

him a successor in business to be proud of, denied him no pleasure that he chose to set his heart upon, though he sometimes feared where-to the thing would grow. It was soon to grow in a way ambitious Pietro little dreamed of.

Just as Francis was approaching his twenty-fifth year he was visited by a severe illness of long continuance. The fires of pain played about him with vehement heat. When he recovered he was greatly changed. His taste for the old manner of life was gone. For a few months he was attracted to the career of a soldier and resolved to devote himself to a life of chivalry. He joined the army of Walter of Brienne, the champion of the Pope, but sickness intervened again and he was compelled to return home.

The Spirit of God was now working on his heart very mightily. Among other impressive experiences he was the subject of a vision in which he seemed to stand in a richly decorated room filled with weapons. On the walls were many shields, each adorned with the sign of the cross. Before him was a "lady of dazzling beauty, attired as a bride." In his ear a voice spake, "These are for thee and for thy knights." The meaning of the vision was not immediately made clear to him, but he learned later to interpret it as a call to spiritual service. The soul-enrapturing bride was Poverty, whom he accepted as his own.

After his return to Assisi his manner of life was much graver than formerly, though he did not entirely discard his old pleasures. It was not long before his companions made a feast in his honour, over which he presided. Eating and drinking over, the party serenaded the town. Some of them were drunk. All were hilarious. Francis was troubled. Suddenly he stopped in the middle of the street, abstracted from all his sur-

roundings. His companions rallied him, but he was speechless and motionless. At length one of them cried, "Ah, I know what is the matter. He is in love. He is thinking of a bride." "Yes," said Francis, "thou art right. I am thinking of a bride, but a nobler and more beautiful bride than thou hast wit to imagine." He was thinking of that vision of Poverty he had seen at Spoleta, and the life of self-denial to which the voice of the Spirit seemed incessantly to be calling him.

But it is one thing to perceive the beauty of a life of holy self-denying service and another thing to choose it. Francis was compelled to wrestle agonizingly before he obtained the full consent of his own will to make the great surrender. He sought frequent retirement. One favourite place of resort was a cave in the neighbouring hills where he often wrestled in prayer and self-conflict until he was on the verge of physical exhaustion. One day as he rode along he encountered a leper who reached out his hand for alms. Lepers seem to have been as common in Italy during the Middle Ages as they were in Palestine in the days of our Lord. Francis had an unspeakable repugnance to them. That natural aversion asserted itself now and his impulse was to turn back, when suddenly he checked himself. He had been praying for self-conquest and here was a call to crucify self. He alighted from his horse, kissed the outstretched hand, filled it with money and went his way.

In after years he was wont to refer to that act as a decisive one in his spiritual experience. He accounted it the point of his conversion. There was an element of fanaticism in it no doubt, but it satisfied the pleading in his conscience for unreserved submission of himself and all his prejudices to