

“THE LITTLE FLOWERS OF ST. FRANCIS”

Those people who delight in the search for “the meanest man” will be interested in a little story printed recently in the newspapers. A person—who has heretofore passed among his neighbors for a man—threw out several handfuls of bread-crumbs in order to attract a flock of snow-birds. When the little birds settled down to their feast their cruel host discharged a shot-gun at the flock and gathered in his prey. He explained later that he wanted the snowbirds for a pie, and added that they had provided him with a delicious meal.

In the light of such an incident it is difficult to do battle against the doctrine of total depravity, but it is a good sign that this person has actually lost the favor of some of his old-time friends, and that some of his neighbors have deliberately “cut” him because of his cruelty.

Men are advancing on these lines. The Audubon society and similar organizations have made such progress in their good work that wings and bills of dead birds are no longer a fashion as attachments for women’s hats; boys seldom tie tin cans on dogs’ tails; the pot hunter is repudiated by decent sportsmen, and many devoted fishermen have resolved never again to use live bait.

J. L. Truitt, of Alturas, Cal., writes: “As unmerciful people have exterminated the buffalo and deer and are waging a war of extermination against all the bird families, it is certainly very necessary that a paper having as large a circulation as The Commoner should from time to time remind parents that the lower animals have rights that should be respected by the human family. I have found but few parents who make it a practice to warn their children against wanton cruelty to the lower animals, and our school teachers seem generally to be silent on this subject. I think The Commoner will do a great work by frequently making a plea in behalf of birds and beasts.”

Mr. Truitt makes a good suggestion, although we think that in these days school teachers generally seek to impress these lessons upon their pupils, while parents are becoming more and more aroused to their duty in this respect.

Have you ever heard of “The Little Flowers of St. Francis?” This is a collection of popular stories read and loved in Italy. These stories relate to the life and deeds of Francis of Assisi, who lived some 700 years ago. They are legendary and may, in a degree, exaggerate the power Francis of Assisi had over the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, but they serve to direct attention to one of the interesting characters in history and one who, according to well authenticated testimony loved all things in creation, animate and inanimate.

Mrs. Oliphant modernized the story of Francis of Assisi, and it would be well if this story could be told to all the children. Francis was the petted child of wealthy parents. Up to the age of twenty-five his life was not characterized by service to the world, although he was known as a generous, lovable lad. He suddenly tired of idleness and, leaving his parents’ home, devoted himself to a life of poverty and service. Despite his extreme poverty he was referred to by many as “the very happiest man.”

Mrs. Oliphant tells us that Francis of Assisi was “a man overflowing with sympathy for man and beast—for God’s creatures—wherever and howsoever he encountered them. Not only was every man his brother, but every animal—the sheep in the fields, the birds in the branches, the brother-ass on which he rode, the sister-bees who took refuge in his kind protection. He was the friend of everything that suffered or rejoiced; no emotion went beyond his sympathy; his heart rose to see the gladness of nature, and melted over the distresses of the smallest and meanest creature on the face of the earth. And by this divine right of nature, everything trusted in him. The magnetism of the heart, that power which nobody can define, but which it is impossible to ignore, surrounded him like a special atmosphere. That sense of security and sympathy which—we all acknowledge—draws the nobler domestic animals, horses and dogs, to those who like them, embraced with Francis a wider circle, for he loved everything that had life.”

Indeed, as has been said, he loved everything, animate and inanimate, that gave even the smal-

lest service to the world. To him every servant was “sister” and “brother.” For instance, one of his songs of praise was as follows:

Highest omnipotent good Lord,
Glory and honour to Thy name adored,
And praise and every blessing.
Of everything Thou art the source,
No man is worthy to pronounce Thy name.

Praised by His creatures all
Praised be the Lord my God,
By Messer Sun, my brother above all,
Who by his rays lights us and lights the day—
Radiant is she, with his great splendor stored,
Thy glory, Lord, confessing.

By Sister Moon and stars my Lord is praised,
Where clear and fair they in the heavens are raised.

By Brother Wind, my Lord, Thy praise is said,
By air and clouds and the blue sky o’erhead,
By which Thy creatures all are kept and fed.

By one most humble, useful, precious, chaste,
By Sister Water, O my Lord, Thou art praised.

And praised is my Lord
By Brother Fire—he who lights up the night
Jocund, robust is he, and strong and bright.

Praised art thou, my Lord, by Mother Earth—
Thou who sustainest her, and governest,
And to her flowers, fruit, herbs, dost color give
and birth.

Mrs. Oliphant reminds us that in the presence of birds and beasts the ordinary person can not divest himself of the feeling that he must be suspected by the creature, but Francis of Assisi had no such feeling. “His sense of brotherhood was real, not fictitious; he had the courage of good intention, feared nothing and was not feared,” and his was “the sympathetic mind open to all the influences of nature with which we have to deal.”

In “The Little Flowers of St. Francis” we are told that returning from beyond the sea he was traveling through the marshes of Venice and heard a vast multitude of birds singing among the bushes. Then the story goes:

And when he saw them he said to his companions: “Our sisters, the birds, are praising their Maker. Let us then go into their midst and sing to the Lord the Canonical Hours.” And when they had gone into their midst the birds moved not from the place; but as on account of their chirping and twittering the brethren were not able to hear each other, the holy man turned to the birds and said: “Sisters, cease your song until we have rendered our bounden praise to God.” And they at once were silent, and when the praises were finished resumed their song.

On another occasion, when he was preaching in the town of Alvia, the swallows, with their perpetual twittering, incommoded the audience. Francis had gone up to a high piece of ground, that he might be seen by all, and had asked for silence from the assembled people. But the birds were fitting all about in airy circles, making their nests, chirping and calling to each other overhead in the blue heaven of the Italian sky. When it became apparent that these sweet disturbers of the peace prevented their human companions from hearing the word of God, the preacher turned and courteously saluted the little nest-builders. “My sisters,” he said, “it is now time that I should speak. Since you have had your say, listen now in your turn to the word of God, and be silent till the sermon is finished.”

Here is another one of the many instances of this sense of brotherhood with all creatures as shown in “The Little Flowers of St. Francis.”

Once when he was seated in a little boat on the lake of Teiti, near a certain port, a fisherman taking a large fish that is called commonly a tench, in his devotion brought it to him. And he taking it kindly and cheerfully, began to call it by the name of brother, and putting it in the water out of the boat began devoutly to bless the name of God; and all the while that he continued in prayer the fish, playing in the water near the boat, departed not from the spot in which he had

been placed, until the prayer being finished, St. Francis gave him leave to depart.

One writer tells us: “He planned a visit to of the emperor to draw his attention to the needs of his little ‘sisters’ the larks.”

Francis of Assisi was courteous to all his fellows, and we are told “when one of the brethren had made a rough answer to a poor beggar who followed them with his importunities Francis was filled with a certain horror and compunction which is very characteristic of his intensely sympathetic mind. He made the uncivil brother prostrate himself at the feet of the beggar and ask his pardon, and his prayers.”

In “The Little Flowers of St. Francis” the parent anxious to train the child to respect the rights of birds and beasts may find material help. In his earlier years Francis had seen much of life. He had learned to place a proper value upon the follies of his day and as Mrs. Oliphant says: “He turned sick at heart from the perpetual strife and contention of his time, from fighting cities, rapacious nobles, a whole world of blood and oppression, and with an unspeakable relief heard the gentle birds singing in the woods, the harmless creatures rustling among the trees. Were all these innocent beings out of the limits of God’s covenant? Were they made for no use but that of an hour’s or a day’s or a year’s pleasure, with cruel death at the end? In Francis’ view they were God’s harmless, voiceless folk who knew His name and sang His praises and kept up the perpetual adoration, before even Piety had bethought itself of that unceasing service. He could not doubt that where God had put life He had also put the consciousness of Himself. Those creatures spoke another tongue; but what was there to hinder that in simple speech of man, who was their natural head, they should recognize the great Name, and do their fluttering, innocent homage with a fulness, a simplicity, a tender, childish devotion which was needed to fill up the harmonies of worship? In this confidence the gentle seer moved about the world all peopled with his brethren, not only putting his benign command upon them, but endeavoring after their edification with a certain ineffable, beautiful, wise-foolishness, as our children do by instinct, as an angel might do by insight superior to ours.”

Who will say that the world would not be happier if there were more of this “beautiful wise-foolishness” among the men of today?

RICHARD L. METCALFE.

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