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The Galilee of St. Francis

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Marie Donegan Walsh

SEVENTH
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THE GALILEE OF ST. FRANCIS

PART 1 — FONTE COLOMBO — THE FRANCISCAN SINAI
PART 2 — GRECCIO — THE FRANCISCAN BETHLEHEM
PART 3 — LA VERNA — THE FRANCISCAN CALVARY
PART 4 — ASSISI — THE FRANCISCAN GETHSEMANE

Marie Donegan Walsh



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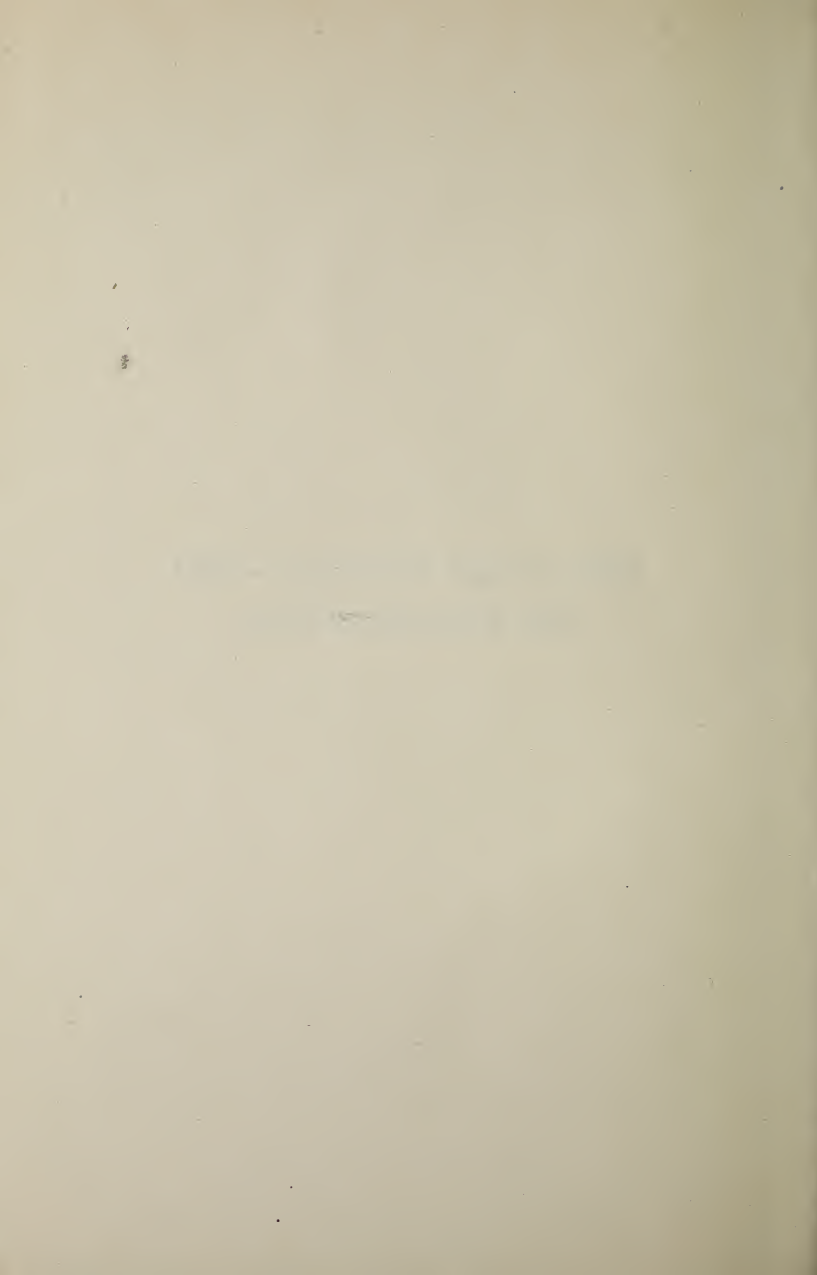
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St. Francis of Assisi

1223—Fonte Colombo—1923
The Franciscan Sinai



FEW, even if familiar with Franciscan shrines and sanctuaries throughout Italy, know the Franciscan Sinai—that solitary convent on an almost inaccessible mountain height crowning the valley of Rieti, where St. Francis drew up his rule and dictated it to Brother Leo. Even among the notable group of convents with which the saint endowed this exquisite valley (a place which came next in his affections to Assisi), Fonte Colombo stands out from the rest in strong individuality and holiness of association.

Its very name, Fonte Colombo, seems to be altogether appropriate. It comes down from the day of St. Francis himself, when a noble and devout lady of Rieti called Colomba, who owned a small property on the mountain summit, presented it, with the house, to the holy founder that he might enlarge it into a convent, near where a limpid mountain spring has its source. The remains of Colomba's original, medieval house still exist, and are incorporated with the newer building.

The Holy Wood

Ascending to the friary by a steep precipitous pathway high above Rieti, one first reaches the "Bosco Sacro" (holy wood), by which Fonte Colombo is surrounded and almost concealed from view. These holy woods, with their centuries-old luxuriant growth, constitute in themselves an outdoor sanctuary, hallowed by the prayers and presence of saints. It was here that St. Francis daily

and nightly prayed and wept, fitting himself by this incessant communion with his God for the incoming of the Holy Ghost, who was to inspire the rule. Each separate spot on earth, covered by the succes-



Friary at Fonte Colombo

sion of tiny shrines erected over them, has its special memory—convent, chapel, rock-hewn cavern, one more holy in association than the other, sanctified by the atmosphere of prayer and contemplation which surround them like a mantle. This mountain hermitage is more rude and primitive in its simplicity than any other Franciscan shrine—truly a home of solitary and anchorite, poised high between heaven and earth. It merits the inscription placed above the outside entrance—the verse from Scripture: “Take off the covering from thy feet, for holy is the ground on which they stand!”

The First Chapel

We reach the first chapel, which St. Francis himself erected in 1217, by a narrow stone pathway on the side of the rock, skirting the convent buildings, where the Stations of the Cross are placed against the cliff of rock. This ante-room, so to speak, of St. Francis' Gethsemane garden, is the scene, each week, of a beautiful and touching commemorative ceremony when on Saturdays, after Compline, the Franciscan brethren go in procession to the shrine, chanting the *Transitus*.

The walls of this early chapel of the saints, with its rude stone altar resting on a single column, were originally decorated with frescoes; but these have faded with time and few traces remain save a figure of St. Mary Magdalen, from which the chapel now takes its name, though St. Francis had originally dedicated it to his beloved Queen of the Angels.

In the course of centuries the small edifice fell into decay, but the spot was so dear to the Franciscans that it was fully restored some years ago, in all its primitive form, every vestige and ornament that remained being left intact and incorporated into the new building. Even the low narrow, medieval doorway is a souvenir of St. Francis, for over it, in the quaint bell tower is the little bell which he caused to be rung till it re-echoed out over the valley, to call the friars to Mass from the hermitage solitudes where they dwelt.

The whole scene is absolutely unchanged from

the days of St. Francis; and as the bell rings out today for midday Angelus, one wholly expects to see the small doorway glorified by a slight, brown-robed figure, with the "novice robin-red-breasts" perching on his shoulder, standing to greet Brother Leo and his companions, as they emerged from their grottoes of prayer.

The interior of the chapel is simple as the lover of poverty could have wished it. His presence is suggested by a large red letter, T, frescoed on the wall; for to him who saw his crucified God in all things, the letter T ever suggested the form of the cross, and he would have it everywhere he dwelt, even placing it on his written blessing to Brother Leo.

From the hush of the little early church one emerges again into the rock pathway, from which it is only a step into the inner sanctuary—the power house of Fonte Colombo, whence St. Francis' "Counsel of Perfection" went forth to the world of his day and to countless future generations. Here one seems to stand literally on the holy mountain where heaven descended to earth. Hidden deep in the very heart of Nature in her sternest, wildest beauty, is this eagles' nest of rock, poised on the very fringe of the confines of mortality, where the voice of the Spirit awoke, amid the murmur of many waters and the diapason of the wind. Before entering the rock-bound sanctuary, it is well to let the beauty of the spot sink into mind and heart.

This little chapel of St. Michael contains the flat rock on which St. Francis slept. It bears the following inscription: "This hard stone served as a bed for the penitent Francis, when he had to allow his suffering members a short rest, to the confusion of delicate Christians, who have a horror of the least inconvenience!" The only striking decoration in the chapel is a picture of a Franciscan friar of Padua, representing St. Francis receiving the rule from our Lord, who appears high up against the oak-tree while the holy founder kneels in ecstasy at his feet, and the group of brethren, apart behind the bushes, look on with awe and wonder.

On a lower level still, reached by seven rock-cut steps, is the "Holy of Holies," the cleft in the rock called the *Sacro Speco*. On coming to *Fonte Colombo*, when St. Francis first beheld this rock-cleft fissure on the mountain, and heard the ancient legend that it had been riven at the time of our Saviour's crucifixion, he claimed it for his own, first in view of its solitude, then for its double association with the Crucifixion. Into it he crept, as into the side of Christ, to meditate, night and day, with burning love on the Passion, and from it he beheld the wondrous vision of Jesus on the oak-tree outside.

The very spirit of St. Francis dwells yet in this spot, where he fasted for forty days on bread and water in honor of St. Michael before drawing up his rule, a spot in which, after *La Verna*, he attained the greatest height of revelation.

The Rule

When the seraphic father came forth, like Moses from the burning bush, his worn, etherealized face was so transfigured that the brethren could scarcely look upon it. On his knees he dictated the rule. Fast as Brother Leo wrote, he failed to keep pace with the burning flood of eloquence from the mouth of one who was habitually slow, simple and uneloquent in speech.

This rule, with its ascetic mysticism, its literal adherence to the Gospel precepts, struck terror into the hearts of those who, though they wished to serve God, were yet far from Francis' summits, and they came there to beg him to mitigate it somewhat, to make some concessions to the frailty of human nature. They shrank from his white heat of sanctity, fearing that few would be able to compass it. They counted on Francis' gentleness, his Christ-like compassion of human weakness, to bend him to what, in all good faith, they deemed the truest wisdom, forgetting that it was not their personal founder who spoke, but the mouthpiece of the Holy Ghost transmitting words of heavenly wisdom! As of old, signs and wonders were needed to convince, and once more God vouchsafed them.

It needs very little imagination to conjure up the scene which happened on this spot. Francis kneeling before his grotto, rapt in communion with his Lord, unmindful of the deputation of brethren on their errand of compromise. They, fearful to ap-

proach him, crept near as they dared; near enough to hear the sorrowful words he uttered audibly to the Presence unseen by them, before which he knelt with wide-stretched arms of intercession: "Lord, did I not say that these would not listen to me?"

Then suddenly, as they listened awestruck, rocks and trees around glowed with a marvelous and blinding radiance, and Francis fell on his face before the vision of his Lord, high up against the branches of the giant oak tree before which we stand today, now incorporated, to protect it, in the convent wall. All present heard the solemn words—this time not from the mouth of the saint: "Francis, in this rule there is nothing of thine. All that is in it originates from One alone. I will that it be observed to the letter, without comment. I know what human weakness can do, and also when I wish to aid it. Let those who do not wish to submit, leave the order, leaving the others and those who will come to it by them, to observe it purely!"

Terrified by the insistent power of the clear, unearthly voice, the temporizing brethren were put to utter confusion, and only the familiar accents of Francis, stern, yet sweet, roused them from their great fear. "You have heard!" he said, turning upon them his glorified face. "Do you desire that it shall be repeated?"

Fully convinced of the supernatural force aiding and inspiring their founder, the weaker brethren went forth, in holy obedience, leaving St. Francis in the peace of his riven rock.

Not far from the holy grotto is another holy cavern, or rather, a hollow, in the bastion of rock, which one of the tenderest of Franciscan chronicles connects with Brother Leo, the saintly brother who



St. Francis Receiving Approbation of His Rule

was St. Francis' confessor and secretary and so like him in humility and gentleness—the "pecorella" (little sheep) of God, as the saint loved to call him.

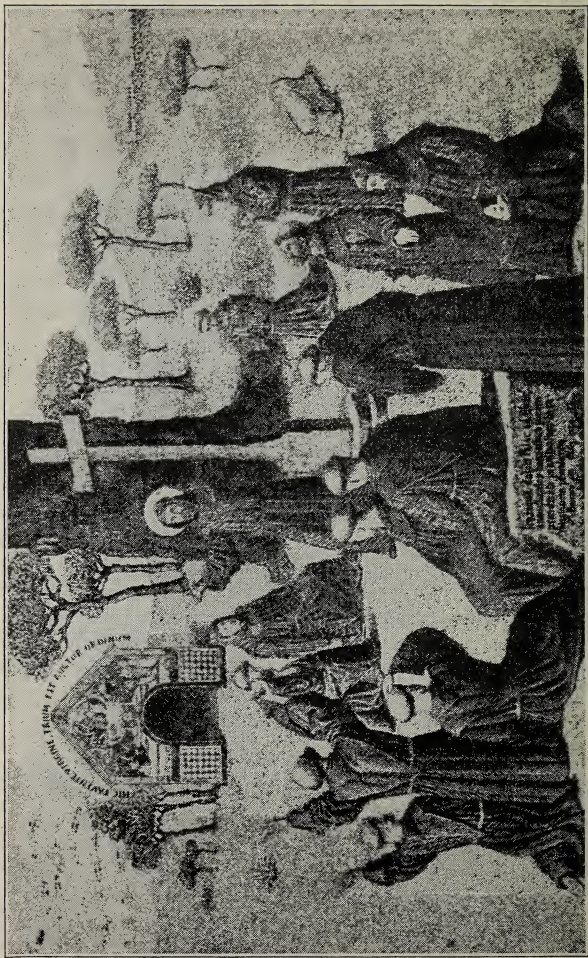
At the time of the apparition of our Lord, Leo, who was never far from his hero, knelt prostrate in

this low-lying rock-cell, in close proximity to the oak-tree. His humility being overcome with a longing to see the beloved Lord whose glory shone from Francis' face, he lifted his head with a sudden movement, which naturally would have brought it into violent contact with the rock; but he suffered no harm, while to this day is shown the impression, made as on wax, on the hard rock by Brother Leo's head. The good Lord ever watched over these faithful, childlike servants of His, who placed their hope in Him.

Perhaps on account of St. Francis' long and frequent sojourns in this favorite hermitage, the touching little daily records concerning him seem to be multiplied here. The place seems to have attracted the saint constantly; it was the scene of revelation and sorrow, anguish and joy unspeakable! He came to its grateful peace and solitude when in terrible suffering from his painful malady of the eyes, brought on by constant weeping and penance over the sufferings of Christ.

The Miracle of the Fire

Here also took place the miracle of the fire. According to the rude surgical theories of the middle ages, it was held that by cauterizing the forehead down to the eyebrows, relief would be afforded to the patient's eyes. St. Francis, with his usual docility, consented to the operation. But his courage momentarily failed at the sight of the fire and red-



The First Followers of St. Francis

hot iron. Then, instantly regaining his habitual serenity, he faced it fairly, and turning to the fire with his never-failing sweetness and winning courtesy, thus addressed it: "Oh Brother Fire, noble, beautiful and useful among all creatures! Be courteous to me on this occasion, for the sake of the love I have always borne thee!"

Meanwhile all the brethren, sick with horror at the agony of their beloved father was about to undergo, fled from the sight. When it was over they crept back, fearfully, to tend him. Francis received them with his usual tranquil smile, gently inquiring: "Why did you flee, oh timid ones? I assure you, I felt no pain whatsoever, and my brother the doctor may once more burn my flesh, if he desires!" Just as he got back from humanity and from living things the love he lavished upon them, so Francis found the very elements repay his love and admiration. Those who stood around, doctors and brethren, could only humble themselves in wonder before this manifest sanctity, murmuring: "What manner of a man is this that the elements obey him?"

Like all his friends, the doctor was passionately devoted to the saint; and through his authoritative insistence and persuasion, seeing that St. Francis' austerities were seriously undermining his constitution, he was able, up here at Fonte Colombo, to persuade him to modify somewhat his incessant mortifications. And then "God's sunbeam," as Francis has been called, acceded to the doctors' commands, and asked pardon of his "Brother Ass" (as he was

wont to call his body) for having treated it so badly, saying gravely but with a smile on his lips: "Now be joyful, Brother Body! For see now, how willingly I second your desires and hasten to cede to your just remonstrances!"

One imagines, somewhat, that a keen perception of humor must often go to the composition of a saint, to enable them to realize and condone the curious foibles of their fellow creatures; for so many saints seem to have been endowed with it. St. Francis possessed the gift to the highest degree, and it helped him greatly in his dealings with others. Each circumstance which happened in this little beloved convent reveals the saint in some new beauty of character and holiness. No matter how simple and homely the incident, his personality illuminated it, like sunlight glorifies a simple landscape! He who considered himself not at all, was always thoughtful of others. Hospitable to a fault, he would have no one turned away from the convent door, neither friend or foe, pilgrim or four-footed or feathered pensioner.

One day his good doctor had come up from Rieti to visit him for his increasing eye trouble, which yielded to no remedies; and St. Francis refused to let him make the steep descent again till he had shared their midday repast! "Go and prepare something good for our brother the doctor!" he commanded the Brother Cook, unmindful of the state of the convent larder. Hurriedly anxious consultations ensued, and the brother, tip-toeing in, re-

monstrated with the saint in an agitated whisper: "Dear father, can we offer him but a small portion of black bread, some oil and wine? It is all we have!" "Man of little faith," replied the saint, "must I repeat? But do as I tell you!"

While this homely scene went on, the guest declared himself only too honored to share any frugal fare. Just as they sat down to table, loud knocking came at the convent door, and a peasant woman deposited with the porter a large basket, containing white bread, fish, delicate dishes, fruit and honey—a gift to St. Francis from some distant grateful friend.

It was Francis' "Wedding Feast of Cana," and the brothers were saved mortification, while the saint smiled his kindly smile, pressing the good fare on his guest with the same princely hospitality with which he would have offered the black bread. One can imagine how they must have said among themselves: "What a thing it is to have a saint in the house!" for they were accustomed to signs and wonders when Francis was concerned.

But the good doctor sat pondering it all over; till, coming out of his brown study with a start, he said to the friars: "Brothers, neither you nor I realize the sanctity of Francis!"

One could multiply unendingly these records at Fonte Colombo; but time presses. Modern pilgrims cannot delay. They must descend to catch trains, and plunge themselves once more into the rushing whirl of daily life, refreshed, however, both in mind

and spirit by that glimpse into the clear heights where sanctity flourished! For with the complete absorption into the personality of St. Francis which characterizes all these convents where he lived, making them seem a visible part of himself, we must not forget that many holy anchorites and hermits followed him here; such as Fra Innocenzo da Chiusi, who made his abode for years in the spreading branches of an ancient oak-tree, known even yet as the "tree of Fra Innocenzo."

After him came Venerable Bartholomew of Salutio, who lived in two caverns (one serving as chapel) suspended almost in mid-air over the precipitous rock. Among the terrific penances of this holy hermit, it is told that on each Friday of the year, in memory of Our Lord's suffering he, having made a cross of a heavy tree-trunk, loaded himself with it and climbed the three mountains adjoining Fonte Colombo, planting it on the summit of the loftiest!

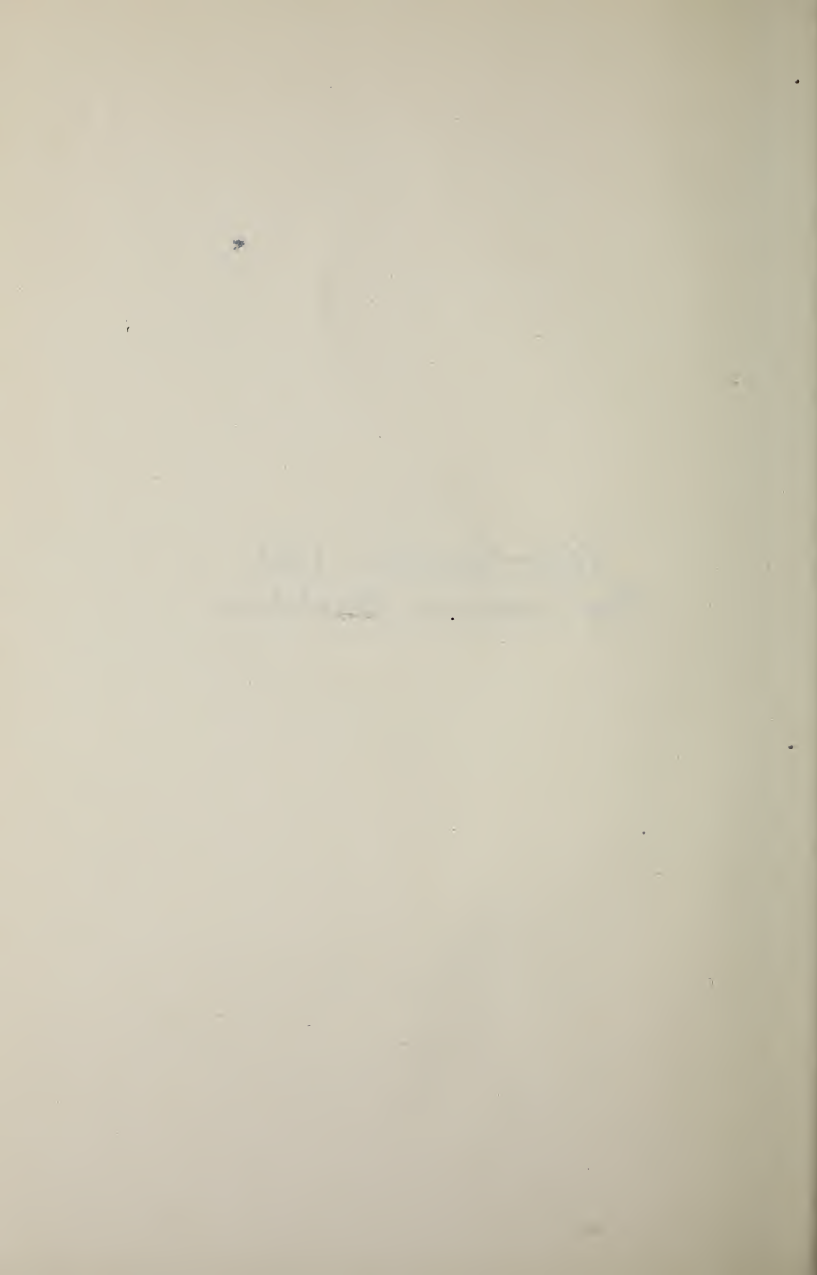
It can well be seen that this mountain of Fonte Colombo has always kept its character as dedicated to the memory of the Passion, since St. Francis consecrated it with prayer and blood and tears—a fitting environment for the inception of that rule, which, like its founder, clings closely into the side of Christ crucified.

Fonte Colombo (that is, the Dove Fountain) suggests its inner source of unearthly peace. This very peace, however, the cloistered shade of oaks, the

hush of the pines, and the rush of falling water, causes us momentarily to forget the price of high renunciation by which it was attained. Suffering is ever the cost of revelation, and St. Francis paid the price, not only for himself, but for the spiritual children who were to come after him throughout the ages. But the peace of his victory reigns triumphant at Fonte Colombo.



1223—Greccio—1923
The Franciscan Bethlehem

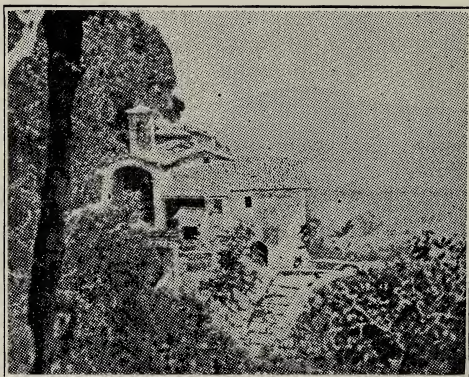


MANY of the fairest spots in a land where Nature has been prodigal of beauty, are inseparably connected with Franciscan memories. The saint who loved Nature so closely and intimately as the outward manifestation of his one transcendent Love, seemed, in all the great crises of his life, to have been vouchsafed an intuitive inspiration to seek her in her most hidden wonder spots.

On the mountain summits he made holy for all time, the soul of Francis, steeped in the earthly beauty, stood in the very presence chamber of Beauty divine and infinite! "His feet were beautiful, indeed, upon the mountains," and the loftier the summit, the greater his revelation, culminating on the Thabor of La Verna. From height to height one can follow him, everyone showing Francis in a new light of holiness. Even today his memory lives in these mountain solitudes of his—a perennial miracle—as no other man's memory has survived or will survive again. He who lived but for humility, who fled to the heights to escape the world's notice, drew weary, restless humanity after him, wistfully curious, eager to learn the secret which transfigured him, even to their earth-bound eyes.

The modern critic will say scornfully that, apart from his personal magnetism, which swayed them, these contemporaries of St. Francis, prince or peasant or townsman alike, were but simple, credulous medieval folks, to whom legends of miracles and supernatural happenings seemed everyday

events! Yet Francis' magnetic personality has passed—seven centuries ago! And can we, of this most materialistic age, be called simple and credulous? And does the supernatural enter greatly into our busy lives? Yet even we have followed him up to the mountain heights, and the Umbrian solitudes are broken today by the chant of pilgrims, with St. Francis' name and praise upon their lips.



Friary at Greccio

As I write, I have just returned from a pilgrimage to Greccio, the Franciscan Bethlehem, the humble birthplace of the tenderest of Franciscan memories—the one, perhaps, which has most influenced the world.

“*Serafico Francesco!*” The pilgrims' hymn, as they wind up the mountainside, still re-echoes in my ears, mingled with the song of the birds and the

purling of brooks. How little one realizes, at Christmas time, that every Catholic, in every land, as he kneels by the Christmas crib in mission chapel, stately cathedral or city church, owes it to St. Francis, who, in his "intellect of love" (as Dante terms it), yearning to bring all men near to the heart of a Child, encompassed it by this simple human representation in the Cave of Greccio, which all ages have copied! Not by rebuke or sermon did he win the rough, neglected mountain people to the Love he personified; but straight from the tender heart of lover and mystic came the inspiration to use the things of everyday life they knew so well, to take them out of themselves. So when the Greccio peasants helped Francis to prepare his Crib, and lent their animals, and ransacked their winter hedges for shining berries; and chose the fairest, most modest girl for Our Lady, the best of the village youths for St. Joseph, and the most angelic babe for the Infant King, they too had done their bit, wondering, yet content, as they knelt beside him at midnight on the mountain, and watched his glowing, ecstatic face; they felt the divine reflection and came back to God, to "find the Child with Mary, his Mother." And with them followed the centuries to come; all from that one inspiration of a beautiful life.

The story of the Crib of Greccio returned to the mind with fresh significance, in the seventh centenary year (1923) on account of the solemn celebrations in Rome and Greccio, where on Christmas

eve, the Pope sent his Cardinal-Legate to celebrate Mass in the Greccio grotto, on the very spot of St. Francis' Crib. Simultaneously, in the great basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (Our Lady of the Snow) in Rome, where the relics of the boards of our Lord's manger are preserved, midnight Mass was celebrated by a cardinal, before such multitudes of people that hundreds who could not gain entrance to the vast church, knelt outside the doors to assist at Mass! Thus the two Cribs alike, the humble Greccio hermitage on its mountain ledge, and the Bethlehem relic in its priceless reliquary framed by the splendor of the Roman basilica, drew their worshipers to kneel by the Christ-Child in the light of the seraphic Father's face; as his deed, with joy renewed a hundred-fold, found a living echo in the heart of humanity.

The recent centenary celebrations filled one's mind with a desire to see the spot of St. Francis' Crib, and when the occasion of a Roman pilgrimage to Greccio presented itself, one gladly availed oneself of the opportunity.

A cool June morning found 130 Franciscan pilgrims assembled at the Rome station, en route for Greccio. The pilgrimage was under the direction of a committee, whose genial director, Cavaliere Verzicchi, was the life and soul of the party; leaving nothing undone for the pilgrims' welfare. His interesting talks on the holy places and Franciscan landmarks we visited, made them live again in our sight, besides giving us a fresh impetus of devotion

to the saint of whom he was so worthy a follower—a true Franciscan Tertiary. The different congregations of Roman Tertiaries were well represented, accompanied by their various directors, whose genial and helpful presence added not a little to the general satisfaction; for the sons of St. Francis invariably carry with them that atmosphere of real kindness, courtesy and simplicity of manner which their seraphic Father left them as a perpetual heritage.

As the train wound by the exquisite curves of the Tiber, through the valley of Sabina, with its vistas of silver olives, its green vineyards and its crops white for the harvest, framed by the encircling chain of mountain ranges, fading into the blue line of the distant Apennines, the pilgrims sang Franciscan hymns or recited the Rosary, or broke spontaneously into the new hymn of the Catholic peoples, "*Vogliamo Iddio! We Want God!*" with its startlingly emphatic answer to unbelief, which surely would have been dear to the heart of St. Francis, expressing, as it does, the great need of nations, which has brought the modern world low. "*Vogliamo Iddio! We Want God!*" It was striking to hear it, rolling out in the strong sonorous Italian strophes: "We want God! We will have God! In home and school and factory! That work may be sanctified!" Then the chorus with its triumphant refrain: "We Want God! We Want God! For our Father and our King!" Surely this oft-repeated, heartfelt aspiration, as it has re-echoed ev-

erywhere about the streets of Rome during the last few months of many public religious demonstrations, will bring its blessing not only on the city of martyrs, but upon all this beautiful land, which has been doubly blessed by Nature and Grace!



The Holy Night at Greccio

In the soft evening light our pilgrimage reached the valley of Rieti, the second "land of St. Francis." We sped through the great plain, overshadowed by mighty mountains and strewn with Franciscan sanctuaries, each with its separate memories of the seraphic founder. Foresta, Poggio Bussone, Fonte Colombo (where St. Francis drew up his rule) and Greccio, towering on in inaccessible height!

Greccio

The night was passed in the quaint old walled city of Rieti, so full of Franciscan memories that it is a pilgrimage apart. The next day, in the pearly freshness of early morning, when the mists were rolling off the Reatine valley, revealing peak after peak in a wondrous panorama; the pilgrims arrived at the tiny roadside station of Greccio Nuovo, ready for the mountain ascent, which was to be made processionally; headed, as becomes a Roman pilgrimage, by the city flag of Rome.

A cavalcade of sturdy *asinelli* (donkeys) waited outside the station; worthy descendants of St. Francis' "little brother Ass," which carried him so willingly on his mountain journeys and whose smooth grey coat and patient eyes were eulogized by the saint; the saint's great tender heart instinctively protected all things lowly, despised and humble, even the familiar little beast of burden.

At first the pilgrims, starting with the sturdy pilgrimage ideals of "peas in their boots," looked askance at such concessions to "Brother Body,"

unmindful of the wistful looks of the donkey-boys and girls! However, as the path grew ever steeper and "Brother Sun" climbed merrily with us, high in the heavens, some of the elderly folk or the stouter brethren fell out of the march unobtrusively; and at a sudden sharp curve of the path, it was surprising to see that a considerable "cavalry detachment" brought up the rear. But the fervor of the pilgrims never waned, and the Rosary went on unceasingly, varied by hymns.

In some curious way our singing seemed to reproduce or be suggested by the scenery! When the beautifully wooded Monte San Francesco came in sight (the lofty mountain on the summit of which St. Francis built his first rough hermitage hut), the pilgrims instinctively changed their Rosary into the pathetic minor cadences of the Franciscan hymn *Serafico Francesco*, lingering on the beloved words, in themselves a prayer and a memory of him in whose steps we followed up the mountain side; amid all these things that he, too, looked upon and loved—the birds and the running water and the glorious morning face of Nature, fresh from the hand of God.

When a particularly steep bit of rocky pathway had to be negotiated, the hymn turned into the fine, insistent marching rhythm of *Vogliamo Iddio*, to the accompaniment of a vigorous crunching of stones and gravel. Every now and then, at a short halt, came an enthusiastic outburst of "*Evviva San Francesco!*"—the *prolonged Evviva!* literally wak-

ing the echoes. Half-way up, when a particularly precipitous-looking rock loomed ahead, one of the pilgrims shouted sonorously, "*Evviva il Santo Padre!*" (Long live the Holy Father)—to which the entire pilgrimage responded with such hearty good will that their *Evviva* shook the valley! It only needed to be heard to realize, in some manner, what his Roman children think of Pius XI. One wondered curiously if the rock before us had suggested to the pilgrim's mind the Rock of Peter, with its difficulties, or whether the mountain pathway reminded him of our Alpinist pope, to whom this pilgrimage would be a joy. In any case the Holy Father was constantly with us in remembrance, as the first prayers in every shrine and sanctuary were for him.

The lower world grew more and more panoramic beneath us as we neared our goal, which seemed to grow more elusive at every turn of the path! Finally we entered the exquisitely wooded avenue leading directly to the sanctuary, while the pilgrims intoned a triumphant *Magnificat*. Never had we sung the grand hymn more appropriately than on this spot, where truly "the soul doth magnify the Lord, and the Spirit rejoice in God its Savior!"

Thus we came under the convent buildings, nestling like white homing doves under the fortress rock! (Strange, that in any place connected with St. Francis the mind turns instinctively to metaphors of the living world of creatures, that he made

so intimately his own!) Overhead, the terrace parapet was full of *contadini* (peasants), who had come up here to Sunday Mass, and who formed gay spots of color in their bright shawls and the handkerchiefs on their heads, as they waved the Roman pilgrims a welcome from the heights. At last we stood on the square outside the church, only then realizing that we had gained the very heart of the mountain.

The first glimpse of the church seems disappointing in its comparative newness; for it is a later structure, built over the grotto and the original tiny church and convent of St. Bonaventure, which grew all too small for the pilgrims who flocked to Greccio. However, when the newer church was built, the little hallowed home of so many memories was left intact. Even the present church has its precious souvenir of St. Francis; for they placed over the high altar one of the oldest existing portraits of the saint, painted in the thirteenth century by the reverent hands of his good friend and benefactress, Giacopa di Settesoli.

It is a sad little picture—the slight, almost tiny figure, in a grey habit, with dark, sad eyes and emaciated features worn by furrows. It would seem as if it had been painted in St. Francis' later years, when illness and privation had wasted his frail body, and sorrow and trouble had saddened the sweet, glad nature.

Upon this altar-piece our eyes rested during the pilgrimage Mass, celebrated with the deepest devo-

tion by Father Bernardino of Ara-Caeli, Rome. Just before the Communion a *fervorino* was preached by a young Franciscan who, in burning words, told the story of Greccio, likening the kindled fagot cast by a child across the ravine at St. Francis' bidding, to fix the spot of his friary, to the torch of faith and love which St. Francis launched on the world, which Catholics of today must keep valiantly lighted, in the midst of an unbelieving world. The entire pilgrimage received holy Communion at the Mass, after which we thronged into the original old convent refectory (now a guest-room) for breakfast.

St. Francis' Crib

Then came the visit to the sanctuary, beginning with our goal—St. Francis' Crib! The hallowed grotto is small, dark and narrow, as the Bethlehem cave, with its overhanging walls and tiny altar. At first one's eyes can scarcely pierce the darkness (lighted only by one small window giving on a corridor); but gradually the quaint old frescoes over the altar glimmer out like a frescoed prayer! A fine, stalwart young Franciscan was our guide; making a picture in himself as he knelt before the altar with his uplifted candle, telling the story of his Father's Crib, simply, without rhetoric or effect, but just as if he had been there and seen it all!

On one side, to show its Bethlehem counterpart, the old master painter has put before us his simple homely conception of the Mother nursing her Child, with St. Joseph kneeling by. "Is it not wonderful,

how that Mother and Child look into each other's eyes?" said the young monk. Truly it was wonderful; for what those painters of the ages of faith lacked in technique, they made up in devotional feeling. On the other side is depicted the scene which makes Greccio live today as the Franciscan Bethlehem. The Infant lies in a stone crib, beside which St. Francis kneels with clasped hands, a light of serene ecstasy on the pure, rapt face. Behind him, seen through an open doorway, are the groups of country folks who came to see the saint's Crib, headed by his convert, the old friend who loved Francis—Giovanni Velita, who first brought him to this hermitage, and now lies buried in its precincts. After the manner of the old masters of art, who depicted several scenes in one fresco, there is painted beside the Crib picture the first midnight Mass at Greccio by the Crib, where St. Francis as deacon is seen singing the gospel, carried away in an ecstasy of love and devotion.

We were anxious to linger in this little Christmas sanctuary of holiest memories; but pilgrims' time is ever short, and many other landmarks remained to be visited. But before seeing further, the history of St. Francis' first coming to Greccio is appropriate here, for one looks at it all in the light of this story. Amid many lovely Franciscan chronicles it stands apart for its strong human interest. Amid the grandeur of the episcopal court of Rieti, where he was tended during the malady of his eyesight and regarded as an honored guest, the soul of Fran-

cis yearned for his Lady Poverty, dwelling on the mountain-tops, and for the souls who lived in its shadow, whom he had heard the city folk stigmatize as wild and barbaric. So the saint crept quietly away to his apostolate, taking up his abode in a twig hut on the mountain and descending to Grecio village to evangelize the mountaineers, who even in those days were considered half civilized. Gradually, the gentle hermit softened them and brought them lovingly to God with only his one weapon—love.

Giovanni Velita

One day the lord of the land, Giovanni Velita, came out from his castle and drew nigh to listen to St. Francis. Like the rest, his heart warmed to the frail little other-worldly figure, with the glorified face, preaching his joyous gospel of renunciation, his very glance bringing restfulness and peace. Again and again Velita listened, and when St. Francis returned to his mountain eyrie, the man of the world felt he could not do without the one person who interested him, who lifted him out of his own grey materialism and disillusionments to a higher plane of life. Presently he made the saint a bold proposal. "Come and live here among us always," he coaxed, "and I will give you land to build a hermitage more accessible." For, as the old chronicle says, Velita was stout and gouty, and found the mountain difficult when he climbed it painfully to seek his friend's counsel and companionship. St. Francis smiled enigmatically—the far-seeing smile of the saint and

seer, and told a child to pick up a lighted faggot from a woodman's burning pile and fling it as far as he could throw and where it lay, he would build his convent. Giovanni looked on complacent, knowing the child's strength would reach only a few paces away; so their saint was safe in their midst. But the faggot flew out of the child's hand, across the great ravine which separated Greccio village from the opposite mountains, to lodge against a sheer ledge of precipitous rock, where its blackened mark is seen today. Faithful to his pact, the lord of Greccio gave St. Francis the land, and the saint, with two companions, took up his abode on the rock—the small beginning of a friary where so many saints were to dwell in after years. Francis founded many convents later in the Reatine valley, but he returned ever lovingly here.

To continue our visit to the roof-tree of Greccio, each part of which has its separate memory and association, we first visit the dormitory of St. Francis and his companions, now a chapel—only a tiny cave or hollow in the rock—so low that one must bend to enter. Besides the tiny niche for St. Francis (like a child's grave in the Roman catacombs), the sleeping places for his companions are marked by rough crosses on the wall. Here in this very spot where we kneel, the lover of poverty stretched his weary limbs on the hard ground, to snatch his few hours of rest. Some kind soul (probably the faithful Velita) had sent Francis a pillow to ease the terrible headaches from which he suffered; but, af-

ter trying it, he cast it from him, saying quaintly and whimsically to his companion that its soft feathers had a restless devil in them, who gave him evil dreams; and he returned joyfully to his bed of rock. This is St. Francis, with ever a merry quip or excuse to conceal his heroic mortification! The holiness of this spot brings with it an incredible peace and blessing, as if the saint's bodily presence dwelt within it still.

Another more than interesting part of the old friary is the church and choir built by St. Bonaventure. Though rough and primitive in its Franciscan simplicity, it is altogether suited to the rock hermitage St. Francis loved. In the choir are kept several relics of his daily life,—the rough boards of his table, part of the stone from which he daily preached in Greccio village, his primitive metal crucifix and candles, and the beautifully wrought and decorated irons with which Francis was wont to cook the unleavened bread for the hosts; for his favorite Eucharistic charity was to lend or procure these irons for poor priests, so that everything pertaining to the altar should be done with reverence and decorum. Another souvenir of the great preacher St. Bernardine of Siena is kept here among the Franciscan relics—his pulpit, from which so many burning words of sanctity went forth. As the sunlight makes a glory of the tiny sanctuary, one seems to see the rude choir stalls peopled again with the saints who lived and prayed here—a Francis, a Bonaventure, a Bernardine—little thinking,

in the cloister simplicity of their lives hidden with God, that their names would go forth to the ends of an earth more vast than they ever dreamed of. Outside, on the mountain pathway, another saint dwelt, an anchorite and hermit, Bl. John of Parma, who lived for twenty-two years, in a rock cavern, a life of penance and prayer.

In the midst of our voyage of retrospect in this haunt of saints, a Franciscan father comes hastening down the woodland path, to warn us that the procession of the Blessed Sacrament is being formed in the church, and that the pilgrims are to join it outside.

Procession of the Blessed Sacrament

One has witnessed many splendid processions—in Rome, in Lourdes, in many a famous shrine, but never did a procession have more impressive setting or more nearly touch the heart, than this simple pilgrim cortege from the Franciscan Bethlehem, far from the haunts of men, escorting the Lord of Nature up the mountain side, that from the heights he might bless his beautiful creation, together with his people! Up the tree-shaded winding pathways came the Blessed Sacrament, under a canopy reverently held over it by the leaders of the pilgrimage, followed by the Franciscan fathers, two by two, and the pilgrims, carrying lighted candles. It seemed to sweep along as if encircled by an aureole of gold—the golden canopy; the sunlight filtering through the trees, making gold mosaics on the path, and the

hillsides blazing with golden broom (*genista*). As they walked, the women gathered the golden branches from the bushes and scattered them on the ground till it was carpeted with a gold carpet whose trodden sweetness perfumed the air. As we mounted higher through the woods, each turn showed new vistas in the panoramic world beneath; and at intervals, peasants who had climbed the steep hillsides knelt reverently, with clasped hands; then rose, joining in the procession. And ever with us, present to the minds of all, walked a small Franciscan figure, with a face transfigured by the glory of his Lord.

Finally we reached a high open plateau near the summit of the mountain, facing the billowing sea of plains and hills and distant Rome. The Blessed Sacrament was borne into the center, while the pilgrims knelt in widening half-circles around, and out of that lofty mountain top, in the overwhelming hush of its stillness—the more impressive for its remoteness—the Father Guardian of San Francesco a Ripa at Rome, advanced to the edge of the plateau and raised the monstrance high over valley and plain towards Rome, to bring a blessing upon the city so dear to all Catholic hearts—the home of these pilgrims who were the first to plant the flag of Rome on Greccio's heights. An unforgettable scene, which remains outstanding in the mind amid the many beautiful memories of that pilgrimage day.

As we descended, the woods rang with the *Mag-*

nifcat, ending in a grand final *Te Deum* in the little eyrie church, clinging to its rock. Afterwards the pilgrims dispersed, to take their places in the convent refectory for the pilgrim banquet, where our kind Franciscan hosts attended to our wants with such royal hospitality and kindness as to make us seem not only honored guests but friends and brethren of the Franciscan roof-tree!

All too short was the brief afternoon in these fair surroundings where we wandered at will over the hillsides, in the fragrant thyme-scented mountain air, or explored the woods, where St. Francis' "little Sisters" made us a wood symphony. From the steep parapet terrace we looked over into the monks' flower garden—a brilliant color spot, blossoming literally out of the rock. But most lovingly of all, the pilgrims' gaze dwelt on the vista of plains, where St. Francis' eyes had so often rested; dreaming over again the memories which vivify it, till we see stout Giovanni Velita climbing the height to visit San Francesco, and the peasants bringing holly for the Crib; and, best of all, the mind picture of the saint, standing on the summit of Monte San Francesco, clasping the wounded leveret which took refuge in his arms.

Reluctantly, when the last goodbyes were said, the pilgrims descended from the Franciscan Bethlehem, with many a backward glance at that home of abiding benediction. At Greccio Nuovo, on the plains, we came down to earth again with a start, at the railway station, where the pilgrims parted—

some to continue to Assisi, others to turn their face Romewards. As we sped back again through Sabina in the sunset, the pilgrimage spirit continued. The gentle-faced Friar Bernardino, so like his saintly namesake, intoned the Rosary standing, and hymns were softly sung.

Darkness had fallen when we neared the Eternal City. From the great Roman cemetery of San Lorenzo outside the walls, in the basilica of which, near the relics of St. Lawrence, the saintly Pope Pius IX lies buried, as he wished, "among his poor,"—the myriad electric lamps which keep watch and ward over the city of the dead, twinkled out through the darkness of the city limits. One of the Franciscan fathers, quietly stood by the window to bless the Campo Santo (Holy Field), and surrounded by the pilgrims, recited the *De profundis* for those who lie in peace above the catacombs—the pontiff and his people.

To those who love to seek St. Francis in his hidden byways of beauty, I would recommend a pilgrimage to Greccio, to the peace of its Christmas sanctuary, to the sunshine of its woods, where the winds and the pines murmur and swell into one glorious long-drawn symphony—"Serafico Francesco!"

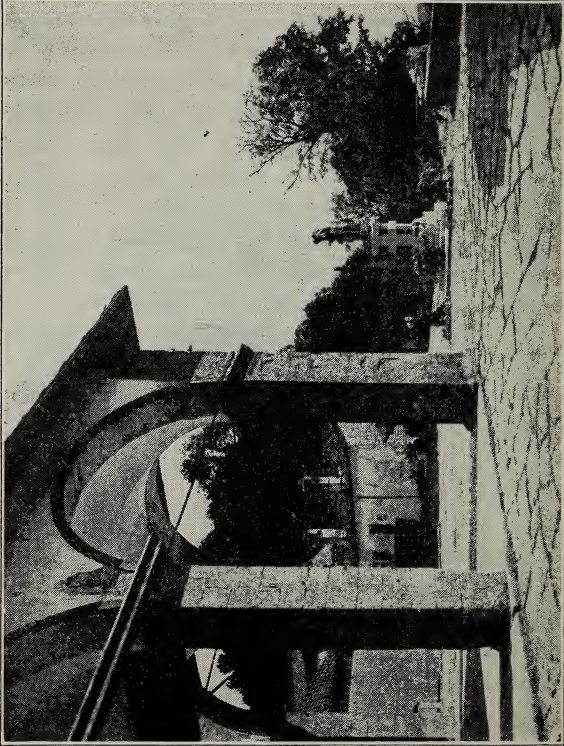
1224—La Verna—1924
The Franciscan Calvary

UPON the still heights of its mountain-solitudes, raised between heaven and earth, like the hill of Redemption it so wonderfully symbolizes, La Verna—the Franciscan Calvary,—shines out upon humanity; still glowing, through seven centuries, with the tender radiance with which the holy night of the Stigmata illuminated the world.

“By thy likeness to thy Master, Christ was glorified in Thee!” As in life, St. Francis draws hearts and souls after him, to keep the “watches of the Passion” with him in his hermitage!

The very name of La Verna quickens heart and mind. To the Franciscans it is the corner-stone of the edifice, the power-house of their energy, the outward sign of the divine Covenant, signed in their Master’s blood. Even the indifferent remain so no longer, for “La Verna” leaves none as it found them, and even a short sojourn there has wrought many miracles of grace, of healing, light and consolation.

More especially in the seventh centenary-year of the “Stigmata” those who love St. Francis turned instinctively, at least in spirit, to “La Verna,” to picture the event of that September night, seven hundred years ago, when heaven came down to earth, imprinting the sign of the Cross on the pure body of the most favored saint of divine love. “La Verna” differs from utterly, and surpasses the other beloved sanctuaries of St. Francis’ life-pilgrimage, which twine themselves round the heart, bringing the human St. Francis near to us, in their tender



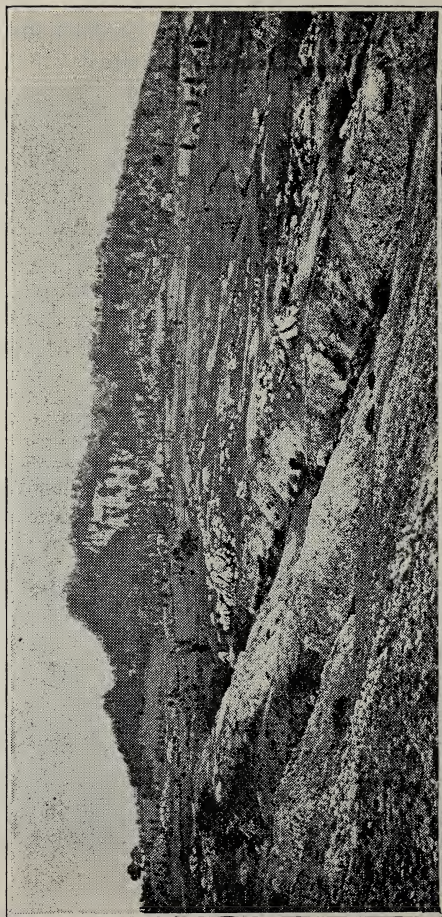
Convent at La Verna

memories of joy, sorrow and blessing. On the mountain of vision our saint has crossed the borderland, from the finite to the Infinite!

Our little band of pilgrims left hill-set Bibbiena, in the Casentino, in the cool freshness of an early summer morning; speeding across wide breezy uplands, climbing, relentlessly climbing, till it seemed as if each fresh turn brought a steeper ascent. Finally, across tracts of moors and barren earth, a great mountain appeared in sight, towering high above us in somber majesty. No need for the driver to proclaim, in sonorous Tuscan, as he indicated it with his whip, *Ecco "La Verna!"* for the mind realized it and the heart felt it.

La Verna

At this first distant sight one saw only the rugged bare exterior, the barren rock, up which the cross-bearing Francis toiled to his Crucifixion; for its interior beauties were still hidden from our eyes. Momentarily one wondered, that the tender, beauty-loving soul had been drawn to a spot so wildly desolate. Upwards and ever upwards, till the last turn brings us almost unexpectedly into the tiny hamlet of La Beccia, the nearest inhabited village to "La Verna," the hostel in which ladies are lodged and beyond which one cannot go further in a carriage, but must climb the remaining slopes on foot. The first introduction to "La Verna"—is truly Franciscan, filling the heart of a pilgrim-lover of the "*Fioretti*" (Little Flowers of St. Francis) with

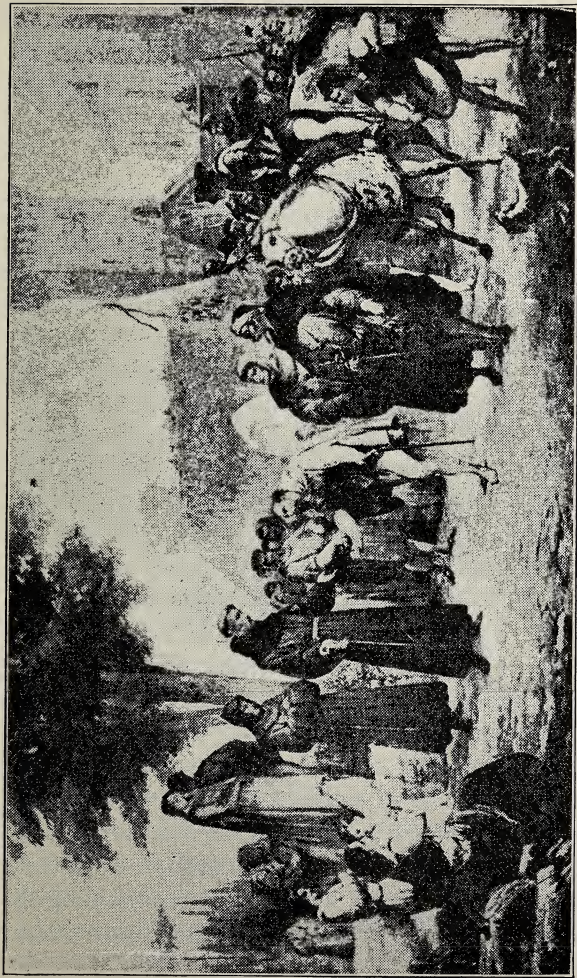


Mount La Verna

delight. A wayside chapel on the first turn of the road shows a colored terra-cotta statue of St. Francis, absolutely life-like, his head encircled by a flight of birds, for this simple shrine marks the spot where birds of all kinds flew out from wood and thicket to greet St. Francis and bid him welcome on the day of his first coming to "La Verna." It is touching to think of the tender love that conceded this homely miracle to the childlike heart who welcomed it as a harbinger of blessing, on the mountain where transfiguration awaited him on its consecrated heights. A quaint covered gateway of medieval times forms the entrance proper to "La Verna" and from now on every step of our pilgrimage is a memorial of some actual happening, some especial circumstance, in a life whose music made these barren rocks rejoice. With a thrill of expectantly joyous interest we passed under the gateway, stopping to read the inscription upon it—"In the whole world there is no holier mountain." The last steep stony way to the friary is bounded by a wall parapet, ending in a court yard square, upon which the church, chapels and monastic buildings open. It is impossible to convey even a remote idea in words of how the whole of "La Verna" is built. It follows the conformation of the mountain clinging perilously to the eyrie rock and culminating in the awful cliff of the "Stigmata Chapel" which hangs over a sheer precipice.

The hush of noonday broods on the cloister-precincts of this monastic fortress in the clouds, like

the silence of untrodden forests. Below the parapet, in abysmal depths, stretches a boundless prospect so fair and goodly of nature's wildest loveliness, of forest and plain and sky, that one instantly realizes why St. Francis chose "La Verna," or rather why God led him here, to the greatness of his revelation. The fine courtyard is just as it might have been in its founder's day, kept in true Franciscan fashion, ruggedly severe: the old stone well in the center, the red-tiled roofs, and the cloistral simplicity of the grey buildings. Only one touch of modern art, altogether worthy of its surroundings, is suffered to be here, the noble work of a Franciscan sculptor of the Third Order, who worked with such loving comprehension on his Father's semblance, that the exquisite statue of St. Francis is a sovereign work of art. It represents the episode in the saint's life when, finding a boy with a cage of singing birds, his tender heart was moved by the plight of the tiny prisoners and obtaining the cage, he liberated them all, watching with great joy their free flight. It is good to think that our 20th century art has forged one more beautiful link in the chain of life-records of St. Francis at "La Verna." This courtyard is a place to linger, dreaming of its many memories, its panoramic vistas of unearthly loveliness, in the balsamic purity of its clear air! But Franciscan hospitality claims us for its own. The dear old lay-brother comes rushing out to meet us, hastening us off to the guest-house refectory, saying as he goes,



St. Francis receiving the mount from Count Orlando

“L’avranno molto fame, perche l’aria di—‘La Verna’ e buona” (you must be hungry, for the air of La Verna is good), waiving aside our protests that the wildwood strawberries we consumed en route (surely never so good as on “La Verna”) had supplied our needs thus far.

Bustling about and excusing himself for the want of meat (which the brethren seldom touch) he plies us with abundant good fare! Only when thoroughly satisfied that “Brother Body” had been sufficiently restored did this kindly son of St. Francis allow us to stray back to the fascinations of the broad parapet with its matchless panorama.

The door of the *“Chiesa Maggiore”* (greater church) stands hospitably open; so while waiting for the father who was to be our cicerone, we wandered through its colonnaded entrance into the dim cool freshness of the solemn interior, full of the atmosphere of wordless prayer, which envelops “La Verna” like a mantle; as if the saint who prayed and suffered here had obtained that his prayer might linger, and continue to draw down benedictions throughout the ages, on this poor earth, which prays and suffers so little and so unwillingly. On entering a burst of splendid beauty greets the eye, emerging from the austerity of the Franciscan background like a vision of deathless purity—three wondrous “Della Robbia” altar-pieces, representing the Nativity, the Annunciation and the Resurrection! A singularly limpid purity always marks the work

of the Della Robbia brothers, its heaven-blue and pearly-white, so like clouds in a summer sky, rendering it the happiest medium to convey a sense of spiritual beauty. Here in St. Francis' chosen sanctuary, the artist-brothers surpassed themselves, throwing their whole heart and soul and genius into these masterpieces of religious art. While we are admiring their loveliness, the guest-father arrives, a fine ascetic figure, with a face of benevolent sweetness, coupled with that exquisitely natural Franciscan courtesy, which always distinguishes the sons of St. Francis. Is it the least of the saint's miracles, that he has been able to impress so indelibly, not only upon the dwelling-places of his life, but even more on his followers, the mark of his personality, making men and places alike so unmistakably his own? Instantly recognizing our delight in our surroundings, Fra Antonio proceeded to make his beloved mountain live before our eyes, never sparing himself in pointing out every hidden beauty and its story, every familiar charm. The few hours spent under his guidance left us with a more intimate knowledge and appreciation of the spiritual value of "La Verna" than would seem possible to a restricted stay.

First Visit of St. Francis

Briefly we learned the history of the Blessed Father's first coming here. The proud and powerful Count Orlando of Chiusi heard Francis speak of the "things of God," yet so ardently, withal,

that, straightway, a desire came to him to "do something for God." Like the young man in the Gospel he was not prepared to go to the lengths St. Francis spoke of, "the saying was too hard," but with the princely generosity of medieval days he offered the saint a noble slice of his great possessions, the mountain of La Verna, to be a hermitage of penance, expiation and prayer. St. Francis accepted the gift gratefully and, it being the eve of his departure for Spain, he sent two brethren to take possession.

On his return St. Francis hastened to La Verna. This was in 1215. At first sight Francis loved it with an almost prescient love, as if even then he realized its eventual significance, and the influence it was to exert on his life. At this time were laid the foundations of the actual church we see today. Like all St. Francis' devoted friends, who, when absent from him, longed for the sight of his face and the sound of his voice, Count Orlando followed him into the solitudes with the excuse of coming to see with his own eyes that the saint had all he needed. St. Francis begged his friend and benefactor to build him a small stone chapel to replace the rude earth oratory. This was willingly and quickly done and added to by slow degrees. This first church of "La Verna" was dedicated by St. Francis to his beloved St. Mary of the Angels, and in 1260 it was consecrated by the great St. Bonaventure, together with seven other bishops. "Santa

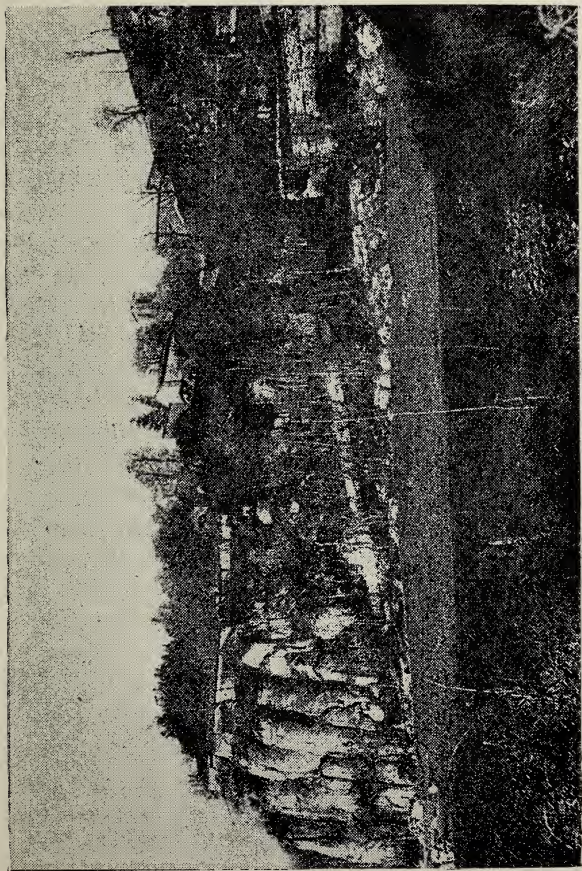
Maria degli Angeli" with the chapel of Orlando still stands today and we pass through it into the greater church. We were shown many familiar relics of St. Francis in the sacristy here, his drinking cup, some linens soaked with the blood of the "Stigmata" wounds, and the cord with which St. Francis received Count Orlando into the Third Order, which the latter's sons presented to "La Verna," together with the title-deed of the property. Relics and memories are not confined to one place, however, for it is all a treasure house, leading up by slow degrees to the "Holy of Holies" of the Chapel of the "Stigmata." Through ages a number of Franciscan saints have come to live and pray near St. Francis' shrine, as close as their humility allowed them to the spot, holier and more venerable to them than any other on earth. Past the Chapel of St. Peter of Alcantara, and that of St. Paschal Baylon (the great Apostle of the Blessed Eucharist) and along the narrow rock gallery, up and down by many holy spots, our kind Franciscan guide leads us on. At any other time and place, these cells would excite interest and attention, but in "La Verna" one figure only claims the mind to the exclusion of all others. The lovers of St. Anthony, however, cannot be hurried past the tiny cell which harbored the Wonder Worker of Padua in the last year of his glorious life. The brethren offered him the second cell of St. Francis but in touching humility St. Anthony refused deeming himself unworthy of so great a favor. Determined,

however, not to deprive him of being near the place of the "Stigmata," yet satisfying his humility, the monks built St. Anthony another hut near by, like that of St. Francis, where he lived happily in contemplation, only leaving it to return to Padua to die.

Not far away St. Bonaventure had a tiny oratory, immediately under the spot where St. Francis received the "Stigmata." He wrote his sublime "*Itinerary of the Soul to God*," as if from contact with the holy consecrated rock, he himself might draw inspiration. We halt once more at the Chapel of St. Peter of Alcantara for it is one of the most interesting spots in all "La Verna," the site of St. Francis' primitive cell, built for him by Count Orlando on his first coming to La Verna, but, at his own expressive request, of rough clods of earth. Here our Savior appeared to St. Francis many times in vision, and the stone, covering the rock table, is kept here under glass, with the following inscription graven upon it: "The Table of St. Francis on which he had admirable apparitions and which he sanctified by pouring oil upon it, saying, 'This is the altar of God.'"

Cell of St. Francis

It was in this holy spot our Lord made the five great promises to St. Francis, the last of which he would never reveal to any human being. From this chapel we are in the Presence Chamber of the "Stigmata," where St. Francis, pierced and wounded, seems to stand across the threshold, an integral part of the Passion Mystery of Pain! Holi-



The Precipice and Convent

est of all the sanctuaries, save the actual place of the "Stigmata," is the "Chapel of the Cross," St. Francis' second cell, where he lived and prayed and from whence he perilously passed across a terrific rock abyss, to the place of his predilection, his suffering and his glory of infinite union. To this cell he retired to stretch his weary wounded members and enjoy the little repose his austerity permitted, when the agony grew unendurable. Here St. Francis was daily called to Matins by the falcon, his faithful dumb friend, whom he remembered so tenderly in his last beautiful blessing on "La Verna." Here, twice a day, Brother Leo brought him bread, but, by the order of the saint, he first halted and shouted, "Lord! Thou wilt open my lips." If St. Francis answered: "And my tongue shall proclaim thy praise!", he proceeded, but if no answer came his orders were to leave his master undisturbed. For not even his beloved Leo, his priest and confessor, might approach him in the course of the dread communion between the Maker and the creature. Brother Leo's cell, it is true, was not far away, carved out in the rock above, where St. Francis climbed to assist at his Mass, while the birds sang "Matins." What a picture for a painter, Brother Leo's daily Mass, on the eyrie summit of La Verna's rock, with all nature as an altar, and Francis for worshiper and server. It was here that Leo saw him raised in ecstasy, high as the lower branches of the trees, and creeping near, all unperceived, devoutly kissed the pierced feet, glowing,

like rubies, in the clear light of dawning. No wonder that in the "Chapel of the Cross" voices are hushed to a whisper, for the very walls seem to re-echo with St. Francis' long and prayerful breaths of love. Earthly joy and consolation even of the most spiritual were no longer for him. He had left his Bethlehem, his Nazareth, his Tabor of the Angeli behind; and, high as the actual mountain, scaled the spiritual heights of this mystic Calvary which set him irrevocably apart, receiving him into its eternal embrace. To gain access to the "Stigmata Chapel" one crosses a small vestibule bridge now filled up with earth, but it is the site of the original abyss, across which St. Francis and Brother Leo threw a great tree trunk to form a bridge between the rest of the friary and this sanctuary where Francis could retire for his colloquies with the Most High, undisturbed by the footsteps of men. At his first coming St. Francis loved and yearned for this perilous hermitage, there to dwell alone with the God of his heart.

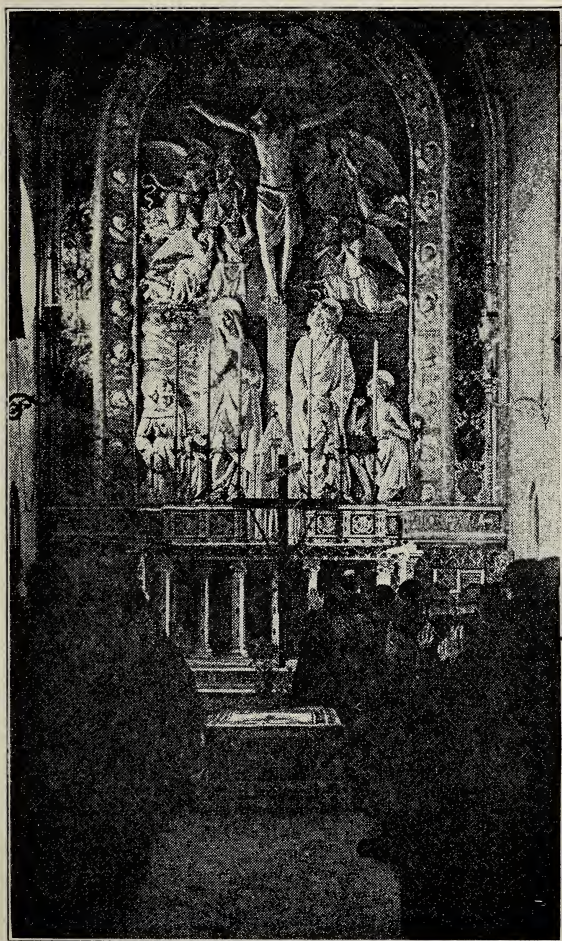
Before entering the "Stigmata Chapel" we visited another of the tiny sanctuaries most dear to St. Francis' heart, a rock ledge leading out from the cell of St. Anthony. On this spot, it is told, the demon, tired of uselessly tempting the saint, tried to hurl him over the abyss, when the rock miraculously jutted out to receive him and make him a foothold, the prints of St. Francis' fingers as he clung to the rock, having been visible here for centuries. The saint composed his wonderful *Laudes*

or Hymn of Praise, resting on this platform rock, and also the famous blessing given to Brother Leo and still preserved, in the "Sagro Convento" at Assisi. Underneath its rocky ledge stretches a vast panorama of forests, mountains and meadows, with the distant town and villages of the Casentino dotting the plains. Looking upon its still perfection, one faintly realizes why it was so dear to St. Francis, and what its inspiration must have been to that passionate lover of nature.

A far different spot, in its chill asceticism, is the next halt in our pilgrimage, the dark, narrow cavern called the "Bed of St. Francis," to which one descends by steps cut in the rock, a short horizontal recess, upon which the saint could barely extend his limbs. One wonders if St. Francis the ascetic in his renunciation, had wished to counterbalance his spiritual delight in nature's loveliness, or the heights of his revelation, by the rigors of this damp, narrow cavern.

Sasso Spicco

Another, and perhaps the most singular and extraordinary aspect of "La Verna" is the "Sasso Spicco" (Riven Rock) a gaunt weird scission in the earthquake-riven rocks high as awful frowning battlements in their wild grandeur. St. Francis, tender lover of the Passion, in all its manifestations, ever sought a fissured rock in his mountain hermitages. To him it stood for the "Rock of Ages," cleft for us, and at "La Verna," it is said, an angel revealed to St. Francis that all these rocks were



Chapel of the Stigmata. In front center, Stone of the Stigmata.

opened at the time of the Crucifixion. For this he loved the "Sasso Spicco" and its forming part of the dark cavern we just visited, probably led him to choose it as his place of rest. We cannot stop to visit the hermitage of Blessed John of La Verna, for time is all too short. Father Antonio calls our attention to a high set eyrie rock, far, far above us. "The Cell of Brother Wolf," he remarks, and proceeds to relate the true story of another of St. Francis' lightning conquests of a soul given up to evil. When the saint first came to "La Verna," the mountain fastnesses were infested with brigands, so rapacious and cruel that their savage chief was known throughout the countryside as "the wolf." But Francis feared no man or beast, and the two met, the burly brigand armed to the teeth, and the frail, defenseless hermit. The result was a foregone conclusion; like his animal namesake, the famous "wolf of Gubbio," the human wolf became a lamb; and we have just seen the solitary eyrie where Fra Agnello (Brother Lamb) expiated, in long years of penance, his many crimes. It was for souls like these that St. Francis' life-sacrifice was so joyfully given.

The Stigmata Chapel

Our pilgrimage has reached its fulfillment now; and we stand, expectant, on the threshold of La Verna's "Inner House," the place of the "Stigmata." Seen through the open doorway the interior is dominated by its great Della Robbia altar piece of the "Crucifixion," an embodied prayer. At the

first sight one is disappointed by the modern restorations, though they are beautiful, solemn and harmonious, and longs to see, in their place, the little gem-like gothic church of 1263 consecrated in 1310. Time and dampness had done their devastating work; and restorations were imperative. Marbles and mosaics have bejeweled its walls, and the light pours through high narrow windows on the wondrous "Crucifixion," but the eye returns to the spot before the altar, where a sunken white marble slab surrounded by an iron grille, marks the exact place (as ascribed by Brother Leo), where St. Francis received the "Stigmata," on September 14, 1224. Upon the tablet is inscribed *Hic signasti*. Could one do better here than recall the graphic account of the miraculous scene, so often pictured and imagined, as it was transcribed by Brother Leo from St. Francis' consecrated lips? "St. Francis, being merged and lost in Him who was immolated for us, suddenly perceived descending from heaven a seraphim with six wings of burning light, two above its head, two extended in flying, and two enveloping its body. Francis, trembling with terror, perceived his Crucified Lord, and in the abjection of the Crucifixion with the immortality of a Seraphic Spirit, and in the Revelation, there came to him the explanation that this vision symbolized what was to be his martyrdom of spirit. On his body he would carry the living likeness of the agony of the Cross and in his soul the tenderness of the seraphim! From that moment his whole being was

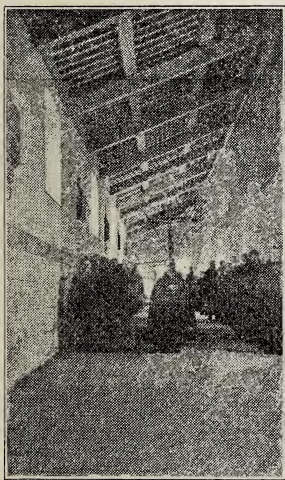
enlarged and elevated with angelic peace and plenitude, and on his members appeared the prints of the crucifixion. His feet and hands were pierced through with great nails moving in the wounds, and his right side showed an open wound which frequently bled profusely."

And on that wondrous night the whole summit of "La Verna's" holy mountain glowed with a burning light which shone for miles around, like the reflection of a colossal fire; till the country people from the whole district hastened up to see if the friary and forest were on fire. And this happened on the actual spot on which we stand, only broken by the rushing of a mountain-torrent below, and the passionate thrill of a nightingale.

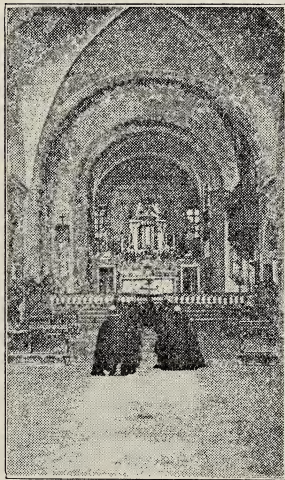
No wonder that the brethren keep the "Stigmata Chapel" with most loving care, even deputing two fathers and a brother to be constantly attached to it. They live apart from the rest of the community, in a tiny hermitage known as the "Hermitage of the Stigmata."

Scrupulously and worthily do St. Francis' sons observe the solemn injunction he laid upon them in his last blessing to "La Verna"—that they should cherish the spot and there recite the office day and night. In every detail they have carried out his explicit orders to Fra Masseo which run as follows: "Know that my intentions are that in this place shall ever reside God-fearing religious—the chosen of my Order. Therefore let the superiors always strive to send the best monks here!" He then ex-

horted to all the Order, comprising all present and future brethren, never to permit that the place should be profaned, but be ever respected and venerated. He left his benediction to all who should ever live upon "La Verna," and upon those who should hold it in reverence; but (St. Francis con-



The Daily Procession



The Main Chapel

tinued in solemn warning) "might those be confounded who fail in paying it due honor; for their punishment will be in the hands of God."

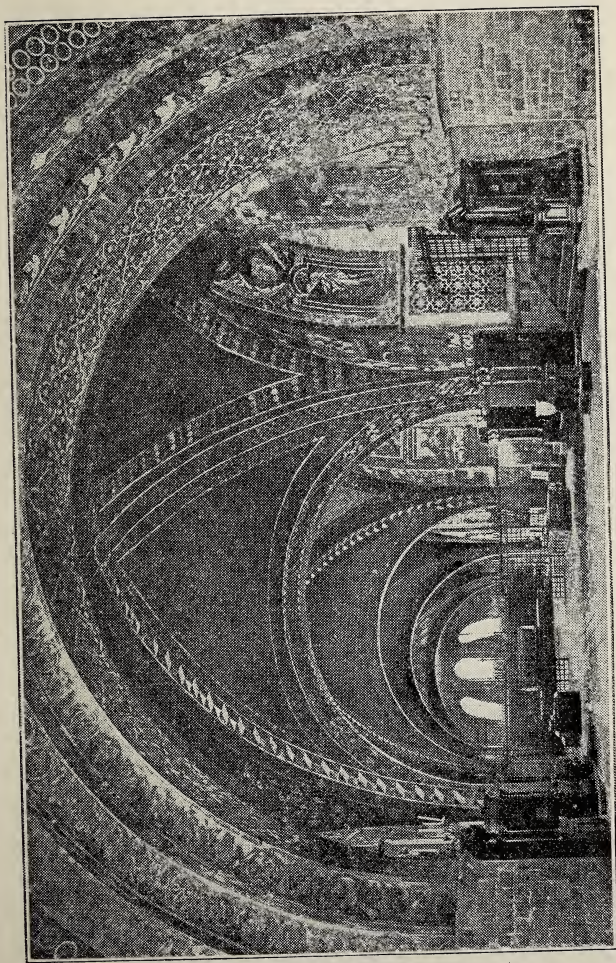
After a brief moment of recollection and prayer, and full of overwhelming solemnity of the holy place, we returned to the court, to ponder, in sight of the marvelous prospect from its parapet, mem-

ories and impressions received. The vesper-bell was ringing from the medieval belfrey, and, as if in a dream evoked by the associations of the spot, we imagined ourselves back in the days of St. Francis at the sight which greeted us. A long defile of brown-robed religious emerged from the church, in slow procession, with folded arms and downcast heads, chanting the hymn, *Crucis Christi Mons Alvernae*, a picture truly worthy of the place. We followed at a distance, as they traversed the long winding rock-gallery which skirts the mountain, their footsteps re-echoing along the vast corridor, their solemn chant growing more distant till they passed at last into the "Stigmata Chapel." Twice in the twenty-four hours at La Verna, rain or shine, feast or fast, the whole community assembles at 2 p. m. and 2 a. m., and proceeds in solemn procession to the "Stigmata Chapel," to commemorate the great mystery accomplished there. No outsider is allowed to enter the chapel at that time, but from the open doorway visitors can follow the brief but overwhelmingly impressive ceremony. The religious take their place in the beautiful carved stalls and around the altar and another hymn, this time the *Coelorum candor splenduit* rang out sonorously, over the silent precincts. Towards its close two novices, standing out from the ranks, reverentially incline before the sacred stone of the "Stigmata" and indicating it with their right hands, intone the versicle, *Stignasti Domine hic servum tuum Franciscum*. Then each religious in turn, in solemn sil-

ence pays the same homage to the holy spot, with such deep recollection that this unique commemoration, never failing, never forgotten, enacted here at dawn and eve, throughout the centuries, leaves a lasting impression on everyone who has ever been fortunate enough to witness it. Still more striking must be its repetition in the still hour between night and dawning, when, in the piercing cold of winter-time, on the frozen mountain, or in the teeth of snow and wind-storms, which tear and rage about La Verna in the fury of the elements, the monks rise and traverse the ambulatory on the cliff, to renew the expiation and the glory of the "Stigmata" night! A quaint old story, handed down at the friary, says that once in ages past, a Father Guardian, merciful for his poor monks on a night of a terrific snowstorm, dispensed them from the ceremony (the rock-gallery at that time being still uncovered). The next morning the thick layer of snow from the church to the Chapel of the "Stigmata" was covered with innumerable and even paced footmarks of all the beasts and birds of the forest, St. Francis' dumb brethren, who had come from forest lair and cave to supply for the monks. Since then no stress of elements has ever been known to prevent the twice recurring daily procession. The footsteps recede, the solemn chanting grows ever fainter in the distance, as these favored sons of St. Francis return to their daily tasks in the friary upon which he invoked perpetual peace.

We take leave reluctantly of our large-hearted Franciscan hosts who have been so prodigal of hospitality, sharing with us their spiritual and material treasures with open hands, to go in spirit with St. Francis, down the mountain, on the last sad journey of September 30th, 1224. He could no longer walk, by reason of the pierced feet, and the faithful Count Orlando had to send him a mount. One needs not to imagine the sadness of that final farewell from the mountain where he had scaled the summits of bliss and sorrow, for it breathes, in every line of his testament to Fra Masseo; embodying all that life and eternity meant. The heart of saint and poet commended his loved ones and his loved place. "A Dio! To God! My brethren, may you dwell in peace. I go from you in body, but I leave you my heart. To God, mountain. To God, to God, Mount La Verna! To God, Mountain of Angels, most dear to God! Brother Falcon, I thank thee, for the charity thou hast shown me. To God, to God, O Riven Cliff! I shall never visit thee more. To God, Rock! To God, to God! Rock that received me in thy side, to the confusion of the demon, we shall never see each other again! To God, St. Mary of the Angels, Mother of the Eternal Word, to thee I recommend my children here!"

1226—Assisi—1926
The Franciscan Gethsemane

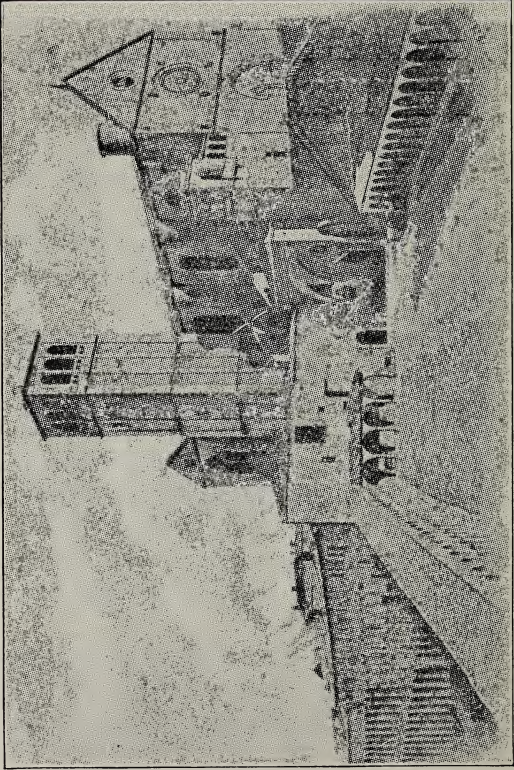


The Lower Church

ON the lofty hillside of Monte Subasio, high up above Assisi, rises the Sagro Convento and the three churches which compose the great sanctuary of San Francesco, built one above the other, the rocky crypt where the tomb of St. Francis lies, the lower church above it and the upper church above this again. No more striking contrast can be imagined than these three churches, in atmosphere and architecture; yet each one has its especial part in the great festivities connected with the life of St. Francis.

It is curious that in this, the one place where his gracious living presence never rested, every stone should speak of him, every gleaming fresco dream of him, every line of the solemn Gothic architecture, whose style he so loved, should intimately recall St. Francis. Yet one no longer wonders when kneeling by the rock-hewn tomb to which the brethren carried him by night and where St. Francis' relics rest in a riven rock which was his best beloved resting place in life. Down amid the dim shadows the lamps burn softly before the open grille (with its altars before and behind), showing the great rough blocks of the rock-bound sepulcher.

The spot is preeminently a place of prayer, with its constant streams of quiet worshipers; for the world throngs from far and near to seek the help and consolation which the saint of humanity never denies. Here, truly, St. Francis dying yet lives. His mark is upon it, his presence dwells within it and around it, like an encircling mantle, is that



The Sagro Convento of Assisi

sense of ineffable well-being which he always shed around him in life.

Ascending the inner stairs which lead from the crypt to the lower church, one enters into the solemn, mellow beauty of the harmonious interior, where arch and altar and frescoed wall mingle in a dream of mystic beauty and spirituality, whose arched doorway forms the entrance to a kingdom as far removed from the world of today as is the spirit of St. Francis. Above this again rises the upper church, a gem of pure Gothic architecture, so flooded with light and color as to make it a symbolic church of the resurrection, an embodiment of pure Franciscan joy. Its high windows pour floods of light on the magnificently frescoed walls; the Madonna in billowing clouds of angels, and the whole life story of St. Francis, with which Giotto, the first of Franciscan painters, lavished his great genius. Only on great festivals is this upper church used, the lower, containing the sacred tomb, being the center of the life of the Sagro Convento.

We love to linger there at Vesper time, when the mystic surroundings of the lower church seem literally transfigured; in the rosy afternoon light, when the level sunshine through the rich stained-glass windows made many-colored mosaics on the tessellated pavement.

All around us stretch vistas of Gothic arches, fading into dim, shadowy side chapels, like zones of tremulous prayer; where saint and confessor and martyr look down from the walls in a painted litany

of saints. But in the center, under the arched roof with its airy spandrils, glows an incandescent concentration of light, like a nimbus around the Monstrance. The myriad candles, the gold shimmer of vestments, the somber habits of the Conventuals in their stalls, and the kneeling crowds on the pave-



The Espousals with Lady Poverty

ment, outside the circle of light, seem to throw out the picture into higher relief, lighting up Giotto's gloriously inspired frescoes above: Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, the motive power of St. Francis' life, depicted as only the Franciscan artist who

knew their inwardness could have portrayed them. One of these frescoes stands out from the rest; and long after, when far distant from Assisi, the mind sees it again. It is St. Francis' Espousals with his Lady Poverty—a theme which the two great medieval Tertiaries, the greatest of all poets and the first of artists—Dante and Giotto, have handed down to us in poetry and art, in deathless symphony. Never did saint or founder or lawgiver have better interpreters than did the humble Francis in these two master intellects, inspired by their strong living faith.

October the Third

All evening the bells ring out from Assisi's many belfries: the church on the site of Francis' paternal house, the cathedral house, the cathedral church of his baptism, the bells of his best beloved San Damiano down among the olives, the church of Santa Chiara, the distant chimes of Rivo Torto, and the mountain hermitage of the Carceri, with the deep reverberations of Santa Maria degli Angeli dominating the rest, as if each bell proudly proclaimed its part of the life symphony which St. Francis closed so gloriously on 'the morrow.

An extraordinary animation pervades the little city, which usually lies so quietly on the hillside dreaming of St. Francis in a noonday calm. All kinds of conveyances pour in a stream up the ascent from the Angeli, not to speak of the sturdy pedestrians from the plains and mountains, who come up to *fare la festa di San Francesco*

(keep the feast of St. Francis), and fill up every available dwelling and inn. One carries away many beautiful and vivid mind pictures from this Assisi festival, but most striking of all is the solemn midnight Mass of vigil at Santa Maria degli Angeli, a vigil truly worthy of the dawn of St. Francis' birthday in heaven.

In the pure, frosty starlight of an Umbrian October, clear as moonlight, with the stars scintillating in that wonderful dark blue radiance of the Italian night sky, as if the light behind shown through it, a little pilgrim band starts from Assisi at eleven o'clock to descend the ever memorable road to the Angeli. Each time one passes down that winding hill path it seems to reveal fresh beauties. Each aspect seems more beautiful, the pearly freshness of early morning in its blue distances, the glory of noon upon the olives, and the rosy sunset, when Assisi, far above, stands out like a vision of an Apocalyptic city.

Ever with us on this road is St. Francis' presence. He trod it so often, in joy and sorrow, coming and going from his beloved city to the Little Portion, which had become even dearer to his heart. And ever and always the Saint of Nature rested his gaze upon the vast ethereal distances, the spring-time glory of this fair Umbrian land that his pure soul loved; for verily, perpetual springtime seems to dwell on St. Francis' Umbria.

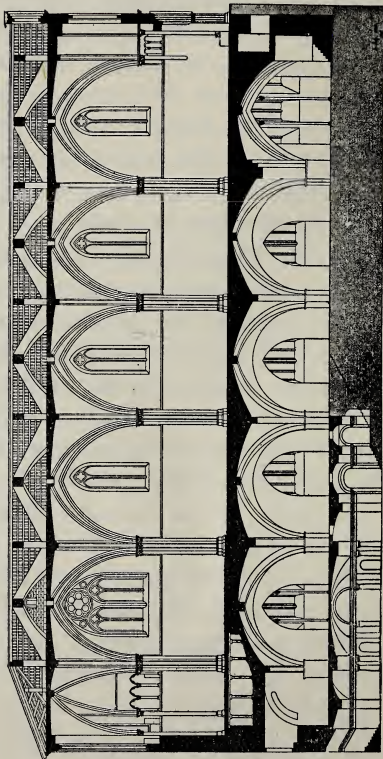
Passing the wayside chapels and the wilderness of vineyards, we come to the hall of Casa Gualdi,

the first and last station, so to speak, of St. Francis' Via Crucis of life. The spot is twice hallowed by his memory. In his time it was the leper hospital, and in the early days of his conversion the delicately nurtured, over-fastidious young man, over-sensitive, by his fine organization, to all that was repulsive and revolting, gained that first triumph over his natural inclinations, in kissing and tending the leper's sores. It was but the beginning of a life of such hard-won triumphs.

Last Blessing of Assisi

As one knows St. Francis better, one can better appreciate his boundless heroism, his iron strength of will for self-conquest; for he had none of the somber (may one call it), righteous satisfaction in austerity of a harder nature. By nature it was foreign to him; by grace he embraced it gladly, as the nearest approach to the suffering crucified Love of his life. We must pause here, too, with the second memory of the spot. It was here, as they carried him down to the Angeli to die, that St. Francis made the brethren put down the litter and turn him towards Assisi, that he might bless it for the last time. His blind eyes could scarcely see the city unless—who shall say?—the Master, ever thoughtful of his faithful servant, granted to the dying eyes a last sight of Assisi, bathed in the soft evening light.

The brethren raised him tenderly in their arms that, like the prophet of old, he might bless and



Cross Section of the Three Churches

prophecy. As if energized with new strength the saint stretched out his arms wide in a sign of the cross over the city. A serene smile of ineffable sweetness lighted up his face; and to the astonishment of those present the persuasive voice, which had drawn thousands to the Master, until now hardly audible, rose clear and musical as of old in the blessing which was yet a prophecy. For surely, in that moment Francis saw in vision the reward of his work. Even yet, seven centuries after, it seems to linger on the air: "Mayest thou be blessed by the Lord, beloved city! For by thee many souls shall be saved, and because in thee will live many servants of God, who will glorify Him, and that many of thine inhabitants will be elected for the kingdom of eternal life." The exquisite beauty of this scene is worthily portrayed by a great artist, Ary Scheffer, in a picture in the Louvre in Paris, which though well known, deserves to be more widely appreciated; for the artist entered heart and soul into its spirit.

As we near the great mass of buildings of Santa Maria degli Angeli, looming against the dark blue curtain of the starlit sky, every window of the vast church is suddenly illuminated and the bells send out a resonant joyous peal. The landscape, beautiful before in its midnight stillness (like another scene on a hillside where shepherds watched their flocks by night), presents a new aspect of radiant beauty as the light streams in many-colored facets through the stained-glass windows and lays in sheets

of brightness on field and plain and over the tiny village of Santa Maria degli Angeli clustering beneath the shadow of the mother church. It is like the Bethlehem *Gloria in excelsis* this new Gloria of the angels, rung out to welcome Francis to the angelic company he had so constantly loved and honored on earth.



St. Francis Blessing Assisi

Crowds are streaming through the doorways, and with them we enter the vast majestic church, which stretches like a small world of space around the tiny chapel of the Portiuncula in its midst, embracing it with mighty columns as did the forest trees in St. Francis' time; for this selfsame little chapel, isolated in the midst of the massive basilica of Our Lady of the Angels, then stood in a woods, with the huts of the brethren clustering around it.

For once the Portiuncula is not the center of attraction in Santa Maria degli Angeli. The crowds hurry past it, or through its low doorways, to gain their goal, which is the even smaller chapel on the right; the chapel of the Transito, the tiny hut cell where St. Francis died the third of October, 1226.

We approach, as far as is possible for the kneeling crowds, to the actual door of St. Francis' time, the same door through which he entered for the last time. Inside, the sanctuary is a mass of radiance; but the Franciscan simplicity remains unchanged and the rough brown walls, worn smooth through the contact of centuries, are the same against which the dying saint leaned when they laid him, by his own desire, on ashes on the floor of the cell. These walls saw his passing, re-echoed his last sigh; and these memories hallow the spot for all time. Silently and continuously the people pass, to kneel some moments in prayer, then reverently kiss the dark, hard stones and hallowed pavement.

Before the eyes grow accustomed to the light, it seems that the crowds are kneeling before the living presence of St. Francis, so absolutely realistic is the statue standing over the altar, in habit and cowl, a frail, emaciated figure, ineffably sad, with the high unearthly splendor of renunciation shining like an interior light through the worn, transparent features. It is Luca della Robbia's faithful representation of St. Francis, taken from his death mask, before the seal of suffering had passed into infinite beatitude.

The outside wall of the Transito chapel is decorated with a vast and grandiose fresco representing St. Francis' death, recalling its every detail to mind. The dying saint is in the center, supported by his brethren. His old and faithful friend, benefactor and spiritual daughter, Giacopa di Settisoli, with her two sons and her retinue of followers, had arrived from Rome, warned by an inspiration, only in time for his death. He had beckoned all present to come near him, that, as he could not see them, he might lay his hand on their heads in blessing, his only regret being that he could not do the same by his future brethren.

But Francis, the never forgetful, had them all in his mind at this supreme moment. He blessed them and absolved them, and bade those present to hand it down to the order in his name. He had spoken, too, of Clare, his spiritual daughter, recommending her and her sisters to the care of his brethren. "Farewell, my children! I leave you in the fear of God. Keep firmly attached to your rule, for the hour of tribulation is near and defections and scandals will come. Blessed is he who perseveres. As for me, I go to God with confidence; for I have served him with all the strength of my soul. I recommend you all to his grace." Then, all worldly affairs being ended, he laid upon the brethren his last command on earth; that they should lay him naked upon ashes on the pavement, that he might die in the embraces of poverty.

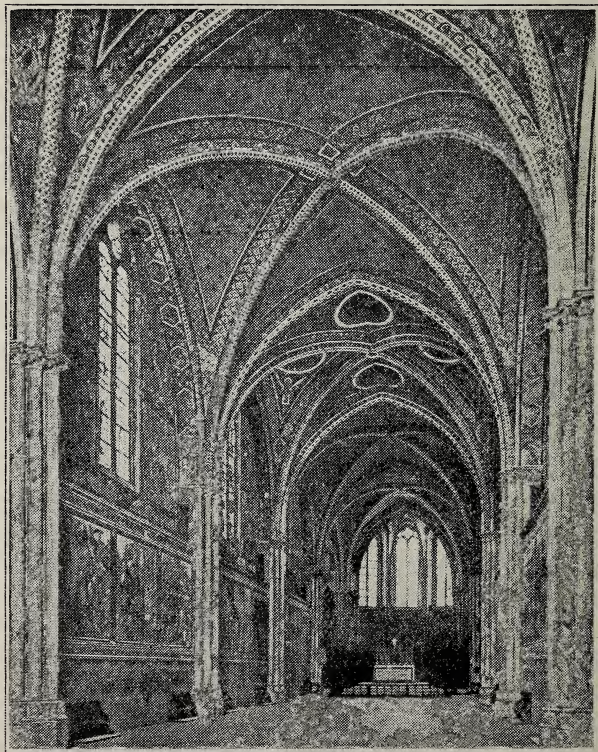
Serenely, St. Francis awaited welcome Sister Death, begging the brethren to sing to him once more the *Canticle of Creatures*, and, while they laid him on the ashes, to read the Gospel of St. John. The dying saint himself, in a last effort, intoned a psalm at the last verse of which the great, generous heart stopped beating, and the seraphic soul of Francis was safe in the embrace of his one absorbing Love, while the beauty and joy ineffable after which he constantly aspired, were his in the fulness of perfection.

All nature mourned its apostle with sad autumnal winds; and, as St. Bonaventure writes, the birds, who hated the darkness, yet ventured forth to sing their requiem over the friend they would never more call to *Matins*.

On the other side of the Transito chapel is frescoed the funeral of St. Francis and the halting of the cortege at San Damiano, that St. Clare might look upon the face of the saint for the last time. But there is "no sadness of farewell" at Sancta Maria degli Angeli. "The night is over and the day is come," and in the early dawn of St. Francis' heavenly birthday only infinite rejoicing prevails, as he himself would have desired it.

The magnificent organ peals out, as the long procession of friars emerges from the sacristy, the celebrant and his assistants in gorgeous golden vestments. They halt at the chapel of the Transito and standing around the humble cell, amid the pealing of bells and the swell of organ intone the *Te Deum*

so sonorously triumphant that it seems to rock the walls; reverberating like waves on a rocky coast, a very ecstasy of thanksgiving for the life of the saint of purest joy. Then followed the solemn high Mass with its ringing *Gloria*. At its close we came



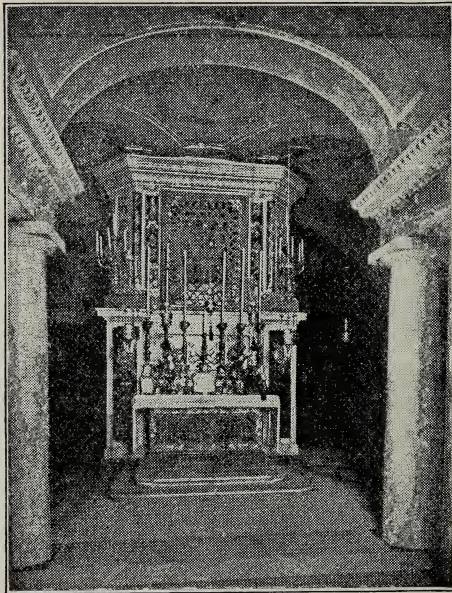
The Upper Church

out once more into the frosty starlight, our hearts too full for words, from the memories of this holy night, and turned our faces to the distant lights of Assisi twinkling out on the hill-set fortress and half expecting to hear the birds twittering over the roofs of the Angeli.

October the Fourth

Early in the morning, long before daybreak, the bells are ringing all over Assisi, and the steep, stony streets are filled with surging crowds eager to find a place in the crypt of St. Francis, to have the privilege of assisting at one of the endless Masses celebrated on the tomb today. No longer a dim sanctuary of silent prayer, the rock tomb with its two sides, where Mass can be celebrated simultaneously, is as richly beautiful as loving care can make it. Not only at the double altars of the tomb, but at the other altars surrounding the crypt, Masses are said without intermission. On every day of the year, at the tomb of St. Francis and at the papal altar above it, in the lower church, the votive Mass of St. Francis must always be said. Cardinals, bishops, prelates and members of every religious order succeed each other at the altars alternating with St. Francis' own brethren. Young Franciscan missionaries are there with their laurels yet to win, their faces glowing with St. Francis' eager thirst for souls, as they come to beg their father's blessing on their distant work, the blessing he so confidently promised with his dying lips more than seven hundred years ago. No one who

has witnessed it will ever forget that early morning scene at St. Francis' tomb at his Assisi festival, so intimate in its fervor, so full of deep devotion, as if it were his *urbi et orbi* blessing to his universal family.



The Tomb of St. Francis

Later on comes the solemn pontifical Mass, celebrated by a cardinal at the papal altar in the lower church. One imagined that this wonderful sanctuary could offer no fresh beauties superior to those

already seen ; but on this day of days it surpasses itself in pure ideality of surrounding. Each perfect arch, stretching away in marvelous perspective to the papal altar, is outlined in light, with hundreds of crystal chandeliers. Magnificent sixteenth century brocades of rich crimson damask cover the lower walls, and the high raised altar, facing the people, is decked with all the Sagro Convento possesses of the most precious, canopied overhead by Giotti's frescoed vision of St. Francis in glory amid the angelic hierarchies he loved, while Cimabue's tender Madonnas on the walls make a sunlit glory around.

One might imagine St. Francis smiling his indulgent smile, to see himself and his Lady Poverty amid such magnificence, save that he so passionately loved the beauty of God's house.

All day long Assisi keeps high festival with music and illuminations, and on the succeeding days the *Fiera di San Francesco* (St. Francis' Fair) takes place on the old grey stones near Santa Chiara and the city gateway. Side by side with Umbria's store of splendid fruit, lie household ware, utensils and pictures of San Francesco, together with the terra cotta painted bells, to ring in the feast, these latter a survival of Etrurian Umbria, the whole scene after the pleasant custom of Italian *feste*, combining a popular gathering with the religious celebration.

As the great day draws to a close, we pause a moment at Santa Maria degli Angeli where at the hour of his passing, the Friars Minor go in solemn



Most Holy Soul, Pray for Us!

procession to the Transito chapel to sing on their knees the hymn *O sanctissima anima*. Once more St. Francis' brown-robed brethren of the Portiuncula gather around him as they did on their first fourth of October. His image, calm and serene, looks down on them from the altar, while the most holy soul of friend and father blesses them even more tenderly than at his last blessing on earth. It is our last watchword or recollection of Assisi's wondrous feast. "Most holy soul," indeed, in whose clear mirror of sanctity countless thousands first saw and loved their God. *Sanctissima anima*, pray for us all!



