

The Road to Assisi

The Essential Biography of St. Francis

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Sample Chapter

The Annotated Life of St. Francis of Assisi
Chapter One
His Youth and Family

Assisi is today very much what it was six or seven hundred years ago. The feudal castle is in ruins, but the aspect of the city is just the same. Its long-deserted streets, bordered by ancient houses, lie in terraces halfway up the steep hillside. Above it Mount Subasio proudly towers, at its feet lies outspread all the Umbrian plain from Perugia to Spoleto. The crowded houses clamber up the rocks like children a-tiptoe to see all that is to be seen; they succeed so well that every window gives the whole panorama set in its frame of rounded hills, from the summits of which castles and villages stand sharply out against a sky of incomparable purity.

He was born about 1182. The biographies have preserved to us few details about his parents. His father, Peter Bernardone, was a wealthy cloth-merchant. We know how different was the life of the merchants of that period from what it is today. A great portion of their time was spent in extensive journeys for the purchase of goods. Such tours were little short of expeditions. The roads being insecure, a strong escort was needed for the journey to those famous fairs where, for long weeks at a time, merchants from the most remote parts of Europe were gathered together. Among all these merchants the richest were those who dealt in textile stuffs. They were literally the bankers of the time, and their heavy wagons were often laden with the sums levied by the popes in England or France. Bernardone often made these long journeys; he went even as far as France, and by this we must surely understand Northern France, and particularly Champagne, which was the seat of commercial exchange between Northern and Southern Europe.

He was not there at the very time of his son's birth. The mother, presenting the child at the font of San Rufino, had him baptized by the name of John, but the father on his return chose to call him Francis. Perhaps, indeed, the name was only a sort of grateful homage tendered by the Assisan burgher to his noble clients beyond the Alps.

Merchants, indeed, played a considerable part in the religious movements of the thirteenth

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century. Their calling in some sense forced them to become colporters of ideas. What else could they do, on arriving in a country, but answer those who asked for news? And the news most eagerly looked for was religious news, for people's minds were turned upon very different subjects than they are now. They accommodated themselves to the popular wish, observing, hearkening everywhere, keeping eyes and ears open, glad to find anything to tell, and little by little many of them became active propagandists of ideas concerning which at first they had been simply curious.

The importance of the part played by the merchants as they came and went, everywhere sowing the new ideas that they had gathered up in their travels, has not been put in a clear enough light. They were often, unconsciously and quite involuntarily, the carriers of ideas of all kinds, especially of heresy and rebellion. It was they who made the success of the Waldensians, the Albigensians, the Humiliati, and many other sects.

Thus Bernardone, without dreaming of such a thing, became the artisan of his son's religious vocation. The tales that he brought home from his travels seemed at first, perhaps, not to have aroused the child's attention, but they were like germs a long time buried, which suddenly, under a warm ray of sunlight, bring forth unlooked-for fruit.

The boy's education was not carried very far; the school was in those days overshadowed by the church. The priests of San Giorgio were his teachers, and they taught him a little Latin. This language was spoken in Umbria until toward the middle of the thirteenth century; every one understood it and spoke it a little; it was still the language of sermons and of political deliberations.

He learned also to write, but with less success; all through his life we see him take up the pen only on rare occasions, and for but a few words. In general he dictated, signing his letters by a simple T, the symbol of the cross of Jesus.

The part of his education destined to have the most influence on his life was the French language, which he may have spoken in his family. It has been rightly said that to know two languages is to have two souls. In learning the language of France the boy felt his heart thrill to the melody of its youthful poetry, and his imagination was mysteriously stirred with dreams of imitating the exploits of the French cavaliers.

His father's profession and the possibly noble origin of his mother raised him almost to the level of the titled families of the country. Money, which he spent with both hands, made him welcome among them. Pleased to enjoy themselves at his expense, the young nobles paid him a sort of court. As to Bernardone, he was too happy to see his son associating with them to be overly concerned as to the means. He was miserly, as the course of this story will show, but his pride and self-conceit exceeded his avarice.

Pica, his wife, a gentle and modest woman, about whom the biographers have always been too

silent, would not despair of her son. When the neighbors told her of Francis's escapades, she would calmly reply: "I am very sure that, if it pleases God, Francis will become a good Christian." The words were natural enough from a mother's lips, but later on they were held to have been truly prophetic.

The son of Bernardone not only patterned himself after the young men of his age, he made it a point of honor to exceed them. With eccentricities, buffooneries, pranks, and prodigalities, he ended by achieving a sort of celebrity. He was forever in the streets with his companions, compelling attention by his extravagant or fantastic attire. Even at night the joyous company kept up their merrymakings, causing the town to ring with their noisy songs.

At this very time the troubadours were roaming over the towns of northern Italy and bringing brilliant festivities and especially Courts of Love into vogue. If they worked upon the passions, they also appealed to feelings of courtesy and delicacy; it was this that saved Francis. In the midst of his excesses he was always refined and considerate, carefully abstaining from every base or indecent utterance.

Already his chief aspiration was to rise above the commonplace. Tortured with the desire for that which is far off and high, he had conceived a sort of passion for chivalry, and fancying that dissipation was one of the distinguishing features of nobility, he had thrown himself into it with all his soul.

But he who, at twenty, goes from pleasure to pleasure with the heart not absolutely closed to good, must now and then, at some turning of the road, become aware that there are hungry folk who could live a month on what he spends in a few hours on frivolity. Francis saw them, and with his impressionable nature for the moment forgot everything else. In thought he put himself in their place, and it sometimes happened that he gave them all the money he had about him and even his clothes.

One day he was busy with some customers in his father's shop, when a man came in, begging for charity in the name of God. Losing his patience Francis sharply turned him away; but quickly reproaching himself for his harshness he thought, "What would I not have done if this man had asked something of me in the name of a count or a baron? What ought I not to have done when he came in the name of God? I am no better than a clown!" Leaving his customers he ran after the beggar.

Bernardone had been pleased with his son's commercial aptitude in the early days when the young man was first in his father's employ. Francis was only too proficient in spending money, but at least he knew well how to make it. But this satisfaction did not last long. Francis's companions were exercising a most pernicious influence over him. The time came when he could no longer endure to be separated from them; if he heard their call, nothing could keep him; he would leave everything and go after them.

All this time political events were hurrying on in Umbria and Italy. The rivalries between cities were strong, and Perugia, Assisi's neighbor to the west, was at this time at the apogee of its power, having already made many efforts to reduce Assisi to submission. It declared war on Assisi in 1202. An encounter took place in the plain about halfway between the two cities, not far from *Ponte San Giovanni*. Assisi was defeated, and Francis, who was in the ranks, was made prisoner.

The treachery of the nobles was not universal; a few had fought along with the people. It was with them and not with the *popolani* ("common people") that Francis, in consideration of the nobility of his manners, passed the time of his captivity, which lasted an entire year. He greatly astonished his companions by his lightness of heart. Very often they thought him almost crazy. Instead of passing his time in wailing and cursing he made plans for the future, about which he was glad to talk to any one who came along. His fancy life was something that the songs of the troubadours had painted; he dreamed of glorious adventures, and always ended by saying: "You will see that one day I shall be adored by the whole world."

A compromise was finally arrived at between the counts and the people of Assisi. The agreement being made, the prisoners detained at Perugia were released, and Francis returned to Assisi. He was twenty-two years old.