

Marie-Augusta Bonnet (1874-1941)

She is the one who gives us these little stories.

Her parents came from southern France (Lyon and Dauphine) and had gone to Peru where they worked in the silk trade. Anita (A) was born in Arequipa but she was so weak that her parents did not want to get attached to her. They had already lost three children. One son died in an accident.

She was baptized Anne-Marie and Anita. Her father hardly knew her. He traveled frequently to Europe where he died when A was six years old.

Three people formed the child:

Jeanne: an old Indian nanny

Idylle: "a black woman that Mr. Bonnet had found in Martinique"

Eusebe: an African two years older than A.

A annoyed Jeanne and would play tricks on her. "I don't want that ugly black woman to touch me," she said of Idylle who, as a consequence, was banished from the kitchen and could no longer take care of her.

Eusebe was a playmate. Where did he come from, why was he "hired"? He took classes with A. One day he let Milord, the mastiff, get to the little girl and the dog bit her on the face.

He invented things to amuse and astound the little girl. In order to go to the next rain station, he had the bright idea of getting up on the fender of the locomotive.

Eusebe disappeared one day without a trace. It seems he was the one who gave her the taste for fantasy which she will later develop in her stories, "the short comedies" that she loved to tell.

A was two or three when one day she filled the pockets of her apron with ants that she found in the garden. She put them on the table for the meal. When her father reprimanded her she answered that she could find even more.

She showed a great desire for freedom. She wanted to run away from home (like Eusebe?). One time she staged a kidnapping in the park. When the maid was not looking she dropped her cape and took off. The maid was terrified.

Another time, she swung from the parapet of the first floor balcony.

"She loved dangerous games, activities full of the unexpected that sometimes endangered her life."

Her mother, who was partially blind, forbade her to climb the trees in the garden. The little one built a platform with a table, chair and bench. Her mother: "I forbade you to climb..." The little one: "I didn't climb, I got on it."

Several times the child traveled to Europe. One time the ship was in the midst of a storm and a woman fainted. A revived her with a bit of Cologne saying: "Lady, Lady don't die yet!"

During another trip one of the sailors built her a swing and she swung over the waves. Danger of death – a strong injection of adrenaline. Later she would say how stupid it was, "it was really dangerous, but I loved it."

During still another ocean crossing, water came right into the cabin. Her mother prayed the Our Father. The daughter put on a life jacket and said to her, "Our daily bread will be really soggy and will be no good to us if we drown."

At our sisters' boarding school in Arequipa her fantasies continue. In her desk she kept a collection of tame ladybugs, which she made march in procession – two by two. One day the sister supervisor discovered the bugs and threw them on the ground and crushed them under her foot. A, "Why did you kill my ladybugs? They didn't do anything wrong."

She told of a dream. She wanted to accompany Jesus when he ascended into heaven. She hung on to his feet. "A quick way to heaven," she thought. But then a wicked rooster appeared who began to peck at her feet – so much so that she let

go of Jesus' feet and fell back to earth. She woke up and said to herself, *"I guess it's not all that simple to get to heaven."*
A good story for psychoanalysis.

In 1889 she accompanied the superiors to the General Chapter where she made profession on December 27 taking the name Marie-Augusta. A few days later she was named second novice mistress, her predecessor having been sent to America.

From 1900 to 1926 "Madame", the usual title, was second mistress. Then she had charge of the novitiate in Picpus, almost forty-two years in all.

She remained sort of a grab bag of surprises given all the stories people tell of her (and that she probably told about herself.) Only edifying things, naturally. For example: she could pronounce the name of Jesus before she could say "mommy."

When she was about sixteen and the gutter had to be repaired, a mysterious workman arrived, did the work in record time and disappeared – Saint Joseph in person.

During a brief exile from Picpus to Saint Servan in 1939-1940 she came to know war and sickness. She was hardly able to walk because of her knees.

She was known for her life of mortification. Already as a young girl, one time she "tattooed" her arm with a white-hot knife and sprinkled the wound with salt and pepper. Was it a way of avoiding an offer of marriage?

We discover her true personality behind all these anecdotes. She was a woman who looked to heaven with her two feet on the ground. She knew that was the way to remain rooted.

She was a "mother" and she created "family."

A little selection of her sayings:

In the convent, like the mules in the Andes, you have to have two blinders so as not to see either to the right or the left but straight ahead.

You don't make reparation without suffering, and you don't suffer without feeling it.

Everyone is useful and no one is indispensable.

The just one sins seven times a day and what can we say of the unjust?

Humiliations are like nettles: you have to grab them with your hand, that way they sting less.

I don't like novices who have no faults: it's like the skin of a frog; it's all slippery when you touch it.

Don't desire honors: we are not like a family of monkeys who climb going from branch to branch.

"Quelques pages d'une belle vie – Mère Marie-Augusta Bonnet, Maîtresse des Novices," 1874-1941, Picpus 1941, 73 pages, mimeographed

By way of Introduction: “Madame’s” (Marie-Augusta Bonnet) little stories

Of all the sisters’ biographies consulted for this presentation, Marie-Augusta Bonnet’s is the most amusing. She seems herself to have been the real author as she recounted her life to the novices and the young sisters.

NB: The most alive ss.cc. histories have been passed on orally and then written down as was the case of the GF with HL and the GM with GB. This oral tradition calls for a serious study.

Marie Augusta Bonnet was a mischievous child, also a bit racist (“I do not like that black woman,” she said of her maid.) She developed exotic fantasies. She resembled a bit Lucy from the comic strip “Peanuts” by Charles Schulz.

One reason could have been that she was French – a daughter of parents from Lyon – but born and brought up in Peru. That contact with and integration in another world (cultural, social, religious) probably shaped her personality. She had her feet on two continents. Her French-Spanish religious name, Marie and Augusta, is a sign of this. She was an example of globalization (she was at least inter-continental) before we used such language.

In a broader sense, she was what is called in Spanish “indiano”: “a native, though not originally from America...it is said also of someone who returns from America rich.” (*Diccionario de la lengua española*, Real Academia) Her biography, published after her death in 1941, although heavily hagiographic and corresponding to the politically correct ideas of the time, gives us a glimpse of the vivacious vitality of this woman who had refused an offer of marriage (from her tutor) because she could see instinctively that she would find greater freedom in the religious life. The biography (72 pages) contains no dates (the kind of things chroniclers look for) but all kinds of maxims, little stories and anecdotes which show the personality better than a series of chronological facts.

Right from the beginning she has an effervescent spirit and is a bit of a whirlwind. At birth she was so small that her parents made the decision not to become attached to their little girl (good Catholics that they were). They had already lost three or four children at an early age. And that was “statistically normal” at the time (the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century) when only half the children born survived.

We could analyze the situation as follows: Marie-Augusta fought to survive because she loved life. And she loved life because she loved God and wanted to respond to his love by a positive attitude toward life.

Her greatest title was “Mistress of Novices.” And she can rightly be placed along side the great wisdom figures and masters: Anthony de Mello (Birdsong), Henri Bouland (Parables for today) etc.

A photo taken in 1939, two years before her death, shows her strong, like a “round petticoat” that the GM speaks about in one of her letters to GB (see below). She is smiling like an imp, a practical joker at the service of God’s reign. A radiant face in the midst of the fortress formed by her black habit and starched veil. A life force which helps to overcome obstacles and find joy even behind the thickest walls.

Apparently she was the mother of her novices, the mother hen of the young ones entrusted to her to train for religious life. To do that she made use of her imagination. She found images and stories in daily life to use in spreading the message of God’s love. She was born too soon. She would have been an excellent mid-wife after Vatican II.

One of her inventions was the letter she wrote at Christmas to her novices. Each one was illustrated with a drawing and signed “little Jesus.” The date was no accident. Christmas is the birthday of the Congregation and little Jesus is already big Jesus whose birth, life and death is our rule. (Constitutions 3)

Each evening’s presentation will be introduced by one of her Christmas letters.

First Story

Marie Augusta Bonnet’s story – On the back of an elephant

My dear child, oh how this good and peaceful mount will bring you to the haven of perfect love, by the difficult path of perfection!

This charitable beast can lift you up effortlessly each time you fall; he will do it gently; she will place you on her large back and continue on the way, always peaceful and calm.

The Lord approves the choice you have made as regards this type of mount, and he wants you to keep it as your symbol for this beautiful feast of Christmas; know that perfection does not mean that you do not fall, but that you always get up peacefully, lovingly and confidently, without great worry.

So that you can really put this into practice, I give you my Heart which loves you so much; which asks of you in return, childlike and loving abandonment to the arms of your Father. Will you refuse me that? Will you hurt your Jesus so?

Second Story

Marie-Augusta's story: The (aero)plane

It is important that you progress as quickly as possible in the path of the perfection. I send you the fastest means of transport: the plane of Confidence. If you know how to manage the machine, and if the wheels and the motor, are good quality, your journey will be quick.

I advise you to take the 'Good Will' plane; you know it, but sometimes you abandon everything to look at the earth, and suddenly! - the plane capsizes and my X... falls to the ground, is flattened and weeps foolishly.

More than that now; higher! Hurry and forget everything and don't keep coming back with unpleasant words that attract a reprimand or a criticism that you find too severe. I love you, my little X..., you know that; Love me too, without measure.

Yours in Jesus – (1922)

Third Story:

Marie-Augusta's story: The Elevator.

I have chosen for you the surest elevator: the arms of my dear Mother. Come, my little sister M... Be well, have no fear, the little way of holy abandonment, of childlike confidence.

Don't stop along the way to look for the origin of some sound that scares you. We will soon find our Mother, the blessed Virgin, and you will have nothing to fear, nestled against her heart.

Hide there. You feel so good in the arms of your mother! Have confidence, fear nothing. Here are the rose petals that the Heart of Jesus asks of your love. (1923)

Community includes everything related to the spirit and the reality of family, everything that is "common."

It is striking to see how this family is formed by the Eucharist – the communion we celebrate and our practice of adoration.

Patrick Bradley ss.cc. in his circular on our vocation and mission speaks of that: "I don't think it is accidental that the SS.CC. spirit is both Eucharistic and community oriented, for they grow together." (p. 66)

Forth Story:

The story of Marie-Augusta – The Sugar Bowl

The sugar bowl and the indispensable "tongs" that prudence calls for. The first of them is for you: fill it each day with your acts of calm and gentleness. The tongs are for those who come to you some days seeking your help.

Never the less, I hope it is only a bit of prudence, and that knowing how to control yourself and knowing yourself well that nothing is done without knowing how to contain yourself, to abstain, to hold yourself back, the tongs will be useless.

Fill your sugar bowl with acts of gentleness, for little Jesus will often come to take from the sugar bowl of your heart. Will it be necessary for him to use the tongs? Oh no, the sugar bowl is his and he can get in there with both hands, isn't that so, my adorer and repairer?

Jesus (1924)