from the college next door came running towards her.

Immediately Sister St. Eugene turned back and began scraping feverishly to enlarge the hole through which she had escaped. The first of the Brothers to come up to her threw himself down beside her without a word and joined in clearing the hole of tiles, bricks and fragments of wood. As soon as it was big enough, he lowered himself down head first, supported by another Brother and with great difficulty dragged out Sister St. Enda and Sister St. Xavier, both semi-conscious from their injuries.

Even while they were rescuing them, they heard cries for help coming from underneath the smoking ruins. Listening hard, Sister St. Eugene recognised the voices belonging to Sisters St. Dunstan, Sebastian and Helen.

The rescuers spaced themselves out and listened carefully until they knew exactly where the buried Sisters were, then began work furiously to clear the rubble, heedless of torn and bleeding hands, for now they shared an unspoken realisation, too terrible to be put into words: they were racing the clock against a new and even worse menace—fire!

Soon after the first shock, huge conflagrations had begun in Tokyo and Yokohama, many started by charcoal stoves overturned and buried under inflammable wreckage. At the same time all the water mains had

been broken, and fire-engines destroyed in their shelters. Yokohama was soon a sea of fire. Even as they worked to extricate the victims, the roaring flames and crackling of burning timber came rapidly closer, and the Brothers, together with Sisters who had escaped from other parts of the convent, redoubled their efforts, suppressing what they knew in their hearts —that they could never rescue the three trapped Sisters in time.

As soon as they uncovered the head and shoulders of Sister St. Helen, who was nearest the surface, one of the Sisters knelt at her side to give her a few drops of water, but she felt sick at heart as she saw the massive wooden beams lying across the Sister's breast and legs. They could never hope to raise those beams without block and tackle and many more helpers!

Sister St. Dunstan and Sister St. Sebastian were buried more deeply. Two of the Brothers at great risk to themselves managed to worm their way underneath the debris and succeeded in getting a little water to the two Sisters, but in spite of superhuman efforts they could not release them.

Flakes of burning material blown ahead of the fire were already falling among the rescuers, charring clothes where they landed, a sign that they had very little time in which to make their escape. Realising this, the Brothers tried unsuccessfully to persuade the nuns to go and take the children to a safer place. Almost as if on the cue Japanese policemen arrived on the scene. As he approached the group, the officer-in-charge called out: "All survivors are to leave the area immediately and proceed to the public park!"

One of the Sisters, covered with dust, white channels down her face where tears had run, stopped digging for a moment and answered hoarsely: "We can't leave now. Don't you understand? There are others underneath. We can't leave them alone to ... " As her voice broke, she turned back with desperate energy to her hopeless task, but the officer stepped forward and lifted her to her feet.

"I'm sorry," he said, not unsympathetically, "I do understand, but I have my orders. I cannot permit you to throw away your lives. All of you must leave now."

At once the Brothers supported the officer, but only when the Brothers assured them that they would keep working to the last possible moment did the Sisters turn reluctantly away to take the children to safety.

Sister St. Helen, the life being slowly crushed out of her by the heavy beams, silently watched the flames licking hungrily towards her and made her preparation for death, while Sisters St. Dunstan and Sebastian, deep underneath the rubble, sank to unconsciousness.

Once in the public park the Sisters counted the survivors. Fifty orphans had been rescued from the dining-hall, though fifteen others together with two Japanese Sisters and a young postulant and the Sister-in-charge (Sister St. Etienne) had been killed. Soon the Brothers too rejoined them and all watched wordlessly as the flames engulfed the place where the chapel and convent had stood. It was three o'clock in the afternoon when the fire consumed the last of the wreckage where the three Sisters were trapped.

Sister St. Patrick who had escaped death as though by a miracle when a bed had fallen on top of her and one of the seven European children left by their parents at the convent during the school holidays and had suffered badly from the shock when she realised the remaining six had been killed, was now rapidly getting back to normal. Turning to Sister St. Enda, she said: "I think we'll have to make a move out of here soon. The fire seems to me to be coming closer on two sides. What do you think?"

Sister St. Enda rubbed her eyes, sore from the smoke and dust and looked carefully around. "You're right! We can't stay here much longer. In any case we'll have to have food and water, and we won't be able to get any here. Where do you think we ought to make for?"

They were not yet out of danger. Thousands who survived the earthquake itself were burned to death when they tried to take refuge in Yokohama's canals. When they arrived they found the water had been drawn away by the eruption and every way of escape blocked by fire. Thousands more were burned to death in Yokohama Park, only those in the centre who covered themselves with mud survived.

After a hurried consultation it was decided to make for Akobara, a small village outside Yokohama where Reverend Mother St. Louise, Sister St. Martin, Sisters Antonia and Martha were staying for a rest.

Already it was impossible to leave by the road. Since all the roads leading from the Bluff were destroyed, the Sisters and older children carrying the little ones slid and slithered down the slope of the hill. It was no time to worry about personal appearances: all the Sisters were filthy with smoke and brick-dust, their habits torn and ragged. Three

had lost their coifs and covered their heads with big conical straw hats they had found on the road, while Sisters St. Eugene and Patrick had lost their habits entirely under the wreckage of the convent.

As they tramped along in the direction of Akobara, there was little or no conversation: their throats were parched with thirst and they had fallen into a stupor of fatigue in which the only reality was putting one foot in front of the other. Throughout the heat of the late afternoon and early evening they kept walking until the Sisters felt almost like disembodied spectators watching themselves stumbling along unsteadily, now and again going among the children, many of whom were weeping with thirst and tiredness, to tell them that "soon" they would be able to rest and have something to drink.

Darkness was falling when they heard a voice ask tentatively: "Are you the Sisters from the Bluff?"

Looking up, a Sister recognised one of their Japanese lady-teachers. The Japanese lady caught her breath as she saw who the dishevelled figure was.

"I'm sorry," she said, "But I didn't recognise you all at first. Where are you all going now?"

When the Sister explained what had happened, she was horrified and immediately took charge of them.

"All of you come into my house right away!" she ordered. "There is plenty of water and we'll soon get you something to eat. You can't possibly go on to Akobara tonight."

With bustling efficiency she found sleeping quarters for all sixty of them, and within a short time she and her servants were going from room to room, serving bowls of steaming rice and vegetables. At length the children fell asleep, but most of the Sisters, though exhausted, were kept awake by the still frequent earthquake tremors.

As Sister St. Patrick lay silently awake, her eyes fixed on the glow in the sky above Yokohama, which filled the room with flickering blood-red light, she wondered, not for the first time that day, how Mother St. Louise would feel when she heard what had happened on the Bluff.

At that very moment Mother St. Louise was making her way through the wrecked outskirts of Yokohama on her way to the convent, together with Sister Antonia and a Japanese manservant. Although the earthquake had been violent in Akobara, none of the Sisters had been hurt. No one yet guessed the extent of the disaster, but Mother St. Louise's fears for the safety of her community mounted as the hours went by without a word of news from Yokohama. At last she could bear the suspense no longer and set out on foot to find out for herself, although the Sisters begged her not to take the risk.

Hour after hour the three picked their way patiently through a jungle of debris past the scorched bodies of those who had failed to escape, sometimes having to retrace their footsteps for hundreds of yards as they came to bridge after bridge collapsed into the canals, sometimes making wide detours to avoid fires which were still raging and would continue to burn for days. Even while Mother St. Louise pushed on implacably, impervious to fatigue, her heart was growing cold with apprehension as she realised the extent of the destruction. Could any of the community have escaped?

Sister Antonia and the Japanese servant glanced at her furtively from time to time, as the same thought struck them, but none of them put their fear into words. At length they stood on the Bluff itself, and for a moment stared unbelievably at the expanse of rubble lit up red by the flames in the sky. Nothing was left standing, not a single house in the whole residential area, everything was completely gutted, and in place of the fine houses and schools was nothing but smoking ashes and glowing embers. And beneath those ashes, how many bodies, how many Sisters and children?

Momentarily broken Mother St. Louise sank down on to a rock, covered her eyes with her hands to blot out the sight and wept. She never fully recovered from this night. Those who knew Mother St. Louise in the ten years of life which remained to her, still remember her unflinching patience and gentleness, and also the sorrow which never left her eyes.

With an effort she finally regained control of herself. There was always the chance that they might find someone who knew exactly what happened. The three searched until at last they found someone who had met the Sisters in the public park. Yes, some of the Sisters had escaped, Mother St. Louise was told, but many had been buried under the ruins of the convent!

When it was clear that no one knew anything precise, they returned to the site of the convent and spent the night in the open air. Though the other two slept fitfully, Mother St. Louise remained awake, weighed down by her feeling of responsibility and tormented by her imaginings, throughout the long night hours until dawn.

With the first light, two ragged figures could be seen, climbing up the slope towards them. Sister St. Theophane, who had escaped injury because she had left the chapel to ring the Angelus a split second before it caved in, had walked from the Japanese teacher's house together with another Sister on *the off* chance that someone might have gone from Akobara to the Bluff in search of news.

Mother St. Louise was now in complete command of herself and heard the story of the death of the ten Sisters without flinching, for during the past few hours, she had envisaged even worse than that.

Quickly she decided to bring the whole community back to Yokohama, as she had learned that they could be taken on board ship, as life ashore was fast becoming impossible.

When all were reunited by mid-day, they had to wait for several hours before embarkation as even the sea was aflame with burning oil, and they could not board the "Andre Lebon" until four o'clock in the afternoon.

Later that night, as Mother St. Louise stood at the rail, looking over the water towards the continuous ribbon of fire which was the shoreline of Tokyo Bay, she clenched her hands together as she thought of all the work to be done. Even while she prayed silently and mourned her dead, the words of a quaint Japanese proverb came to her, reminding her of Mother St. Mathilde's indomitable spirit in the face of discouragement—"Fall down seven times, get up eight!"

THE VICTIMS

Sister St. Mary Dolores (Annie Keegan) born Rathaspick, Ireland, aged 69 yrs.

Sister St. Dunstan (Lizzie Keegan) b. Rathaspick, Ireland, aged 55 yrs.

Sister St. Helen (Julie Van der Heyde) b. Ostend, Belgium, aged 49 yrs.

Sister St. Sebastian (Eugenie Menoevri) b. Loire-Inferieure, France, aged 55 yrs.

Sister St. Pierre (Firmine Sifferlin) b. Haute-Alsace, France, aged 44 yrs.

Sister St. Wilfrid (Bridget Sweeney) b. Co. Clare; Ireland, aged 50 yrs.

Sister St. Etienne (Seraphine Seguin) b. Lozere, France, aged 48 yrs.

Sister St. Michael (Alice Duffy) b. Roscommon, Ireland, aged 32 yrs.

Sister Gertrude (Marianne Matsuda) b. Tokyo, aged 60 yrs.

Sister Eugenie (Francisca Shikado) b. Japan, (Novice).

Angela, a postulant,

Fifteen orphans,

Six boarding-school pupils.

R. I. P.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO Naval Engagement

Pale wintry sunshine spilled through the window on to Mother St. Mathilde's table, but did not lighten the cloud of sadness which had been gathering around her for many months.

Slowly she tapped her lips with her pen as she thought over again for the hundredth time the implications of what was happening in Japan in this year, 1892. Perhaps, she thought, at my age one is too inclined to look at the dark side and discouragement is the temptation.

When Mother St. Mathilde and the Sisters first arrived in Japan the government was in the hands of a group of "bright young men" of samurai origin. Their purpose was simple: to make of Japan a great modern power in the pattern of the Western powers. In carrying out their purpose they had shown amazing adaptability, intelligence and energy, learning all that they could from the Western nations, with the result that within their own lifetime they succeeded in building up a great modern nation.

But they were not satisfied. They also wanted to capture the minds of the people and they did what all totalitarian states have copied ever since—they provided, as far as they could, universal education, not with the intention so much of developing young minds, but in order to make of them willing and obedient cogs in the national machine.

They were taught to glory in Japan's military traditions and brought up to believe that death on the battlefield for the sake of the Emperor was the most wonderful thing that could happen to any man.

It was ironical, Mother St. Mathilde reflected, that the poor Japanese peasants, patient and docile after the grinding poverty of the previous hundred years, never permitted to wear the two swords of the warrior, should now be so easily persuaded that they were a warrior race. Knowing as well the latent anti-foreign feelings, politely hidden normally, but far from dead, she had a premonition of future disaster. But she was almost alone in seeing the dangers. Now she no longer spoke of her fears to anyone—nationalist pride made it impossible—but they weighed upon her through the rest of her life.

Now, too, the girls of the working classes were being directed into factories, so that the number of those asking for education in the convent was diminishing every year. Not, she thought, that the poor girls benefited so much from the factories, which were little better than sweat-shops.

She mentally shook herself. I ought to look more on the bright side, she thought. After all, even if we can do less for the poor than we did before, at least we are being given a chance now of getting into touch with the upper classes. Since Japan had defeated China so decisively a year earlier through the use of Western military techniques, it had suddenly become more fashionable than before for the young girls of the aristocracy, hitherto shielded from all non-Japanese influences, to apply for lessons in Western art, music, languages and literature.

A knock at the door broke into her reverie. "Come in," she called out absently, and Mother St. Domitilla Pallol; Superior of the Tokyo Convent entered.

Whereas in Yokohama the Japanese girls of the upper classes had mixed easily and freely from the first with the European girls and attended the same classes as the orphans for their Japanese studies, the girls in Tokyo still kept themselves carefully cloistered from unnecessary outside influence. Thus, it was necessary to provide separate buildings and facilities for them. Faced with the difficulty of finding a suitable piece of land for building in Tokyo, Mother St. Mathilde had appointed Mother St. Domitilla, at the time a Sister of the Yokohama community, to take over the responsibility. From time to time she came over to Yokohama to report progress and discuss any fresh difficulties which might arise.

After she had settled herself opposite Mother St. Mathilde, they both went carefully through the half-yearly accounts of the Tokyo Convent, and finally Mother St. Mathilde sat back in her chair with relief.

"Well," she said feelingly, "I'm glad to see that you are managing to clear the debt on the new building for your young aristocrats."

Mother St. Domitilla smiled to herself. She knew that initially Mother St. Mathilde had been reluctant about undertaking schools for the wealthier Japanese girls, but pressure had been brought to bear on her by Monsignor Osouf and others, and then finally the fact that the opportunities of working for the poor had diminished had decided her. But still she chafed very much under the restriction of not being allowed to teach the richer girls the catechism.

"You must admit it is well worth the trouble," Mother St. Domitilla answered. "These girls have fine characters and even if we cannot teach them catechism, I know quite definitely we are an influence for

good in their lives and all this may have a great effect in years to come."

Mother St. Mathilde did not reply immediately. She admired the quality of these young Japanese girls, but she was less optimistic than Mother St. Domitilla about their possible influence in their home circle. Japan was unquestionably a man's country: a woman's opinion counted for less than nothing, usually, and she knew that this was true of the upper classes. Still, she kept her misgivings to herself. There was no point in dampening enthusiasm, and now that they had undertaken this work, it ought to be carried through energetically.

"Do you remember that young girl who wanted to spend her holidays with the mayor?" Mother St. Domitilla continued after a pause.

Mother St. Mathilde's face broke into a smile: that was one girl she could hardly forget! Not very long ago a Japanese girl of the aristocracy studying in the Tokyo convent had shown great interest in the Church and asked for instruction. Before her course of instruction was over, she called on Mother St. Domitilla one day and with eyes modestly cast down, asked for permission to go and spend her holidays with the mayor of a nearby town. For once in her life Mother St. Domitilla was at a loss for words. It all sounded a very scandalous proposition to her, but on the other hand the girl had asked so innocently for permission that perhaps there was more to it than met the eye. She mumbled some excuses to the girl about being very busy just now and seeing her again later on, and then immediately went to consult one of the Paris Foreign Mission Fathers in the hope that he might know something of what was going on. As soon as she had explained the affair to the priest and told him the girl's name, he looked

back at her for a long moment, then began to shake silently in an effort to control his laughter, the end of his beard twitching spasmodically, while Mother St. Domitilla regarded him with surprise and irritation. Eventually he gasped: "Oh yes, I think you can give her permission all right. You see, she happens to be the mayor's wife! He told her to come to you for further education, so that he will have a wife who will be a credit to him when he gets promoted!"

Mother St. Domitilla stared at him incredulously. "But no one ever told me! She never said she was married! She just came and asked to be enrolled and took her place among the others like an ordinary pupil!"

"Of course," the Father replied, wiping his eyes, "You've just had a lesson in how docile and obedient Japanese women are. It would never have occurred to her that she merited any special treatment because of her station in life, and it came natural to her to ask permission to go home for the holidays."

After the holidays were over, "Mrs. Mayor" had returned to school with permission to be baptised, that much Mother St. Mathilde already knew.

"What happened now?" she asked curiously.

"A couple of weeks ago her husband fell seriously ill," Mother St. Domitilla told her. "I got the whole story from her when she returned yesterday. She must have had a good deal of influence over her husband after all, because he asked her to give him instructions in the Faith, and in fact it was agreed that when the nearest priest could visit them he would be baptised."

"As it happened, though, he became more seriously ill all of a sudden, but although her husband was asking for baptism, she kept putting it off in the hope that the priest might still come. At the end, though, she realised she could not wait any longer, so she baptised him herself."

"As soon as she told me the story," Mother St. Domitilla went on, "I sympathised with her and remarked how worried she must have been and how she must have wondered whether she could give her husband baptism when the priest didn't come. All very innocently she answered me: Oh, I'd already told my husband a lot about how necessary it was to repent of one's sins before baptism, and when the time came for baptism and he was unconscious, I just made the act of contrition for him with all my heart ... "

Mother St. Mathilde chuckled. "A novel idea that. Just as well she had him make an act of contrition himself beforehand."

It was near the time for Mother St. Domitilla to return to Tokyo, and Mother St. Mathilde went with her down the stairs. Just as they arrived at the outside door, they heard the steady tramp of the feet of marching men approaching the convent.

Mother St. Domitilla turned to Mother St. Mathilde with a knowing smile. "So your young men still come to see you!"

Since the French warships "Turenne" and "Clochetterie" had arrived in harbour Mother St. Mathilde had taken under her wing a number of young sailors, most of them good Catholic Bretons. They had been patients at the General Hospital close by and had come to look forward

to Mother St. Mathilde's visits, and the catechism lessons she gave them.

Occasionally, as today, they marched in a body to the convent where one of the chaplains heard their confessions in the chapel, and afterwards it was pleasant to relax over a cup of coffee and chat with Mother St. Mathilde of their homes and families, especially as many of them were still young enough to feel twinges of homesickness.

The noise of boots crunching gravel grew louder and a trident voice bellowed: "Left, Right; Left, Right; Left..Left.. Left." Soon they arrived outside the chapel and the voice almost rattled the stained glass with a roar: "Squad, HALT!!"

"I think I'll leave you to your sailors," Mother St. Domitilla whispered, and slipped away towards the gate.

As soon as the owner of the loud voice, a red-faced petty officer, saw Mother St. Mathilde approach, he turned, slammed a salute and reported: "All present and correct, Reverend Mother!"

"Good," Mother St. Mathilde smiled. "Now tell the boys to break off or something, whatever it is you usually say."

The petty officer grinned broadly and gave the necessary order. Breaking ranks the sailors greeted Mother St. Mathilde and then clattered noisily into the chapel to hear a talk from their chaplain in preparation for confession.

Mother St. Mathilde followed them in and settled herself cosily to listen to the talk. At first, she nodded wisely to herself as the chaplain

began ticking off a list of perils and temptations lying in wait for young sailors in foreign ports, but when he began to detail all that could happen to them in a certain notorious district of Yokohama, she fidgeted uneasily. She would dearly have loved to tell the chaplain that these were HER young men, and she knew without a shadow of doubt that not one of them would have had the courage to look her in the eye if he had been up to that kind of thing. Mother St. Mathilde knew perfectly well that the sailors had a superstition that even at seventy-eight years of age she could spot a guilty conscience a hundred yards away.

As the talk drew to a close, Mother St. Mathilde slowly knelt down. While the sailors made their way one after the other to the confessional, she prayed quietly for them and for their families.

From the end of a bench, some distance in front of her, Mother St. Mathilde heard a stealthy movement and saw the petty officer rising slowly and reverently to his feet. She sighed with satisfaction. She had been wondering whether or not to exert pressure on him, for her eagle eye had noticed that although he came to Mass every Sunday, he never received Holy Communion. Watching him absently as he walked quietly along the side of the chapel she suddenly jerked to attention as he disappeared through a side-door.

"Ah, mais ca, c'est trop fort!" she whispered, rising to her feet and following him out.

He had barely had time to light his pipe when Mother St. Mathilde went into the attack. "Do you realise that the chaplain is waiting for you to go to confession?" she asked sharply.

He spun around, looking so horrified that Mother St. Mathilde was hard put to remain serious.

"But..but..but you're TERRIBLE!" he finally got it out. "I never told you I wanted to go to confession!"

"What? What?" she barked, her icy-blue eyes pinning him down. "Would you be too much of a coward to follow these boys? You owe it to them to give them a good example, and if you hold back now, it will serve you right if I ... if I tear off your epaulettes!"

As she moved towards him menacingly, he skipped hastily out of reach. "You deserve more than that, you deserve the cane, you deserve...."

"For goodness' SAKE!" the petty officer hissed desperately. "Stop it! Not so loud! What if one of the men heard you? It would be all over the Fleet. Please stop and I'll go to confession right away. Honestly!"

"And don't forget do make a good preparation!" Mother St. Mathilde added implacably.

Coffee-cups were clattering and there was a loud buzz of conversation in the parlour where Mother St. Mathilde was entertaining her young men, when she looked up to see the petty officer standing by the door furtively signalling her.

Excusing herself, she threaded her way through the crowded room until she came to him.

"I hope you've not called me over just to tell me how angry you are with me?" she asked, one eyebrow lifted quizzically.

The petty officer grinned sheepishly down at his large polished boots. "I don't think that being angry with you would ever get me anywhere. Mother, you're really a holy terror, sometimes, aren't you? No," he continued. "To tell you the truth, I wanted to say that I'm very glad now that you made me go to Confession, and my family will be happy too, when I write to tell them the news. The fact is, I've been wanting to go for a long time, but I've been away from the Sacraments for so long, through laziness, that every time I came near a confessional I just froze up with fright until this evening when you came along and ..."

"And gave you the good push you were waiting for," Mother St. Mathilde finished for him, her eyes twinkling.

He looked down at her with growing suspicion, seeing her eyes full of amusement.

"Why," he began slowly, "You know all the time. You KNEW that I really wanted to go to confession. But how could you? I never told anyone."

Mother St. Mathilde almost laughed outright at his bewilderment. "Really now," she said. "You don't imagine that a nice young man like you can keep any secrets from a crafty old nun like me, do you?"

Taking him by the arm and drawing him into the room she gave him one last admonition. "You know, going to confession is like having a bath. Lots of youngsters don't like having a bath. Today I pushed you into the water and you feel a lot better now that you are clean, but now

you must go regularly yourself to be washed clean from your sins. Promise!"

"Promise!" he echoed firmly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE Fifty Missionary years

Mother St. Mathilde sniffed appreciatively the fresh smell of newly-ironed linen at the door to the sewing-room. The Sister in charge clapped her hands together sharply as she saw her and there was a bustle as some forty girls rose and greeted her.

Mother St. Mathilde's eye, experienced in the ways of young people, had noticed something furtive in the way some of the girls were trying to cover up the work they were engaged in. approaching the nearest of them as though she had noticed nothing, she asked casually: "What is the piece of work you just pushed behind you?"

The girl twisted her hands in embarrassment before Mother St. Mathilde's gentle but relentless gaze, and finally capitulated.

"Mother!" she said earnestly, "It's a big secret, and I'm not allowed to tell you."

"Well," Mother St. Mathilde laughed, patting the shiny black head before moving away, "If it is a really BIG secret I won't ask any more questions."

As the end of a white cloth "angel's wing" was poking out behind the girl, she understood that the preparations for the concert for the coming celebrations were in full swing.

Soon she would be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of her arrival in the missions. As far as she was concerned, she would have preferred the day to go past unremarked by any fuss and bother. Still the days were long gone when celebrations and speeches in her honour had the power

to irritate her, and on the other hand the children, and in fact some of the Sisters looked forward to them, so she said nothing while all the "secret preparations were taking place all around her.

It was beginning to look, though, as if this particular celebration was going to be on an unprecedented scale, for many of the people in Yokohama held her in respect bordering on awe because of her advanced age and the fact that she had spent so many years working for souls.

Looking down from the balcony at the children playing below, she thought to herself, nowadays I always seem to be surrounded by children, there are so many youngsters under sixty about, and no one left of my generation here.

Turning around at the sound of footsteps, she was concerned to see Sister St. Martha coming towards her, weeping.

"What has happened?" she asked.

Sister St. Martha drew a breath and told her: "Little Takai died this morning."

Without a word Mother St. Mathilde drew her into her office. It was a shock for her, as much as for the Sister, because Takai was a young man, in the height of his vigour.

"Now," she said, when both of them were seated, "Tell me exactly what happened."

"Yesterday afternoon I met Takai in the corridor, and he really looked dreadful," Sister St. Martha began. "I asked him what was wrong, and

he told me: I know that you are fasting today for Jesus. I can't, but I offer him all my sufferings, and it is a lot to offer, because I feel very ill."

"Of course, I made him go home to bed at once," she continued, "But this morning he had some sort of attack and sent for one of us to go and baptise him, but I was too late, he had already died."

Sister St. Martha blew her nose forlornly.

"What I didn't know," she went on, "And only just heard from the other workmen was that for a long time he hadn't been taking his rest in the middle of the day but had been studying the catechism by himself."

"What a pity I didn't know!" Mother St. Mathilde exclaimed.

The labourers worked long hours, eating very little, just a bowl of rice with a few pieces of vegetable, so that their mid-day rest was a necessity, not a luxury.

Sister St. Martha continued, "One of his friends told me that one day when Takai had a little time to spare he went down to the mission house to arrange for a date when he could be baptised, but neither the priest nor the catechist were there, and since then he couldn't find any free time, so he never did manage to be baptised after all."

Mother St. Mathilde looked thoughtfully at the Sister before speaking. "You are not really worried because he didn't manage to be baptised in the Church, are you?" she asked. "We would all have liked that, naturally, but still, you should not worry. I'm sure Takai is happy and

safe now. He was a very good, simple little fellow, and of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. Many a Catholic brought up in the faith could be envious of our little Takai's goodness and faith!"

Sister St. Martha gave Mother St. Mathilde a watery smile as she rose, and said before leaving, "It's really that I felt responsible in some way for him; if I had only known, I could have made it so easy for him to be baptised."

"I know," Mother St. Mathilde replied sympathetically, "But if I were you, I wouldn't use those words 'if only' very often. They usually introduce singularly useless thoughts."

Two months later, on 1st July 1902 was the children's day for celebrating Mother St. Mathilde's fiftieth anniversary as a missionary. The school hall was already crowded with an audience made up of friends, Sisters, priests, and notables of the town when Mother St. Mathilde arrived. Nodding, smiling and exchanging a few words with one and another as she walked down the central aisle to her place of honour, she managed to whisper to one of the Sisters to ask Father Rey to stay behind for a few minutes after the concert was over, as she had good news for him.

Sitting down in the front row, she again fingered the flimsy slip of paper which had just arrived from Paris as a special gift for her anniversary—permission to begin a new foundation in Shizuoka about two hundred miles away from Yokohama.

Mother St. Mathilde joined in the laughter and applause as the stage curtain swung aside jerkily, revealing small Japanese "angels" in

serried ranks, clad in little white night-shirts, with tinsel wings and haloes. The angels looked back at them reproachfully until a sufficiently respectful silence was restored, and then in chorus, at a signal from Sister hidden in the wings, they all piped up: "A Dream ... and How It Came True!"

After a few minutes Mother St. Mathilde realised with amusement that they were portraying her life on the stage. Someone had done a good deal of detective work, but, she thought wryly, it is just as well they did not penetrate too deeply. They could hardly have shown those many days and nights of emptiness when she first arrived in Penang and all seemed against her and only faith in God remained. And all those other times through the years when only prayer had saved her from giving in passively to black discouragement. I wonder, she thought idly, if everybody really believes that my life has been progress from triumph to triumph?

Now they had come to the point where she and her companions were sailing for Malaya, and four little figures dressed in the black habit were re-enacting their departure at the centre of the stage. Her mind, resting against the background of children's voices was carried back over the years, so that once again she seemed to feel the heat of the deck underfoot and the cool offshore breeze fanning her cheek. It seemed such a ridiculously short time ago since they had set out on a great adventure with all the high hopes of youth to win souls for Christ.

Ever more frequently nowadays her thoughts returned to her first companions, for soon surely she would be rejoining them? Sister St. Damian, vivacious, witty and outspoken, and the soul of loyalty. Sister St. Appollinaire, calm and quiet. gentle towards everyone, perhaps

sometimes too gentle and forbearing. Both now long dead - Sister St. Damian dying of smallpox forty years ago in Penang at the age of forty; Sister St. Appollinaire succumbing to cholera at the age of fifty-five.

And then there was the youngest of the group: Sister St. Gregory Connolly. Mother St. Mathilde had always been particularly close to her, closer perhaps than anyone else. When they first met, Sister St. Gregory was a young novice, very unsure of herself and just a little frightened at this venture into unknown parts half a world away, in the company of older French nuns whose language she didn't understand very well. Yet, within a very short time she felt herself perfectly at home with them, especially with Mother St. Mathilde to whom she gave complete trust. From then on she was always with Mother St. Mathilde, in every foundation from Penang to Yokohama.

In some way, Mother St. Mathilde mused, half-smiling, the young novice never did change very much. Sister St. Gregory was always a little shy, always remained in the background by preference, though her timidity quickly evaporated when it was a question of asking for help to clothe and feed the poor and the orphans. Even she went to her rest seven years ago, Mother St. Mathilde thought with a touch of loneliness, and here I am, the only survivor.

A prolonged burst of applause aroused her. The concert was over and it was time to come back to the present and become once again the strong, smiling institution they were familiar with.

Catching sight of Sister St. Lutgarde, Mother St. Mathilde signalled to her and they both went in search of Father Rey. As she had suspected, he had slipped out early from the concert, and was walking up and

down the path outside, keeping a close eye on the hall. When he saw the two nuns coming towards him, his face lit up eagerly. "Reverend Mother, is the good news what I think it is?" he asked.

"Yes," she smiled, "You have your reward at last for your perseverance in attacking me for a school in Shizuoka. I received permission from Paris to go ahead with the foundation only yesterday, and if we start work right away, perhaps we could be ready to open the school about next January or February."

"A happy anniversary to you, Mother, and a happy anniversary to me, as well," he grinned exultantly. "There were times when I thought I'd never manage to get a school operating and even now I can hardly believe it. Just think what might have happened if I'd taken your first refusal as final? As it was, I took a leaf out of your own book and decided to try, try, try again, and it worked!"

Mother St. Mathilde laughed. "If you didn't have your school some years ago, then you must blame a confrere of yours, not us!"

Father Rey was taken aback.

"Yes," Mother St. Mathilde continued with some enjoyment, "If Monsignor Fee of Singapore had not been as persistent as you and had not kept pressing our Mother General to build schools in Malaya—in Seremban, Kuala Lumpur, Taiping and Ipoh—I might have had enough Sisters to start a few more schools here. Those towns must have mushroomed in the past few years—they were only tiny villages when I was in Singapore."

"In case I forget," she added, "I ought to tell you that Sister St. Lutgarde here is to be in charge of the new foundation in Shizuoka."

That satisfied Father Rey, as Sister St. Lutgarde was already well-known for her kindness in helping missionary priests. He could return to Shizuoka happy with the way things had turned out.

Alone in her room later that night Mother St. Mathilde sat for a while as usual in total darkness, for what could be saved on candles could always be given to the poor. Tiredness soaked through her. It had been such a crowded day, so many people to meet, and then there were two more days of celebrations to face. After that there would be all the work of setting the new venture in Shizuoka on its feet. Surely this would be the last foundation? It was time to pass the reins over to someone younger; at eighty-eight years of age she was beginning to feel the strain of responsibility. Perhaps soon she would be allowed to retire?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR As it was in the Beginning

Pausing to rest every few steps, Mother St. Mathilde slowly mounted the stairs to her room to continue her thanksgiving after Mass.

For over fifty years as Superior of the Mission her days had been filled with activity: the complicated details of business and government, the need for exercising shrewd judgment in making decisions which could affect the welfare of so many, the satisfaction of seeing her enterprises succeed more than she could have hoped for.

Certainly, eighty years earlier no one in the village of Suriauville could have foretold that such a timid child as Justine Raclot would become one of the best known missionaries in Asia, foundress of the first convent schools in Malaya and Japan.

All that was behind her now: the wheel had turned full circle, and the young farm-girl who had begun her life spending hours alone dreaming of becoming a "Desert Father" practising prayer and penance, was now ending her days alone in union with God. She asked nothing more.

Sometimes during these last years a Sister would ask her: "Mother, what do you think about during all those long hours you spend alone in your room?"

The question always took her by surprise. "What do I think about?" she would ask in astonishment, "Why about God, of course. What else do you expect me to think about?"

She could pray now to her heart's content, but when it came to her practice of penance she met unexpected opposition, for the Sisters did their best to make her comfortable—but the old veteran had no intention of living soft after all these years, just because she was ninety-six years old.

Several minor battles were fought, in which Mother St. Mathilde was not always the victor. One such battle centred around a cushion. To protect Mother St. Mathilde from the early morning cold of the chapel—for she was there every day without fail from 5.30 a.m. to 7.30 a.m.—the Sisters installed a plump cushion on her kneeler. Without a word being exchanged on the subject the cushion kept disappearing as Mother St. Mathilde removed it—and reappearing soon as the new hiding place was located.

It ended when Mother St. Lutgarde, the new Superior, put a large square of green and white carpet under Mother St. Mathilde's prie-dieu and told her she must keep the cushion as she was wearing out the varnish on the kneeler.

Mother St. Mathilde accepted her defeat gracefully, only remarking: "You certainly chose a beautiful rose of May to put on top of all that fresh greenery! I'm ashamed of the contrast!"

After Mass her day was divided between prayer, reading and knitting. With her magnifying glass she would read a line or two from one of her three favourite books, the Gospels, the Imitation of Christ, or the writings of St. Teresa of Avila: that was usually enough to begin her prayer. Sometimes lately, much to her annoyance, she was apt to doze off in the middle of her prayer.

Reproaching herself for her laziness she would pick up her knitting to try and wake herself up properly. Because her hands were so swollen, she sometimes dropped a stitch and could not repair the mistake herself, but waited patiently until one of the Sisters looked in on her as they often did, for a few minutes' chat, and to see if she needed anything.

One day Sister St. Anthony plucked up courage to visit her. She had only been with the community for two weeks and had not yet found her feet: everything was strange and confusing. As she sat beside Mother St. Mathilde, and talked to her of relatively unimportant things, she covertly studied the old nun.

She seemed so small, almost shrunken, in her armchair, and it was hard at first to imagine how she had accomplished so much that she had become a living legend in the Institute. Yet, as she looked more closely, she could still see unusual strength in the lines of her face, but when suddenly Mother St. Mathilde looked up at her directly, the young Sister was only aware of the naked intelligence of her eyes, wise and understanding.

On an impulse Sister St. Anthony laid aside trivialities. "Mother," she said, in a rush, "I need somebody's advice, but I don't know if you can understand how I feel. When I was in France and volunteered to come abroad, I never really thought of the difficulties of being a missionary. Everything is so different from what I've known. All the Sisters have been out here years and years and are quite at home, and it is so hard for me to tell any of them how I feel. I feel, well, lost ... and ... "

Mother St. Mathilde took both her hands in her and patted her reassuringly. " ... and just a little bit homesick?" she finished the sentence with a little smile.

Sister St. Anthony nodded.

"And perhaps you are wondering if you have made a big mistake, and that you'll never become a good missionary." she went on.

Again the young Sister nodded intently.

"I imagine most of the Sisters here have felt the same way, you know, when they first came out," Mother St. Mathilde continued. "Oh yes!" she smiled at Sister St. Anthony's disbelief. "You're not unique. You're not the only one who has come to me thinking that homesickness is the same as having no missionary vocation! When you are in France you see the great need for missionaries and because you are young and generous the hard side of mission life doesn't seem very real, does it? Ah, but when you have been here for a few weeks and you've just had time to find out how very different things are from home, it suddenly hits you that you are here for life. ... and it hits very hard, doesn't it?"

"We all go through the same thing, though it's hard to believe, but it will pass. In fact, after a few years you would be homesick for Japan if you returned to France."

"I want to be a missionary as much as ever," Sister St. Anthony broke in, "But I thought this homesickness might be a sign that I didn't have a missionary vocation."

"It all depends on you, dear," Mother St. Mathilde smiled at her.

"If you decide to remain a Frenchwoman in Japan you will be a failure as a missionary. St. Paul became all things to all men to win all men to Christ—and you have to become Japanese to win the Japanese to Christ. There are Europeans who have lived here for years and who will always remain complete foreigners, Always living in exile, because they are forever comparing Japan with France, England, Ireland and America. It's an unhappy life they lead, because they are perpetually on the look out for things they don't like."

"Your first lesson is: don't make comparisons! Accept the country and the people without question. Try to find out the reasons behind the customs, looking for the good in them. Of f course, not everything is good and noble in Japan, but you must begin with love. Later on when you genuinely love the people, you can criticise and your criticism will be of value, but not before."

Sister St. Anthony drew a deep breath. "I hadn't thought about it that way," she confessed. "But I see things more clearly now."

With dawning wonder in her eyes, she added hesitantly, "But, Mother how could you tell so exactly what was going on within me?"

Mother St. Mathilde's wise old eyes crinkled in amusement. "My child, when you know what is inside one egg, you know what's inside them all!"

When she had gone, Mother St. Mathilde looked down at her hands. She had been thinking of Sister St. Martha while she was advising the young Sister. There was one who had been all things to the Japanese!

Cheerful and forthright, she never worried whether her grammar was accurate or not. As soon as she picked up a few words of Japanese she launched out into conversation, using gestures to reinforce her small vocabulary, never worrying about her mistakes, so that in a very short time she spoke Japanese more fluently than any of the other Sisters, even though many of her expressions obviously came from the marketplace. Not that the Japanese minded.

She amused them, and they loved her, for whenever an epidemic struck, Sister St. Martha was there, with never a thought for danger. With her, fear was a delayed reaction.

Vividly Mother St. Mathilde remembered her standing erect and fearless among her orphans during an earthquake, reassuring them that there was no danger at all when the danger was at its height. Then, when all was over, she would totter into Mother St. Mathilde's office, face white and hands trembling.

Mother St. Mathilde sighed. She, too, was gone now. Sister St. Martha always hoped to die without giving any trouble. "Without anyone noticing," she used to say. In the event, she died because of her willingness to be of service.

When she heard, in January 1905, that her old friend, Mother St. Domitilla, lay dying in Tokyo and that none of the Sisters there relished the thought of warning their Superior of her danger, Sister St. Martha

volunteered to break the news for them, even though she herself was more seriously ill than anyone realised. After a long visit with her old friend, during which she persuaded her to receive the last Sacraments,

Sister St. Martha returned to Yokohama. Her exertions had at last overstrained her heart and she collapsed and died in the railway station.

It must be part of the hundredfold reward, Mother St. Mathilde reflected quietly, to have known such as these.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE Home at Last

A tiny figure in black sat patiently in a wheel-chair in the middle of the vast wooden gallery. No longer could Mother St. Mathilde go up and down stairs as she pleased: she was confined to her own floor.

Today they were anticipating her hundredth birthday. Always 7th July had been a festive day in the Yokohama convent, as it was the commemoration of the Japanese Martyrs and also Mother St. Mathilde's feast-day, but 7th July, 1910 was going to be particularly elaborate, for everyone, including Mother St. Mathilde, knew that it would be her last feast-day on earth.

The clatter of children's shoes began to echo hollowly in the gallery. All the schools wanted to see Mother St. Mathilde for the last time.

First came the European school. After they had sung a song composed for her feast-day, a little five year old danced with solemn concentration for Mother St. Mathilde's entertainment, singing what was then a "pop hit"—"It's a Wedding Day!" The older girls felt subdued. An era was passing.

Next came a sibilant shuffling as the girls of the Japanese school entered, eyes cast down modestly. Hands placed flat on their knees they bowed gracefully, then, still in silence, one of them came forward close to the old nun, and recited a "haiku", a short poem of three lines, wedding Mother St. Mathilde's -spiritual youth to her holiness—and yet their faces remained expressionless, according to Japanese etiquette, even though they were deeply attached to the old lady they were seeing for the last time.

A little later the shuffling on the stairs was more disorganised - the school for the poor made its appearance, "The School of the Violets" as it was called in Japanese. Mother St. Mathilde's eyes lit up and her mouth curved humorously as she heard the teachers laying down the law, telling the children not to tire out the old Reverend Mother, who would be tired out enough, goodness knows, in the next few days.

If she had favourites, these were her favourites. It was a common saying among the Sisters that as far as the poor were concerned an action would have to be very evil for her not to be able to find some excuse for it.

As soon as they were lined up, she was in among them, making them at home, and showing she still had an encyclopaedic knowledge of all they had been up to in school. Not satisfied with being wheeled around once, she made a second tour to make sure she had missed no one out.

The next day belonged to her own children, those she had received as orphans, brought up and married to suitable young men. Many of them, some of whom she had received nearly forty years ago, had come from distant parts of Japan with their own children, so that on 8th July about three hundred were assembled in the gallery.

According to Japanese custom, each had brought her gifts, poor in worldly value, but rich in love. As Mother St. Mathilde moved among those for whom she had done so much and loved so much, Japanese etiquette cracked for once and although it is considered ill-bred to show distress, they could not hold back their tears for they knew they were seeing her for the last time. The gallery echoed to their weeping, the

babies whimpering in sympathy, while Mother St. Mathilde moved among them, teasing, encouraging and laughing to dispel their sadness.

It was Mother St. Mathilde's last appearance in public.

It was already pitch dark at the end of December when Mother St. Lutgarde returned to her office after having spent some hours sitting up with Mother St. Mathilde. As she approached her door, she thought she could make out dimly a figure in the light from a window.

"Who's there?" she called out sharply.

"Sister St. Anthony," the reply came in a low voice. "I wanted to ask after Mother St. Mathilde, but everyone is so busy and doesn't have the time to say whether I might go in and see her or not."

Mother St. Lutgarde felt a twinge of shame that they had neglected the young Sister.

"Come right in and I'll tell you what I can," she said, putting extra warmth into her voice.

Mother St. Lutgarde pressed her head between her hands before looking up at Sister St. Anthony and saying: "I suppose you, too, are one of those Mother St. Mathilde helped?"

Sister St. Anthony nodded mutely.

"We are all in the same boat," Mother St. Lutgarde smiled at her tiredly. "I'm afraid the end is close now," she went on, "I think she's entering into her final purification."

Mother St. Lutgarde smiled slightly at the young Sister's bewilderment. "It's usual," she explained, "That when very holy people are dying they become more sensitive than ever about the smallest faults they may have been guilty of, even years before. For the past few days Mother has been asking me: `Do you really think I shall be saved?' It's heart-breaking, and arguments are no use. I only say to her: `Remember the Good Thief. Our Lord himself said he was saved and you are not in a worse position than he was.' She thinks it over for a few minutes, and when she is satisfied, she looks up and smiles and nods her head."

By special permission Father Renoir was allowed to see Mother St. Mathilde. As he said himself, he'd had plenty of arguments with her and knew her so well that he couldn't let her go without seeing her one more time.

When he entered the room, she seemed hardly to be breathing, and her skin was translucent.

"Now Reverend Mother," he bumbled with uneasy joviality, "I'm sure you won't keep any ill-feelings against me. You'll drag our old friend into heaven after you, won't you, hey?"

Oh, oh! Mother St. Lutgarde thought, as she saw once again and for the last time that excessively solemn look descend upon Mother St. Mathilde's face. Here comes the knife!

Mother St. Mathilde gazed long and thoughtfully at Father Renoir's magnificently bald, shiny head, and still with her old solemn air whispered feebly but distinctly: "Well, not by your hair at any rate."

Time no longer meant anything to Justine. For all that she had given up, all she had loved and lost in the years of love and service of her Lord was already being given back to her, purified and more worthy of her love than ever.

The gently rolling hills of Lorraine, the rich smell of baking bread in the farmhouse, her father and brother, brown and strong, working in the fields. Smiling faces of her family and friends, half-forgotten lately in her old age came back now with new clarity to welcome her home.

Shadowed in the flickering candles at half past one in the morning, the Sisters heard her say clearly: "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

Justine had come home at last.

EPILOGUE

Father Rey lifted the heavy processional cross a few inches off the ground to test its weight before moving off. He was not very fond of taking part in processions but today was different. This was a way of saying "thank you" to a good friend. He could, of course, say Mass for Mother St. Mathilde and would do so, but he suspected that in the future he would be asking for her help more than praying for the repose of her soul. He smiled, knowing what her reaction would have been to such an idea, a reaction he had heard before—"Mais taisez-vous donc! - Be quiet!"

A new sound warned him that the procession was about to set off to the church. Glancing back at the coffin bearers Father Rey repressed a smile at the sight of Messieurs de Gogolin, Dentici, the Suzor brothers, de Champorin and Dr. Mecre, all in immaculate black suits and high, stiff collars. Mother St. Mathilde must be enjoying herself immensely, he thought, for he knew that most of them had profited not only from her advice but on more than one occasion from her scoldings as well. But all of them had asked as a favour to be allowed to carry her to her resting place.

Immediately behind them came the Sisters and the children, almost lost in the crowd of people in the procession. Many of the children were too young to understand what had happened, but they felt they had lost someone who loved them more than most are able to love.

Further back were the cotton kimonos of the poor, intermingled now with the well-to-do in their silk hakamas: all classes of Yokohama had come to pay tribute to one of the best known and best loved figures of the city, and the church, draped in sombre black and white, was not big enough to contain them all.

Later, at the graveside, as Father Rey, still holding his processional cross, stood looking down at the coffin—a coffin of the poor as Mother St. Mathilde had asked—he wondered how many people there had benefited from her kindness. No one will ever know, he thought. But a few yards away he noticed a young Sister, her face strained with grief.

As the prayers droned on, Sister St. Anthony prayed, her eyes intent on the coffin, "Pray for me to become a good missionary. Like you. All things to all men."

A few clods thudded down into the grave, and among the crowd a Protestant Minister called out a final farewell: "Go, good and faithful servant. You have deserved well of the Lord!"

THE END



"God will take special care of those who sacrifice themselves in the service of others" – Nicolas Barre