



ROSE of the ANDES

Rev. Paul Aronica, S. D. B.



Laura Carmen Vicuña was born in Santiago, Chile, on April 5, 1891, to Joseph and Mercedes Vicuña. The Vicuña family were Chilean aristocrats who were forced into exile by a revolution. After Joseph died suddenly, Mercedes took her two daughters to Junín de los Andes, Argentina, where she went to work for Manuel Mora and also agreed to live with him.

In 1900 Laura and her sister went to board at the Salesian Sisters' school in Junín. She was a model pupil: prayerful, obedient, available to her companions, always happy, and ready to make sacrifices. She made her First Communion in 1901 with a fervor and ideals like St. Dominic Savio, whom she had taken as a model. She enrolled in the Children of Mary at school.

During her vacations on Mora's farm, Laura noticed that her mother never went to the sacraments and made her pray in secret. While one of the sisters was explaining the sacrament of marriage during catechism class, Laura began to understand her mother's sinful state, and fainted. Laura increased her prayers and sacrifices for her mother's conversion. During a vacation in 1902, Mora made advances toward her; she firmly refused him, sending him into a rage.

Laura returned to school as a student assistant, because Mora would no longer pay her fees. With all her heart, she asked to become a Salesian sister, but she was denied because her mother was living in sin. She offered her life to the Lord for her mother's conversion, became more self-sacrificing, and with the consent of her confessor, made private vows. Her health began to suffer from her sacrifices and from sickness. She was beaten by Mora for refusing him again. On her final night, she confided: "Mama, I am dying! For a long time I have asked Jesus, offering my life for you, so you will return to God. Mama, before I die will I have the chance to see you repent?"

Mercedes answered, "I promise I will do what you ask." With this joy Laura died on the evening of January 22, 1904. Her body lies in the chapel belonging to the Salesian Sisters in Bahía Blanca, Argentina.

Laura's virtues were recognized by the Church on June 5, 1986, and she was declared Venerable. At the centennial of Don Bosco's death, this chosen daughter who had given her life for the virtue of purity, was proclaimed Blessed by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Turin and Castelnovo Don Bosco, September 3, 1988.

The photo above is the only known authentic photo of Laura, part of a group photo from the Sisters' school, taken in 1900.

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Rose of the Andes

A BIOGRAPHY OF

BLESSED LAURA VICUNA

BY

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Preface

GREATER love than this no child hath than to lay down her life for her mother.

The Rose of the Andes unfolds the appealing love story—factual not fictional—of the complete dedication of the child, Laura Vicuna to win back to God the soul of her widowed mother, Mercedes, who was involved in an affair with the carousing ranch owner, Mora.

In our generation, when American life is saddened and weakened by the failure of too many parents, the child Laura speaks with the moving eloquence of great love to the parents of broken homes. She pleads in behalf of those tragic youngsters whose lives are burdened with shame and loneliness simply because their parents are sinful and selfish.

Laura tells these parents of the unsuspected wisdom of a child. She reveals to them the tenderness and the depths of a child's heart.

During Religion Class when the Sacrament of Matrimony was under study, little Laura fainted because of the suffering and the sorrow that came with the realization that her mother was living in sin. Her mother was separated from God.

Laura loved her mother dearly. She remembered other and happier days when Mercedes was a true mother, a model of prayer and propriety.

Tragedy stalked into their lives when Mercedes abdicated her place as mother. She sent her two children away to school at Junin while she accepted employment at the ranch Quilquihue.

Mercedes must have known that this situation was fraught with danger. She made her decision and the inevitable disaster hurried to shame and shackle her life.

Sinful attachments produce a callous cruelty, unnatural in a mother. Mercedes knew of Laura's uneasiness and yet she put off her pleadings to come back to the Sacraments. Mercedes knew that the great desire of Laura's heart on her First Communion Day was to have her mother receive Holy Communion with her. Mercedes refused. Laura's disappointment was not well concealed. The sad realization of her mother's predicament was her constant martyrdom.

In the designs of God, the punishment of sin often comes from the partner in crime. Mora, in a drunken frenzy mercilessly beat Laura who died as a result of his savagery. Just before her death, Laura confided to her mother her complete dedication of her life to God in exchange for her mother's soul.

So late did Mercedes realize the love and value of her child. She consoled the closing moments of Laura's

life with the assurance: "I will come back to God."

We can gauge the enormity of sin from the sufferings exacted by Divine Justice. Souls are ransomed by Redemptive Love—the love that is fashioned by a Cross.

How fortunate for Laura that through the kind Providence of God, she was entrusted to the care of the saintly and scholarly Salesian Sisters. Their solicitous and loving attention nurtured the seeds of holiness and brought to flower the lovely Rose of the Andes.

We pray that Laura Vicuna may be the instrument in the Hand of God to strengthen and adorn Christian family life by her instruction to parents and her inspiration to children.

† JAMES A. McNULTY

February 11, 1957

I.

THE *Santa Rosa* was ingloriously stuck in the mud. There it sat in the low waters of the Rio Negro, propellers still, prow partly buried. After a tossing, rollicking trip of three days from Buenos Aires, when it rode more like a bucking bronco than a respectable passenger packet, this was quite a change. Some of the passengers strolled the deck in quiet thankfulness for an even keel; others tried to get down their first meal of the voyage. The crew was busily preparing to unload by setting up cranes, oiling winches, opening hatches, and cluttering up the deck with cargo.

Four Sisters leaned over the rail, peering anxiously towards the shore like little eager schoolgirls on a picnic. Their black veils flapped happily in the breeze, and their white starched gimps bobbed up and down, while one pair of hands could not suffice to hold down headgear and skirts in the wild gusts that blew in from the sea and followed the river into the dark interior.

"Oh, Mother, here we are!" exclaimed the youngest Sister. "What a relief to see solid land after that terrible voyage!"

"Thank God we made it!" joined in the second. "My stomach is still in my mouth. But when will we be able to go ashore?"

"Anxious?" queried the eldest, evidently, from the respect shown her, their superior. "The captain says we will sail inland to the port of Patagonia during the night with the lifting of the high tide. Tomorrow we will be home!"

"Home!" interjected the youngest Sister. "How strange that will be! Home in a foreign land, among foreign people!"

"But they will be our people soon, not strangers," reflected the fourth Sister in quiet tones. "Look, that is where they live!"

The four Sisters gazed along the low lines of the *Santa Rosa*, off its prow into the headwaters of the Rio Negro. A long, flat muddy road of water lay ahead of them, lazily glittering in the last rays of the setting sun, losing itself into a fertile, silt-filled valley. Well up the shore, above the annual flood level, were perched the houses of the inhabitants—scattered ranches, wooden frame houses that seemed to have been thrown up in a hurry, each one with its protective fence of rough hewn logs. All this—muddy river, ramshackle ranches, endless tracts of field and forest—all this would be theirs. These people—white or Indian—would be their people. But a few years before, these same four Sisters had been little girls in their native villages of Italy, sharing the joys and hardships of their families. Now they were in Patagonia, Argentina, several thousand miles across the ocean, approaching the port of Patagones, from

which they would soon proceed to their mission labors in the interior.

Mother Angela was the veteran of the group, not in age, of course, for she was but 27, but she had a year's experience at Buenos Aires. The first qualms of homesickness had left her, problems had come and gone, and yet the reality of mission life had not dulled her enthusiasm. Like the young Sisters whom she was now shepherding, she felt a pleasant tingling in her heart at the thought that she would bring Christ to those pagan tribes of the Rio Negro valley, so long abandoned by the Europeans who had come to South America for their own profit.

Groups of people walked along the shore or rode on small Pampas ponies. Many were Europeans. As they spied the black skirted nuns, they waved in happy surprise, their faces lighting with the remembrance of other Sisters whom they had known in their native lands. The Sisters waved back.

"How nice those people are to us!" exclaimed the young Sister.

"That's probably because we are the first Sisters to come to Patagones," explained Mother Angela. "But it does make us feel good to be so warmly welcomed."

Along with the whites came clusters of natives, their dark features and clothing of animal skins contrasting sharply with those of the rancheros. Araucanians they were called, one of the numerous tribes that had been

undisputed masters of the Pampas but now roamed the ranges as if in a dream, beaten and subdued by the Argentinian armies, subject to the whims and laws of their white conquerors.

"Indians!" exclaimed the Sisters, not in fear but in anticipation of their future apostolate. "And they stare at us as if we were people of another world!"

"Maybe they think we are angels," interposed Mother Angela. "They have been waiting for us a long time."

Four Sisters and a vast continent before them! What could four do among thousands, Mother Angela wondered that evening as she walked the deck and all through the night, while she felt the ship rise upon the incoming tide, free its prow from the mud, and cautiously nose its way into the interior.

"Who knows," she said, half in prayer, "we poor Sisters may be but a small part in God's plan for these people. Maybe somewhere in this endless wilderness there is a potential Saint waiting for us to bring her God's grace. Maybe, because of our labors, a Rose will burst up from these fertile lands and its beauty will live long after our work is done."

It was January 21, 1880.

On April 5, 1891, that "Rose" was born.

II.

NO SOONER had the year 1891 dawned upon the Republic of Chile, than (true to the pattern of South American dynamic politics) civil war broke out. On January 6, General George Montt, member of Parliament, appointed himself commander of the fleet, set himself at the head of the new "Congressional Party" and sailed against the government port of Valparaiso. President Jose Balmaceda hastily drew up whatever part of the army remained loyal to him and within ten days met the first rebel attack as Montt's vessels steamed into Valparaiso and opened their batteries upon the shore defenses. But a successful landing was made by the rebels, and the president soon realized it would be merely a question of time before he would be pushed out of the country. Nevertheless, he stubbornly resisted, falling cautiously back at each rebel attack. From town to town it was always the same headstrong defense, pitiful slaughter, sad burial of the dead—and withdrawal lower down the narrow borders of Chile. National feeling, so fickle in disorganized governments, rose hotly against him, friends turned into enemies, and a disgruntled army began to move more sluggishly at every command.

Meanwhile, Santiago, the capital, was divided. As battles were won or lost, the crowds switched allegiance. Defenses were thrown up about the city, military law was enforced, and political talk faded to whispers. The general feeling was, "That last election started all this bloodshed. Claudio Vicuna should not have been pushed into office."

The decisive battle of the eight-month civil war was fought at Concon in August. The government army—dissatisfied and discouraged, torn by ill feelings, weakened by desertions—fell helplessly before the forces of General Montt. The defeated president, true to the pattern of dictators, committed suicide, and General Montt became president.

Meanwhile, 10,000 lives were lost, poverty stalked the land, and little groups of Chileans began making their way over the Andes into the fertile fields of a more peaceful Argentina. Claudio Vicuna never became president. Rather, the Vicuna name—once so popular because it had been a Vicuna who published Chile's first democratic newspaper and again a Vicuna had been the nation's first Archbishop—now turned bitter in the months of the new generation.

Also a Joseph Vicuna, an army man, though we do not know how closely related he was to the Vicuna whose disputed election precipitated the way, felt the disgrace. Public resentment forced him to leave Santiago with his young wife, Mercedes, and their five-

month-old daughter, Laura. Penniless and in disgrace, the family was forced to join a little company of political refugees and make their way through the winding mountainous passes of the Andes southward, away from the moving line of battle.

So it was that Laura Vicuna opened her baby eyes to a world of war, hunger, and exile. She was born in the midst of the rebellion, on April 5, 1891. The troubled state of the city made it necessary to postpone the child's baptism till May 24. To all appearances she was a healthy baby, but no sooner did the Vicunas get started on their long journey into the Andes than a baffling illness seized Laura. Choking spasms doubled up her tiny body as she kicked and struggled for breath. Within a few weeks her clear, sparkling eyes dulled to a sad gray, she scarcely fed, and her little body wasted to a mere nothing.

The Vicunas could go no further than Temuco, a mountain fastness of central Chile. Mercedes reconciled herself to the loss of her first child. She prayed and hoped, watched and nursed the tiny signs of life that remained—and waited. But the wait was long. Laura became a year old, and still no improvement. Months passed, the baby lived but was no better. "She has a cross to carry," some friends whispered, "She will have an invalid on her hands, maybe a stupid child." But one day—Laura was then a year and a half—the child showed the first signs of improvement. Life and

strength seemed to flow right back into her thin limbs. Her eyes regained their former lustre. A healthy pink suffused the little body.

Senora Vicuna bowed her head in gratitude to God, who had heard a mother's prayer in exile.

The Vicunas had a second child, another girl, in 1893. She was baptized Julia. Things were going well for both Joseph and Mercedes in Temuco. They were not associated with politics, and their name was not known in the Andes. Work was plentiful enough, and, though life in the Andes was tougher than it had been in Santiago when the Vicuna name had been held in honor, Joseph kept his family alive and happy. The children grew strong. Mercedes settled down in peace. But illness struck the Vicuna cottage a second time, this time claiming the life of husband and father. Mercedes sat stunned with grief, staring at the stiff corpse of Joseph. She followed it with unseeing eyes as it was taken into the hills to be laid to final rest. For the first few days that followed, life was a mechanical, unfeeling process of cooking, feeding, dressing, cleaning. Then reality once more dawned upon her grief, and she began to realize the full burden laid upon her young shoulders. Should she remain at Temuco and grub a living for herself and two daughters from its stubborn soil? Return to Santiago was out of the question; her name forbade that. Friendly neighbors suggested a change. Argentina was not far off. Many Chilean fami-

lies had settled there and found their fortune in ranching. She might do the same, or at least find such a family and obtain employment with them. Surely, they would not refuse a country-woman of theirs, a widow with two baby daughters.

Mercedes bowed her head in agreement. She bundled up the family's possessions, put the children astride a little donkey, and made for the rocky trails across the Andes in the company of a small caravan of emigrants as poor as herself but more fortunate in the possession of men and boys in the family.

III.

The Andes form the rocky backbone of South America. From top to bottom of the continent they spread in a varying chain of peaks and valleys, woods and lakes, glaciers and extinct volcanoes. They twist and wind about like a giant whose broad, gaping head is washed by the warm waters of the Pacific and whose tail is lashed by the ice-crested waves of the Antarctic, while its broad belly is belted by the equator line. Snow capped peaks rise sharply from the coast line in broken patterns. Wrapping about these broad bottoms stretch winding paths, straight or level for scarcely any length, carved from the rugged mountainsides for mules rather than men.

Along these seemingly endless trails through forests and wind swept plateaus traveled Mercedes and her baby girls. Above them towered the mountains, rising as high as a mile high, some of them dripping with giant glaciers. Before them lay the rock studded path that would lead them to the rolling plains of the Pampas.

Their route extended southward, below Temuco, and then eastward, over the hump of the Andes, into the pleasant foothills that sloped into Argentina. It is

even today a pleasant route, when one is not pressed by hunger or the worry of children, as it makes its leisurely way through forests of pine and hard woods, along the pebbly shores of pretty mountain lakes whose icy waters are fed by glaciers. As one reaches the border of Chile, the rocky ridges become sloping hills, and one can look across a vast expanse of rolling fertile meadows known as the Pampas—an endless extent of tall grass and luxuriant undergrowth, the feeding grounds of Argentinian cattle and sheep and the native guanaco.

Dona Vicuna's first stop was at Norquin, a lonely settlement of Chilean refugees, a mere dot of makeshift huts in an open wilderness. A woman with two baby girls would find it very hard indeed to make a living in such a place, where everyone had to struggle to keep himself alive, with little time to look out for a widow and babies. After resting there for a few days, Mercedes once more packed her children and belongings and set out northward across the plains towards Las Lajas, a settlement of Chileans that she was told would be larger and better suited to her needs.

Las Lajas was slightly better than Norquin. Originally meant to be only an army outpost, it developed into a pioneer town after the Indian treaty of 1883 between Argentina and the Araucanian Indians led by their indomitable chief, Manuel Namuncura. As peace settled over the Pampas, whites and Indians intermarried and with their families began tilling the soil

and raising cattle. Cut off from Chile by the Andes, Las Lajas was in the middle of a great natural triangle formed by three rivers—the Rio Negro, the Nequen, and the Limay. It was therefore cut off from political centers and offered an isolated refuge for emigrants like Dona Vicuna.

The young widow was made welcome in Las Lajas. A place could easily be found in a frontier town where there were few eligible white women. There would be work for her, she was told, on the neighboring farms. It would be heavy work, of course, for what else could be expected in the wilderness, but Mercedes sought for nothing else but a chance to make an honorable livelihood for herself and daughters. Gratefully she took a ramshackle shed and began converting it into a home for herself, Laura, and Julia.

The trip had been long and painful, but the children had taken it nicely. Laura showed no signs of her former illness. Rather, the other members of the caravans used to marvel at her strength and her good-naturedness. She rarely cried and was content to ride on the swaying back of a donkey. Julia was not so quiet a child. Mercedes often had to carry her in her arms to hush her whimperings. But, thank God, she thought, now that is all over, and we can start life anew!

Mercedes was very happy to find out that even religiously Las Lajas was well taken care of. A group of missionary priests who called themselves Salesians

came regularly to the town from Neuquen, their mission center, to minister to the people's needs. A little chapel was built for them where they celebrated Mass several times a month, baptized both whites and Indians, and performed Christian marriages. They were friendly priests, anxious for the settler's religious progress, serious yet cheerful in their tiring mission task. For Mercedes, whose religious life had been confined to a few prayers mumbled as she walked the rocky trails or to a few ejaculations for divine pity as she painfully stumbled along, the quiet little chapel was a refuge for her soul. Often she and the children could be seen kneeling before the crude altar, thanking God for the benefits they now enjoyed.

Life at Las Lajas left much to be desired, of course. It was rough and crude in the extreme. The rancheros, some Indian, some white, some half-breed, were coarse in language, customs, and habits. Drunken brawls were not uncommon, some ending in murder. There were daily squabbles between families squeezed in restricted, unhealthy quarters. Certainly, it was no place for two growing girls. Mercedes feared she would have to move again.

The problem was solved by the missionary priest. "We have just opened a little school for children in Junin," he told Mercedes when she told him of her problem. "It is in a beautiful location, away from harm. It is staffed by Sisters, Salesian Sisters, and they

are as wonderful as angels. Why not send Laura and Julia to them?"

Mercedes asked Laura. "Oh, yes, mama," was the immediate response. "Right away!" Let's go to the angel's school. I'll like it there!" While a heavenly voice seemed to be calling Laura, Julia was not so content to leave her mother and the carefree life of Las Lajas, but Mercedes had made up her mind. Both girls would go to Junin as soon as possible.

IV.

THE Salesians first came from Italy to South America in 1875, in order to care for the spiritual needs of many neglected Italian immigrants. Opening a parish in the unpoliced "Boca" slum of Buenos Aires, they began the hard task of moral and spiritual rebuilding. Their kindness and patience bore fruit in a few months, and the "Boca" neighborhood took on a badly needed new look of decency and lawfulness. But the Salesians had their gaze fixed on the fabulous plains of the Pampas, to the west of Buenos Aires, extending clear to the Andes. It was a land of wandering, ferocious Indians called Araucanians, who had never heard of Christianity and whose only contact with white men had been in war. It was the Araucanian tribe which St. John Bosco, the founder of the Salesians, had seen in a vision submitting their arms of war and torture to the missionaries.

In 1879 the opportunity came. The Argentinian government decided to put an end to the bloody series of border fights between whites and Indians, with their consequent *malones*, or massacre raids, of the natives and the equally inhuman retaliations of the white settlers. The army would launch a full scale, vigorous campaign against the Araucanians, striking them from

three points at once. General Julius Roca was assigned to the task. Adding four thousand troops to the already existing frontier garrisons, he set out to break the power of the Indians. When he asked for chaplains to attend the army, two Salesians volunteered, Father John Costamagna and a Salesian seminarian named Louis Botta. With them went Monsignor Espinoza, Vicar General of Buenos Aires.

On April 16 the army set forth from the city to the accompaniment of church bells and the prayers of the populace. General Roca was confident of his strength. The Araucanians, he knew, could muster no more than 4,000 braves, even at the rally call of their greatest chief, Manuel Namuncura; they would crumble under the attack of a well organized and equipped army. But Father Costamagna was not so sure of his own task. The Araucanians were pagans—downright immoral, brutal, excessively embittered against all white men. To teach them the principles of Christianity would be to change black to white. But the field was opened to the Salesian missionaries. They would try.

General Roca was right. By April 1881, all of the vast plains of Patagonia were in government hands: 60,000 leagues of prairie lands and some 5,000 Araucanians, who weakly laid down their bows and lances in submission. Indian reservations were set up for them. Peace settled over the Pampas for the first time in a century.

Father Costamagna set up two mission centers for both natives and whites: the first at Patagones, on the north bank of the Rio Negro, which he dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel; the second in Viedma, its twin city across the river. More Salesians came to help, but, as one of them wrote, "Without the Salesian Sisters the missions would have failed like all preceding missions in the conversion of Patagonia and the Pampas." Father Costamagna himself went to Buenos Aires, where the Salesian Sisters had first started their work among Italian immigrants, and recruited the first band of Sisters to penetrate the interior of Argentina. The superioress was 27-year-old Mother Angela Vallese, missionary pioneer of the Order.

Establishing themselves at Patagones, the Sisters took up the gigantic task of teaching the Faith to both whites and natives at Carmen. Certainly, it was as trying a task as one could ask for. "Here we are at Carmen," wrote Mother Angela. "We are sewing dresses for our poor Indian girls. It looks like the Lord is heaping up work for us. But we desire it anxiously to save so many unfortunate souls! Oh, if you could see how many Indian girls there are here, all so pitiful in soul and body! We feel so sorry for them and grieve that we cannot help them all because they are so many and so poor. We have thirty girls here at Carmen . . . we could have many more if we had the means to support them. Every Sunday we go to the parish church for religious



instruction to the Christian girls, who are so sadly ignorant. Once a month we prepare them for confession; then they go to Communion with great devotion. This practice does much for them and their parents, and it excites a bit of Faith in the Indians, drawing them to our holy Religion . . . Pray for us to Mary Help of Christians! . . . Send us more Sisters! . . . How late is their coming!"

The cry was always the same—more Salesian Sisters! Their patience, motherliness—alive with kindness and cheerfulness—won over the hearts of both Indians and whites. "The Angels of Patagonia" they were commonly called, and everywhere the Salesian Missionaries went in their tireless activity, their first care was to procure the Sisters.

From Patagones and Viedma the Salesians, Priests, Brothers, and Sisters, worked their apostolate inland along the shores of the Rio Negro. Their mission plan, drawn up by their leader, Bishop John Cagliero, and put into execution by such zealous men as Father John Costamagna, Father Dominic Milanesio, and Father Joseph Fagnano, was carefully worked out. Trade schools, poor but sufficient for the purpose, were set up by the priests and brothers; at the same time the Sisters erected homes for girls to teach them domestic arts. Both groups thus aimed at elevating the Indians above their nomad existence. Both groups, as history attests, achieved wonderful results, civilly and religiously.

Mother Angela was, beyond doubt, the driving force behind the Sister's missionary work. A born leader, she guided both Sisters and pupils with a motherly hand that was gentle yet firm. Her name was held in blessing everywhere her influence spread.

In 1883 the Salesian Missions had made such progress that the Holy See extended them to the territory of South Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Father Fagnano was made superior. He immediately asked for the Salesian Sisters and for Mother Angela to head them. And thus, in 1887, leaving the work she had so bravely begun in northern Patagonia, Mother Angela pioneered new mission fields in the ice bound lands of the Magellan Straits.

In the meantime, her work along the Rio Negro advanced. Following the lead of the Salesian Fathers, the Sisters set up a chain of centers all along the river to serve as bases from which they could branch out into the interior. In 1893 Father Dominic Milanesio, the missionary who had negotiated the peace treaty between General Roca and Chief Namuncura, set up a new mission center in the open plains between the Rio Negro and the Rio Limay, called Junin de los Andes. Originally a frontier garrison, it had become a sort of meeting center for ranchers and sheepholders, as well as a makeshift trading post for the Indian reservations that extended along the Rio Limay. In the priest's eyes, Junin would serve well as a school for children, In-

dians and white, who had no school and no protection in the open prairies. He built himself a mud hut as a temporary home and for three years dedicated himself alone to mission work among natives and whites. He erected a two wing building, one wing for boys, the other for girls, plus a small chapel which he dedicated to Our Lady of Snows. In 1899 the Salesian Sisters came to Junin de los Andes.

Here in the open prairies, beneath the protection of Mary Immaculate, was to bloom the Rose of the Andes.

V.

"I CAN'T understand it myself," Laura Vicuna later wrote, "but I certainly was happy to go to Junin. I think the Infant Jesus was glad and gave me this feeling of joy, so much alive and so new to me."

Laura was now eight years old, Julia six. Though sisters, the two girls were miles apart in character. Laura was by nature quiet and docile; probably because of her early illness and her sufferings during the long trip from Chile, she was responsive to the least attention given her. Obedience was not so much a lesson to be learned as a normal course of behavior. Julia was a pixie child, given to childish tantrums of crying and stamping her feet and balking at her mother's orders; the freedom of the prairies seemed to flow in her veins and would not easily be tamed. Not that she did not love her mother. Mercedes, Laura, and Julia were a happy trio of family love firmly sealed by the untimely death of Joseph, deepened by the untold hardships of travel and exile. But, whereas Laura's love was openly shown and constant, Julia's was often hidden in the little storms she occasionally threw up. Mercedes knew she would miss both children, but her better sense

told her they would be safer in the hands of the good Sisters.

And so, on January 21, 1900, Dona Vicuna packed her household belongings again, set the children on prairie ponies, and trekked southward—for the last time, she hoped—to a wilderness hamlet set up by other Chilean refugees and called Quilquihue. It was not much of a place to live in, just a combination of ramshackle sheds in the open prairies, but it was just fifteen miles from Junin and would allow Mercedes to visit her children regularly.

When they reached Junin de los Andes by evening, they found little to distinguish it from any other Pampas settlement. There, exposed to sun and wind and rain, stood a cluster of shacks, unpainted and drab, set against a horizon of the Andes, whose foothills at the edge of the village were washed by the crystal waters of a mountain stream. There were hardly any trees, just miles and miles of tall, waving grass. Beyond the town, almost at the foot of the mountains, stood the school—a low, unpainted wooden structure shaped like an inverted L, the longer part made of added sections, the roof crowned by a rustic bell tower. One section of the mission school was used for boys, cared for by Salesians; the other was for girls and was in the charge of the Salesian Sisters.

Poor as it was, lonely and remote even today as we write this story of heroism, this was to be the garden

chosen by God and tended by His holy Mother, where the Rose of the Andes would bloom—the first fruit of holiness for the Salesian Sisters.

Dona Vicuna dreaded the moment of departure. This would be the first time the three would be separated. Would the girls bear it? Little Julia put up a storm of protest with tears and hugs and choking sobs. Laura cried too in her own way. But both children agreed to stay. Then, Mercedes mounted her pony and set out for the open prairies alone. Laura drew her little sister to herself, kissed her, and together the two went into the house with Sister Superior.

Wisely the good Sister took them first to the pretty mission chapel. "As soon as Laura entered," she wrote later, "she looked at 'Jesus' little house,' as she called the tabernacle, and, when she was told that Jesus lived there, she blew Him a kiss and promised to come back often." It was a simple act of piety, such as one might expect to find in an innocent child.

It took Laura practically no time to get used to life at Junin. She fitted into it quietly and soon made herself an integral part of its activity. "Once she was introduced to her school mates," writes Sister Superior, "Laura won them over by her sincere kindness, her simple unaffected ways, her gentleness of feeling and speaking. She was not instructed in religion, but she applied herself with energy to learn it, and as Heaven opened the truths of Faith to her she made us feel that



she found all her happiness and peace in them. Her first catechism lesson made such an impression on her that she became thoughtful and often kept saying, 'I have been very bad, but from now on I want to be very, very good!' "

Certainly, after the hard life the girl had gone through, unsheltered except by her mother's love, exposed to poverty, suspicion, the pain of loneliness, she must have found true joy in the knowledge that she was God's child, loved by Him, and in the feeling that the good Sisters really wanted her. The thoughtfulness was not so much regret for the little failings of the past as unspeakable happiness at the sight of a bright and hopeful future.

"You should have seen her play with her friends," a neighbor at Las Lajas recalled later. "She was a bustle of movement, alert, keenly enjoying herself. But at a single word from her mother she would quit her games, run to her, and with the same glad smile run an errand for her or take her afternoon nap."

When Dona Vicuna came to visit her children in a month's time, she was pleased with Sister's report. Laura was an exceptionally good child, she was told, and took such fine care of her little sister. "Yes, I expected to hear that," she answered. "Laura has never given me a bit of trouble."

Laura was really a happy girl. One thing alone toned down her joy. How she missed her mother! It was

a deep longing, born of close association in sorrow and suffering during the long days and cold nights of travel in the Andes footpasses. Then the hearts of mother and daughter beat as one, and a bond of sympathy was forged between them so strong that they lived and thought and felt as one person. "Oh, if only mama would come and live here instead of living all alone in Quilquihue!" she often told the Sisters.

But the little girl did not know that precisely in this unfathomable love for her mother lay the course of her coming bloodless martyrdom. "If only mama would come and live here!" It was but the beginning of a pain that would bring death.

VI.

DONA MERCEDES had her daughters spend their first vacation at home with her in Quilquihue, so that at least for two months she might enjoy their company and hear their laughter ring through the empty house. She was pleased with the change she noticed in the children. Although Julia was still the firebrand flaming one moment, dead the other, her violent storms had quieted down to a good extent. The poor Sisters, thought Mercedes, must have weathered a few tempests of the girl. Laura, however, already bore the marks of a young woman, even-tempered, considerate, anxious to help out in the farm chores. One thing in particular struck the mother: each day Laura earnestly gave a few moments of spiritual reading.

While Dona Vicuna was thus studying the characters of her daughters, she too was being observed by Laura. The older girl noted quite plainly that her mother was not happy, that under the false smile that lit her face was a deep reality of sorrow. It had something to do with her employer, Laura was sure. Just what it might be she could not tell, but she certainly did not like him or his coarse laughter or his crude ways. More than

once, when he attempted to hug her and she smelled his foul breath heavy with wine, she squirmed out of his arms and ran to her mother. Then she noticed the fire that flared in the woman's eyes as she protected her daughter, only to be put out soon by a flow of tears. No, something was definitely wrong, and it was breaking her poor mother's heart.

In March Laura and Julia returned to Junin, "Laura's heaven," as she called it. There was good news awaiting her. A few days after she had arrived Sister Superior told her she could make her First Holy Communion in June. Laura's face gleamed with sudden joy, but then she immediately broke into a sob.

"Laurita, what is wrong? Aren't you glad?"

"Yes, Sister, I'm very glad. Only, I was just thinking of my poor mother! She is not happy at home, I know she is not! But I'm really glad I can make my First Communion, and I'll prepare myself very well."

Sister Anna Rodrigues, the first Argentinian girl to become a Salesian Sister, was appointed to instruct her. She taught the child her catechism and prepared her for confession weeks ahead of her Communion day. Laura learned quickly, and Sister Anna noted with pleasure how lovingly the girl awaited the great day of her union with the Jesus she read so much about and to whom she prayed so devoutly in the mission chapel. Laura went to confession every week as part of her preparation.

"Why do you always go to confession, Laura?" impulsively asked Julia. "Are you that bad?"

"Julia, dear," was the quiet answer, "when you will receive Jesus, you'll realize how pure and sinless we must be, and you'll go to confession too. How strong I feel after confession!"

Laura's First Communion day was set for June 2, 1901. Her mother came the night before. As soon as Laura saw her, she clasped her tightly and, trying to control her tears, sobbed, "Mama, tomorrow I am going to make my First Communion. I'm sorry I ever hurt your feelings or disobeyed you. It will never happen again."

Dona Vicuna kissed her gently. How soon her little Laura had bloomed into a young woman, like the Andes flowers that the two of them used to pick as they made their way into exile two years before.

"There is nothing to feel sorry for, Laurita," she replied. "Nothing, because you have always been a joy to me."

The next morning the chapel of our Lady of Snows was filled with children and neighbors. Kneeling in her white dress and veil just before the altar, was Laura, recollected in prayer, her gaze fixed on the tabernacle, "Jesus' little house." The altar bell rang for the Consecration. Laura bowed in adoration to the God who loved her so much that He would come to her in the wilds of the open Pampas. Then it rang again to tell her

that the great moment had come. She approached the rude altar rail, knelt and waited for her Jesus, the first and only love of her young heart. When He came—then came bliss and the first kiss of Divine Love!

If we are to judge from Laura's later Communions, so frequent and so fervent, an unbreakable bond of love, stronger than death and more consuming than fire, must have been forged between the innocent heart of Laura Vicuna and the flaming heart of the King of Heaven and earth.

Mercedes wept to see the evident bliss of her daughter as she proudly watched her receive her God in an embrace of love. But she herself did not join her daughter at the altar rail—she only knelt in the back and wept.

After Mass, mother and daughter met alone. Laura hugged her tightly. Then, looking straight into her face, she opened her lips as though to speak, but her only words, choked by sobs, were, "O, my poor Mama! My poor Mama!"

It was a sad ending to a happy day. Laura had already begun her bloodless martyrdom. The Rose of the Andes was beginning to shed its perfume because its petals were becoming bruised!

As in the lives of many Saints, First Holy Communion was the turning point of Laura Vicuna's life. She had told Sister Anna, "You will see how good I'll be! Nobody will ever have to complain about me!"

Sister Anna could very well have wondered what all this meant, for up to now Laura had given no one cause to complain of her conduct. In fact, as far as the Sisters were concerned, it was just about natural for Laura to be thoughtful and considerate, polite and kindly, even-tempered in school and play, but she generally found the strength to put in that effort where others would have faltered. Yes, Laura was a loveable child. Very probably, this loveableness was developed in her during the long weeks of illness in her babyhood when cares were showered upon her, and later during the months of exile when mother and daughter were united in a bond of love that had been forged by sorrow. To those who knew her, tenderness and affection were a normal part of Laura.

However, at her first meeting with Jesus in the kiss of Holy Communion, a vast new world of supernatural grace and sanctity burst open before her. She saw in a moment what the possession of her God would mean to her if she cooperated with His grace. Even at the age of eleven, she must have realized, dully at least, what that Divine kiss would require of her—the lofty paths of supernatural love it opened to her, the purity of heart, thought, and desire which it demanded of her, the thorn-strewn path of love it bade her trod. And she answered yes with all the fire of her young soul.

The spiritual impact of Laura's First Communion is evident from the resolutions she herself wrote, pre-

served for us by her confessor and later her first biographer, Father Crestanello. They are simple enough, revealing for one thing the sensible religious training the Sisters were giving her, but they bear also the promise of great holiness.

Oh, Jesus, I want to love and serve You all my life, and so I offer You my soul, my heart, and all that I am. I want to die before ever offending You by sin; and therefore I want to mortify myself in everything that might take me away from you.

I promise to do all I can, at the cost of any sacrifice, to make You known and loved; to make up to You for all the offenses You receive every day from people, especially my own family. My God, give me a life of love, of satisfaction, of sacrifice.

To us who read them in English, these resolutions may appear stilted and stiff; the Spanish is of course more natural. They contain phrases from prayerbooks. Probably, she did not have a clear idea of some expressions, like sacrifice and satisfaction. But there is an important tradition of Catholic sanctity being handed down to us in these resolutions of a Chilean girl. It is a tradition that stems from St. John Bosco, Founder of the Salesian Society and the Salesian Sisters. It is the tradition of "*Death rather than sin*": "*I want to die*," she wrote, "*before ever offending You by sin!*" How striking that this is the very same thought expressed by St. Dominic Savio, pupil of St. John Bosco, fifteen-year-old Confessor of the Church, on the day of his own



First Communion! The resolution calls for generosity and love—such as we are apt to find in the heart of a boy or girl who truly loves God above all things! We will find it to be the mainspring of the life of Laura Vicuna, as it undoubtedly was of the life of St. Dominic Savio.

Of course, every Saint lives his own life, and so saint differs from saint. Dominic lived up to his “Death rather than sin” in his own way—avoiding sin in himself and trying to stop it in others. Laura’s way will be different. As we look back upon her life we see that she preferred to sacrifice her own life for the sins of another. Her resolution might read “My death in exchange for her sins!”

Whose sins?

Laura’s mother, Dona Mercedes Vicuna, found life in Quilquihue much harder than she had thought. She was alone, a young widow with some attractiveness in a restless prairie town of rough and hardy cattlemen, some of them outlaws. There was no tradition of decency or morality to guard her, or, if there had been, it was discarded by the wild life of the Pampas. She soon found herself in a real struggle for existence.

In those days there was an unwritten law in the western Pampas for unprotected women—a law that was in stark opposition to the laws of decency that Mercedes had learned as a girl, a law that she did not believe in, yet a law that held her in its grip. In a remote

settlement such as Quilquihue, any land-owning master who had an impressively large enough ranch used to declare himself "protector" of all unmarried women in his area. Such poor women "voluntarily" joined his household, working in his fields or home. They "belonged" to him, very much like his sheep and cattle. As long as they were under his "protection" they would be molested by no one.

Mercedes did not agree with this way of life. Yet, unless she returned to Chile or settled in some large city of eastern Argentina, she apparently had no choice. She made the unfortunate decision and moved into the household of her "protector."

The new alliance was a miserable one, morally as well as every other way. She was neither wife nor friend—just a piece of property. Senor Mora, her "protector," was unscrupulous, heartless, beastly. His only interest was his own pleasure. He would not hesitate to destroy whatever stood between him and his satisfaction. As for Mercedes, she was his slave, subject to his every whim. Day by day the net of sin closed desperately about her, till she found she could not free herself.

Laura, whose life had always been an innocent one, probably did not suspect the full extent of her mother's sinful life. But she did know that it was wrong and that it brought her mother an unbearable burden of misery.

"Mama, dear," she often pleaded with her mother

when Mercedes would visit her daughters, "why don't you live here? The Sisters will take you in! Don't go back to that man! Please, Mama!"

But Dona Mercedes had always the same answer. Bowing her head in shame, she would only sob and mutter, "Pray for me. Laurita! Pray for your poor mother!"

Arguments were useless. Both mother and daughter would end in tears, and the farewell words were always the same:

"My poor Mama!"

"Pray for me, Laurita!"

VII.

WHILE back in Quilquihue Dona Mercedes Vicuna kept falling deeper into misery, both moral and mental, her little daughter began taking great strides up the mountain of Christian perfection, enjoying fully the happiness reserved for those who courageously follow Christ with total self-dedication.

The Sisters were not slow to realize the spiritual treasure they had in Laura, and they put her talents to good use. On their suggestion, the girl began an apostolate among her schoolmates. First of all, she took the poorest girls under her friendly care, personally giving her time to them to help them dress properly, learn their prayers, take on a refinement they had never known in their poor shacks of the Pampas. "She loved the poor girls," one of her classmates tells us. "If she had been free to do so, she would have given them all she had. She was pained if anyone of us hurt a poor child by laughing at her clothes or her poverty. She would never let us poke fun of anyone, and, while she was always kind, she became severe with us if we started being nasty."

Sister Superior tells us that whenever Laura received candy from her mother she would pass it out among

the girls, making sure that all got a share, although she herself often enough did not even get a taste of it. Towards the day students she was particularly kind. They formed what was really a "mission school," being children of poor Pampas cattle-herders. As such, they were improperly dressed against the cold of the prairies, undernourished, crude and harsh in their poverty. Many were half-breeds and open to the ridicule of the white girls. "She used to give these poor children what ever pennies her mother gave her," Sister Superior writes. "She would give them even some of her better clothes, her playthings, sometimes her food. She used to cheer them up with her kindness."

Laura's particular anxiety was to help sinners, or, as she called them, "the poor people who don't love God." Her every suffering, her every act of mortification was for them and for the missionaries who were trying to reach their hearts.

In consequence of this one-girl apostolate, a certain sense of kindness and a fine spirit of obedience and content began to fill the school of Junin. Everyone felt it. The Sisters knew it was due to Laura. But Laura herself had little time to feel that way. Rather, she felt herself very small as she ascended higher in Christian perfection and got a closer look at Christ, her Divine Master. She was already beginning to feel the need of deep humility.

One day she handed in a paper signed, "*La loquita*

de Jesus," "Jesus' crazy little girl." Sister knit her brows in amazement and called her to her desk.

"What does this mean?" she asked severely.

"It's a punishment, Sister."

"Who's punishing you, and what for?"

Laura blushed and hung her head in shame. She made as though to speak, but, when Sister began to explain how silly the title was she kept silent. Later, when the good Sister asked her again, she answered:

"I'm punishing myself, Sister. You see, a few days ago I was playing with some friends. It was the feast of the Sacred Heart, and I must have been feeling very happy because I was doing silly things to make them laugh. One of them told me, 'Oh, Laurita, you're crazy today!' That hurt me very much. I almost told her off. But then I reflected how stupid I really was and I told myself I would have to learn humility by signing my name as Jesus' crazy little girl.

"It wasn't easy to write that, Sister," Laura added sincerely. "But I am really Jesus' crazy little girl."

The interview stopped there. At Sister's prudent request, Laura dropped her self-imposed title of humiliation.

Such out of the way occurrences were few and far between. To all appearances Laura was an ordinary schoolgirl. There was little in her outward conduct to mark her out among her schoolmates apart from her spirit of obedience and cooperation. That she practiced



obedience from a strictly religious motive as an act of supernatural virtue would not be known to onlookers. It was an interior virtue. But it was there. A classmate once asked her, "Which virtue do you like best, Laura?" The answer was confidential: "All of them—purity, humility, charity, obedience—but especially obedience, because it takes them all in!"

Laura left a record of her obedience at Junin. The story of "Laurita's flower of obedience" is still told there. One day, it seems, Sister Superior was talking to the girls about obedience, remarking, "Obedience works miracles. Plant a dry stick, water it, and by your obedience, it will grow!" The girls got a nice laugh out of it, except Laura, who remarked, "But I don't see what's so funny about that! It can happen!"

She took Sister at her word, to the Sister's dismay and her schoolmates' joy. Every day they watched her water the dry twig she had planted. Every day the question came to her, "Has it grown yet, Laurita?"

But one day the remarks gave way to a gasp of surprise. "Look," the girls squealed, "it's really growing!" Yes, Laura's stick was very much alive and sprouting green foliage. Laura triumphantly kept watering it, and the day soon came when she could snip off a full blown flower and bring it to our Lady's altar. "Laurita's flower of obedience" was a mute witness to her heroic virtue.

VIII.

As THE vacation of Christmas, 1901, drew near, Laura waited anxiously for word from her mother about going home. She dreaded living in Quilquihue. She already knew that her mother had moved in with "him," as Senor Mora was always referred to, and very plainly Laura could not stand the sight of him, coarse, sensual, sarcastic, often drunk.

But her mother's answer was firm, and Sister suggested obedience. Both she and Julia were to "go home" for Christmas. For the first few days that they were back in Quilquihue Laura felt her fears had been ungrounded. Everyone went out of the way to make the girls welcome and show them more than the usual kindness. Dona Mercedes, happy at the sight of her two growing, well behaved daughters, regained somewhat of her former joyfulness and laughed brightly again. Even "he" had the graciousness to keep away from the house as much as possible, and when he did come around he toned down his coarseness. But Laura could still feel the hostility in the air. Time and again she noticed how her mother trembled in his presence, how she served him at table like a whipped dog, how she

paled at his every order, as though she feared a storm was brewing every time he entered the house. One day, while she and the girls were praying at our Lady's picture, she suddenly stood up, listened fearfully to the banging of doors and the stamping of heavy boots, and with terror in his eyes, exclaimed softly, "Stop your prayers! Don't ever let him catch us praying! I'll suffer for it!"

Laura understood only too well. She had once heard that the devil cannot stand holy water. "He" was no better!

The tempest burst over her head a few days after Christmas. Senor Mora announced that he would hold the annual town ball in his own house. It was understood, of course, that more than an invitation it was an order to all his workers and dependents to attend. For some days the ball was the only topic of conversation. "What a time we'll have," Laura heard on all sides. "There will be dancing all night and drinking and roast meats and all sorts of cakes and sweets and gifts!" Everywhere it was the same. Poor people, Laura must have thought, he drives you like cattle all year long and you curse and hate him—and then once a year he throws a banquet at you and soaks you in wine and you forget your misery!

Dona Mercedes knew how her daughter felt about the ball. Laura had already told her clearly, "I am a Child of Mary and am not allowed to attend dances.

Furthermore, I don't want to go! I hate the whole thing!"

"Please, Laurita, for my sake," pleaded her mother. "You must come! Everyone comes to this dance. It is an insult to him if you refuse. He'll take it out on me!"

But Laura would not yield. On the night of the dance, as men and women, boys and girls, came trooping into the yard, Laura put on her cloak and hid in a shack at the rear of the house, where Senor Mora kennelled his dogs. There she sat through the night, hungry and cold, while she could hear the screaming and singing, the noises of coarse revelry that told her of unrestrained festivity and drunken merriment. It was better out there, she knew, in God's pure air!

At sunrise, when all the guests had departed and left the cottage in shambles, Laura went back to help her mother clean up. The poor woman was in tears. There was an unpleasant silence about the house. Tension grew with the clock. Then everything exploded when he came in for dinner.

"*La santita!*" he growled at Laura. "The little saint! Too good for us, she is! She's a gentlewoman! We're scum! She won't soil herself at our party!"

He raved and ranted, while Laura stood by her mother in fear. Mercedes tried to put in a word or two, but she only angered the bitter "protector."

"Very well!" he concluded, "very well! If that's the way the young lady feels about me, I'll fix her! I'll stop

paying her tuition at school. Not a cent will she ever get from me! She can die first, she and her sister! If they want money, let them both work for it in the fields! We'll see who runs this ranch!"

He grabbed his cloak and stormed out into the yard!

Mother and daughters passed the night in fear. Dona Mercedes knew only too well there was no law in Quilquihue apart from the "protector's" word. Early the next morning, she hastened to a kindly neighbor, Dona Felicita Espinosa, who had taken a liking to the two girls, and unburdened herself. The good matron listened to the sad story, clucked her tongue in reproof several times, shook her head angrily, and exclaimed, "You just leave it to me! He can't boss me around, and he won't touch Laura either!"

Dona Espinosa was as good as her word. That same day she saddled her pony and rode all the way to Junin. She spoke to Sister Superior, explaining the entire incident with an anxiety that denoted the real danger the girl was in for having crossed the wealthy ranchero. Sister's answer was unhesitating: Laura was to return to the school, regardless of tuition.

That very night Senora Espinosa was back in Quilquihue with the good news.

"Well, Laurita, what do you say?" she asked. "Will you go back to Junin? The Sisters will have you gladly!"

The girl was beside herself with joy. How soon her

grief had been turned into joy. "Oh, to be back in paradise for four more years! How can I be grateful enough?"

Dona Mercedes bowed her head in thankfulness and embraced Senora Espinosa. She knew this was the best thing for Laura. Remaining on the ranch would kill the child and it would help no one. Even in her moral and social degradation God had hearkened to her prayer. "Thanks," she said humbly, "for something I don't deserve!"

IX.

VACATIONS would not be over till March, when the cooler winds of the Antarctic would sweep over the Pampas and announce the coming of Fall. Till then Laura patiently bided her time. Fortunately, Senor Mora was rarely in the house, for his numerous flocks scattered over the plains kept him away from home for days and nights at a time. But whenever Laura heard the stamping of his heavy boots, she cautiously withdrew to the kitchen and kept out of his sight, silently tending to her housework and rarely volunteering a word in his presence. Now and then a cutting remark would be aimed at her, but she pretended not to hear. Any back talk, she knew, would only bring hurt to her mother. It was virtue put to the test.

Finally March came, and with March her deliverance. Dona Mercedes knew that Junin and the Sisters' school would be the ideal home for Laura. She herself, with her personal guilt growing stronger each day, knew she could not train the child in virtue, and certainly the loose, hostile, and sometimes downright immoral atmosphere of Quilquihue was no place for a

girl like Laura. As for Julia, she decided to keep the younger child with her, to gladden the long hours at the ranch and, possibly, to soften "him" by having a little girl in the house.

At the beginning of March Mercedes and Julia accompanied Laura across the prairies to Junin. Laura could hardly wait to see the school and the pretty chapel of Our Lady of Snows. Sister Superior awaited the little party. Without causing the child or mother any embarrassment, she took Laura in her arms and kindly asked, "Would you like to stay with us, Laura?"

"Oh, Sister, yes!" was the joyful answer. "I'll be your servant! I'll work for you! I'll. . . ."

"No, no," laughed Sister. "There are no servants in our house. You will be just one of us, and we will be glad to have you."

She meant it, indeed. She and all the Sisters already realized what a treasure of goodness they had in the girl.

Laura fitted into Salesian life with scarcely any need for adjustment. It agreed with her. It was cheerful and bright, a pleasant combination of piety and enjoyment, and, most especially, she felt she was wanted. The Sisters noted little change in her, except a deeper tone of seriousness in all she said and did, a more profound and adult sense of prayer reflected in her eyes, and a more than willing eagerness to help out in the house. Without being asked, she swept and cleaned, washed and

scrubbed, helped the Sisters at their tasks, and even fed the chickens and the school's pet dog. No one thought it strange that she should give up her playtime for such work. Her broad smile was proof that she liked doing it.

Along with the winds of March came the happy news that Bishop John Cagliero, superior of the entire district, would come to Junin on an official visit, during which he would conduct a Mission and administer the Sacraments. He was a well known figure in Patagonia. Often he could be seen riding horseback across the Pampas, his black cassock merging into the drab underbrush of the prairies, as he hastened from one frontier settlement to another, or as he covered the many mission posts he had thrown up in his few years as superior. He was a biggish man, of great stature both moral and physical, very positive in his opinions, demanding in his orders, yet considerate of the weakness of his people. His kindness drew all to him, whites and Indians alike, for each of whom he had a fatherly blessing and a word of comfort. To his own men, whether veteran or recruit in rugged mission life, he was a steady support and leader.

Laura had often heard from the Sisters the story of his exploits, how he had crossed the whole of Patagonia and penetrated into the wild prairielands of the Araucanian tribes, how he had won their confidence by his manliness and honesty, how he had set up chapels on their scattered reservations, and how he had baptized

their chief, Manuel Namuncura, once a dreaded name to all Argentina. Young Zepherin Namuncura, she had been told, was even studying for the priesthood under the Bishop's care.

Laura was doubly thrilled by the news because she hoped her mother would now make the Mission and break the bonds that chained her to her misery, and because she was told she would be allowed to receive another promise of divine love—the sacrament of Confirmation.

Catechism lessons now became intensive. Every spare moment was given to them. Sister Azocar was teaching the older girls, among whom was Laura. Her lessons centered on the duties of Christian life, particularly as demanded by the Commandments and the laws of the Church. Marriage was the topic of several lessons, and the good Sister carefully explained Christ's attitude toward marriage and the married life, as well as His laws governing this sublime sacrament. Sister found it necessary in the course of her instructions to show how evil and immoral were some practices kept in the Pampas, particularly some of the marriage customs of the larger ranches. Clearly she was hitting at the "protector" system. Laura trembled as the realization of her mother's sad condition sank into her mind. It cut her to the quick—the baseness, coarseness, misery of the whole thing! She stood up, sickly pale, and toppled to the floor.

"Sister, Laura has fainted!"

Sister Azocar was puzzled, for Laura had never fainted before. She told Sister Superior, who notified her of the poor conditions at Laura's home. "The lessons," she continued, "must however, not be stopped, because these girls will be the mothers of the coming years, and they must know what is right or wrong. Laura will understand."

The next day Sister continued the lesson on marriage, but she made little headway for she suddenly had to run to Laura's side and catch the girl as she sank limply into her arms.

"But what's wrong, Laura?" the girls asked her. "Are you sick?"

There was no answer, just fresh tears and a look of pain.

Laura now knew the secret of her mother's sorrow. The poor woman's real misery was not so much the brutal, sometimes inhuman treatment of her "protector" as he raged and roared and reeked of liquor. No, her mother's sorrow was her separation from God—it was that cold, hard, pitiless wall of sin that locked her prisoner in her moral humiliation and gave her no end of shame and loneliness. And yet, in spite of it all—Laura knew oh, so little of it—how tightly those bonds held her, how hard it would be to break them! What great effort it would take to leave "him," even to return to God!

Laura hardly dared think so cruelly of her mother, yet there could be no other explanation. She wished she could make sure, ask Sister, for instance, "Is my mother living in sin?" But in the midst of the girls she could only sit and worry. One day a suggestion came indirectly when one of the girls asked a question that embarrassed the class and the Sister answered simply, "Why not ask the priest in confession? He will give you a good answer." She would do the same. She would ask her confessor.

The answer confirmed her fears. When her mother came to visit her a few days later, Sister Superior noticed that the poor girl just hugged her mother tightly and cried her heart out. Dona Mercedes crimsoned as she noticed the cause of her child's tears. Not that she expected to keep her life a secret from her daughters, but she feared what Laura would now think of her.

Sister Superior knew the answer to that. "This sad realization," she writes, "was her constant martyrdom, the one object of her prayers and mortifications which she offered in reparation and in an endless plea for pity. For a soul such as Laura's aspiring to the purity of the angels, finding no sacrifice too great, no humiliation too harsh to keep her classmates from sin—she would gladly have died rather than submit to sin—it was a real torture for her to feel that her mother might have withdrawn herself from God."

Laura's decision was clear in her mind. She, Laura

herself, would have to obtain the grace of repentance for her mother. Her every deed, her every prayer, her every cry of anguish would be for her mother. Even her life—yes, if nothing else would purchase that grace from God, she would offer her own life. But her mother must return to God's grace!

X.

BISHOP John Cagliero came to Junin on March 6, 1902. It was a holiday for the ranchers and their families, who came in crowds to greet the missionary prelate. In their poverty the good Sisters and their pupils tried to make him welcome as they flocked about him to share in his smiles and blessings. On the morrow he celebrated Mass in the little school chapel, packed to the doors. Then, after a few days rest, he began his missionary tour of the Neuquen territory, preaching, baptizing, planning new mission centers.

He returned on Palm Sunday, and on the following day the great Mission began for all the neighboring families. In wagons and on horses and ponies, even on foot they came, large groups of them, both Indian and white—many of them making the first mission of their life, all of them coming like beggars to the Father's home to ask a share of His riches of grace and the sacraments. What was Laura's surprise, as she watched the wagons roll into the yard, to see her mother and little sister coming to make the Mission. Could it be that her prayers were already answered?

"Senora Espinosa convinced me to come along,"

whispered Dona Mercedes as she embraced her daughter, almost in answer to her questioning gaze. The good Senora, in the meantime, energetic and assertive as ever, came to greet the girl and inquired after her health.

"Oh, mama, you have come to make the Mission! It will help you ever so much!"

"That it will, child," put in Senora Espinosa. "Your mother is going to make a good Mission."

The Mission lasted through the week, crowned by the traditional splendors of Holy Week. Laura prayed her heart out, spending most of her free time in church, begging, pleading, weeping for her mother's conversion. And she waited, waited anxiously, for a single word from her mother, but Mercedes seemed to be going through all the exercises of the Mission mechanically, with never an encouraging sign to her daughter. As the week came to an end, Laura scanned the lines of people that slowly shifted into the confessional to make their peace with God—but Mercedes was not among them.

Easter Sunday dawned bright and clear with all the glory of the Resurrection. The Chapel of our Lady of Snows was festooned with fresh prairie flowers till it looked like a blaze of beauty and holiness. Ranchers, dressed in their colorful finery, flocked to the Bishop's Mass, the last mission sermon, and their Easter Communion. There was rejoicing everywhere, except in

Laura's heart. It seemed to her that everyone went to Communion that day—except Senora Vicuna!

That afternoon Bishop Cagliero crowned the week's spiritual activities by giving Confirmation. Among the large number of adults and children knelt Laura and Julia. Behind them, hand on their shoulders, stood their godmother, Senora Espinosa. Her firm hand gave Laura assurance and strength, and the girl needed it, for she knew that her mother knelt in the back of the church, head in her hands, following the service in tears.

After the brief ceremony was over, Laura ran to her mother. She tried to hide her disappointment behind a smile, especially since Julia was with her. "Oh, mama," she exclaimed, "you just watch and see what good soldiers of Christ Julia and I will be now!"

The answer was partly hidden in a blush and a kiss, but it was not what Laura wanted to hear.

The next morning Senora Mercedes bade good-bye to Laura and with Senora Espinosa and Julia rode off to Quilquihue. Laura watched them fade into the distance, till her tears screened them from view. Evidently all her prayers had gone unheeded. Nothing had happened. She wondered, did God demand more of her before He would grant the favor? Certainly, she had prayed and had sacrificed the little pleasures that were her share in life. Was she to do more?

A few days later Bishop Cagliero announced that be-

fore leaving Junin he would give the religious veil of sisterhood to one of the postulants and would receive the Vows of a new Sister. Almost immediately a desire that had long been forming deep in Laura's heart but had never risen to the surface asserted itself. Ever since she had first seen the "angels of Junin" in their long black gowns she had felt the wish to be one of them. While sharing their simple life at school she had begun imitating their ways, copying their modesty, their industry, their gentleness. Without realizing it, she had always looked at her own life in terms of theirs, especially since she had last left Quilquihue. Now it all came back to her, insistent and clear: "I must be a Salesian Sister!" It seemed the only thing she had ever really wanted. And a more compelling reason now put the thought firmly before her: the salvation of her mother's soul. This could be the possible answer to the heart-rending problem. All her prayers and sacrifices of the mission had been powerless to make her mother yield to God's grace. Something more was needed, something that would be strong enough to work a miracle of grace. If she made the supreme sacrifice of her entire life to God—would not God in return give her the favor of her mother's life? It would be such a sweet sacrifice, one that she was most willing to make. Yes, there could be no doubt now that this was the step to take. She must ask the Bishop first thing in the morning.

Bishop Cagliero listened kindly to Laura as she told him of her desire to become a Salesian Sister. Gently and prudently he questioned her as she spoke of her mother and told how she had been praying all during the mission for her conversion. She made no attempt to hide her motives or feelings. Simply she concluded: "This way God will accept my life in exchange for my mother's soul."

The Bishop was moved by the girl's plea. Her simplicity and evident purity of heart gave him a sense of deep comfort as he realized that his years of labor in the Pampas were well rewarded by the virtue of this child. Of course, she was but a child, merely eleven years old, far too young for the Sisterhood. His answer was kind but definite: "Laurita, your intentions are good, and I approve them, but I am afraid you will have to wait a bit longer. In the meantime, pray." He saw the girl's eyes fill with tears and hastily added with a smile, "and eat a lot more bread, so you can grow!"

Forcing back her tears of disappointment, Laura walked out of the room. She was doubly sorry: she could not take the veil of Sisterhood which she so longed for, and, as far as she could tell, there was nothing more she could do for her mother.

She consulted her confessor. As she later revealed to Father Louis Pedemonte, who assisted her on her deathbed, she proposed a solution that came into her mind: could she not take religious vows just as the Sis-

ters did but in a private way, so that no one would know except God? Thus she could be a "little Sister." Later on she could make those vows publicly as a Salesian Sister. The priest hesitated, with good reason, stressing the seriousness of any vow, even a private one, asking her if she felt she could be faithful to such sacred promises. The answer was firm and fervent, "Yes, Father, with God's grace, I'll be faithful!"

The confessor prayed and considered. Evidently this was not the case of an ordinary fervent child. There were certain marks of exceptional promise in Laura. He instructed her carefully in the meaning of the vows and how she was to keep them. Finally he gave permission: "You may take the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but only in a private manner and for as long as I decide. You may renew your consecration on the greater feasts of the year."

And so Laura Vicuna, aged eleven, became the "spouse of Christ" in a simple and secret way. Alone she knelt in the little chapel of Our Lady of Snows and pronounced her vows to Jesus in the holy tabernacle. From the wonderful fruits these vows brought her we may safely conclude that they were graciously received by her Divine Master.

Such a procedure is of course an exceptional thing. That her confessor allowed her to take private vows is a proof of the high esteem he had for Laura and the marks of virtues she must have showed. The vows of re-

ligious life are a total self dedication to God, most sacred and serious in His sight. Infidelity implies sacrilege; faithful correspondence brings fruits of holiness and joy such as are scarcely dreamt of in human life.

Laura revealed her deep happiness to Sister Superior: "What a happy year this has been for me. I have come back to school, I have received Confirmation, and *today more than ever I am really a child of Mary!*"

XI.

LIFE was different for Laura now. Her total self-surrender to God by vow did not make her a prisoner but rather released her into a vast new world of the supernatural where endless vistas of divine splendor opened themselves before her. Like the eagles of the Andes which she often admired poised high above the mountain peaks ready to swoop into the valleys, she was also ready to wing her flight to God on the strong wings of her vows.

The Sisters could not help but notice the change in their Laurita. A new joy gleamed in her eyes. A new strength animated her. Though they did not know her secret—for Laura had been told to keep her vows to herself—their own experience of religious life would tell them that the girl was in love, yes, with the Divine Spouse of her heart, who alone could satisfy her endless yearnings. And they prayed for her, especially the older nuns, knowing that the path to God demands more than the courage of beginning, that it calls rather for a total self-giving, that it is a path strewn with heavily thorned roses.

The month of May, coming upon her so soon after

her profession, gave her a chance to try out her new wings of love. Every day the pupils of Junin used to offer spiritual deeds of love to Mary, just little acts of kindness or their house chores or their special private prayers. Then each evening for every deed they had offered to their Queen they would ask Sister Superior for a paper rose and then place it in a bouquet before her Marian shrine in the playground. Laura was delighted at her chance of honoring the Mother of God, but she soon found it a source of embarrassment. When, on the first evening, she counted up the good deeds she had done for Mary, she hesitated to go up to Sister, for she could see at a glance that there were not enough roses, even if she claimed them all. What was she to do? If she asked for less, she would not be telling the truth. If she claimed the right number, what would her classmates think? She decided to tell the truth. Sister smiled as Laura whispered her number of Marian deeds for the day and gave the girl the entire bouquet!

The next morning Laura consulted her confessor. His answer was easy: she was to keep increasing her deeds for Mary and she was to tell the correct number to Sister, but she was to ask for only some twenty or thirty roses as her share in the school's bouquet of love to the Mother of God.

Sister Rose Azocar, one of her favorite teachers, tells us she used to watch Laura offer her roses to Mary and would sometimes ask, "Why so few today, Laura?"

But Laura never told her the secret. It was only on her death bed that she told the Sister of her confessor's arrangement.

On May 24th of that year, at the school entertainment in honor of the day's feast, Mary Help of Christians, Laura was chosen to read a composition she had written in honor of our Lady. The townsfolk were present, among them her mother and sister. Dona Vicuna beamed with pride as her daughter read in a flowing Spanish refined by training and as the entire assemblage vigorously applauded. Then Laura offered as an encore a hymn the children had sung often during the mission, a song telling of the Redeemer's death for sin. While the others clapped at the young girl's simple devotion, vibrant in every note, the mother wept at the meaning of her daughter's prayer. Later Laura ran to meet her mother.

"Mama," she exclaimed, "leave home for good and come here with Julia! You'll be happy here! Stay with me!"

The girl's heart sank. The answer was the same. "Not yet, Laura! I cannot! Pray for your mother!"

With June came the bitter cold waves that sometimes make their way up the flat Pampas lands from the icy Antarctic. That winter of 1902 will not easily be forgotten, for it dropped temperatures down below zero and brought freezing squalls and rains that threatened the life of humans and animals. The little wood stoves

that squatted in the classrooms were choked to the mouth with fuel, but the rooms were still cold as the wind whistled through the cracks in the plank walls. The children clustered about each other like bees in a hive to drink in every calorie of heat it could cook up. Laura became ill, not enough to go to bed but enough to make her days and nights miserable. Since she was not one to push someone else aside for a place near the stove, nor would she wear warm clothing if she saw a companion needed it, the bitterness of the winter cut deeply into her non-too-strong body. The only heat she got was the love of sacrifice that pushed her on to carry out her usual tasks without complaining of cold or poor appetite or lack of sleep. Sister Superior became worried, "Laura, you are ill."

"Oh, I'm all right, Sister," was the reply, but Sister could tell the smile was forced. She put the child to bed, smothered her in blankets and tried to stuff her with nourishing food. Laura showed no signs of improvement. Nor did any remedies help. "If the child has periodic fever," the general consensus of neighboring housewives was, "give her cold baths."

So little Laura, hot and weak, would be plunged into cold water repeatedly till her teeth chattered and she shook all over. More than once the good Sister who was trying to help her heard the child gasp in pain: "Virgin of Carmel, take me with you!" But there was no other complaint.

At the same time that she was suffering physically—possibly because of it, too—Laura had a severe attack of spiritual dryness. Her prayers became tasteless, her mind wandered aimlessly, rebelling against her will, her sacrifices seemed useless and wasted. Even when she sat in the chapel before her “Jesus’ little home” she could not pray. Then it was that her lips formed but one prayer, “Jesus I cannot see You, I cannot hear You. But You see and hear me, your poor Laurita. You know I trust in You.”

With spring came warmer winds and glad sunshine. And Spring bloomed in Laura too. She became appreciably better, eating and sleeping normally, and a new pink flushed her cheeks. To her joy, she found that the winter of her soul was over too. As it so often happens in the lives of those who make the Divine Love their only goal in life, she also realized that the trial, bitter as it was, had only served to strengthen her in her resolve and sweeten her every effort.

Laura did not go home that summer, probably because she was afraid of the trouble that might break out if Senor Mora saw her at home again. She remained at Junin, not without a bit of homesickness for her mother and sister, but certainly with joy at offering a further sacrifice for her Jesus. During the summer months she found plenty to do at school, substituting for the Sisters who left to go on retreat, and taking care of the orphans who had no homes to go to. Often she taught catechism

to the ranchers' children who used to go to the Sisters' school for want of a better playground.

These were happy weeks for Laura and the Sisters who, in the intimacy of a small school, away from disturbing influences, came to know and love each other. It was with pleasure that Sister Superior saw this rose of the Andes open its petals wider each day and stretch its face to the Almighty in a burst of beautiful love.

XII.

IT IS unfortunate, but it is also true, that many people are afraid of holiness. To their short-sighted gaze, used to **fix itself** on the gaudy trifles of their human existence, holiness is a craggy, snow-capped peak looming high above them, cold and forbidding, remote and unreach-able, the throne of the Almighty. Or to their hungry hearts, clutching at the bitter-sweet joys of daily life, holiness is a weed that must first choke every other plant of the human heart before it can itself grow. Like the poet, Francis Thompson, they cry, "Is Thy love indeed a weed . . . suffering no flowers except its own to mount?" Yet holiness means resting in the arms of God, feeling His love breathe upon them, sharing personally in His infinite happiness. Christian perfection is the fulfillment of a perfect human personality, so that it is the Saint who truly is a perfect person, for he has stripped off the old man of sinful and imperfect deeds, and has put on the new man "that is being renewed according to the image of his Creator" (Col. 3, 9). Hence, far from being a sterile, passive, negative way of living, true holiness is an active growth in personality, a dynamic, fruitful, and exceptionally precious life, because it is the ultimate fulfillment of the Creator's own words:

“Let us make man according to our image and likeness.”

Laura Vicuna, guided by Divine Grace in the Sacraments, as well as by her confessor's and Superior's wise advice, followed this pattern of Christian sanctity. As we read the testimonies of those who knew her and lived with her, we realize that her personality was not a dwarfed, dried up, puny thing, lost in sentimental gushings of the heart, locked in by a rigid frame of pietistic practices; it was a vibrant, pleasant, active, and fruitful personality that attracted by its simple charm and purity. To sum up her companions' testimonies: Laura was loved for herself, because of her personality, because of the very core of her being, which was her Christian sanctity. Had she been less of a saintly girl, she would have been less loved by her companions.

“No man is a saint to his valet,” it has been said; neither is one a Saint to his schoolmates, unless he has the true thing. A few testimonies of people who knew her will help us to get a good picture of Laura.

“The picture of this virtuous girl is still imprinted in my mind,” says Father Ortiz, for some time chaplain of the school. “When she received Communion she resembled an angel. Several times it seemed that her very body became transparent as crystal, reflecting the love of her soul, as she received Jesus into her heart.”

“On several occasions,” a schoolmate says, “I followed Laura secretly to the chapel to watch her pray.

In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament her very face lit up with the sweetness which her heart was then experiencing. Hands joined, eyes fixed on the Tabernacle, she was evidently in the presence of her only Love. A force seemed to hold her there; a heavenly attraction kept her close to the feet of Jesus."

Another schoolmate adds: "Many times I used to watch Laura as we made our way from classroom to playground or to our house chores. She used to stop for a moment to gaze at the chapel door, while her lips moved in prayer, and her eyes closed for a brief moment in meditation."

Seeing Laura gaze often upon a picture of the Sacred Heart which she kept on her desk, one of the girls asked her, "What does this crown of thorns tell you, Laura?"

The answer was simple in its truthfulness: "It tells me that our wicked thoughts and sins have wounded the Sacred Heart, and I must be careful not to renew His sufferings."

"And this wound?"

"The wound tells me that the Sacred Heart is always open to take in everybody, even me, because He wants us to hide in Him, to be near Him, and to avoid sin and love Him as He has loved us."

"But do you really think about this when you look at the picture?"

"Yes," was the answer. "When I feel pain, I look at the Cross over the Heart, and I don't get discouraged."

When I am tired and sad, I look at the flames of the Heart and remember that He loves me; then I am glad, and I want to suffer more for His love.”

“Many times,” another classmate tell us, “as we watched Laura in prayer, we used to say, ‘Our Laura must be enjoying very intimate favors from Heaven!’ ”

Sincere holiness, like its opposite, is not easily lost upon one’s schoolmates. They are quite able to detect the sham as well as the real thing. It would have taken a perfect hypocrite to deceive an entire school. That is why we place value on these testimonies of her schoolmates, who knew her for what she was.

“When she was in church,” one classmate says, “Laura did not look around, even if she knew her mother and sister were present, though she must have wanted to look at them. If the service was long and the children became restless, it was enough for them to look at Laura, her lips moving in prayer, her gaze fixed on the tabernacle, and they would quiet down again. ‘How can you keep awake during those long sermons,’ I remember one girl asked her. ‘It’s easy,’ replied Laura. ‘I pinch sleep away. You see, I pinch my arm every time I feel my eyes close, and that keeps me wide awake.’ ”

Even the neighboring folk got to know and admire Laura. One rancher, who for a long time had forgotten what the inside of a church looked like, tells us that one Sunday morning he was standing outside the school

chapel watching the children file silently in for Mass. He was particularly struck by one girl. Whether it was her beauty or just the happiness that seemed to shine in her innocent gaze, he did not know, but he soon found himself walking into the church after her. He was impressed by her earnestness in prayer, even when she yielded her place in the pew to another girl and knelt on the bare floor. The man could not tear his gaze from the child, so deeply moved was he by her devotion. He watched her go to Communion and return radiant with an otherworldliness, so that he muttered half audibly, "She is not a child of earth!" He followed the youngsters out after Mass, still looking at that one girl.

"Who is she?" he asked one of the children.

"That's Laura Vicuna," was the answer.

"I don't know what happened to me," he later wrote to Sister Superior, "but I certainly changed. I began learning the prayers children used to recite in church. I never again missed Sunday Mass. I started living as a good Catholic. I wanted to pray with that little girl and pray like she prayed. I turned again to God, and God turned again to my soul."

Due in great part to God's grace, this simple piety was the result of Laura's own spirit of mortification, whereby she guarded her eyes and controlled her imagination, purifying her heart to love God above all things.

Laura particularly trained herself in obedience, for

this is the virtue of young people and oftentimes the beginning of their sanctity. Her superior writes: "Laura was always obedient in big things and small, in things she liked and those she did not care for. She did not only the things the Sisters asked her to do, but often enough she obeyed the wishes of her schoolmates."

"Laura," admits one of her classmates, "was the most obedient of the girls. She never delayed to do her house work or left it half done. She went promptly from one duty to another, from study to work, from class to play, always with a smile, without becoming peeved or cross."

This obedience was coupled to a docility that sometimes surprised the Sisters themselves. The girls, for example, used to be given weekly conduct marks by the Superior with an accompanying private correction. "Whenever I called Laura to correct her," Sister recalled, "I found to my surprise that not only did she not excuse herself, but she quickly admitted her fault and asked pardon. I marvelled at such humility in a child."

And so on, down the line of the Christian virtues. They are a parade of fine qualities that made up a charming and pleasant personality, endearing her to both Sisters and schoolmates, marking her as an heroic soul who made Christian perfection the one goal of her life. Some day we hope to see these same virtues crowned by the Church's authentic seal of Beatification and Canonization.

XIII.

THE school year reopened in March, 1903. Laura was now twelve years old. Just about a year had passed since she had consecrated herself to God by vow—a happy year indeed for Laura and, as we can see who look back upon her life, a year of progress and getting closer to God. However, the same grief kept cutting into the girl's heart—her mother had not made the slightest step to return to God and the way of His commandments.

What was Laura to do? Her every prayer, her every sacrifice—and there were many in this young girl's life—were all for her mother. Yet, grace had not yet touched her heart. Would death claim the poor woman before she had a chance to repent? Or would death claim Laura first, so that she could no longer do penance for her mother? What more did God ask of the daughter to save the mother?

Laura waited . . . waited . . . and prayed. She pleaded with her mother, too, every time the woman came to Junin. But the answer she got was always the same: "I can't, Laura! You don't understand! Pray for your mother!"

Easter brought the sacraments and peace to hundreds of hearts in Junin, but not to Senora Vicuna. Then came the second Sunday after Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday it is often called. Laura assisted at Mass in the chapel, prayed the same prayer once again, and asked, "Jesus, what must I do for my mother?"

The answer came in the Gospel, so strikingly clear that it startled the girl. "I am the good shepherd," she heard her Jesus say, "and I lay down my life for my sheep."

"Lay down my life!" That was the answer! Could not Laura plead with God to take her life in exchange for her mother's soul? If Jesus died for all humanity could not Laura follow Him to Calvary and lay down her life for only one person, her mother? The idea took a few days to crystallize, and when it did she went to her confessor for permission to offer herself to God as a victim for her mother's soul. She would beg Him to take her life, send her any suffering, illness, even death—just in exchange for her mother's eternal salvation.

Victim for sin! Well did the confessor hesitate. Did the child realize what sin was, that she was ready to make her life a miniature hell, for hell is the real punishment for sin? Being a victim for sin meant answering yes to the question of Christ, "Can you drink of the cup of which I am about to drink?" (Matt. 20, 22) and then taking upon herself, in a mitigated manner, the agonies of Calvary. It meant accepting the thirst and the cold

sweat, the lashings and the scorn, the remorse and the grief that plague the sinner as God lays His heavy hand of justice upon him.

Yet such heroism, the confessor knew, was in total agreement with the traditions of the Christian church. It was the realization of St. Paul's desire, so often repeated: "I rejoice in the sufferings I bear for your sake; and what is lacking of the sufferings of Christ I fill up in my flesh." (Col. 1, 24) "I am made the libation for the sacrifice" (Philip. 2, 17). "I am already being poured out in sacrifice" (2 Tim. 4, 6). "I am satisfied, for Christ's sake, with infirmities, with insults, with hardships, with persecutions, with distresses. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12, 10). "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6, 14).

Whether God would accept the sacrifice of this innocent twelve-year-old the priest could not know, but he did know that, if God did, the child would need courage, for God's hand weighs heavily on the sinner. Where would she find strength but in the love of Christ, who "though he was by nature God . . . emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave . . . humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even to death on a cross" (Philip. 2, 6-8). In offering herself to God in reparation for her mother's sins, Laura would be following in the footsteps of her own Jesus, of whom she had heard, "In



this we have come to know his love, that he laid down his life for us" (1 John, 3, 16).

Her confessor agreed after much thought and prayer. She might offer herself to God as a victim to His Divine Majesty to obtain the grace of her mother's conversion. This second consecration was also secret, unknown to all, even her mother, revealed only on her deathbed. Did Laura know exactly what this act of self-sacrifice really meant? Did she expect God to receive it? Did she hope that through her personal sufferings, accepted from God's hands as reparation, her mother would find the courage to abandon her immoral position, confess her guilt, and return to the-way of God's commandments?

We do not know the answers to these questions, but we do know that God did accept her offering. Indeed, it was just a few days later in that Fall of 1903 that she suddenly took sick once more. To the Sisters' surprise, she weakened almost by the hour, so quickly that they feared the worst and summoned a doctor from St. Martin de los Andes, the nearest community. Strangely, Laura, who up to now had always submitted to treatment in the hope of getting well and had said she would soon be up and around, now smiled faintly to the doctor and told him, "Don't bother about me. Your treatments are useless, because I will never get well."

However, she took his medicines and in a few days was out of bed, trying to carry out her school duties and

house chores. To all appearances she was the same sunny Laura, but it did not take too practiced an eye to see that the girl was forcing herself and that every strain told pitifully on her little body.

That May she again took part in the Marian exercises, and her mother was present. As usual, Laura's first words as she hugged her mother were, "Mama, when are you coming with Julia to live here in Junin?"

This time Mercedes wept not for herself but for her child. "Laurita," she exclaimed, "what has happened to you? You are sick!"

She left Junin the next day with a heavy heart. Before leaving she begged Sister to care for the girl. Sister told her of the remedies they had applied, saying that Laura had improved and that probably she would soon be her old self. But Mercedes was not to be put off that easily. "I fear for the worst," she confessed. "Sister, I am not worthy of this child of mine. She is too good for me. I am afraid God will take her from me and bring her to Heaven!"

May and June passed rapidly enough. Laura did not improve but still kept her regular schedule. With July came the first cold of winter and the annual heavy rains. The rains of 1906 are still remembered in the Pampas. A deluge came down on the prairies; brooks swelled overnight into torrents; and rivers burst their shores to spill their angry waters over the plains. Down the foothills of the Andes tumbled seething mountain

streams, bearing uprooted trees, ripping gullies into the mountain sides, precipitating avalanches. The darkened sky kept pouring its contents upon the isolated Pampas settlements, till corrals and pasturelands sank deep in water, and cattle perished and entire ranches were washed away.

Junin had to be abandoned. Volunteer ranchers rowed makeshift rafts and river boats to the school, loaded them with frightened children in the middle of the night, and brought them to the Andes foothills several miles across the flooded plains. In the heavy downpour and bitter cold of a winter's night the children were barely protected, having just taken the bare necessities as they were picked up from their beds and carried to the boats. They now clutched each other for warmth and cried for fear and cold, mingling their sobs with the Rosary prayers the Sisters had intoned. It was an unforgettable night. Sister Superior later recalled how throughout the entire crisis Laura Vicuna had taken her place by her side, comforting the children, giving them her own warm scarf and cloak, bidding them forget the cold in their prayers to our Lady.

The entire school had to spend a few days in the hills at the villa of a kind friend, till the waters receded and they could again return to Junin. The ravages of the flood were heart-breaking. Entire ranches were washed away. Many people had drowned, too late in their flight from the rushing waters of the rivers. Cattle lay

bloated over the pastures, once a source of income, now carrion for vultures. The school was practically ruined. Mud lay deep in the rooms, school equipment was water soaked, walls and roof were dangerously weakened. But none of the children had been lost. The good Sisters tucked up their gowns and with the help of the older girls began making the house again habitable. Once more Laura, considerably weakened by exposure and illness, pitched into the work, disregarding the pain that racked her chest and the fever that burned in her face.

To add to her pain, she had heard nothing at all about her mother and sister, except that the flood waters had engulfed also Quilquihue and Senor Mora's lands. But a few days after the waters had all receded and families began coming back to Junin, she was relieved to see her mother and sister ride into the school grounds. Mother and daughters embraced in a prayer of gratitude.

But Senora Vicuna saw that Laura was worse. "Sister," she begged, "I am so worried. Laurita is not well. Please let me take her home with me for a few days or weeks till she puts on more weight."

Sister Superior advised the mother to wait. "Laura is doing well here and is happy. She will not be happy in Quilquihue, you know that. Besides, she has a doctor here who is treating her, while at home she would have no chance for medical help. Let her finish her school

year, and if she is not improved by September you may take her home with you."

Dona Vicuna agreed. She left Junin the next day, promising to return in September. Laura was not anxious to leave Junin. For her it was really home, and the center of that home, now the center of her heart, could not be found in Quilquihue, Jesus' little house of the tabernacle. To be away from Him could mean only loneliness and grief.

But Sister Superior had also made up her own mind. "Go home with mother, Laurita. She needs you, and you need her. Be obedient."

Laurita bowed her head. When September came Laurita packed her bag, said good-bye to the Sisters and her schoolmates, and rode off to Quilquihue with her mother and sister, with the promise that she would return as soon as possible.

Just a few days before, she had made a retreat and had begged for grace to be faithful both to her vows and to her self-sacrifice. With this double secret in her heart, knowing that her Jesus would never leave her, Laura went forth to what she felt would be the saddest period of her life.

XIV.

LIFE in Quilquihue was not as bad as Laura had feared it would be, mostly through the efforts of Dona Mercedes, who was determined that her daughter should find new health in the bosom of her family. Laura's time was entirely her own; about her were only kindness and thoughtfulness. Even the tyrannous "protector" Mora, kept out of her way—not that he could even tolerate the sight of Laura because her virtue was a silent condemnation of his own brutality. Whenever he saw her, he had only a glance of scorn for her and a growling threat uttered between tightly clenched teeth as though he were cursing an animal that crossed his path. Yet, much as Laura feared him, she did not cow before him but only met his stony stares and invectives with prudent silence.

Quilquihue was pretty in the spring. Every day mother and daughter could be seen strolling across the prairies, breathing in the cool freshness that blew in from the mountains, heavy with the scent of new Andes flowers and tall Pampas grass. Soon they got to know where the prairie birds tucked their nests to await their

new broods and how the flower buds burst into bloom at the sun's rays and how quickly the trees put forth a new crop of leaves. Nature was alive to them. To Laura it was the still, silent voice of God speaking to her of His love. Dona Vicuna later recalled how often Laura spoke of God in these walks, as though her soul were saturated with Divine Love and needed but the prompting of a flower's brightness or a bird's song to draw forth a hymn of praise. Together mother and daughter conversed of God and His goodness; as Dona Vicuna heard her child speak so eloquently yet so simply, she felt her heart being squeezed tightly by a vise of shame and contrition.

Laura's conversation was full, too, of Junin and "Jesus' little home" in the chapel of our Lady of Snows. Truly, the eucharistic soul of this youngster missed her sacramental Jesus and lived on memories associated with the Tabernacle. She would willingly have walked back to Junin to stay with her Jesus, if it were not that her mother wanted her at home. However, Dona Mercedes did not need too much prompting to see that her daughter was not happy in Quilquihue. In spite of its peace and healthy air and restfulness, the town did not improve Laura's condition. Even the hottest rays of the Pampas sun could not put a touch of pink into her pale cheeks. And there was no doctor anywhere near Quilquihue, with its rambling ranches and scattered homes. But most of all—and her mother's eyes were sure to see

it—Laura's heart was in Junin, with her Eucharistic Jesus and the Salesian Sisters.

Dona Mercedes made up her mind. Disregarding the threats and ravings of Senor Mora, who protested that she was abandoning him, she packed her family goods, took whatever money was hers, and left Quilquihue with Laura and Julia for good. She broke off her association with her "protector" and sought the protection of Junin.

The three took rooms in a small house just next to the parish church, only a stone's throw from the Sister's school. There was great rejoicing in the town when the word spread that Laura Vicuna was coming back. For some time both Sisters and townsfolk had come to look upon Laura as their own little saint; to have her back with them would be a pleasure. Laura had been away just a month and a half, but she was now overjoyed to see the Sisters again and to have the chapel of our Lady of Snows open to her at all times. More especially, she was glad that her mother had left Quilquihue with all its bitter memories and that she had broken off her unlawful alliance with her "protector." It was the first step to God and peace.

Now began a series of happy days that were to live long in the memory of Dona Mercedes and the Sisters. Every day, regardless of her growing weakness, Laura walked to church with her mother for Mass and Communion. Again in the afternoon, when the town lay in

stillness, they returned to the church, just to sit there in its cool peace, to read a spiritual book, or to tell their beads, or, more often, to look at Jesus' little house in silent prayer. Like the hart of the Bible, Laura yearned for the waters of living comfort that streamed from the tabernacle and quenched her deepest thirst.

She often went to the school to visit the Sisters, to whom she had long felt she belonged. There she did odd little tasks or taught the children their prayers or just talked and played and prayed with the Sisters. She was so much at home with these brave missionaries who had left their families in far off Europe to bring happiness to the children of the Patagonian prairies. The days went by in a smooth succession of peace and prayer—but Laura never got better. For all who treated her, doctor, mother, Sisters, she had but one request: let me do God's will, because I will never get well. But her voice had nothing of self pity in it, nothing of harshness, just a pleasant sincerity that led her mother to question, "But why does she suffer so? What does God ask of her? Why does she not respond to treatment?" Only Laura knew the answer to that.

Periodically Senor Mora rode into Junin, protesting his right over the family as "protector." His face bloated with anger and drink, he would demand loudly that his "wife" and "children" return to his ranch. Generally he made a scene in the open streets, asking if that good-for-nothing "*santita*" had not died yet, so

that the neighbors hissed him to shame and bade him drive off to the devil. He would storm off then, always with the threat that he would return one day and claim his lawful property. But the neighbors were quick to respond that they would be waiting for him. These stormy visits disturbed Laura and upset her because she feared for her mother, who was clearly left to the graceless mercy of her "protector," who, according to the unwritten law of the Pampas, could claim her, as his right. It was either that or the hardship of loneliness in what was definitely a hard man's land. Her prayers for her mother increased in fervor. She begged with God and pleaded—and suffered.

Christmas came and passed happily and peacefully, but still no change in Dona Mercedes's position; she went to Mass and prayed but never attended the Sacraments. Then came the feast of the Epiphany and to the three Kings' gifts Laura added her own gift of the myrrh of suffering. The last offering was at hand.

It happened a few days later, when evening had already settled its cloak of darkness over Junin. Dona Mercedes and her daughters were at home, relaxing after supper. Suddenly their domestic peace was broken by the stamping of heavy boots and a loud insistent knocking, accompanied by a volley of curses. The door was kicked in, and there in the entrance stood Senor Mora, eyes bloodshot with heavy riding and anger, cheeks red with drink, moustache and beard

soaked with saliva and sweat. He swayed dangerously. In his hand he held his horsewhip.

"Now will you come back?" he demanded loudly. "Or must I whip you back home?"

Laura screamed. She and Julia clung to their mother for protection. Dona Mercedes was panic stricken. She could only gasp, "Laura, save yourself!"

Laura knew but one refuge, the Sisters' home. She must get there at any cost. She screamed as her drunken assailant stepped towards her, raising his whip threateningly, and then, as her mother drew his attention to herself, she dashed past him out the door and into the street.

"*La santita!*" yelled Senor Mora. "I'll get her now! She won't escape me!"

He darted after her, whip high in hand. It took but a moment to reach the girl, who had already fallen from weakness into the dusty road.

He lashed madly at her, whipping her little body as though it were one of his cattle, kicking her with his heavy boots, and cursing diabolically all the while. Dona Mercedes and Julia screamed for help, and, as their cries pierced the silent night air, doors were flung open and people rushed into the street to beat off the madman. Just as he bent to take up the girl, the crowd rushed upon him. Throwing her to the ground, he leaped upon his horse and rode off to Quilquihue in the darkness.



The first to reach Laura was Senora Espinosa, who had always befriended her as her own child. Tenderly she picked up the unconscious girl, carried her home and placed her on her bed. Then, as she kept back the angry mob, Mercedes hurried to revive her daughter.

Laura was a mass of bruises. Her face, shoulders, and back were red with angry welts where the whip had cut into the skin. Large portions of her body were black and blue, where the heavy boots had dug into the tender flesh. Blood stained her arms and legs and crimsoned her white dress. Her eyes were closed. Only choking sobs that shook her pitiaibly showed that she was still alive.

Hastily Senora Espinosa washed the swollen wounds with warm water and poured soothing oil into them, while Dona Mercedes spoke to her daughter, calling her by name and praying to the Mother of God to have pity on this her little one.

Laura slowly came to and tried to move her swollen lips in prayer, but she had scarcely strength to breathe. Dona Espinosa feared the worst. Sending the neighbors back to their homes, she sent a boy for the priest and then went back to Laura. The girl was suffering badly, no doubt of that. Her face was twisted in a pattern of pain, and tears forced themselves from her closed eyes. But she did not whimper or complain; at times only, one could hear snatches of prayer that escaped her lips.

To her confessor, who questioned her, she said only,

"I forgive him, Father. I bear him no grudge." But to all others she refused to speak of her assailant. She only whispered, "Pray for me. God's will be done."

Laura would never again rise from that bed. The last blow had been struck. As she lay there, bruised and broken, she resembled much more closely her blessed Jesus, who had lain as pitifully upon the bed of the Cross for the salvation of mankind. Is it too much to see in this the offering of a young, innocent victim to God Almighty for the salvation of a mother's soul? As He had once used the malice of brutal executioners to redeem mankind by the voluntary offering of His Son's life, could He not also use the hatred of this man as the instrument of His victim's death for the sins of her mother?

Laura's condition became worse. Yet, for all who came to see her and there were many, even those who would not lower themselves to greet her mother in the street—Laura had a word of comfort and a single request, "Pray for me!" Those who recall seeing Laura those last few days speak of a strange sense of peace that surrounded the girl, much as though she had just completed a tiring task and was now resting from the ordeal. To none did she appear dying.

But Laura knew the truth. On January 17, three days after the brutal attack, she asked her mother to summon the school chaplain, Father Crestanello, who, as her regular confessor, had given her permission for

both her private vows and her act of self immolation for her mother's soul. As he walked into the room she smiled faintly.

"Father, I want to make my confession. I have little time left."

As her confessor, Father Crestanello knew well the soul of this thirteen year old girl. He alone shared her most intimate secrets of soul which have now been sealed in the bond of the sacrament. He alone knew the reason of her mysterious illness and tragic death. Now, as so many times in the past, he listened to her confession, candid and contrite, while she told her faults and begged the grace of sacramental absolution. More than ever edified by the goodness of this child, he sat by her side, suggesting prayers, till evening.

To him alone Laura confided, "Father, this pain is terrible . . . yet the grace that gives me hope is great!"

Before leaving her, Father told her that Sister Superior, whom Laura had grown to love as a second mother, would have to leave Junin for her retreat in Santiago, Chile, and that he was to accompany her and a few other Sisters. The blow was heavy for the girl. She had looked forward to these two persons to strengthen her in her last hours; to them she felt bound by a sacred tie. Now she bowed her head.

"Then I shall have to die alone. Jesus, as you wish!"

The tears flowed freely as she bade her confessor fare-

well and asked, "Father, pray that I may save my soul!"

The next few days were long hours of pain and prayer, interrupted now and then by Dona Mercedes and Julia, who tried to ease her pains by their kind attentions. Laura could no longer retain food, breathing was a task, and sleep was out of the question.

On January 21, she appeared to be at death's door. With scarcely any strength left, she called Julia, and, when the two girls were alone, she gave her a last message. It so impressed the younger sister that she later wrote it: "Be good to mama, don't give her trouble, respect her always. Don't ever leave her, even if later on you will have a family of your own. Don't look down upon the poor, but be kind to them. Love our Lord and the Blessed Virgin. Pray every day to your guardian angel to keep you from sin. Don't forget, Julia. We will be together in heaven."

The following morning, Father Zachary Genghini, a Salesian missionary who was acting chaplain of the school, brought Laura Holy Communion. The girl knew it would be her Viaticum, her food along the way to eternity. Oh, how she had prepared for this last visit with Jesus in His Eucharistic Presence! As the priest entered the room, she raised herself in bed, eyes aglow with longing, arms outstretched as to a friend. In the presence of her mother and sister, she received her Sa-

rior and then settled calmly into bed, her arms folded over the coverlet, her eyes closed, her face a picture of rest. Even the physical pain that had wracked her body now eased off.

"Laura," asked the priest, "would you like to receive Extreme Unction?"

"Yes, Father," was the quick reply. To her mother, whose tears had begun to flow freely she said. "I am not afraid to die, mama. Only by dying can I give you the help you need."

A significant statement, indeed, but its meaning was lost to Dona Mercedes.

After the sacrament had been administered, Laura rested quietly. When her mother and sister had gone out of the room, she spoke to Father Zachary, "Father, I am ready, but I cannot go yet. As I received Extreme Unction, I renewed the sacrifice of my life that my mother may receive the sacraments. Can I not tell her before I leave her?"

The priest nodded in agreement, called Dona Mercedes, and left them alone.

"Laurita, you are leaving me?" asked the woman.

"Yes, mama. But I must tell you something first. I myself begged Jesus and Mary for this death. I have offered my life for you!"

Dona Mercedes was stunned for a moment. Then the whole reality burst upon her—the many pleadings of her daughter to leave her "protector," the child's tears



and prayers, her sudden illness and rapid decline, and this last brutal attack—and all this for her! Now her tears were more of remorse than grief. How blind she had been all this time, how callous to grace, how blind to the real worth of her daughter!

“My Laurita!” was all she could say. “What have I done to you?”

Then, after a moment, she dried her tears. “I swear, Laurita, I promise you I will never go back to that man. I’ll confess my sins and come back to God!”

Laura called the priest back into the room.

“I promise you before God’s priest,” repeated Dona Mercedes, “I will come back to God!”

Laura lay back upon her pillow. Distinctly both priest and mother heard her last words.

“Thanks, Jesus! Thanks, Mary! Now I die happily.”

A moment of silence, broken only by long drawn out sighs, then “Jesus, Mary, Joseph. . . .”

Next door, in the church steeple, the six o’clock Angelus bell sent its message of prayer into the evening air as it accompanied the soul of an innocent victim to its Creator.

Laura’s self immolation was complete! The Rose of the Andes had yielded its full burden of sweetness.

XV.

LAURA passed on to her Creator at six o'clock, Friday evening, January 22, 1904. She was thirteen years and ten months old. As the news spread about Junin, the populace read a meaning into the fact that she had died as the Angelus rang. "She has gone to Heaven with the Angels," they said, "to sing her *Hail Mary* to the Mother of God."

Laura was laid out in a white dress and veil, her hands clasping a rosary and the prayerbook of the Children of Mary. By her side passed a devout line of schoolmates and townsfolk who had long prized her presence in their midst. Dona Mercedes sat at the child's head, her face streaked with tears, her fingers running nervously through a rosary. She could not forget the last words of her Laurita as the child bared the truth of her suffering and death. That very night she walked alone to the village church and in the silence of night and the secrecy of the confessional she told her sins to God's priest, humbly and sincerely repenting of her past errors. Then, cleansed by God's grace and fortified by the confessor's words, "Go in peace," she returned to keep her night vigil by the body of her child.

The next morning Laura's body was taken to the town cemetery, where the Herrera family had offered their private tomb as the final resting place of Junin's favorite child. It was an open tomb, in imitation of the Indians' manner of burial; the body was laid on a raised platform in a small hut of mud and grass, to be dried up by the hot Pampas winds and thus to fall into dust and merge once more with the prairieland.

During the funeral Mass, true to her promise, Dona Mercedes walked up to the altar, knelt near the body of her daughter, and, in the presence of the entire town, received Holy Communion, thus publicly showing that she had been reconciled to her God and her Church. It was a moment of intense emotion for her, packed with remorse and sorrow and yet with a sense of peace she had not known in years. What her little daughter had done for her was so generous, so far above ordinary human love, that the poor woman was overwhelmed. She could only hear again and again the words of the Redeemer sanctioning her daughter's action: "Greater love than this no man has. . . ."

Laura's tomb became a shrine. Many people made it a regular custom to adorn the prairie hut that held her body with sprays of wild Pampas flowers as they prayed for her intercession. The self-immolation of Laura was a known fact, for her mother would not let it remain a deathbed secret, much as it embarrassed her, so that the word quickly spread, "If Laura could win her

mother's conversion by her death, can she not obtain other favors for us from God?"

A few days after the funeral, while Dona Mercedes was resting at home in the company of two woman friends, the inevitable stamping of heavy boots and crashing of doors told her that "he" had come back. In the doorway stood Senor Manuel Mora, brandishing a whip. In tones of fierce anger he hissed a command thick and heavy with drink, "You come back home now! She's dead! Come back or I'll kill you!"

The old fear gripped Dona Mercedes again. She choked in fright. Then, feeling braver in the presence of her two visitors, she answered, "You killed her! You can kill me too, but I will never break the promise I made my daughter!"

The two women screamed for help. Senor Mora, remembering the threats of the townsfolk, cursed and dashed out of the house. But he did not give up. More than once he tried to claim Dona Mercedes as his "property" according to the lawlessness of the Pampas, so much so that Dona Mercedes had to move into a family for protection, sending Julia to the Sisters' school.

Senor Manuel Mora was under police surveillance until his death in 1907. He was shot in a drunken brawl with several other ranchers. To the end he was the cruel, tyrannical "protector" of Quilquihue.

The aftermath of Laura's tragic death is, of course, a

happy one for her family. Senora Mercedes left Junin for the little town of Freire in Chile, where she remarried and where she was held in high esteem for her virtuous life. Until her death in 1929, at the age of 59, she was in continual correspondence with Father Genghini and Father Crestanello, to whom she gave information for a biography of her daughter. Julia, too, settled happily in life. After finishing her studies at the mission school of Junin, she married a fine Catholic rancher in 1906. In accordance with her sister's last wishes, she made her home with her mother, moving with her to Chile and remaining with her till her death. Together the two women kept alive the memory of Laura's virtuous life and her sweet love.

Meanwhile, Father Crestanello, Laura's confessor, began compiling a biography of his former penitent, realizing that her virtues should be made known to the world and that her act of self-immolation should receive the honor it merits. In 1911 he published the little book, and it immediately made such an impression upon Argentinians and Chileans that they made her tomb a frequented shrine. Many favors, some of them quite striking, were attributed to her intercession by devout clients who had prayed for her aid. The Salesian Sisters, especially, have proposed Laura Vicuna as a model for their girls to imitate, not only in Argentina, but throughout the world, for virtue goes beyond the frontiers of nations.

It would appear that God has placed His own stamp of approval on the heroic life of Laura Vicuna, as He has done in the case of His canonized saints, namely by miraculous cures. The term "miraculous" is, of course, being used in this instance in a loose way, since the authority of medicine and Church has as yet made no pronouncement. But there are some striking cures, nevertheless. There is a case of impending blindness warded off by prayers to Laura. There is also the case of a young Italian boy thrown into prison during World War II for political reasons. He was despaired of by his family. His sister prayed to Laura, and unexpectedly her brother was released. There are spiritual "cures" too of persons who rejected God's grace till someone prayed for them to Laura.

These are some cases now under consideration by competent doctors and priests.

In 1954, fifty years after Laura's death, the Argentinian government gave the Salesian Sisters permission to remove the remains of Laura from the old Herrera tomb to a modern grave in the school grounds of Junin. This simple ceremony was attended by high church and government officials. At the same time the Most Reverend Alphonse Buteler, Bishop of Neuquen, inaugurated the official cause and diocesan inquiry for the beatification and canonization of Laura Vicuna.

The official decision now rests in the hands of Christ's Church.

XVI.

BESIDES Father Crestanello, Laura's confessor, the one who knew her best, in whom she often confided, was Sister Angela Piaia, her superior at the Junin school. Sister Angela's testimony of Laura's virtues carries much weight: It is plain, concise, restrained.

"Laura," she writes, "was certainly God's gift to the Vicunas. Still, it is due to her mother's care that, from the child's infancy, nothing was allowed to spoil the candor of her soul. For this she deserves praise and indulgence for the evil errors of her later life.

"On the foundation of this unspoiled purity the Holy Ghost erected an edifice of holiness. From her childhood, Laura showed herself disposed to be good; as she grew older, in the favorable environment (of the mission school) she advanced steadily in the paths of the Lord, her soul remaining pure as crystal.

"We noticed in her a sense of the spiritual that was superior to her years, as well as a strong leaning towards prayer. She applied herself to prayer with such earnestness that she was not even aware of things about her. More than once we had to remind her that it was time to leave the chapel. From her first days at school, in her religion classes, Laura understood the meaning

of prayer and eternal salvation and the misery of those who refuse the sacraments. Hence, she was resolved to stay close to Jesus.

“Because of her devotion she was allowed to receive Communion every day. ‘How lucky we are,’ she used to tell her schoolmates, ‘that we can receive Jesus so often! We must live only for Him!’ To keep her fervor alive she proposed: ‘From the moment of my Communion to four o’clock I want my every thought, deed, and pain to be an act of thanksgiving to Jesus, who has come into my heart. From four o’clock on, everything will be an act of preparation to receive my Lord and King. I will keep nothing, not even a moment, for myself.’

“Since she could not stay in church as long as she wished, she used to make spiritual visits. How often we saw her in the classroom or sewing room or playground turn her face to the chapel and spend a quiet moment in silent adoration! Because of this some girls used to call her ‘Jesus’ slave.’ Her answer was, ‘How I wish it were true!’

“Every First Friday was sacred to her. She carried out the Exercise for a Happy Death with her classmates; she made her monthly confession, renewed the resolutions of her former Retreat, and begged Jesus for the grace of a happy death. Her devotion was without mannerisms, without show.

“Learning in class that confession does the soul good

if one reveals everything to the confessor and obeys him, she used to tell her spiritual father everything that went on in her soul, not only her sins but also her desires, hopes, endeavors to be good, and the books she was reading, the company she used to keep. Then she carried out everything she was told.

“She had special days of mortification for the Missions. Whatever she could put aside from the money her mother sent her she gave freely to the Missions. On holidays, when the girls used to spend their money on candy and trinkets, Laura used to say, ‘What good comes of it? Is it not better to give your money to the Missions? If we remember God’s love for souls we will gladly give!’

“It was the climax of her love to exclaim, ‘Oh, how wonderful it is to be a Child of Mary!’ ”

Another Sister who was very close to Laura was Sister Mary Azocar, her teacher.

“Laura,” she has left written, “showed signs of a practical, though not brilliant, intelligence in school-work and domestic arts. As regards the soul, religion, Heaven she had knowledge beyond her years. She was quite different from those girls who have time for everything else but prayer, who can multiply their energies for vanity and gossip but cannot speak about our holy Religion. Laura spoke but little—yet what eloquence she showed in speaking about God!

“Laura was quite ordinary in looks: of normal

height, good figure; her face was round, very fair in complexion; she was not of a very strong build. At all times a pleasant smile lit up her very dark eyes.

"Sometimes I had to call her from prayer to attend to some duty or I had to refuse her permission to go to the chapel. Then she would tell me, 'If I leave my prayer to do something God asks me to do, I am equally pleased. To do His holy Will is my prayer!'

"Laura's tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is well known. Our Lady's feasts were dear to her, and she prepared for them by an act of mortification and a special act of kindness. Though always busy, she found time to recall the school's daily practice in honor of the Mother of God. From the day she became a Child of Mary she called her by no other name than my mother! Before going to bed each night, she used to place her Sodality ribbon in the shape of an **M** at the foot of her bed, where she could see it."

And so run all the testimonies of both Sisters and schoolgirls who lived with Laura and knew her intimately. All are of the opinion that she was heroic in the practice of the Christian virtues and can be offered as a model of Catholic life to all schoolgirls of modern times. In spite of—or rather should we not say because of—the fact that she was mortified, that she preferred suffering to pleasure, that she put the salvation of souls first, because she reserved the fullness of her love for God, she was popular and well loved. Is it not because

she was changing her personality, by the alchemy of Divine Grace, into the personality of Jesus, the one love of her heart?

Thus passed the life of this young Chilean schoolgirl of the twentieth century : ordinary almost to monotony, yet rich, alive, and fruitful. It was a life richer in pain than pleasure, yet it was so because she willed it and prayed for it. It was a life unadorned by miracles—yet who will not say that it was one long miracle of Divine Love? “Love is stronger than death” is ever so true of Laura Vicuna.

How true the words of Cardinal Minorette, Archbishop of Genoa, who said of Laura: “*Laura’s life is a bouquet of roses, a bouquet studded with thorns!*”

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*Anyone receiving favors through the intercession of Blessed
Laura Vicuna is asked to present a record of such favors with
competent testimony, to:*

REV. MOTHER PROVINCAL

DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

655 BELMONT AVENUE

HALEDON, NJ 07508

