

A RHYME OF ST. FRANCIS

A. BEATRICE HICKSON

I

O Francis, was the hidden fire
Which in thee burned, but man's desire
For all that human nature craves—
The wine of life—the love that saves?

Those thou forsookst, purging the flame
Until soul's rapture it became:
For human love was of the flesh,
A vain delight—a dangerous mesh
To snare unwitting feet which trod,
Too readily, the path from God!

And all the love thy soul couldst hold,
In all its ways made manifold,
Heaped up and running o'er the brim,
Was guarded jealously for Him,
Thy Being's only Lord and King,
Whom thou didst praise in everything.

Thou gavest thy love to beast and bird,
And lived by virtue of His word;
Thou gavest thy heart to His dear Son,
Praising Him for all victories won—
For ills sustained and marvels wrought,
Demons expelled and evil fought.
Therefore the Holy Francis' way
Is known, world-over, to this day—
And how he preached Christ crucified,
With Lady Poverty as bride;
And scarce had where to lay his head,
Yet nothing lacked, because the bread
Of Heavenly Love supplied his needs—
Strengthened his soul and fired his deeds.

II

Yet, Francis, didst thou feel no stir
When first thou sawst the face of her
Who, having heard thy burning speech,
Found sweet the precepts thou didst teach,
And felt all Heaven within her reach?
What time she said, that ardent one,
"Father, I would become a nun".
Didst mark the radiant spirit shine,
In that pure face, with faith divine,
And feel that Blessed Mary then,
Perchance, drew near to sinful men?

Thou didst the sacred bread prepare
Clipping, thyself, the shining hair,
And badst her change the rich array
She wore, for one of sombre grey,
And give herself, a heavenly bride,
To Jesus, of the pierced side.
To sanctuary thou broughtst her then—

The shelter of St. Damian—
And, ever after, soughtst her when
Thy spirit quailed, midst strife of men.

Thus, did she come to Christ through thee
And shared thine inner ecstasy.
Her mystic fervour matched thine own—
Well didst thou reap where thou hadst sown.
Her soul and thine became as one;
Her service did thine own outrun.

She gave thee of her body's pain,
Aching of nerve and toil of brain—
And, alway, if thy courage failed,
The fastness of her faith prevailed.
She hid thy dolours in her heart,
And sought for grace to heal their smart;
And the white passion of her love
For thee, she took to God above—
Whilst, all the human creature's share
Of strife, she left in Mary's care.

Yet, Francis, she was woman still,
And did such tasks as women will.
Sandals, to ease thy road-worn feet
She made—and little comforts sweet
Supplied, or simple dishes cooked
To give thee strength—and ever looked
For means, by which she might allay
The rigors of thy earthly way.
And thus, together, year by year,
Ye brought Christ Jesu's Kingdom near;
And many souls were turned from sin
Who, by God's mercy, entered in.

III

Then, Francis, came a solemn morn
When thy frail body, sick, outworn,
Lay spent forever, on the sod
Of thy poor hut—the soul to God
Had fluttered, on a sighing breath
Of thanks, for Life, through Jesu's death.

The mourners, in procession, bore
Thy body past the convent door.
And paused thereat, the bier to rest,
That those might see, who loved thee best,
The holy peace upon thy face,
And look farewell a little space.
Then all the Sisters, weeping, said—
“What do we now, our Father's dead?
May Blessed Mary hear our prayer,
And have his orphans in her care!”

But one, with face like ashes grey,
Knelt by that precious form of clay;
An instant raised her eyes above,
As though she sought the face of Love—
Then pressed mute lips on the cold hand.
Dead Francis, didst thou understand?