

# The Indiscretion of Marie-Thérèse Beauchamps

Roger White

from *Witness of Pebbles*, 1981

The time of the sojourn was limited to a number of days,  
but the results in the future are inexhaustible.

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Loretteville, Québec

1 September 1962

Ah, Beauchamps you were married to fool, and if you ever doubted it you know it now; at my age to be making this long journey to Montreal, just to see the place again. But I do this, Jean Paul, for both of us for I derive more comfort there than from the Masses I have said for you. It brings you close; it helps me remember how it was between us when we were just beginning our life together, before the children came. There I do not feel the sadness I experience when I tend your grave. Sometimes I cry a little, but for a different cause. Grant me my little solace, Beauchamps, and be patient with an old fool. Forgive me, too, for having kept this from you all these years—the only secret I ever withheld from you who knew me like your own hand. It was not a matter for the confessional but I would defend it before the Mother of God who surely knows my heart. It is a bitter thing to outlive so many of those you have loved.

It is different now, I must remember, with half the building torn down. I must prepare myself for that. I always expect it will look the same as when I first saw it so many years ago. I was a shy and awkward girl and would not have dared approach so grand a place, but it drew me like a magnet for I had seen a picture of that face. {Many times] I have wondered whether it was by accident that I glimpsed the face of my father. My heart was pierced by those eyes. I could not struggle with the print but asked my friend who reads English to explain. Such stories she told! The papers had been full of the news of his arrival, his sermons. He was called the Apostle of Peace. 'He is an Eastern Sage,' my friend said, but my heart told me that he was much more than that, though who or what he might be, I could not tell.

The aunt of my friend knew someone whose child had been healed by his touch. He was a worker of miracles. Oh Beauchamps, I needed a miracle. Three years married and my womb still barren. My tears, my novenas, the votive lamps—nothing availed. Mother of Heaven let me see him! I prayed.

It was easy to find the Windsor Hotel. A crowd had gathered and I stood unnoticed at the edge, not nervous but shaking with excitement, and feeling shabby and out of place among those elegant people, among *les anglais*. But when he arrived I felt no strangeness, just great awe and a tender love, for he shone, Beauchamps, with a beautiful light. He had the face of a saint which held all the happiness of heaven and all the sorrowful burdens of earth. No one saw me as I quickly crossed myself in his holy presence.

But then a deep shame swept over me as I watched him move among the people, smiling and greeting them, for they were like children, each wanting the attention of their tired and patient father, each wanting a solution to their problems, an answer to their questions and their needs, just as I did. I wanted to leave but I could not turn away from his gleaming figure. He will know no rest, I thought. We will crucify him with our questions. We all want to take from him but who will help him in his great work? God strengthen him for this, I prayed silently.

At that moment, almost as though I had called his name, he turned his glance in my direction and for the first time I felt the full force of his gaze. There are no words to describe it, my Jean Paul, but it was as though he read the pages of my soul. My heart which had been pounding wildly was overcome with a greater peace than I have ever known. There was in his glance all the sad wisdom and tenderness that must have been seen in the face of our Lord, and a question, too, but I could not read it. The moment seemed like eternity.

Then he smiled and turned to reply to someone who spoke to him and I knew what I would do. I had to touch him, just lightly touch his robe. I still do not know whether it was courage or madness that prompted me, but I had no willpower to resist that impulse.

I made my way through the crowd quietly and unobserved. Who would notice anyone while that holy man was in their midst! Closer I came until I could almost reach out and touch him. And the woman in front of me who had been speaking to him began to weep softly and in turning away she stepped aside and I was face to face with him. Without thinking of what I was doing I began to genuflect in order to touch the hem of his robe to my lips but he caught my arm and raised me to my feet and held my gaze searchingly. My both hands were in his. I do not know what language he spoke but I understood his gentle word: No, my daughter. He reached into his pocket with a swift grace and pressed something into my palm with a playful smile and released me without a word, easing himself away so smoothly that my little indiscretion had scarcely been noticed and caused no embarrassment.

I slipped away then, stepping slowly backward through the people who were glad enough to come forward to replace me, and then I began to run across the square, stopping for breath under the trees where I continued to watch for a little while until he entered the building and the crowd drifted away. Only then did I remember that he had placed in my hand the gift which I still held in my clenched fingers. Two little sweets wrapped in paper. I did not doubt what they were for. They were our banquet that night, Jean Paul.

When I conceived Pierre I was tempted to tell you, but how could I have found the words? And then the other children came and there was no need to [say anything] for life moved on in the normal way. How gladly I gave Pierre and Martine to the church, and would have willingly seen the others take Holy Orders, too, if they had the call. And so I never spoke to you of this, my Beauchamps. Do you smile from heaven as you watch me come here each year on this day to offer gratitude?

Sometimes I think the grandchildren might understand if I were to speak of it, especially Céleste, who is like one of God's angels. Perhaps I will speak of it to her one day and bring her along; I would be glad of her company on the bus. We could sit under the trees in the square and I could try to describe him to her. But what shall I say if she asks what became of the Apostle of Peace for I never saw him again or heard what

became of his work. But I know it was the work of God and God's work is not lost even after half a century.

Will Céleste laugh at the pilgrimage of a stupid old woman? No, she will try to understand. She has my ways, but is more restless, more questing, and finds no answers in the church. She reads about the Buddha and Muhammad—matters we did not speak of in my day. No, Céleste will not mock the stranger work of heaven.

Roger White