

LITERATURE.

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI.

THOSE of us who recognize that greatness in the kingdom of heaven consists, not in knowledge, but in devotion; not in the acceptance of the largest number of Christian doctrines, but in depth of conviction with regard to things vital, will not hesitate to sit at the feet of the Saint of Assisi. Our own ways of thinking, and our own applications of the teaching of Christ to life, are in many respects so different from his, that we must, in order to derive the greatest possible spiritual benefit from the marvellous career of "The Christ of Umbria," keep constantly in mind that the power of a man lies not in the accuracy of his beliefs, but in the intensity of his life, and that the Spirit of Christ in men is

The gold chain that binds

The whole round earth about the feet of God.

When the son of Pietro Bernardone, the wealthy cloth merchant of Assisi, was born (1182), that strange epoch, known as the Middle Ages, was in its grandest period. Men were everywhere burning with enthusiasm and eager for great achievements. In Italy the spirit of the Renaissance was beginning to show itself. At no time before or since was life so intense; at no time were there such vital contrasts. Men seemed to be capable of the extremes of generosity, heroism, and self-sacrifice, and yet never was there so much superstition, savage cruelty, treachery, and moral corruption. The Church had reached the height of its power, but everywhere it was a scandal to the world. Simony, extortion, oppression, ignorance, and gross worldliness characterized all ranks of the clergy, and so wide-spread and deep-seated were these abuses that they resisted the power of the strongest and best popes. But most good men, though they vehemently attacked its abuses, were loyal to the Church. The prophet in those days, as ever, found his bitterest enemy in the priest, yet he still revered the priest. "Even if they persecuted me," wrote Francis, "I would still have recourse to them. . . . I will not consider their sins, for in them I see the Son of God, and they are my Lord's."

The story of the Saint's early youth is well-known. A companion of the young Umbrian nobles, he was their leader in prodigality and buffooneries; but even in those gay, thoughtless days, he displayed uncommon purity and nobleness of spirit. Francis was twenty-two when he first came face to face with the deep things of life, and his spirit turned in loathing from the vanity and barrenness of his life. "He was terrified at his solitude, the solitude of a great soul in which there is no altar." Shortly

after this experience,—which was not decisive,—he joined, with unbounded joy and hope, a military expedition—for his high chivalrous spirit burned for military distinction. What happened is not certain; but in a few days after the departure of the force, he was back at Assisi.

Now began his real life. His inward struggles were profound and terrible. A grotto, to which he often resorted, and in which he had his hours of anguish, despair, and strengthening, became afterwards a Gethsemane to the devout Franciscans.

The full light came to him as he prayed before the crucifix in the rude chapel of St. Damian, near Assisi. A voice seemed to steal into the depths of his heart, accepting his life and service, and endowing him with divine insight and strength. From this time forth the brilliant cavalier gave himself up without reserve to the service of the Crucified. "No one showed me what to do," he said long after, "but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I ought to live according to the Model of the holy gospel."

It was soon made plain to him how he should serve his Lord. His wealthy father had different plans, and haled him before the ecclesiastical tribunal; but Francis firmly announced his resolution to forsake the delights of the world. Leaving the room for a moment he reappeared absolutely naked, and laying his clothes and money beside the bishop, he cried: "Until this time I have called Pietro Bernardone my father . . . henceforth I desire to say nothing else than "Our Father who art in heaven." This act, which is not to be judged according to our standards, was symbolical of the complete self-renunciation of St. Francis throughout his life. He then took his "Lady Poverty" for his bride, and continued faithful to her. A few months later he got his definite message through a priest who was celebrating mass at Portinucula: "Wherever ye go," the priest read, "preach, saying, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils. Freely ye have received, freely give. Provide neither silver nor gold nor brass in your purses, neither scrip, nor two coats, nor shoes, nor staff, for the laborer is worthy of his meat." "This is what I want; this is what I was seeking," cried Francis, instantly throwing aside his staff, purses, and shoes, in literal obedience to the command. At this time he was twenty-seven years of age.

Next morning he preached at Assisi. He was received by the people at once as a Saint, and never lost their reverence. He came with the simplest possible message, and delivered it in the simplest possible way, without rhetoric or appeals to the imagination. Yet men seemed to hear a divine voice speaking to them, and they rejoiced as in a