



Ririro

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The Christmas At Greccio: A Story Of St. Francis

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"The beautiful Mother is bending
Low where her Baby lies
Helpless and frail, for her tending;
But she knows the glorious eyes.

"The Mother smiles and rejoices
While the Baby laughs in the hay;
She listens to heavenly voices:
'The child shall be King, one day.'

"O dear little Christ in the manger,
Let me make merry with Thee.
O King, in my hour of danger,
Wilt Thou be strong for me?"

—Adapted from the Latin of Jacopone da Todi.
Thirteenth Century.

One night in December ... Brother Francis, with one companion, was walking through the beautiful valley of the Velino River, toward Rieti, a little city where he came often on his way from Assisi to Rome. To-night he had turned somewhat aside from the main road, for he wished to spend Christmas with his friend, Sir John of Greccio. Greccio is a tiny village, lying where the foothills begin, on the western side of the valley. The very feet of Brother Francis knew the road so well that he could have walked safely in the darkness, but it was not dark. The full moon floated over the valley, making the narrow river and the sharp outlines of the snow-covered mountains shine like silver. The plain and the lower hills were pasture land, and, not far from the road, on a grassy slope, the Brothers saw the red glow of an almost spent shepherds' fire. "Let us stop and visit our brothers, the shepherds," said Francis, and they turned toward the fading fire.

There was no sense of winter in the air, scarcely a touch of frost, and the only snow was that on the silver peaks against the sky. The shepherds, three men and one boy, lay sleeping soundly on the bare ground, with their sheepskin coats drawn closely around them. All about them the sheep were sleeping, too, but the

solemn white sheep dogs were wide awake. If a stranger's foot had trod the grass never so softly, every dog would have barked, and every shepherd would have been on his feet in an instant. But the dogs trotted silently up to the Grey Brothers and rubbed against them, as if they said, "We are glad to see you again," for they knew the friendly feet of the Little Poor Man, and they had more than once helped him to eat the bread that was his only dinner. Followed by the dogs, Francis walked about among the shepherds, but they slept on, as only men who live out of doors can sleep, and Francis could not find it in his heart to waken them. The sheep lay huddled together in groups for more warmth. Around one small square of grass a net was stretched, and, inside it, were the mother sheep who had little lambs. There was no sound except the faint cry, now and then, of a baby lamb. The coals over which the shepherds had cooked their supper paled from dull red to grey, and there was only a thin column of smoke, white in the moonlight. Francis sat down on a stone, and the largest of the white dogs pressed up against his knee. Another went dutifully back to his post beside the fold where the mothers and babies slept. The Italian hillside seemed to Francis to change to that of Bethlehem, which he had seen, perhaps, on his Eastern journey; the clear December night seemed like that of the first Christmas Eve. "How these shepherds sleep!" he thought; "how they would awaken if they heard the 'Peace on earth' of the angels' song!" Then he remembered sadly how the armies that called themselves Christian had, year after year, battled with the Saracens over the cradle and the tomb of the Prince of Peace. The moonlight grew misty about him, the silver heights of the mountains and the silver line of the river faded, for the eyes of Brother Francis were full of tears.



As the two Brothers went on their way, Francis grew light of heart again. The sight of the shepherds sleeping on the grass had given him a new idea, and he was planning a surprise for his friends at Greccio. For at Greccio all were his friends, from Sir John, his host, down to the babies in the street. In the valley of

Rieti he was almost as well known and as dearly loved as in his own valley of Assisi. The children of Greccio had never heard of Christmas trees, nor, perhaps, of Christmas presents. I am not sure that, in the thirteenth century, Italians had the beautiful custom which they now have of giving presents at Twelfth Night, in memory of the coming of the three kings with their gifts to the Christ Child; but in the thirteenth century, even as now, Christmas was the happiest festival of the year. This year all the folk of Greccio, big and little, were happier than usual because their beloved Brother Francis was to help them keep their Christmas-tide. Next day Francis confided his plan to his friend, Sir John, who promised that all should be ready on Christmas Eve.

On the day before Christmas, the people came from all the country around to see and hear Brother Francis. Men, women and children, dressed in their holiday clothes, walking, riding on donkeys, crowding into little carts drawn by great white oxen, from everywhere and in every fashion, the country folk came toward Greccio. Many came from far away, and the early winter darkness fell long before they could reach the town. The light of their torches might be seen on the open road, and the sound of their singing reached the gates of Greccio before them. That night the little town was almost as crowded as was Bethlehem on the eve of the first Christmas. The crowds were poor folk, for the most part, peasants from the fields, charcoal burners from the mountains, shepherds in their sheepskin coats and trousers, made with the wool outside, so that the wearers looked like strange, two-legged animals. The four shepherds who had slept so soundly a few nights before were of the company, but they knew nothing of their midnight visitors. The white dogs knew, but they could keep a secret. The shepherds were almost as quiet as their dogs. They always talked and sang less than other people, having grown used to long silences among their sheep.

Gathered at last into the square before the church, by the light of flaring torches, for the moon would rise late, the people saw with wonder and delight the surprise which Brother Francis and Sir John had prepared for them. They looked into a real stable. There was the manger full of hay, there were a live ox and a live ass. Even by torchlight their breath showed in the frosty air. And there, on the hay, lay a real baby, wrapped from the cold, asleep and smiling. It looked as sweet and innocent as the Christ Child Himself. The people shouted with delight. They clapped their hands and waved their torches.

Then there was silence, for Brother Francis stood before them, and the voice they loved so well, and had come so far to hear, began to read the old story of the birth of the Child Jesus, of the shepherds in the fields, and of the angels' song. When the reading was ended, Brother Francis talked to them as a father might speak to his children. He told of the love that is gentle as a little child, that is willing to be poor and humble as the Baby who was laid in a manger among the cattle. He begged his listeners to put anger and hatred and envy out of their

hearts this Christmas Eve, and to think only thoughts of peace and good will. All listened eagerly while Brother Francis spoke, but the moment he finished the great crowd broke into singing. From the church tower the bells rang loud; the torches waved wildly, while voices here and there shouted for Brother Francis and for the Blessed Little Christ. Never before had such glorious hymns nor such joyous shouting been heard in the town of Greccio. Only the mothers, with babies in their arms, and the shepherds, in their woolly coats, looked on silently and thought: "We are in Bethlehem."

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