

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI.

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The closing years of the twelfth century saw the Pope of Rome the supreme arbiter of the world. The kings and armies of Europe were at his beck and nod. England, France, Germany and Italy poured out thousands of lives and millions of money at his call in the stupendous folly of the crusades. Papal collectors and bankers were busy in every land gathering in tithes and contributions from priests and people for the enrichment of Rome's exchequer. Ecclesiastics vied with the great barons in maintaining a state of luxurious pomp and pride. In Italy, the duty of preaching was vested exclusively in the bishops, and they were so busy with war, politics, and the management of their great estates that the people, for the most part, went unfed. Battles and sieges were everywhere. Revelry and licentiousness abounded. The masses of the people were ignorant, superstitious, almost heathenish, yet subject to great waves of religious excitement which swept provinces from end to end and frequently assumed very grotesque forms.

Feudalism was in its prime and held the lower orders of society in the grip of a tyranny so complete as to prescribe the dress each might wear, the manner in which he might carry on his trade, the dimensions of his home, the number of trees he might plant and the details of his funeral. The god of the age was the great trinity of worldly power, worldly pomp, and worldly pleasure, while the faith of the lowly Nazarene was as much despised by hierarch and noble as when the Pharisees and Herodians delivered Him up to the Gentiles

to mock and scourge and crucify Him.

But the religious instincts of man can never be wholly suppressed, and we find mingling with this towering worldliness numberless wild growths of heresy and fanaticism. Sabatier, falling back on the Hebrew terms used in the book of Genesis to describe the original chaos, says, "The thirteenth century was a tolu-bohu of mysticism and folly. Every sort of excess followed in rapid succession. Without the slightest pause of transition, men passed through the most contradictory systems of belief." These systems were the products, for the most part, of the inferior clergy and the common people. The blows which actually threatened the Church of the Middle Ages were struck by obscure labouring men, by the poor and the oppressed, who in their wretchedness and degradation felt that she had failed in her mission.

In the midst of all this there were saintly souls who hoped and prayed for better things. "Cry with a loud voice," was the direction given to St. Elizabeth of Schonau, "Cry to all nations: Woe! for the whole world has become darkness. The Lord's vine has withered, there is no one to tend it. The Lord has sent labourers, but they have all been found idle. The head of the Church is ill and her members are dead. Shepherds of my Church, you are sleeping, but I shall awaken you! Kings of the earth, the cry of your iniquity has risen even to me."

Into this state of society there came a poor man who went about doing good, preaching the Gospel