

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 BENEDICT

IT was in the year of our Lord 540 that Saint Benedict was born at Spoleto in Italy, and he was only a boy of sixteen on the night when our story begins.

Such a cold night it was. Piercing wind swept over the mountains, whistling through the pine-trees, and hurrying on to the great city of Rome that lay in the plains below. It was cold enough in the city where the people could take shelter in their houses, and sit warming their hands over their little pots of fire, but out on the bare hillside it was even worse. For the icy breath of the winter wind, which had come far over the snow, swept into every nook and corner as if determined to search out any summer warmth that might be lingering in a sheltered corner.

And there in a cave high up among the rocks, a boy sat listening to the wind, and thinking of many things, as he tried to wrap his worn old cloak closer round him.

He was a tall thin lad, with sad dreaming eyes, and a face already sharpened by want and suffering. The cave in which he sat had little in it, except a heap of dried leaves which served him for a bed, and it was difficult to imagine how any one could live in so dreary and comfortless a place, so far from any other human being.

But he was thinking of a very different home, as he sat shivering in the cold that night. Only a year ago he had lived in a beautiful palace, where everything was pleasant and warm and bright. His father was the lord of the country around, and he, the only son of the house, had everything that he could want. They were all proud of him, he was so clever and brilliant, and as soon as he was old enough he was sent to study in Rome, that he might become a great lawyer.

There the boy's eyes saw a different scene—the great city of Rome, where all was gaiety and pleasure, where all pleased the eye, the ear, and the taste, but where, alas, so much wickedness dwelt as well. He had tried to shut his eyes to things he did not wish to see, but day by day the sights and sounds around him, the talk of his companions, and the things they thought so pleasant had become hateful to him. And one day he had stolen secretly away from Rome, leaving everything behind, determined to go away into a desert place and live alone. This it seemed to him was the only way of truly serving God, to learn to deny himself in everything and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

A tender smile came over the boy's face as the next picture rose before his eyes. True he had left all and gone into the wilderness, but love could not so easily be left behind, and his old nurse had found out a way of following him, and would not be denied the pleasure of serving him and caring for his wants; even begging food, from door to door, that she might prepare a dainty meal for him. It had been very pleasant, but its very pleasantness had warned him that he must deny himself still further. So he had once more stolen away, when his old nurse was asleep and had hidden himself in the cave among the rocks of Subiaco. Here he was indeed alone, and the only food he had was a little bread which a kind old hermit gave him daily, and his only drink the clear water of the mountain streams.

And here he seemed to live with God alone, seeing no one but the kind old hermit who brought him his daily bread. He was happy and peaceful, never ceasing to pray for those who in the busy world might forget to pray for themselves.

But this night the thoughts of past days were troubling him. And as he sat there listening to the wind he began to long for the things he had left behind. One beautiful face especially grew clearer than the rest, and smiling upon him beckoned him back to the pleasures and comforts and earthly joys he had put away from him.

With a cry he sprang to his feet and rushed out of the cave. For a moment he felt as if his feet must carry him down the steep mountain-side, over the plain and back to the beautiful city; and then he stood still, and with a prayer for help to overcome this temptation of the Evil One, he threw himself into a thicket of thorny briars that grew by the side of the cave. There he rolled over and over until he was torn and bleeding; then slowly returning to the cave he lay down upon his bed of leaves, peaceful and contented. The evil thoughts had fled, the face that tempted him had vanished, and Satan was conquered. So Benedict began his life of self-denial and solitary prayer. Years passed by and in spite of the loneliness of the place and the few people who ever passed by that way, it began to be known that one of God's saints lived in the mountain cave. The shepherds who fed their flocks on the lower hills would bring him little offerings of milk or cheese and ask his blessing, or perhaps a prayer for one who was sick. And gradually people began to call him their saint of the mountain, and to come to him for help in all their troubles. Thus the fame of his goodness spread wider and wider, until a company of monks who lived some way off sent and besought him to come and live with them and be their head.

Benedict was grieved to think of leaving his little cell which he had grown to love, and the simple mountain people, who so often came to him in their need. But he thought this was a call he ought to obey, so he sorrowfully set out and journeyed many miles till he came to the convent of the brothers.

It was all very strange to him after the stillness of his mountain cell, and he could not accustom himself to hearing voices all day long and to seeing so many faces. Still he strove to do his duty and soon made many changes in the convent

life. He told the brothers plainly that there were many comforts they must put away, and above all that they must eat less and work more.

Now the brothers did not like this at all, and they began to repent that they had asked so great a saint to come and rule over them, for he made their rule so hard and strict, that few of them cared to keep it.

Then one day a strange thing happened. The brothers were all dining together, and Benedict was silently eating his portion, his thoughts far away in the little mountain cell at Subiaco, when some one touched his arm and offered him a cup of wine. Benedict turned and looked searchingly into the brother's face, and then with upraised hand made the sign of the cross over the cup. Instantly it fell broken to the ground, and the wine was spilt upon the floor, for there had been poison in the cup, which the holy sign had destroyed.

Then Benedict looked round at the company of brothers, who sat with downcast eyes, ashamed and silent, and, without a word, he rose and left them. He returned, alone as he had come, back to his mountain home, where instead of human voices there was the song of the birds, where the wild flowers looked at him with pure, friendly faces, and even the wild animals did not count him their enemy and would do him no harm.

Here he hoped once more to live quite alone, but one by one men came and built huts close to his cave, that they might be near so great a saint, and before long there was a great company living around him.

Benedict's fame had spread even to Rome, and two of the Roman nobles sent their sons to be taught by him. One was only five years old and the other twelve, and it seemed a hard life for such children. But Benedict cared for them and watched over them, and they loved him as if he had been their own father.

And after all life was very pleasant on the mountain-side, when the sun shone and lessons and prayers were over. They could play among the pine-trees and chase the goats over the rocks, and when the sun grew too hot creep back into the cave to rest. In spring there were the first flowers to hunt for, and they would come back with eager hands filled with violets and mountain anemones. And in autumn there were nuts and berries to be gathered, which they laid up like young squirrels for their winter store.

And among the daily duties there was nothing they liked so well as to go down to the lake to fetch water, when the mountain springs had run dry. One day it was the little one's turn to do this, and as he was leaning over, his foot slipped, and he fell into the lake, and before he could utter a cry the water closed over his head.

At that very moment Benedict, who was kneeling in prayer on the hill above, saw a vision of the boy's danger, and hastily sent the elder lad down to the lake to help the child.

He never stayed to question why he was sent, but sped down the mountain-side, and without a moment's delay threw himself into the lake, hoping to be able to reach the little dark head that had risen above the water for the last

time. And lo! he found that the water grew firm beneath his feet, and he walked as if he was on dry land, and lifting the child, carried him safely ashore.

When Benedict saw that so many other hermits had taken up their abode on the mountain, he determined to form them into a company of brothers, and give them a rule to live by, and by and by they built a little chapel where they could meet for daily service.

Now, strangely enough, every evening at the hour of prayer, one young monk became restless and uneasy, and would steal silently out of the chapel and disappear down the hillside. None of the brothers could think what made him do this; but night after night the same thing happened just when prayers were about to begin. All were troubled and disturbed, till at last they went to Benedict, and asked him what it could mean. Then the saint promised to watch, and that very evening he saw what no other eyes had seen.

Into the chapel came a little demon black as coal, and he seized the robe of the poor young monk, and dragged him out of the door. And though the demon was so tiny he was stronger than the monk, and easily led him swiftly away out of sound of the chapel bell.

Then Benedict followed, and touching the monk with his rod, bade the demon begone and trouble him no longer. And after that the young monk stayed in the chapel with the rest, and the demon was seen no more.

It seemed as if Benedict must always suffer from the malice of evil brothers, who disliked his strict rule; and even in his own mountain home the danger followed him. This time the poison was put into a loaf of bread; but Benedict knew that it was there, and while the wicked monk who offered it to him watched with evil eye, hoping to see him eat it, he turned to a wood near by, where a young raven sat. "Come hither," said Benedict, holding out the loaf towards the raven, "come hither, and take this bread and carry it where the poison that is hidden within can do no harm."

And the story tells us that the raven instantly obeyed, and carried off the loaf. And ere long Death, more powerful than the raven, carried off that wicked monk, so that the poison which lurked in his evil heart could no longer do harm to any one.

It troubled Benedict greatly about this time to hear that not very far off on Monte Cassino there was a heathen temple where the people worshipped false gods, and were living in darkness and sin.

It seemed terrible that such a thing should be suffered in a Christian land, so Benedict made up his mind to go himself and force the people to listen to him.

It was a strange contrast to see him in his coarse, poor robe and thin wan face standing preaching among the crowd of gay pleasure-seekers, who cared for nothing but eating and drinking and making merry. They could not understand why any one should choose to be poor, and suffer pain and hunger for the sake of any god.

But as Benedict taught them day by day, the majesty of his face and the solemn notes in his voice forced them to listen half unwillingly. Then, as they began to learn about the true God, they saw that the gods they had worshipped were false, and they pulled down their temple, and built two chapels on the place where it had stood.

Here, too, Benedict built the first great monastery which was called after him; and after this the brothers began to be known by his name, and were called Benedictines.

But the Evil One saw with great rage that Benedict was taking away his servants and destroying his temples, and he tried in every way to hinder the work. Once when the workmen were trying to raise a stone they found it impossible to move it, though they worked hard all day. At last, in despair, they besought Benedict to come to help them.

As soon as he came he saw at once what was the matter, for on the stone sat a little black demon laughing at the efforts of the workmen, knowing they could never move the stone while he chose to sit there.

"Get you gone, messenger of Satan," cried Benedict.

And with a howl of rage the imp fled, and the stone was lifted easily into its place.

Upon a certain day, not long after the monastery was built, as Benedict was praying in the chapel of the convent, one of the brothers came to tell him that a great company of soldiers were coming up the hill, and at their head was Totila, king of the Goths, who had sent a messenger to ask the saint to receive him.

Benedict, who cared little for earthly kings, was yet too courteous to refuse any such request, so he went out to where the company was gathered on the mountain-side.

The rough soldiers stood with heads uncovered, and from their midst came one who wore a crown and sandals of gold and a kingly robe. He knelt before the saint, and said in a loud, clear voice:

"I, Totila, king of the Goths, have come to crave thy blessing, father, for thy fame hath spread even to the wild north country where I reign."

The brothers, crowding behind Benedict, eager to see these curious strangers, were surprised to hear no answering words of welcome fall from the lips of the saint. And still more surprised were they when Benedict pointed an accusing finger at the glittering crown that shone on the king's head, and said:

"Why dost thou bear upon thy head the sign of royalty which belongs not to thy station? And why have thy lips framed this deceit? Go to thy master, and bid him come to me in truth, and think not that I could mistake a servant for a king."

And to the amazement of all, the real king, who had disguised his armour-bearer to test the power of the saint, came quickly forward, and with no royal robe or golden crown, knelt low before the saint, confessing all, and praying to be forgiven. He was sure now that this was indeed a servant of God, and he listened humbly while Benedict reproved him for his many sins, and warned him of the fate that awaited him.

And so the years passed on, bringing much honour and earthly renown to him who had once lived a lonely boy upon the wild mountain-side.

Things had changed since those early days. He could no longer live quite alone as he had once loved to do, for the world had followed him even into the wilderness. But his heart was as pure and his purpose as strong as when he was a lonely boy seeking only to serve God.

Perhaps the one great pleasure of his earthly life was the yearly visit he paid to his sister Scholastica, who had for many years come to live near him. She had formed a little company of nuns, who strove to live as the brothers were living, working and praying and denying themselves all earthly pleasures.

And as it was a great delight to Benedict to visit his sister, so to Scholastica the day of his coming was the happiest day of all the year. The only thing that grieved her was that the golden hours of that bright day seemed to fly faster than any other, while she listened to his words of counsel and advice, and told him all her troubles.

As it drew near the time for one of these yearly visits, Scholastica began to long for her brother as she had never longed before. Something told her that these bright summer days were to be the last she should spend on earth; and the longing to see and talk to her brother grew almost more than she could bear.

And when he came the hours slipped past even faster than was their wont, and before she could realise it the time had come for him to go. There was so much still to say, and she needed his help so sorely, that she prayed him to wait a few hours longer. But Benedict was persuaded that it was his duty to set off, and duty to him ever came before all else. He gently told her it could not be; that he must return to the brothers that night.

But while he spoke, Scholastica was not listening to his words, nor heeding what he said. With her whole heart she was praying God that He would grant her this one request, and prevent her brother from leaving her so soon.

And as she prayed the light suddenly died out of the sky, great clouds arose and, before Benedict could set out, a terrible storm began to rage. The thunder pealed overhead, the hail came down in a blinding shower, and it was impossible for any one to leave the shelter of the house.

Thus God answered the prayer of Scholastica, filling her heart with thankfulness. And afterwards the heart of Benedict was also filled with gratitude, for not many days later he saw in a vision the soul of his sister flying like a white dove up to heaven's gate, and he knew he should see her on earth no more.

Benedict had lived a long, hard life, eating but little, suffering cold, and denying himself in all things. But though his spirit only grew stronger and brighter as time went on, his body was worn out, and at last he prepared to lay it aside, as men lay aside the worn-out robe which has grown thread-bare. And as he had longed to live alone, so, when death came, he prayed to be carried to the little chapel, and there to be left before the altar alone with God. Thus Benedict the Blessed went home at last, leaving his tired body in God's house, while his spirit returned to God who gave it.

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