

In God's Garden, Stories of the Saints for Little Children, by Amy Steedman, Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co. This text is in the Public Domain

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

IN the sunny land of Italy, high upon hills covered with olive-trees, nestles the little town of Assisi. Such a strange little town it is, with its tall city walls and great gateways, its narrow, steep streets, and houses with wide, overhanging eaves. The road that leads up from the plain below is so steep, as it winds upwards among the silver olive-trees, that even the big white oxen find it a toil to drag the carts up to the city gates, and the people think it quite a journey to go down to the level land below.

Now, it was in this same little hill-town, many years ago, that Saint Francis was born.

They did not know that he was going to be a great saint—this little, dark-eyed Italian baby, who came to gladden his mother's heart one autumn day in the long ago year of 1182, when his father, Pietro Bernardone, was away in France. He seemed just like any other baby, and only his mother, perhaps, thought him the most wonderful baby that ever was born. (But mothers always think that, even if their babies do not grow up to be real saints.) She called him Giovanni at first, but when his father came home he named the little son Francesco, which means "the Frenchman," because he was so pleased with all the money he had made in France. So the child from that day was always called Francesco, which is his real Italian name, although we in England call him Francis.

Soon he grew into a happy, daring boy, the leader in all the games and every kind of fun. He was the pride of his father and mother, and the favourite of the whole town; for although he was never out of mischief, he never did a cruel or unkind thing, and was ever ready to give away all he had to those who needed help.

And when he grew older he was still the gayest of all the young men of Assisi, and wore the costliest and most beautiful clothes, for his father had a great deal of money and grudged him nothing.

Then came a sad day when Francis fell sick, and for a while they feared that he must die. But, although he grew slowly better, he was never quite the same Francis again. He did not care about his gay companions, or the old happy life. There was real work to be done in the world, he was sure. Perhaps some special work was waiting for his hand, and with wistful eyes he was ever looking for a sign that would show him what that work was to be.

Walking one day along the winding road, dreaming dreams as he gazed far across the misty plains, catching glimpses of far-away blue mountains

through the silver screen of the olive-trees, he was stopped by a poor old beggar, who asked him for the love of God to help him.

Francis started from his day-dreams, and recognised the man as an old soldier who had fought for his country with courage and honour.

Without stopping to think for a moment, Francis took off his gay cloak and tenderly wrapped it round the shoulders of the shivering old man.

He never thought that any reward would be given him for his kind action, but that very night Christ came to him in a glorious vision, and, leading him by the hand, showed him a great palace full of shining weapons and flags of victory, each one marked with the sign of the cross. Then, as Francis stood gazing at these wonderful things, he heard the voice of Christ telling him that these were the rewards laid up for those who should be Christ's faithful soldiers, fighting manfully under His banner.

With a great joy in his heart Francis awoke, and hurriedly left home to join the army, thinking only of earthly service, and longing to win the heavenly reward.

But in the quiet night he heard again the voice of Christ telling him that the service he was seeking was not what Christ required of his soldiers.

Troubled and sad, Francis went back to Assisi and, when he was once more inside the city walls, turned aside to pray in the little ruined church of Saint Damiano. And as he prayed once more he heard the voice speaking to him, and saying, "Francis, repair my church."

Now, Francis thought this meant that he was to build up the ruined walls of the little church in which he prayed. He did not understand that the command was that he should teach the people, who make up Christ's Church on earth, to be pure and good and strong.

Francis was only too glad to find that here at last was some real work to be done, and never stopping to think if he was doing right, he went joyfully home and took some of the richest stuffs which his father had for sale. These he carried off to the market, and sold them for quite a large sum of money. Then, returning to the little church, he gave the money to the old priest, telling him to rebuild the walls and to make the whole place beautiful.

But the priest refused to accept the money, for he was afraid that Francis had done wrong in taking the stuffs, and that his father would be angry.

This was a great disappointment to Francis, and made him think that perhaps he had been too hasty. He was afraid to go home and tell what he had done, so he hid himself for some days. But at last, tired and hungry, with his gay clothes stained with dust, he slowly walked back to his father's house.

And very angry, indeed, was Pietro Bernardone when he found out what his son had done. He did not mind giving Francis money for fine clothes or pleasures of any kind, and he had allowed him to be as extravagant as he liked.

But to want money to build up an old church, or to spend in doing good, that was not to be thought of for a moment.

Out he came in a furious rage and drove Francis indoors, and there shut him up in a dark cellar, bound hand and foot, so that he could not escape.

But though his father was so angry, his mother could not bear to see her son suffer, whether he deserved it or not. So she stole down when no one was there, and, unlocking the cellar door, she spoke gently to poor Francis, and listened to all his story. Then she took off his chains and set him free, telling him to go quickly before any one should see him.

Francis had no place to shelter in but the little ruined church, and no friend who would receive him but the poor old priest, so back he went to Saint Damiano, leaving parents and home and comforts behind him.

His father, of course, was terribly angry when he found that Francis had escaped, and he went at once to complain to the bishop, and demand that Francis should be punished and made to give back the money he had taken.

The bishop spoke kindly to Francis, who promised gladly to give back the money which had brought him so much trouble. And there, in the market-place, with all the people looking on, he took off his costly clothes, now all stained and worn, and standing pale and thin, wearing only a hair shirt, he gave clothes and money back to his angry father, saying—

"Listen, all of you. Until this time I have called Pietro Bernardone father, but from this moment I will say no more 'my father Pietro Bernardone,' but only 'my Father which art in Heaven.' "

Then the good bishop came quickly up and wrapped his mantle round the poor shivering lad, and gave him his blessing, bidding him henceforth be a true servant of God. A poor labourer gave Francis his rough brown tunic, and the people were moved with pity and would have helped him, for they thought he had been treated very harshly.

But Francis wandered away alone into the world, seeking to do all the things he had most disliked doing, even at one time nursing the poor lepers, and begging his bread from door to door.

Soon, however, he made his way back to Assisi, and to the little ruined church; and began building up the walls with his own hands, carrying the stones on his shoulders, happy and contented to be doing work for God.

And the more he thought of his past life and the wasteful splendour in which he had lived, the more he came to see that to be poor for Christ's sake was best of all.

"If Christ chose to become poor for our sakes," thought he, "surely it is but right that we should choose to become poor for His dear sake."

It seemed to Francis that no one had really loved poverty since the days when our blessed Lord had lived amongst the poor on earth. And he began to

think of poverty as a beautiful lady who had been despised and ill-treated all these long years, with no one to take her part or see any charm in her fair face.

For himself he made up his mind to love her with all his heart, to be as poor as his Master had been, and to possess nothing here on earth.

Even his coarse brown habit had been given to him in charity, and instead of a belt he tied round his waist a piece of rope which he found by the way-side. He wore no shoes nor stockings, but went barefoot, and had no covering for his head. And being so truly poor was the greatest joy to him. He thought the Lady Poverty was a fairer bride than any on earth, though her clothes were ragged and her pathway lined with thorns. For along that thorny path she led him closer to his Master, and taught him to tread more nearly in His footsteps than most of His servants have ever trod.

One day when Francis was reading the gospel, Christ's call seemed to sound in his ears just as it did to Saint Matthew of old. He had often read the words before, but that day they had a new message for him: "As ye go, preach, saying the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses, neither two coats, neither shoes nor yet staves."

Then he knew that Christ did not want him only to be good, but to teach others how to be good, and to look after Christ's poor and sick, always remaining poor and lowly himself. And as soon as he heard the call he rose up, left all, and followed his Master to his life's end.

Very soon other men joined Francis, eager to serve Christ as he did. They all dressed just as Francis dressed, and became quite as poor as he was. Their home was in the plain below Assisi, by the little chapel of Saint Mary of the Angels, which had been given to the brothers. But it was not often that they were there all together, for Francis sent them out to preach to all the world just as the gospel commanded.

In spite of their poverty the "Little Poor Brothers," as they were called, were a happy, cheerful little company. Francis had just the same gay nature and ready smile as when he was a boy in Assisi, and though he might have to go long solitary journeys on foot, sleeping in caves or in woods, hungry and footsore, he was never sad nor lonely. He seemed to love everything that God had made, and all the animals and birds were his special friends. They were never frightened of him, and when he walked in the woods the birds would come and perch on his shoulder and sing their good-morning to him.

And sometimes Francis would stand still and let them all come round him, and would preach a little sermon to them, telling them how they ought to praise God for His goodness.

"Little sisters" he always called them, and it is said they would listen quietly while he spoke, and then when he gave them his blessing, they would rise up to heaven singing their hymn of praise, just as if they had really understood their little service.

Once when Francis and some of the brothers were returning home, they heard a great number of birds singing among the bushes. And when Francis saw them he said to his companions—

"Our sisters, the birds, are praising their Maker. Let us go into their midst and sing our service too."

The birds were not in the least disturbed, but continued their chirping and twittering, so that the brothers could not hear their own voices. Then Francis turned to the birds and said—

"Little sisters, cease your song until we have given God our praise." And they at once were quiet, and did not begin to sing again until the service was over.

And it was not only the birds that loved him, but every kind of creature came to him for comfort and shelter.

Now this is a story which was told about Francis after he was dead, when people tried to remember all the wonderful things that he had done, and perhaps made them a little more wonderful, out of love of Saint Francis.

Once when the saint was living in the city of Agolio a terribly fierce wolf began to prowl about the town. He carried off everything eatable he could find, and grew so bold that he even seized the children and made off to his mountain den with them. The whole town was terrified, and people scarcely dared go out of doors for fear of meeting the terrible wolf. And though the men hunted him, he always escaped and came prowling down at nightfall again.

When Saint Francis heard this he said—

"I will go out and meet this wolf, and ask him what he means."

"He will kill you," cried all the people, and they tried to persuade him not to go.

But Saint Francis set out, taking some of the brothers with him. They went bravely along for a short way, and then the brothers turned back afraid and ran home, leaving Saint Francis alone. And presently he heard a deep growling and the sound of a terrible rush, and the great wolf, with blazing eyes and open mouth, came bounding towards him. But as he came nearer Saint Francis went forward to meet him, and making the sign of the cross, he said: "Come hither, brother wolf. I command thee in the name of Christ that thou do no more harm to me nor to any one."

And then a wonderful thing happened; for, as soon as the wolf heard the saint's voice, he stopped, and then came gently forward, and lay like a lamb at St. Francis's feet. Then Saint Francis talked quietly to him, and told him he deserved to be punished for all the evil he had done, but if he would promise to kill and plunder no more, the people of Agolio would promise on their side to give him food every day. And the wolf rubbed his head against Saint Francis's habit and gently laid his paw in the saint's hand. And always after that the good people

of Agolio used to put out food for the wolf, and he grew so good and tame that he went quietly from door to door, and never did harm to any one again.

Whether all this really happened we do not know; but one thing we are certain of, and that is, that Francis loved all living creatures, and they seemed to know it and to love him too.

It was not long before the little band of brothers grew into quite a large company, and Francis went to Rome to ask the Pope, the head of the Church, to give them his blessing, and his permission to live together under their rule of poverty. All the world was astonished at this strange man, in his coarse brown robe, who preached to them that riches were not worth having, and that the greatest happiness was to be good and pure.

At first the Pope would have nothing to do with him. But one night he had a dream, and in his dream he saw a church leaning on one side, and almost falling. And the only thing that kept it from falling quite over was a poor man, barefooted and dressed in a coarse brown robe, who had his shoulder against it and was holding it up.

Then the Pope knew that God had sent the dream to him, and that Francis was going to be a great helper in the Church. So next day he called for Francis and granted him all that he asked, and took the Little Poor Brothers under his protection.

Soon the company grew larger and larger, and Francis sent them all over the country, preaching and teaching men that they should deny themselves and love poverty rather than riches.

Still they always kept the little home at Saint Mary of the Angels, and the brothers returned there after their preaching was ended.

The convent was built close to a wood, and this wood was the place Francis loved best. For he could be quite alone there, to pray and meditate, with no one to disturb his thoughts. And often, when all the other brothers were asleep, he would steal quietly out and kneel for hours under the silent trees, alone with God.

Now there was a little boy at the convent who loved Francis very much, and wanted to know all that he did, that he might learn to grow like him. Especially he wondered why Francis went alone into the dark wood, but he was too sleepy to keep awake to see. It was a very poor convent, and all the brothers slept on mats on the floor, for they had not separate cells. At last one night the boy crept close to the side of Francis, and spread his mat quite close to his master's, and in case he should not wake he tied his little cord to the cord which Francis wore round his waist. Then he lay down happily and went to sleep.

By and by when every one was asleep, Francis got up as usual to pray. But he noticed the cord and gently untied it, so that the boy slept on undisturbed. Presently, however, the child awoke, and finding his cord loose and his master gone, he got up and followed him into the wood, treading very softly with his bare feet that he might disturb nobody.

It was very dark, and he had to feel his way among the trees; but presently a bright light shone out, and as he stole nearer he saw a wonderful sight. His master was kneeling there, and with him was the Blessed Virgin, holding our dear Lord in her arms, and many saints were there as well. And over all was a great cloud of the holy angels. The vision and the glorious brightness almost blinded the child, and he fell down as if he were dead.

Now when Francis was returning home he stumbled over the little body lying there, and guessing what had happened he stooped down and tenderly lifted him up, and carried him in his arms, as the Good Shepherd carries His lambs. Then the child felt his master's arms round him, and was comforted, and told him of the vision and how it had frightened him. In return Francis bade him tell no one what he had seen as long as his master was alive. So the old story tells us that the child grew up to be a good man and was one of the holiest of the Little Poor Brothers, because he always tried to grow like his master. Only after Francis died did he tell the story of the glorious vision which he had seen that night in the dark wood, at the time when no one knew what a great saint his master was.

As time went on, Francis grew anxious to do more than preach at home; for Christ's message to him had been "Go ye into all the world." He had set out many times, but always something had prevented him from getting far, until at last he succeeded in reaching the land of the Saracens where the Crusaders were fighting. His great hope was that he might see the Sultan and teach him about Christ, so that all his people might become Christians. He had no fear at all, and when every one warned him that he would certainly be put to death, he said that would be a small matter if only he could teach the heathen about God.

But although the Sultan received Francis, and listened to all he had to say, he only shook his head and refused to believe without a sign.

Then Francis grew more and more eager to convince him, and asked that a great fire should be made, and that he and the heathen priests should pass through it, saying that whoever came out unharmed should be held to be the servant of the true God. But the heathen priests all refused to do this, and so poor Francis had to return home, having, he feared, done no good, but hoping the good might follow afterwards.

These weary journeys and all the toil and hardship of his daily life began to make Francis weak and ill. Many things troubled him too; for the brothers did not love poverty as he did, and they began to make new rules and to forget what he had taught them. But in the midst of all trouble, he remained the same humble servant of Christ, always thinking of new ways to serve his Master.

There was no time Francis loved so much as Christmas. He loved to feel that all living things were happy on that day. He used to say that he wished that all governors and lords of the town and country might be obliged to scatter corn over the roads and fields, so that "our sisters the larks," and all the birds might feast as well. And because the ox and the ass shared the stable with the Holy

Child, he thought they should be provided with more than ordinary food each Christmas Eve.

He wished every one to remember how poor and lowly our Lord was on that night when He came as a little child; and so on Christmas Eve he made a stable in the chapel, and brought in an ox and an ass and a tiny crib and manger. In the manger he placed the figure of a baby to represent the infant Christ, and there in the early hours of the Christmas morning, he chanted the gospel at the first Christmas Mass.

It was in the spring of the year that Francis first went to the hermitage among the mountains, which he loved better than any other place. It was a small hut high among the Apennines, among crags and rocks far away from any other place. Here he could wander about the woods, which were carpeted with spring flowers, and hear his little sisters the birds singing all day long.

And here one day, as he knelt thinking of all his dear Lord had suffered, a wonderful thing happened. The thought of all that trouble and pain seemed more than he could bear, and he prayed that he might be allowed to suffer as his Master had done. And as he prayed, seeing only before him the crucified Christ with nail-pierced hands and wounded side, God sent the answer to his prayer, and in his hands and feet deep marks appeared, as though there had been nails driven through them, and in his side a wound as if from the cruel thrust of a spear.

And so Francis learned to suffer as his Master had suffered, and through all the pain he only gave God thanks that he had been thought worthy to bear the marks that Jesus bore.

Francis did not live very long after this for he grew weaker and weaker, and they carried him back to the old house at Saint Mary of the Angels. There the Little Poor Brothers gathered round him, and he spoke his last words to them, bidding them live always as he had taught them to live, in poverty and lowliness. And when evening came, and the birds he loved so much were singing their vesper hymns, his voice joined in their praise until his soul passed away to the Lord whom he had tried to serve so humbly, and in whose footsteps he had sought to place his own.

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