

ASSISI

FRANCES STARR.

*The sunset colours mingle in the sky,
And over all the Umbrian valleys flow;
Trevi is touched with wonder, and the glow
Finds high Perugia crimson with renown;
Spello is bright;
And ah! St. Francis, thy deep-treasured town,
Enshrined Assisi, jolly fronts the light.*

—DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT.

DO you remember a long stretch of country with its little beehive hills? Some are built up the sides and make tiny cities; some are green with forest trees, and here and there on top of one stands a gloomy watch-tower like a lonely sentinel on duty. If you will pick out one of these little towns where the sun shines brightest, paint it, in your imagination, a soft creamy pink, with deep rose earth tones, find a beautiful church and monastery at the end of a white winding road, and crown it with the ruins of an old fortress,—you will then have a mental picture of Assisi.

Closely bound to the life story of St. Francis, so full of deepest interest and mystery, is the natural beauty of Assisi, the city of his birth. It has a wonderful charm,—this “hill-town”—and yet the numerous guide books will tell you to “stay a night at Assisi and then drive on to Perugia.”

One night at Assisi! The sunset which greeted us from our balcony,—the sky, the hillside and the misty evening—were enough for one night, and there’s a wealth of beauty for days to come if you can pause to enjoy it.

I hope the sun will shine on your first day at Assisi,—and it will if the time is May. Have your coffee and rolls on the hotel terrace, and unless you are tired of travel, you will long remember that breakfast. The air is fresh with the wine of early morning; the country stretches miles before you, green with vineyard and olive trees; little hamlets are dotted here and there; and just beyond the foot of the hill, white and gleaming, rises St. Mary of the Angels. You will want to visit this church one day, for it contains the Portiuncula (the first chapel of St. Francis), the garden where is still grown the thornless rose, and other objects of interest in con-

nection with the life of the Saint. Half-way down the hill is a beautiful little drinking fountain and roadside shrine to the Madonna, artistic in design, and softly coloured with the lovely pink building stone of this part of the country.

But you must come into the Piazza, this first morning. It will be full of sunshine, and you will want to linger in its warmth to study the door of the church, and watch the groups of neighbours chatting or selling their wares.

The church of San Francesco, which makes the city of Assisi famous, is built in an unusual way with an upper church over a lower, and underneath them both a crypt which contains the remains of the Saint to whose memory the church is dedicated. The beauty of the lower church can scarcely be described. You must pass under the leather curtain of the portal and learn it for yourself. Unless you have been warned, your first sensation will be one of disappointment, for you will perceive nothing but darkness and a chilly air. Gradually, your eyes become accustomed to this dimness, and as you slowly wend your way to the high altar, and the light from the blue and gold of Giotto's frescoes begins to penetrate your vision, you feel almost an awe, as if you had suddenly found yourself under a sacred halo of soft and glorified light. You have stood under the great domes of Brunelleschi and Michael Angelo, so perfect in proportions that the wonder of their vastness is lost; you have studied the rich mosaics around the jewelled dome of St. Mark's; but here is a beauty so appealing, a shrine "built by simpleness of heart", the story of a saintly life, told in blue like the blue of heaven, and gold like the rays of the sun. These are the famous frescoes of Giotto and Cimabue, but unless you are a student you will not study them carefully; you will be content to rest under the spell of such beauty of colouring, which time has so softened and enhanced.

Surely the most glorious church in Italy!

Study all the little chapels on your way out. Every one is a beauty spot. Before leaving you must ask to see the cloister, and if your guide is a young Franciscan monk, your picture will be complete. This cloister, which is the delight of all artists, is small and damaged somewhat by the dampness, but most beautiful from every point of view.

Do not visit the upper church this first morning. You will like it better if you come back to it another time. Follow the road that leads around the hill to the Campo Santo. Forget the funeral cypresses, except for the note of light and shade they give to the picture. You will enjoy the warmth of the sun once more, and

here are "flowers for remembrance". On the right, where the cyclamen blooms pink all over the bank, you may find growing with them the curious little bee orchid. Do you know them? Farther along on the other side is a soft carpet of clover, each of the three leaves mysteriously stained. They call it the "Calvary Clover". Perhaps you will press one of these leaves and keep it in your diary next the page that marks the day!

The upper church, though not so alluring as the lower, is very beautiful. It is in the form of a Latin cross, with fine Gothic windows and a Gothic portal. The frescoes covering the lower sections of the walls are all incidents in the life of St. Francis, pathetically interesting, probably done by Giotto and his contemporaries. The upper sections are scenes from the Old and New Testaments, attributed to pupils of Cimabue.

There is also the Cathedral of San Rufino to be visited, and the Church of Santa Chiara; and too, there are shops all along this narrow unpaved street where they sell native lace and linen; and because it is so narrow, all the doorways and corners are rubbed smooth by the passing of centuries of men and women. This soft polish of the pink stone—how beautiful! and what a vision it reveals of each passing group as they add to the opalescent hues; a pair of lovers might have lingered at this doorway to make the parting long; children, on their way to school, play hide-and-seek around this corner; and hosts of the faithful followers of St. Francis have brushed this part with their woollen robes as they hurried to their prayers.

Away at the end of the street and down the hill is the Church and Convent of St. Damiano, where St. Francis founded the order of Poor Clares of whom St. Clara was the first abbess. Here among other things is a very wonderful carved crucifix. That an angel guided the hand of the artist, the heart would fain believe, for the face is marvellous with beauty and pathos. Deeply shrouded with the memories of its patroness, this shrine is greatly loved by the hill people and its modest chapels are never without a suppliant. But the lure of St. Damiano is the soft grass of the hillside, the wild flowers and the shade of the trees, and the distant view.

Another day you must drive up the hill to the "Carceri"—the mountain hermitage or prison of St. Francis. Trevi and Spello lie low in the misty horizon, the rivers on their lazy way to the sea gleam here and there through the haze of a summer day. It is a time to dream, as you are slowly drawn along by the tough little mountain pony:—Il Perugino put these things in his landscape; Raphael the boy painter came out of this Umbrian Valley; and

Dante, too, knew these hills. But just here, where you have stopped to rest for a moment, suddenly there appears in this wonderful picture a graceful Italian peasant girl with a snow-white bullock. They seem to emerge from the very earth, and indeed as you pass the tiny stable it looks more like a grotto put there by Nature to make this beautiful scene more picturesque. With the bullock and pony now sharing the burden and the little maid leading, this surprising part of the journey is soon over and the Carceri is in sight.

One does not think of a prison on a hillside with the pure air of heaven all around it, and the trees so close that they make one feel their comradeship and protection. Looking from the window of St. Francis's cell, so near that he might have fondled the fledglings in their nests, one finds no wonder left in his "Sermon to the Birds"; and in the branches of an gnarled old tree it is not hard to imagine the home of the falcon who woke him every day for his prayers, and in her kindly mother's heart let him sleep late when he was overcome with his devotions. Here, too, in this cell you may see his bed cut in the solid rock and protected from desecration by a wooden rail placed there hundreds of years ago by one of his devoted followers.

How human and lasting are these memories of St. Francis, interwoven with the beauty of nature and of art! To the faithful, a deeper note in a religious life; to the traveller, a mark of unusual interest. This is the real spirit of Assisi,—Assisi, city of memories!

In old Assisi's frescoes, sweet and blurr'd,
 Blooming from Giotto's hand like flowers prim
 On storied walls of a cathedral dim,
 Saint Francis charms with universal word
 A congregation all of beasts and bird
 And fishes rising to the river's brim.
 What Francis spake, and what transpired to him,
 As music in my reverie I heard:
 For after I had mused a little while,
 Looking on miracles instead of paint—
 "Teach me, my little brethren", said the saint,
 Beaming upon them with his gentle smile.
 "We'll give thanks, beasties, that to you and me
 God shows how glad and simple love can be."

HENRY TYRRELL.