

Devotion to the Crib

In the brave days of the twelfth century, when knighthood was in flower, a noble Italian youth was ever dreaming of courageous deeds, of adventures abroad and of worlds to conquer. The gleam of cuirass and sword haunted his slumbers, and by day some inner force constantly impelled him to seek his destiny in the field of chivalry.

This young gallant was none other than Francesco, son of Pietro de Bernardone, a rich cloth merchant of Assisi. From earliest boyhood Francesco had been a devotee of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, worshipping knightly characteristics with all the passionate ardor of his unsullied soul. Pleasure-loving and extravagant, he was withal generous, never unmindful of God's glory, and his heart was pure, even as that of Galahad.

Francesco, too, would be a knight of the Holy Grail, and as he dreamed away the hours, conflicting emotions assailed him. Now he swore fealty to his worldly ambitions, again he yearned to serve the Master who had braved Golgotha to redeem mankind.

Francis Weds the Lady Poverty.

At last from high-minded dreaming and lofty purpose was born a saint, and it presently came to pass that the future Francis of Assisi abandoned the world with all its splendor, its dross and its glitter, to espouse the Lady Poverty and consecrate his life to the service of others.

There were plenty of youths eager to share with Francis his exemplary life of self-denial. Thus he was soon at the head of a good-sized community of men. It is not within the scope of this paper to recount any details of the life of St. Francis, or of the nature of his order, so let us merely mention in passing that when he journeyed to Rome in 1223 to secure the approbation of the Holy See regarding the rule for governing his community he availed himself of the opportunity presented to place before Pope Honorius a project that he had long cherished of making a "scenic representation of the place of the Nativity."

To this plan the Holy Father graciously gave his whole-hearted sanction. St. Francis then started out for Greccio, determined, in spite of the gray, sodden weather so characteristic of central Italy in the cold season, to reach the beautiful little Umbrian village by Christmas Eve.

As he traversed the road toward the north, that frequently led him out of the beaten path, his mind was intent upon the realisation of his plan. If the wind was bitter and the cold rain chilling to his scantily clad person, his heart warmed with visions unforgettable of a visit he had once made to Bethlehem. In contemplation of the images that were fixing themselves in his mind he forgot bodily discomfort, scarce heeding the mire at his feet, conscious only of the ecstatic joy of visiting in fancy the grotto at Bethlehem.

He pictured St. Helena as she might have busied herself supervising the work of transforming the grotto or cave where Christ was born into a chapel, or ordering its decora-

tion with costly marbles and mosaics. Then his thoughts flew to Constantine, her son, who erected the first basilica on the spot. What joy must have been his, mused Francis, to be able to eclipse even the magnificence of his mother's design and adorn the church in a "truly regal style."

Doubtless many times during the weary journey the saintly traveller beheld in retrospect the graceful architecture of the basilica that so picturesquely crowns the east hill of Bethlehem, and knelt in spirit at the spot where the Infant Christ was born. Again he must have seen the star cut in stone surrounded with the words *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est.*

The First Crib.

Thus, his mind filled with his purpose, he reached Greccio on Christmas Eve.

Now in the valley beyond the monastery there dwelt a courageous gentleman, one Giovanni Vellita, who had ever been most generous in his dealings with St. Francis and his brothers. To this benevolent friend was entrusted the preparation incident to the little drama to be staged in a mountain cave, and he was instructed to fashion a crib and group around it images of the Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph, and the ass, ox, and the shepherds who came to adore the new-born King.

St. Francis confided to his friend that he wished to celebrate the holy Christmas night and the coming of Our Lord upon earth seriously and see with my own eyes how poor and miserable He wished to be for our sakes."

Swiftly the news of the approaching celebration spread through the wooded country. What an inspiring spectacle for the onlooker. Men, women, and children wended their way to the grotto, the hills rang with the sweet echo of voices raised exultingly in song, and all were in a flutter of joyous expectancy. The torches carried by the peasants illumined the heavy foliage that was silhouetted against the dusky sky.

Beneath the vaulted rock was placed the manger, which the Brothers, all carrying lighted candles, surrounded. Hard by were the ox and the ass staring wide-eyed at the unusual scene.

Mass was sung over the manger which served as the altar, so that the divine Babe "under the forms of bread and wine, should Himself come to the place, as, bodily and discerningly, he had been in the stable of Bethlehem." And then, the legend runs, "it seemed to Giovanni that he saw a real child lying in the manger, but as if dead or sleeping. Then Brother Francis stepped forward and took it lovingly in his arms, and the child smiled at Francis, and with his little hands stroked his bearded chin and his coarse grey habit.

How devotional and beautiful the picture! The celebration of the Holy Sacrifice, with all the solemnity of the magnificent liturgy of Mother Church, fills the heart with emotions indescribable. Conceive then the Mass at this replica of the lonely manger where

the shepherds worshipped that blessed starlit morn nearly two thousand years ago. Within, the humble Brothers, in shabby raiment, and the villagers, serenely unconscious of the bleak December gale blowing drearily through the aperture; without, the weird beauty of snow-capped hills drenched in moonlight and the "stars for tapers tall."

And then began the impressive ceremony and the recital of those significant words, ever ancient and ever new, *Introibo ad altare Dei. Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.*

When the time came for the Gospel, it was sung feelingly by Francis, the deacon, for he could never be persuaded to receive Holy Orders. He then delivered the sermon, which was on the Child Jesus, and was wrung from the depths of a profound and mystic joy and an overwhelming love. Indeed, Brother Francis spoke as one inspired. "With word that dripped with sweetness he compelled the undivided attention of his auditors. Breathlessly they must have hung upon his eloquent and persuasive words. Whenever he pronounced the sacred name of Jesus "the fire of his love overcame him; and he called Him instead the Child from Bethlehem. The word Bethlehem he pronounced with a sound as of a lamb that bleats, and when he had named the name of Jesus, he let his tongue glide over his lips as if to taste the sweetness this name left there as it passed over them."

Joy and Peace at Greccio.

It was late when the holy watch-night ended, after which those present silently dispersed, joy in their souls, and in their hearts that peace which the world cannot give.

In the Basilica of St. Francis at Assisi there is a painting by Giotto which represents St. Francis celebrating Christmas at Greccio, and in the old Franciscan church of Ara Coeli is to be found one of the most beautiful cribs in the world. This crib contains the noted Santo Bambino di Ara Coeli, a figure carved out of wood, which represents the Christ Child. It is reputed to have been brought from the Holy Land, and the passage of time has seen it adorned with countless priceless jewels.

The monks of the monastery at Greccio still preserve the traditions of their holy founder, though the chanting of midnight Mass in the grotto has been transferred to the Church of Ara Coeli.—*Queen's Work.*

THE FULFILMENT.

And the angel said to them: Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. . . For, this day, is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord, in the City of David.—St. Luke, ii, 10, 11.

THE PROPHECY.

And thou, Bethlehem, art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be the Ruler in Israel: and His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity.—Prophecy of Micah, v. 2.

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