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Saint Francis of Assisi



SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI.
From the statue by Andrea della Robbia.

Saint Francis

of Assisi

By Oscar Kuhns



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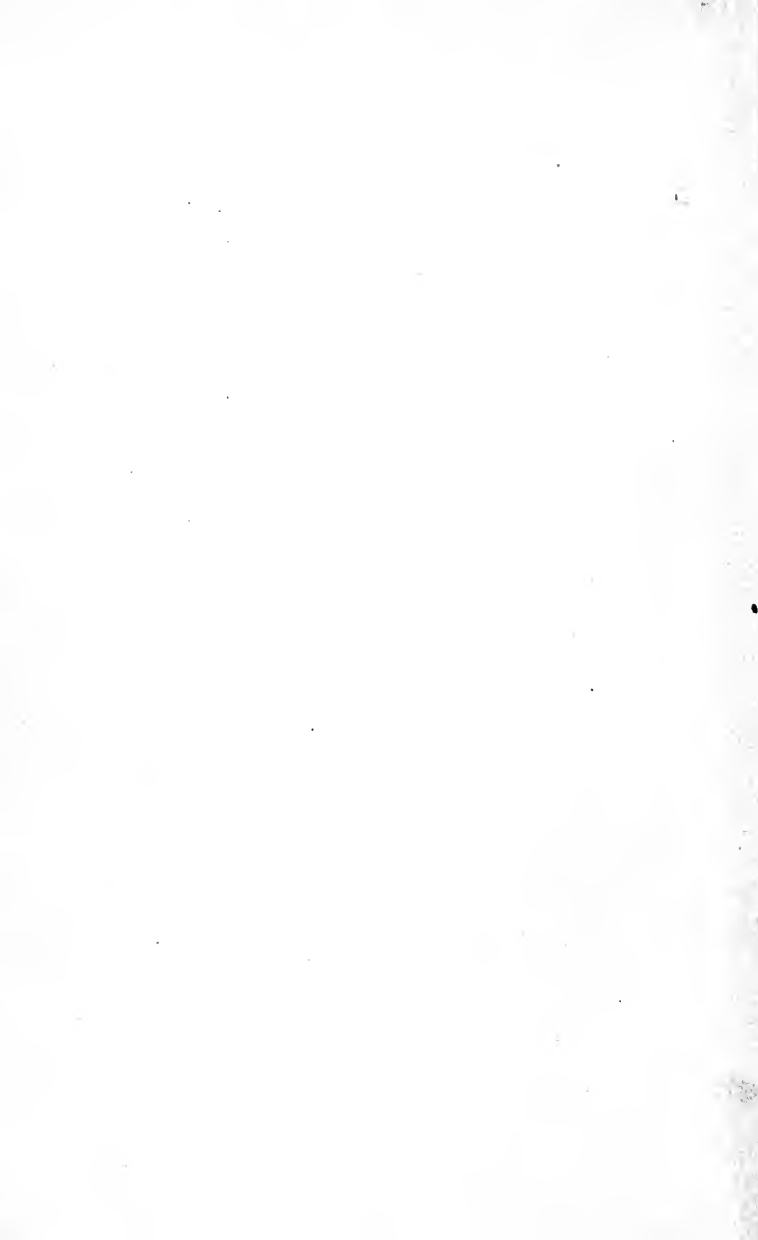
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GENERAL

D. B. Updike, The Merrymount Press, Boston

Francesco e Povertà per questi amanti
Prendi oramai nel mio parlar diffuso.
La lor concordia e i lor lieti sembianti,
Amore e meraviglia e dolce sguardo
Faccan esser cagion di pensier santi.

Dante, Paradiso, xi, 74-78.





Saint Francis

of Assisi

WE of to-day, proud of the achievements of our own civilization, are fond of speaking of the centuries preceding the Renaissance as the Dark Ages, as if ignorance and darkness were their chief, if not only, characteristics. Modern scholarship, however, is beginning to show more and more how vast was the influence exerted by those centuries on the world's history, and men are coming no longer to regard this period of transition with contempt or condescension, but with ever-increasing interest and oftentimes with genuine admiration.

Few centuries have been more fraught with potentiality if not with accomplishment than the twelfth and thirteenth. It was then that arose the free imperial cities all over Europe, the development of which gradually undermined the whole structure of Feudalism and laid the foundation of constitutional government; it was then that the almost fabulous number of great cathedrals were begun which

Saint Francis of Assisi

have been the admiration and amazement of mankind, and which the present generation often finds difficult to keep even in repair; it was then that the sister arts of painting and sculpture began their upward progress toward perfection, leaving all along their triumphant pathway those works which are among the priceless possessions of mankind.

✓ But the most potent influence of these epoch-making centuries was in the profound stirring up of men's hearts, the deep revival of spiritual religion, which swept like a mighty tidal wave over Europe and which shook to its very foundations the hierarchical system of the Roman Church. We are apt to look on the Reformation as a sudden outbreak of evangelical religion, as the sole work of a few men, — Luther, Zwingli, Calvin. But when we examine more closely the genesis of that movement we find, here as elsewhere in the human and natural world, that there are no cataclysms, but that all great movements have been preparing for centuries, "broadening slowly down from precedent to precedent."

(If we cast a bird's-eye glance over the history of Western Christianity we see two distinct influences at work, the one objective, the other subjective. On the one hand we behold the up-

Saint Francis of Assisi

building of the stupendous structure of the Roman Church, with its complicated hierarchy, its claims of universal overlordship, and its scholastic theology; on the other hand, we see, from the days of the Apostolic Church to the present, the stream of spiritual, personal, evangelical religion flowing down the centuries, sometimes pure, sometimes mixed with mysticism and strange superstitions — for the most part hidden, though at times broadening out beneath the open sky — but never flowing full and unrestrained until after the Reformation.

The essence of what we now know as Protestantism existed — in many respects mingled with other things, it is true — throughout all the Dark and Middle Ages, almost always, however, under the stigma of heresy. It is found in the conduct if not in all the teaching of the Cathari, who, in addition to the Manichaeic doctrines of the good and evil powers, believed in living lives patterned after Christ; it is found in the Albigenses, who had the same doctrines as the Cathari without their Manichaeism, and who were destroyed by that most iniquitous of all crusades, instigated by Saint Dominic, promulgated by Pope Innocent III, and carried out to the bitter end by Simon de Montfort; it is found in the Waldensians, — the Poor Men

Saint Francis of Assisi

of Lyons,—who sought to lay up for themselves treasures in heaven rather than on earth, lived lives of poverty, went about preaching the doctrines of pure religion, cheerful under persecution, dying joyfully at the stake for their opinions.

All these sects fell under the ban of the Church, their followers were stigmatized as heretics and suffered persecution and martyrdom. Their doctrines, however, lived after them, not only to reappear, purged and purified, centuries later in the crucible of the Reformation, but carried on by their contemporaries in the bosom of the Church itself. The essence of the Franciscan religion is that of the Waldensians, joined to loyalty and obedience to the Roman Church. The predecessor of Saint Francis was just as much Petrus Waldus, the Poor Man of Lyons, as Fra Gioachino de' Fiore, that mystical monk living high up among the mountains of Calabria,

“Di spirito profetico dotato.”

In the year 1209 a vast army under Simon de Montfort passed like a destructive fire over the beautiful hills and valleys of Provence, sent by Pope Innocent III to extirpate heresy by fire and sword. Villages were burnt, fields laid

Saint Francis of Assisi

waste, flourishing cities besieged, captured and destroyed; thousands and tens of thousands of men, women and children were slain.

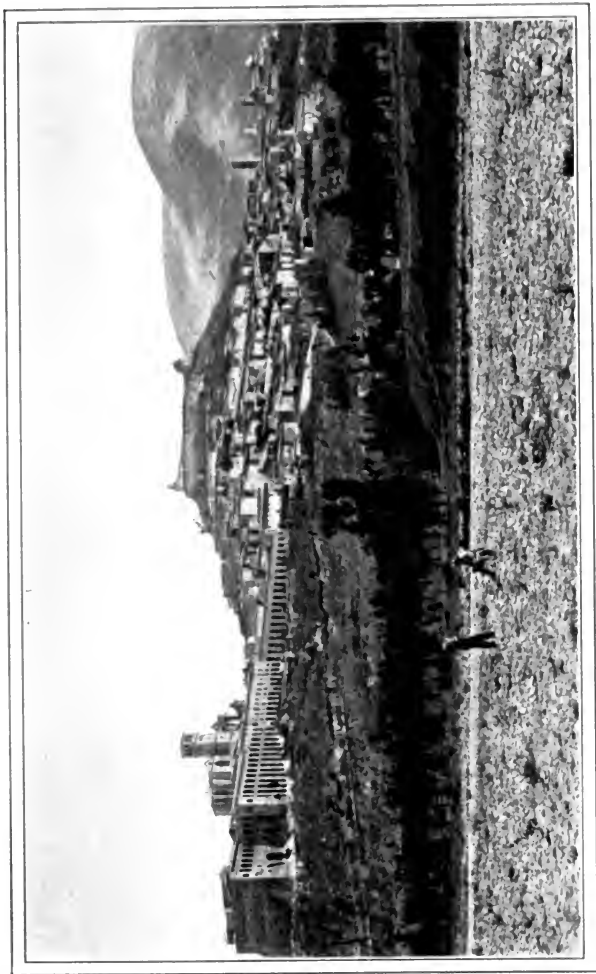
On February twenty-fourth, of this same year, a young man twenty-seven years old was present at the celebration of mass in the little chapel of Santa Maria della Porziuncula, a mile or two from the Umbrian city of Assisi. The gospel for the day was from the tenth chapter of Matthew, and as the young man heard the familiar words: "Go, preach, saying the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give," a new light broke into his soul; he felt that he understood the will of Christ to him-ward as he never had done before. "Immediately," says Saint Bonaventura, "with great joy he cried out, 'These are the things which I wish and desire with all my heart and with all my mind;' whereupon he straightway loosened the sandals from his feet, cast away his wallet and his staff, and began to go about calling upon all men to repent."

Yet this scene, so striking, so fraught with consequences for the Roman Church — nay, for the whole Christian world — was on the part of Saint Francis of Assisi only the climax of a long period of seeking after God if haply he might

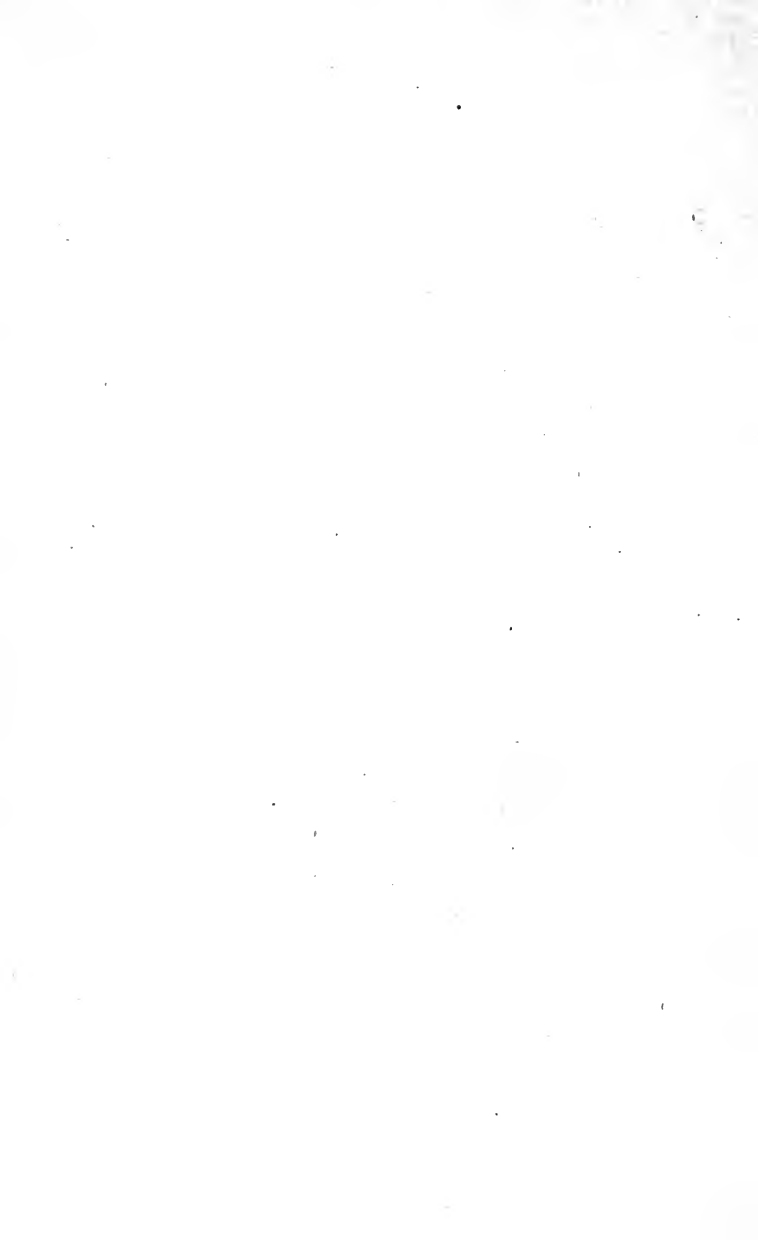
Saint Francis of Assisi

find Him. The story of the conversion of men of great religious genius is always an interesting one, whether it be Martin Luther, rising to his feet halfway up the Santa Scala at Rome, crying, "The just shall live by faith;" or John Wesley in the little room in Aldersgate Street, listening, with heart strangely warm within him, to the reading of Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans; or Martin Boehm, one of the founders of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, kneeling beside his plow in the fertile fields of his Pennsylvania farm.

No less interesting is the story of the conversion of Saint Francis. Born at Assisi, in 1182, the son of wealthy parents, he had lived a wild and careless life; had loved rich garments, banquets, gay companions, and seemed little destined to become one who should induce other men to incur voluntarily and cheerfully the privations of poverty. There are certain definite steps in his conversion from the world to Christ. In 1202 war broke out between Assisi and Perugia; a battle was fought in the plain between the two cities, and Saint Francis was taken prisoner, remaining in Perugia a year. Although he spent this time cheerfully, singing, and not lamenting, yet he must have had plenty of opportunity to reflect on the frivolity of his early life.



THE CITY OF ASSISI AND CONVENT OF SAINT FRANCIS.
From a photograph.



Saint Francis of Assisi

After his release and return home he suffered a prolonged and serious illness. When he was convalescent he left the house one day, leaning on a cane, to look out over the beautiful Umbrian plain, which he had seen so often with joy and pleasure. But somehow or other, as he stood there that day, he felt that a change had occurred. All that exquisite beauty of a spring in Umbria, the flowers, birds, blue sky, the level plain dotted with towns and villages and the amphitheatre of hills on the horizon, left his heart cold and melancholy. The time had come to him, as it came to Wordsworth six hundred years later, as it comes to all men through sickness, sorrow, or the creeping steps of age, when, although the

“Rainbow comes and goes
And lovely is the rose,
And waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair

And the sunshine is a glorious birth—

Yet we know, where'er we go,

That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.”

From that time on Saint Francis could not rid his heart of a deep feeling of discontent and sadness; a yearning for something, he knew not what, haunted his soul. He tried to drown the feeling in pleasure; he resumed his inter-

Saint Francis of Assisi

course with his gay companions, was present at their banquets, and took part in their brilliant cavalcades. He joined the troops of Walter of Brienne, who was making an expedition to Naples in the interest of Pope Innocent III; but after extensive preparations, and after he had gone a few miles, he had a vision — what it was we know not — and returned to Assisi.

He began to seek lonely places, spent hours in prayer and in wandering through the fields. One day in the little ruined chapel of Saint Damian, about half a mile from Assisi, it seemed to him as if the Christ on the crucifix spoke to him, demanding his soul, his life and his service. His heart melted within him; as the quaint mediaeval Latin of his biographer has it: “Ab illa hora vulneratum et liquefactum est cor ejus ad memoriam dominicae passionis.” Another day, while on horseback, he met a leper, and, obeying a natural impulse, he turned away; but almost immediately, being filled with remorse, he came back, gave the leper what money he had, and kissed his hand.

He now gave up all his worldly pleasures, renounced his heritage, sold his fine clothes, wandered about in rags, was looked on as insane by his former companions, became an object of derision on the part of the children, and,

Saint Francis of Assisi

hardest of all, was repudiated, beaten and insulted by his father and brother. But in return for this he had a heart full of love and joy unspeakable. As he went through the woods one day he broke out singing—he had a strong, sweet voice, we are told. Some robbers, attracted by his songs, came up and asked who he was. “I am the herald of a great King,” he said. They took away his cloak, flung him into a ditch filled with snow, saying, “Lo, there is your place, poor herald of God.”

But during all these varied experiences he had not yet found his true home and vocation in this world. And so it was that the scene in the chapel of Saint Damian, on that day in February, 1209, formed the climax of his religious development. From that time on he spent his life in the service of others, preaching, caring for the sick, helping the poor, converting sinners.

In such a life chronological records have but little place. The true events or crises are the facts connected with the man's character and influence. We can sum up all that we need to know of outward events in few words: his birth in 1182; his imprisonment in Perugia in 1202; his final conversion in 1209; his visit to Rome and the oral confirmation of his First Rule by Innocent III; the journey to the Holy Land and

Saint Francis of Assisi

his colloquy with the Sultan of Babylon; the gift by the Benedictine monks of Mount Subasio of the little chapel of the Porziuncula, which from that day became the headquarters of the Order; the journeys through Umbria and Tuscany, preaching and converting; the rapid increase in the number of his followers; the dissension in regard to the observance of the Rule which saddened the last years of his life; his reception of the stigmata in 1224, and his death on October 4, 1226. This, in brief, is a summary of the outer facts of his life.

Above the high altar in the lower church at Assisi is a picture by Giotto representing the marriage of Saint Francis to poverty, the most touching of all the frescoes of that wonderful building. In it we see a woman, thin and ragged, holding out her hand to Saint Francis, to whom she is united by Christ. Before her a boy is casting stones, another points a long rod at her in scorn, while a dog is barking at her feet. This picture illustrates the ruling passion and most significant feature of the life of Saint Francis: his humility and his abnegation of those things—riches and honor—for which all men are struggling. He required in his followers the same things he required in himself: to sell all they had to feed the poor, and then,



THE ALLEGORY OF POVERTY.
(Saint Francis Wedded to Poverty by Christ.)
From the fresco by Giotto.



Saint Francis of Assisi

in lowliness and humility, to beg or work for the simple food necessary to existence.

The patience and meekness of Saint Francis in this life of self-enforced privation and suffering are almost unexampled. No word of complaint ever escaped his lips; nay, the greater the privation and suffering the greater the joy he felt. His ideal of happiness is well expressed in that oft-quoted story from the Fioretti which tells us how, walking one day from Perugia to Assisi with Fra Leone, he said that happiness did not consist in reputation for holiness, nor in the working of miracles, nor in universal knowledge, nor in the gift of prophecy, but in receiving insults, rebuffs, beatings and hardships of all kinds, with humility, gladness and love: "Write down, O Brother Leone, that this is perfect joy."

This constant spirit of cheerfulness and joy was one of the most striking things about his character. Always and everywhere, in the hut of the poor, in the palace of the rich, in the dens of those outcasts of mediaeval society, the lepers, he wore a sweet and smiling face. In his Rule he made joy a part of Christian duty, and often rebuked his followers for being melancholy. "My brother, why this sad face? Have you committed sin? That concerns only God

Saint Francis of Assisi

and yourself. Go and pray. But before me and your brothers always wear a mien full of holy joy. For it is not proper when one is in the service of God to be of a sullen and morose countenance." These words remind us involuntarily of that scene in Dante's *Inferno* where the souls of the melancholy are plunged beneath the surface of a gloomy marsh. "There is perhaps nothing," says Ruskin, speaking of this passage of Dante, "more notable than the profound truth couched under the attachment of so terrible a punishment to sadness or sorrow. I do not know words that might with more benefit be borne with us and set in our hearts against the minor regrets and rebelliousness than these simple ones:

'We once were sad,
In the sweet air, made gladsome by the sun,
Now in these murky settlings we are sad.'

What Dante taught in his symbolic vision, Saint Francis taught by his own example.

In this constant joy of his, his dislike to grieve others by his own sorrows, we have one phase of another of his most striking characteristics — his exquisite spirit of courtesy. This he showed all his life long by example and precept. In the *Fioretti* we read how he said to a noble cavalier who desired to become a member of the Order,

Saint Francis of Assisi

“Know, dearest brother [carissimo fratello], that courtesy is one of the attributes of God, who gives his sun and his rain to the just and the unjust through his courtesy; and courtesy is sister to charity, which extinguishes hate and preserves love.” The method of Saint Francis was not like that of the minister who once proclaimed from the pulpit, “I would break any man’s back if I could save his soul.”

We might linger longer over these minor traits of Saint Francis, his perfect tact, his irenic spirit, his mansuetude—that quality so little known to-day that even the name is obsolescent, if not obsolete. But all these are dimmed by the greater glory of the one overwhelming passion of his soul in its triple form of love for man, love for nature, and love for God. No man since the days of the Saviour had a heart more overflowing with love; it was the great feature of his character, the motive of all his actions, the secret of that invincible attraction which he exercised over all men—nay, over all animals, if we may believe the many stories told of him. He loved the rich as well as the poor, and not merely the poor as well as the rich. After the sanction of the First Rule by Innocent III, in 1209, he sent his followers forth to preach, two by two, and among other things

Saint Francis of Assisi

he said to them, "Let peace be still more in your heart than on your lips. Give to no one occasion of wrath and scandal. Invite everybody to benignity, concord and union. Take care not to judge and despise the rich who live in luxury and wear soft raiment, for God is their Lord as well as ours."

But yet Saint Francis looked upon the poor and sick and needy as his peculiar brethren. Those who have had a glimpse of the horrors of leprosy,—that awful plague of the Middle Ages,—and the cruel measures taken by the
† well to protect themselves from contamination, the outlawry, the wooden clappers, the lazarehouses, will need no greater proof of the devotion and charity of Saint Francis than his constant service of these poor outcasts of humanity. Not his the selfish pleasures of those hermits, far up among the lofty hilltops of Italy, who passed the long days and longer nights in prayer and contemplation, acquiring thus a state of mystic ecstasy. It is true that he had a love for contemplation, and was often tempted to spend his life in this exercise, but at the same time he had another impulse toward the suffering world about him. To him as well as to the poet could be applied the lines of Matthew Arnold:

Saint Francis of Assisi

"Two desires toss about
The poet's feverish blood ;
One drives him to the world without
And one to solitude."

"Go," he said to his followers, "go, and teach. It is not for our salvation that God has called us in his goodness, but also for the salvation of the people."

His love for men showed itself in his constant effort not only to relieve their physical sufferings and needs, not only to cheer and comfort their spirits, but to lessen the evils of clashing interests, civil discord and war. Then, as now, there was hatred between the rich and the poor; then, as now, there were grave social problems to settle. Saint Francis approached all these problems in a spirit of love and brotherly kindness. In 1210 he intervened between the barons and the peasants in the country about Assisi and persuaded the lords to sign a charter granting freedom to their serfs; in 1220 he exhorted the Guelphs and Ghibellines of Bologna to peace; and when, shortly before his death, a bitter contest broke out between the bishop and the magistrates of Assisi he composed a new stanza to his *Cantico del Sole* on the blessings of peace and sent his friars to sing it to the warring parties.

Saint Francis of Assisi

Still another way in which the love of Saint Francis showed itself was in the making of many friends. An invincible attraction seemed to draw all men unto him; those who were rich, like Bernardo da Quintavalle, common people like Fra Leone, — il pecorello di dio, as he affectionately called him, — poets like Fra Pacifico, noble lords like the Count of Chiusi, high church dignitaries like the Cardinal Ostiense, — later Pope Gregory IX, — all these became his intimate friends, drawn to him by his strange magnetic influence.

Of all his friendships, however, none is more attractive than that for Santa Clara of Assisi. We catch a glimpse of this sweet girl-saint in the Fioretti, and in her own legend we read how when only sixteen years old she, the daughter of a noble family of Assisi, heard Saint Francis preach; how the words struck deep into her heart, and how, confirmed in her determination by him, she gave up the world to devote herself to God and to suffering humanity. It was a strange, picturesque sight, that night of the nineteenth of March, 1212, when the young girl, fleeing her father's house, was received by Saint Francis in the Porziuncula, and amid blazing candles and burning incense was tonsured and consecrated to the

Saint Francis of Assisi

service of Holy Poverty. From this time on to the death of Saint Francis a genuine friendship existed between the two; yet their relations were marked by such perfect tact that no breath of suspicion has ever sullied the memory of this unique love of saint for saint. He wrote to her, counselled her, and from time to time visited her in the monastery of Saint Damian, where she had founded the Order of Poor Clares.

On one occasion a feeling of great discouragement came over him, a doubt as to the usefulness of his teaching and preaching. The temptation came to him whether it were not better to retire from the world and give himself up entirely to contemplation. So he sent Fra Masseo to Saint Clara asking her to pray God to show him what to do. And she answered: "Thus saith the Lord, that you should say to Saint Francis that God has not called him into the world for himself alone, but that he should bear fruit of souls, and that many through him should be saved." And Saint Francis, hearing this, rose up with great fervor and said, "Let us go, then, in the name of the Lord," and so started out, filled with the Spirit, not knowing whither he went. It was on this occasion that, his heart overflowing with love and tenderness

Saint Francis of Assisi

toward all God's creatures, he preached the sermon to the birds near Bevagna, of which we shall speak later.

One of the most beautiful chapters in the Fioretti tells how Saint Clara ate with Saint Francis at Santa Maria degli Angeli; how before the meal began he spoke of God so sweetly that the company forgot to eat, and sat there rapt in ecstasy. And, while they remained thus with eyes and hands uplifted toward heaven, the men of Assisi and the country round about saw a great light streaming from the windows of the church, and thinking it was a fire, ran thither to put it out. But on arriving they found that there was no fire, and entering in, they saw Saint Francis, Saint Clara and all the company sitting silently about the table with eyes uplifted, a still smile upon their lips, and a soft light hovering above their heads.

It has been said that a genuine love for nature is characteristic of the modern spirit, being practically unknown to the ancients and to the Middle Ages. This is true to a certain extent, at least so far as art and literary expression are concerned. I doubt, however, whether many people of to-day have a more genuine love for nature in all her forms than had the Poverello of Assisi. It was not aesthetic or artistic, but,

Saint Francis of Assisi

like his love for mankind, it was universal, full of tenderness and artlessness, giving itself not only to animate but to inanimate nature, to brother sun and sister moon, as he quaintly called them. One of the rubrics in the *Speculum Perfectionis*, written by Fra Leone, reads as follows: "Of the singular love Saint Francis had for water and stones and trees and flowers."

He loved all kinds of plant life, and in the same book we read how he made the gardener of the monastery plant sweet-smelling flowers, that in their season they might invite those who saw them to praise God, "*Omnis enim creatura dicit et clamat Deus me fecit propter te, homo.*" Dante had the same thoughts in mind when he wrote that passage in the *Earthly Paradise* where he describes a beautiful lady slowly walking over the green meadow, singing and weaving garlands of flowers in her hands, and who, on being asked by Virgil why she sang, referred him to the words of the ninety-second Psalm: "Thou, Lord, hast made me glad through thy works." Ruskin has said of this passage that it is "the most important in regard to nature love in the whole circle of poetry; for it contains the first great confession of the discovery by the human race that their happiness was not in themselves and that their la-

Saint Francis of Assisi

bor was not to have their own service as its chief end."

Saint Francis had a personal love for all animals, for the birds of the air, the beasts of the field, the fish of the sea. The ants alone incurred his dislike, "because," says Fra Egidio, "of their excess of prudence in gathering and laying away stores of grain." Nor can we blame him much, for frugality and thrift are useful qualities, but one could hardly call them lovable.

It does not surprise us that, with his poetic nature, Saint Francis was especially fond of birds. On that day when Saint Clara encouraged him to go on, and he had started out with renewed courage and joy, he came upon a flock of birds near Bevagna, and as they flew about him he preached to them as follows: "Little birds, ye are much beholden toward God your Creator, and in every place you ought to praise him. You should thank him for your warm covering, and for the air which he has given you to live in; that, neither sowing nor reaping, you are fed by him; that he gives you the mountains and the valleys for your refuge, and the high trees to build your nests in, and the rivers and fountains to drink in. Wherefore, little sister birds, since God loves you so much, beware of the sin of ingratitude and forget not to praise Him."

Saint Francis of Assisi

Probably Saint Francis was the first man in history to have the thoughts of the rights and comfort of animals which have culminated in our day in the formation of the Audubon Society and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. We are told in the *Speculum Perfectionis* how he wished to persuade the Emperor to make a special law, to the effect that at Christmas time men should provide well, not only for the poor, but for the domestic animals, that they should cast grain on the roads for the birds, and that no man should be allowed to take or kill the larks or do them any harm.

No wonder that this love for animals was returned. We are told of hares and rabbits who sought refuge in the folds of his dress, of the sheep who lifted their heads and nodded as he passed by, of the birds who gathered around him and ceased their songs at his request and listened as he preached to the multitudes. One beautiful touch is given by Saint Bonaventura in his description of the death of Saint Francis, where he tells us how "those birds which are called the larks, who love according to their nature the light of day and hate the darkness, on the night when Saint Francis passed away from this life gathered in great numbers on the roof

Saint Francis of Assisi

of the house where he was and for a long time went about singing and showing signs of joy and festivity, rendering testimony to the glory of the holy father who so often had taught them to praise their Creator."

The deepest spring of love in the heart of Saint Francis, however, was for God. From that source sprang all the rest. It was not so much mystical, or sentimental, as practical; it did not manifest itself by brooding over his own feelings or over the problems of theology, but was simple and childlike, a personal yearning after Him whom he took as his model.

In the early days of his conversion he could not think of the sufferings and love of Christ without being deeply moved. He was found wandering in the fields one day, weeping bitterly, and, on being asked why, said, "I weep for the Passion of my Saviour." We are told that often during the celebration of mass he would be so absorbed in contemplation that it seemed for very sweetness that his soul left his body. It is interesting to compare this experience, caused by religious exaltation, with that of Wordsworth so many centuries later, when in his mystical contemplation of nature he fell into

"that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on, —

Saint Francis of Assisi

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul." #

The leading motif of the Fioretti is the resemblance between Saint Francis and Christ. There we are told that he had twelve disciples, fasted forty days, preached from a boat to the multitude gathered on the seashore, wrought miracles, changed water to wine, healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, drove out devils. ✓

But in his character, far more than in these legendary outward things, did he resemble his Master. All men who have studied his life—rationalist historians like Renan, learned German theologians like Ritschl, enthusiastic specialists like Sabatier—are agreed that no man ever came more near to the character of Christ than Saint Francis. His gentleness, his serenity and sweetness of spirit, his perfect tact, his deep compassion for all suffering humanity, his need of prayer, his discouragement, his yearning for communion with God from time to time, his practical application of religion, his mingling with the crowds in the market-place, and his simple appeals to the hearts of the people—all these things and many more make the life of Saint Francis a true Imitation of Jesus Christ

Saint Francis of Assisi

rather than the cold, inaccessible heights of that famous manual of monastic austerity written by Thomas à Kempis.

The climax of this love for Christ came when, in the autumn of 1224, he received the stigmata in La Verna, the hermitage in the valley of the Arno given to him in 1213 by the Count of Chiusi to be a place of prayer and contemplation.

In spite of the constant labors of Saint Francis among the people, he loved contemplation as much as any of his monastic predecessors who, forgetful of the great mass of suffering mankind, spent their lives in this selfish kind of holiness. All along the pathway of his life are scattered the places where he retired from the world from time to time. During his later years he especially loved La Verna, a steep, precipitous mass of rock rising a thousand feet above the surrounding country, far up among the head waters of the Arno, affording from its forest-clad summit a beautiful view, on the one hand, of Romagna and the March of Ancona, with the Adriatic Sea on the horizon; on the other hand, Umbria, Tuscany, and far away the faint blue streak of the Mediterranean.

"Auf dem Berge ist Freiheit," sings Schiller, in the *Braut von Messina*, and men of all ages



SAINT FRANCIS RECEIVING THE STIGMATA.
From the fresco by Niccolo di Pietro Gerini.

Saint Francis of Assisi

have found a calm peace in high altitudes. In Italy throughout the Middle Ages nearly every mountain had its hermitage consecrated to the still worship of God. Saint Francis, who loved nature in all her forms, had especially in his heart the "longing for the everlasting hills," the desiderium collium aeternorum spoken of in the book of Genesis, and often when discouraged, sick in body and mind, troubled and disturbed with the quarrels and bickerings which saddened his last days, his thoughts must have wandered to the high, thin air of his beloved La Verna.

It was in the fall of 1224, two years before the death of Saint Francis. He was sick and frail, suffering from a complication of diseases, almost blind. He yearned once more to see the hermitage of La Verna, set out with three companions, and after long efforts finally succeeded in reaching the summit of the hill. Here he remained for five or six weeks, spending literally days and nights in solitude, prayer and contemplation.

Early on the morning of the fourteenth of September — it was the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross — Saint Francis was engaged in earnest prayer when suddenly he saw a seraphic figure with six wings descending from

Saint Francis of Assisi

the sky and flying toward him. As he looked he saw the figure of a man nailed to a cross within the wings, and all at once his heart was thrilled with unspeakable joy while his body was full of piercing pains. When the vision had passed away he found in his hands and feet dark excrescences having the appearance of nails.

It is not my business here to discuss the authenticity of this event. Professor Mozley says that, whatever the nature or cause of the marks on the hands and feet of Saint Francis may have been, the testimony as to their actual existence is irrefutable. They were seen and believed in by men in all ranks of life, from the humble friar to Pope Gregory IX, who in the hearing of Saint Bonaventura definitely declared that he had seen the stigmata with his own eyes. At all events, they form in legend or history the climax of a career of transcendent piety.

From that day forward Saint Francis felt that his end was not far off. He left La Verna a few days after, and as he and his companions reached the place whence one gets a last view of the mountain and hermitage he dismounted, knelt, and said: "Farewell, mountain of God, in which it has pleased Him to dwell. Remain in peace; we shall never see each other again."

Saint Francis of Assisi

In the summer of 1225 he spent four or five weeks at the monastery of Saint Damian, cared for by Saint Clara. He was very weak and almost blind, yet the kindness and love of those about him and his own perfect trust in God kept him free from sadness and discouragement. It was under these circumstances that he composed the *Cantico del Sole*, that outburst of joy and exultation of a soul touched by the beauty of the natural world and full of worship for God.

One day, after a long conversation with Saint Clara, he sat down at the table to eat his frugal meal. But almost immediately he fell into a sort of trance, and on coming to himself he repeated the stanzas of that song. Not all the stanzas, however, for the last was not composed until nearly a year later. It was under the following circumstances: The physician had tried to keep from him the serious nature of his disease, and said, when Saint Francis asked him one day how long he had to live, "Oh, this will all pass away some day, please God." Whereupon Saint Francis said quaintly, "Doctor, I am no cuckoo that I should be afraid of death." "Then," said the doctor, "you cannot live beyond the first days of autumn." At these words Saint Francis extended his hands, and

Saint Francis of Assisi

with an expression of joy shining in his face and trembling in his voice he cried, "Praise unto thee, my Lord, for our sister, corporal death,

"From which no living man can escape.

Woe unto those who die in mortal sin;

Blessed is he who lives according to thy holy will,

For the second death cannot harm him."

It was the evening of the fourth of October, 1226, one of those long twilight evenings of Italy when the glow of the setting sun lasts almost till midnight in the deep blue of the sky. The world of Umbria—mountain and valley, river and plain, as they lay beneath the stars—was full of beauty and peace and holy quiet. Saint Francis, lying on a bed of ashes, surrounded by his brethren, was dying. He blessed them all in turn, as they stood around him, friends and brethren who had been with him from his youth. He asked to have read the *Cantico del Sole* and then the thirteenth chapter of Saint John, beginning with the words, "Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end." The friars, in tears, knelt in a circle around the bed of ashes, praying in a low voice. His last words,

Saint Francis of Assisi

according to Saint Bonaventura, were from the one hundred and forty-second Psalm: "I cried unto the Lord with my voice; with my voice unto the Lord did I make my supplication;" "and saying these words," continues Saint Bonaventura, "that most holy soul separated from the body and was received into the glory of eternal life."

The next day the body of Saint Francis was carried to the Church of Saint George, borne by two monks and two magistrates and followed by an immense crowd, stopping on the way at the convent of Saint Damian that Saint Clara and her sister nuns might gaze for the last time on the white, upturned face of their spiritual father. At his own request, he was buried on a hill to the east of Assisi where criminals were executed, and known as the Hill of Perdition. When he was canonized by Pope Gregory IX the name was changed to the Hill of Paradise. To-day a magnificent double church rises above the mortal remains of him who in his lifetime had scarcely a roof to cover his head. ✓

Of the works of Saint Francis we have but few: his two Rules, his Last Will and Testament, some letters, fragments of sermons, and the Cantico del Sole. As a preacher he was prob- }

Saint Francis of Assisi

ably one of the most successful the world ever saw. His method, however, was extremely simple. Preaching for him was, to quote his own words, but a distribution of the gifts he had received from God. His sermons were not marked by dogmatism or learning, but consisted in the exposition of the gospel, the development of the Lord's Prayer, the story of the Passion of Christ, and calls to repentance, all presented by a heart full of pity, love, and tenderness.

Whenever he entered a city the bells would ring; people would leave their work and come forth in vast crowds to hear him preach. We have but few extant sermons, but that one given at the time of the Chapter General held at Assisi, when more than five thousand monks were present, may be taken as a type of all the rest. As a text for his sermon he took these words: "My sons, we have promised to God great things, but God has promised to us still greater. Short is the pleasure of this world; the pains that follow are eternal. Little are the pains of this world, but the glory of the other is infinite." And on these words, preaching very devoutly, he fortified his brethren and inclined them to obedience toward Holy Church, to brotherly love, to pray God for all



THE DEATH OF SAINT FRANCIS
From the fresco by Giotto.



Saint Francis of Assisi

men, to practise patience in adversity and moderation in prosperity, to keep peace and concord with God, with men, and with their own conscience. "And," he said in conclusion, "I command you all who are here present not to be anxious what you shall eat or drink, or concerning any of the things that are necessary to the body, but to apply yourselves to prayer unto God, for he careth for you."

The most famous of his works is the *Cantico del Sole*. We have already seen how it was written, in the year before his death, while he tarried with Saint Clara at the convent of Saint Damian. Renan calls it the "most complete expression of modern religious sentiment." In it we find revealed many features of the character of Saint Francis, — his joy and cheerfulness, his love for man and nature and God.

"Praised be thou, O Lord, by all thy creatures, especially
brother sun,

Who rises and shines through thee,

And he is beautiful and radiant in his splendor :

A fit symbol, Most High God, of thee.

Be thou praised, O Lord, by sister moon and the stars,

For thou hast made them to shine in heaven,

Beautiful and bright and fair.

And be thou praised, O Lord, for brother wind and sister water, for brother fire and mother earth, who supports and nourishes us and brings forth fruits and flowers of a thousand hues."

Saint Francis of Assisi

Rude and in some respects uncouth as these lines are, they are yet of great importance as being the first genuine religious poem in the Italian language, as well as for their influence on later poets. Those who have read the magnificent eulogy of Saint Francis in the eleventh canto of the *Paradiso* of Dante need no elaborate proof of the love of the stern-eyed scourger of the wickedness of his times for the Umbrian saint, all gentleness and love.

The influence of Saint Francis on the arts of painting and architecture would merit lengthy discussion had we the time. The magnificent double church erected over his body at Assisi, with its frescoes on the life of the Saint by Cimabue, Giotto and a score of others, gave a death-blow to the old conventional Byzantine school which till then had ruled the whole Western world. The movement toward a more natural style of art begun by Cimabue was followed out by Giotto, and to-day the cultivated traveller turns his steps to those monuments dedicated to the glory of Saint Francis—the Church of Assisi, Santa Croce at Florence, Saint Anthony at Padua—as toward the cradle of modern Italian art.

The chief influence of Saint Francis, however, has been exerted through his life and character.

Saint Francis of Assisi

Of him it could not be said that his "good was interred with his bones." It seemed as he went through Umbria and Tuscany, preaching and converting, as if the early evangelistic days had returned. Everywhere he was followed by crowds. In 1217 the number of his followers, according to Saint Bonaventura, amounted to five thousand. They were drawn from all ranks of society; nobles, lawyers, poets, robbers, one and all left their former life, sold all they had to give to the poor, and followed him.

From Italy the movement crossed the Alps and spread over Germany; it swept over the plains of France, crossed the English Channel, and entered England, everywhere welcomed by the common people, if not by the clergy and monks. Among his most famous disciples we may mention John of Parma, at one time Minister General of the Order, the mystic with the angelic countenance, always gracious and always smiling, so gentle that the birds would come and build their nests upon his desk; Saint Bonaventura, historian, theologian, and poet, — the Doctor Seraphicus, as he was called; Duns Scotus, the forerunner of modern philosophy; Roger Bacon, the forerunner of modern experimental science.

But the strangest of all his followers was Ja-

Saint Francis of Assisi

copone da Todi, that brilliant, rich, and noble young lawyer the story of whose conversion and later life is so full of interest. In this story we are told how one day at a public show a scaffolding gave way, and his wife, young and beautiful, was killed; how on taking her up it was found that beneath her rich garments she wore a hair shirt in token of penitence; how from that day Jacopone became a changed man, wandering about in poor clothing and by his eccentric conduct was looked upon as half crazy; how on being requested by a relative one day to carry two fowls to his dwelling he carried them to the family tomb, and, on being rebuked by his relative, replied, "Where is your dwelling if not here, where you shall live forever?" how, bitter to his enemies, his heart was filled with love toward God and man; how, wandering in the field one day weeping and being asked why, he said, "I am weeping because Love is not loved;" how he became widely known as a poet, chiefly as the author of the beautiful Latin hymn "Stabat Mater dolorosa;" and how at midnight on Christmas eve in the year 1306 he died, singing the hymn, —

"Jesu nostra fidanza,
Del cor somma speranza,"

Saint Francis of Assisi

as the monks in the neighboring chapel were celebrating mass.

But the influence of the character of Saint Francis was exerted not only indirectly but directly. The little collection of epic stories made in the fourteenth century, half legend, half history,—*Wahrheit and Dichtung*, as Goethe would have called them,—has kept for after ages the image of that gentle saint, humble and patient, yet kind and courteous, renouncing all earthly riches, knowledge, and glory, yet full of tact and common sense, his heart filled with the triple love for God, for nature, and for man. Who can estimate the influence of such a man on a church full of formalism as was that of Rome in the thirteenth century? The Catholic historians tell us—more than one—that had it not been for Saint Francis the Church would have fallen into ruin; that the vision of Pope Innocent III, who saw the Lateran ready to fall and upheld by Saint Francis, was an image of the truth. Who can estimate his influence on the private lives and character not only of Catholics, but of Protestants, from the thirteenth century down to the present?

For, after all, the true lesson of his life is this,—that a man may be happy and useful though

Saint Francis of Assisi

poor; that a man can be gentle and kind, though rich and powerful; that sweetness and light are as great a force in the world's history as physical strength or intellectual acumen; that only by detaching our hearts from the entangling love for wealth and power and pleasure can we enter on the path of true virtue and true happiness. The times have changed, indeed, since then; the monkish ideal has gone forever, but the essence of the teaching of Saint Francis is the same now as then:

“Die alte Schale nur ist fern,
Geblieben ist uns doch der Kern.”

“The old shell only's passed away,
The kernel is the same to-day.”

We find this spirit exemplified in Abraham Lincoln, statesman and dreamer, wisest among his fellows, yet tender-hearted, compassionate, simple, and true; in Von Döllinger, the great German theologian, “the most learned and the most lovable man in Christendom;” in Friedrich Ratzel, so recently dead, referred to by a colleague as that “profound investigator with the mind of a poet and the heart of a child.”

We need not imitate or even approve many things said and done by Saint Francis, but we cannot withhold our admiration for his life as

Saint Francis of Assisi

a whole. Nor should we be accused of false sentiment in holding up that life as a model in many respects to the youth of our own time. For would we not call that man wise and fortunate who while doing his work from day to day, in the shop, on the farm, in the courts of law, or the halls of Congress, is free from merely selfish ambition, seeks to comfort and help the weak, is full of genuine love for God and man, and who throughout it all is cheerful and serene?

A few weeks ago there died in Brooklyn a business man whose life was a shining example of just these things; who, after a short though active career, had acquired not only an influential position and a large fortune, but the love of all sorts and conditions of men. At his funeral there was sung as a hymn a poem which he himself had loved for many years, — a poem written by Sir Henry Wotton, the favorite of James I, and the friend of Izaak Walton, a man noted for his graciousness, his kindness, and his wisdom. It sums up those features of the Franciscan ideal which may reasonably be applied to our own, and to all times:

“How happy is he born and taught
Who serveth not another's will;

Saint Francis of Assisi

**Whose armor is his honest thought,
And simple truth his utmost skill ;**

**“Whose passions not his masters are,
Whose soul is still prepared for death,
Untied unto the world by care
Of public fame, or private breath ;**

**“Who God doth late and early pray
More of his grace than gifts to lend ;
And entertains the harmless day
With a religious book or friend.**

**“This man is free from servile bands
Of hope to rise or fear to fall :
Lord of himself, though not of lands,
And having nothing, yet hath all.”**

The End



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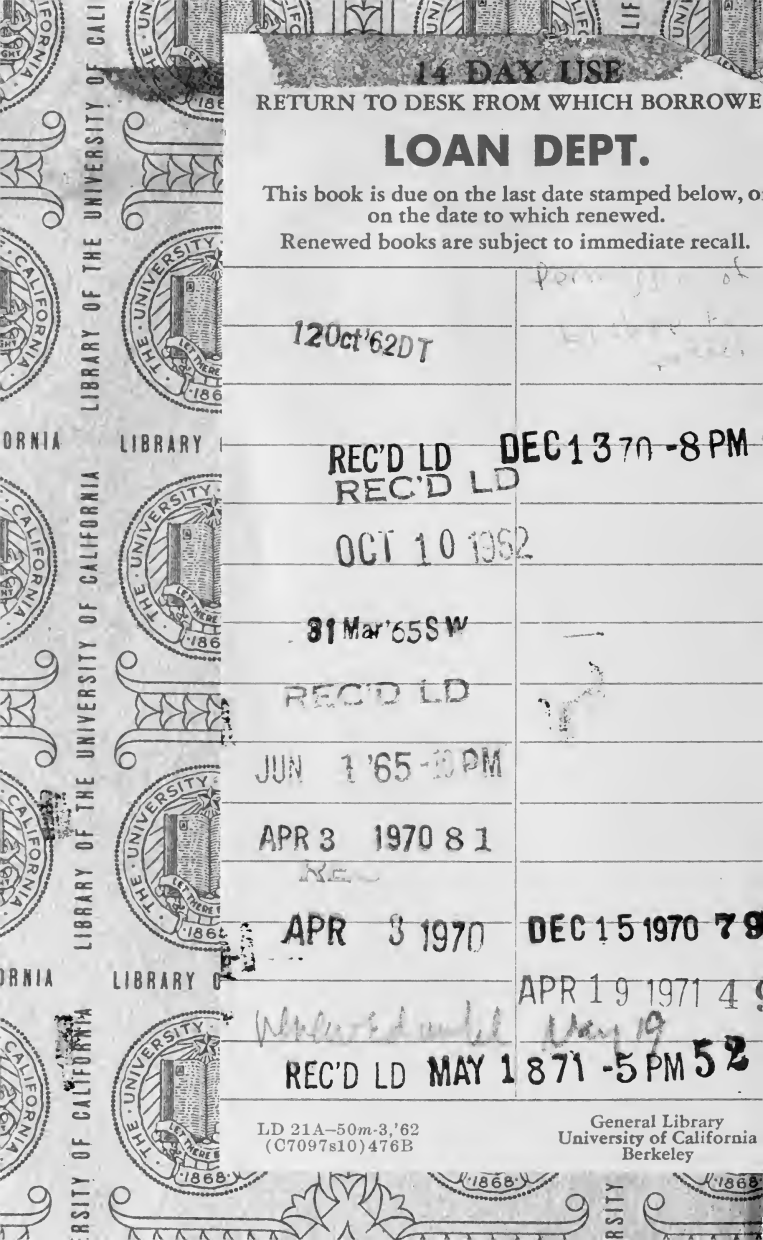
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