

FRANCESCA ALEXANDER

THE HIDDEN SERVANTS
AND OTHER VERY OLD
STORIES

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*The Hidden Servants and Other Very Old Stories:**

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Francesca Alexander

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Introduction

To those who are fortunate enough to know Miss Alexander's pen and pencil pictures of Italian peasant life the very name of Francesca, over which her early work was published, carries with it an aroma as of those humbler graces of her adopted people, – their sunny charity, their native sense of the beautiful, their childlike faith, – which touch the heart more intimately than all their great achievements in History and in Art. For those, however, to whom are yet unknown her faithful transcripts in picture and story from the lives of the people she loves, a word of introduction has been asked; and it was perhaps thought that the task might properly be entrusted to one who had heard *The Hidden Servants* and many another of these poems from the lips of Francesca herself.

Yet, rightly considered, could any experience have better served to banish from the mind such irrelevant intruders as facts, – those literal facts and data at least which the uninitiated might be so mistaken as to desire, but which none who knew

Francesca's work could regard as of the slightest consequence?

Imagine a quiet, green-latticed room in Venice overlooking the Grand Canal whose waters keep time in gently audible lappings to the lilt of the verse, – that lilt that is apparent even in the printed line, but which only a voice trained to Italian cadences can perfectly give. Imagine that voice half chanting, half reciting, these old, old legends, and with an absolute sincerity of conviction which stirs the mind of the listeners, mere children of to-day though they be, to a faith akin to that which conceived the tales. Where is there place for facts in such a scene, in such an experience? Or, if facts must be, are not all that are requisite easily to be gleaned from the poems themselves? Why state that Francesca is the daughter of an American artist, or that she has spent her life in Italy, when the artist inheritance, the Italian atmosphere, breathes in every poem our little book contains? Why make mention even of Ruskin's enthusiastic heralding of her work, when the very spirit of it is so essentially that which the great idealist was seeking all his life that he could scarcely have failed to discover and applaud it had it been ever so retiring, ever so hidden? Nor does it matter that the Alexander home chances to be in Florence rather than in Venice, since it is Italy itself that lives in Francesca's work; nor that she is Protestant rather than Catholic, when it is religion pure and simple, unrestricted by any creed, that makes vital each line she writes or draws.

Yet of the poems, if not of the writer, there remained still

something to learn, and accordingly a letter of inquiry was sent her; and her own reply, written with no thought of publication, is a better report than another could give. This is what she says: —

"With regard to this present collection of ballads, I can tell its history in a few words. When I was a young girl many old and curious books fell into my hands and became my favourite reading (next to the Bible, and, perhaps, the *Divina Commedia*), as I found in them the strong faith and simple modes of thought which were what I liked and wanted. Afterwards, in my constant intercourse with the country people, and especially with old people whom I always loved, I heard a great many legends and traditions, often beautiful, often instructive, and which, as far as I knew, had never been written down. I was always in request with children for the stories which I knew and could tell, and, as I found they liked these legends, I thought it a pity they should be lost after I should have passed away, and so I always meant to write them down; all the more that I had felt the need of such reading when I was a child myself. But I never had time to write them as long as my eyes permitted me to work at my drawing, and afterwards, when I wanted to begin them, I found myself unable to write at all for more than a few minutes at once. Finally I thought of turning the stories into rhyme and learning them all by heart, so that I could write them down little by little. I thought children would not be very particular, if I could just make the dear old stories vivid and comprehensible, which I tried to do. If, as you kindly hope, they may be good for older people as well,

then it must be that when the Lord took from me one faculty He gave me another; which is in no way impossible. And I think of the beautiful Italian proverb: 'When God shuts a door He opens a window.'"

After such an account of the origin and growth of these poems no further comment would seem fitting, unless it be that made by Cardinal Manning when writing to Mr. Ruskin in 1883 to thank him for a copy of Francesca's *Story of Ida*. He writes: —

"It is simply beautiful, like the *Fioretti di San Francesco*. Such flowers can grow in one soil alone. They can be found only in the Garden of Faith, over which the world of light hangs visibly, and is more intensely seen by the poor and the pure in heart than by the rich, or the learned, or the men of culture."

ANNA FULLER.

Preface

THE OLD STORY-TELLER

In my upper chamber here,
Still I wait from year to year;
Wondering when the time will come
That the Lord will call me home.
All the rest have been removed, —
Those I worked for, those I loved;
And, at times, there seems to be
Little use on earth for me.
Still God keeps me — He knows why —
When so many younger die!

From my window I look down
On the busy, bustling town.
But beyond its noise and jar
I can see the hills afar;
And above it, the blue sky,
And the white clouds sailing by;
And the sunbeams, as they shine
On a world that is not mine.

Here I wait, while life shall last,

An old relic of the past,
Feeling strange, and far away
From the people of to-day;
Thankful for the memory dear
Of a morning, always near,
Though long vanished, and so fair!
Dewy flowers and April air;
Thankful that the storms of noon
Spent their force and died so soon;
Thankful, as their echoes cease,
For this twilight hour of peace.

But my life, to evening grown,
Still has pleasures of its own.
Up my stairway, long and steep,
Now and then the children creep;
Gather round me, where I sit
All day long, and dream, and knit;
Fill my room with happy noise —
May God bless them, girls and boys!
Then sweet eyes upon me shine,
Dimpled hands are laid in mine;
And I never ask them why
They have sought to climb so high;
For 'twere useless to enquire!
'Tis a story they desire,
Taken from my ancient store,
None the worse if heard before;
And they turn, with pleading looks,

To my shelf of time-worn books,
Bound in parchment brown with age.
Little in them to engage
Children's fancy, one would say!
Yet, when tired with noisy play,
Nothing pleases them so well
As the stories I can tell
From those pages, old and gray,
With their edges worn away;
Spelling queer, and Woodcut quaint.
Angel, demon, prince, and saint,
Much alike in face and air;
Houses tipping here and there,
Lion, palm-tree, hermit's cell,
And much more I need not tell.

Then they all attentive wait,
While the story I relate,
And, before the half is told,
I forget that I am old!
But one age there seems to be
For the little ones and me.
What though all be new and strange,
Little children never change;
All is shifting day by day, —
Worse or better, who can say?
Much we lose, and much we learn,
But the children still return,
As the flowers do, every year;

Just as innocent and dear
As those babes who first did meet
At our Heavenly Master's feet.
In His arms He took them all:
Oh, 'tis precious to recall —
Blessèd to believe it true —
That what we love He loved too!

Since the time when life was new,
All my long, long journey through,
I have story-teller been.
When a child I did begin
To my playmates; later on,
Other children, long since gone,
Came to listen; and of some,
Still the children's children come!

Some, the dearest, took their flight,
In the early morning light,
To the glory far away,
Made for them and such as they.
I have lingered till the last;
All the busy hours are past;
Now my sun is in the west,
Slowly sinking down to rest
Ere it wholly fades from view,
One thing only I would do:
From my stories I would choose
Those 't would grieve me most to lose.

And would tell them once again
For the children who remain,
And for others, yet to be,
Whom on earth I may not see.
Here, within this volume small,
I have thought to write them all;
And to-day the work commence,
Trusting, ere God call me hence,
I may see the whole complete.
It will be a labour sweet,
Calling back, in sunset glow,
Happy hours of long ago.

The Hidden Servants ***AND OTHER POEMS***

THE HIDDEN SERVANTS

A sheltered nook on a mountain side,
Shut in, and guarded, and fortified
By rocks that hardly a goat would climb,
All smoothed by tempest and bleached by time —
Such was the spot that the hermit chose,
From youth to age, for his life's repose.
There had he lived for forty years,
Trying, with penance and prayers and tears,
To make his soul like a polished stone
In God's great temple; for this alone
Was the one dear wish that his soul possessed,
And 't was little he cared for all the rest,

Nothing had changed since first he came;
The sky and the mountain were all the same,
Only a beech-tree, that there had grown
Ere ever he builded his cell of stone,
Had risen and spread to a stately grace,
And its shifting shadow filled half the place.

Many a winter its storms had spent,
Many a summer its sunshine lent
To the little cell, till it came to look
Like another rock in the peaceful nook.
Mosses and lichen had veiled the wall,
Till it hardly seemed like a dwelling at all.

'T was a peaceful home when the days were soft,
And spring in her sweetness crept aloft
From the plains below where her work was done,
And the hills grew green in the warming sun.
And in summer the cell of the hermit seemed
Like part of that heaven of which he dreamed:
For the turf behind those walls of flint
Was sprinkled with flowers of rainbow tint;
And never a sound but the bees' low hum,
As over the blossoms they go and come;
Or – when one listened – the fainter tones
Of a spring that bubbled between the stones.

But dreary it was on a winter's night,
When the snow fell heavy and soft and white.
And at times, when the morn was cold and keen,
The footprints of wolves at his door were seen.
But cold or hunger he hardly felt,
So near to heaven the good man dwelt;
And as for danger – why, death, to him,
Meant only joining the Seraphim!

Poorly he lived, and hardly fared;
And when the acorns and roots he shared
With mole or squirrel, he asked no more,
But thanked the Lord for such welcome store.
The richest feast he could ever know
Was when the shepherds who dwelt below,
Whose sheep in the mountain pastures fed,
Would bring him cheeses, or barley bread,
Or – after harvest – a bag of meal;
And then they would all before him kneel,
On flowery turf or on moss-grown rocks,
To ask a blessing for them and their flocks,

And once or twice he had wandered out
To preach in the country round about,
Where unto many his words were blest;
Then back he climbed to his quiet nest.
By all in trouble his aid was sought;
And women their pining children brought,
For a touch of his hand to ease their pain,
And his prayers to make them strong again.

And now one wish in his heart remained:
He longed to know what his soul had gained,
And how he had grown in the Master's grace,
Since first he came to that lonely place.
This wish was haunting him night and day,
He never could drive the thought away.
Until at length in the beech-tree's shade

He knelt, and with all his soul he prayed
That God would grant him to know and see
A man, if such in the world might be,
Whose soul in the heavenly grace had grown
To the self-same measure as his own;
Whose treasure on the celestial shore
Could neither be less than his nor more.
He prayed with faith, and his prayer was heard;
He hardly came to the closing word
Before he felt there was some one there!
He looked, and saw in the sun-lit air
An angel, floating on wings of white;
Nor did he wonder at such a sight:
For angels often had come to cheer
His soul, and he thought them always near.
Happy and humble, he bowed his head,
And listened, while thus the angel said:
"Go to the nearest town, and there,
To-morrow, will be in the market square
A mountebank, playing his tricks for show:
He is the man thou hast prayed to know;
His soul, as seen by the light divine,
Is neither better nor worse than thine.
His treasure on the celestial shore
Is neither less than thine own nor more."

Next day, in the dim and early morn,
By a slippery path that the sheep had worn,
The hermit went from his loved abode

To the farms below, and the beaten road.
The reapers, out in the field that day,
Who saw him passing, did often say,
What a mournful look the old man had!
And his very voice was changed and sad.
Troubled he was, and much perplexed;
With endless doubting his mind was vexed.
What – He? A mountebank? Both the same?
What could it mean to his soul but shame?
Had his forty years been vainly spent?
And then, alas! as he onward went,
There came an evil and bitter thought, —
Had he been serving the Lord for nought?
But in his fear he began to pray,
And the black temptation passed away.

Perhaps the mountebank yet might prove
To have a soul in the Master's love.
He almost felt that it must be so,
In spite of a life that seemed so low.
Perhaps he was forced such life to take,
It might be, even for conscience' sake;
Some cruel master the order gave,
Perhaps, for scorn of a pious slave.
Or, stay – there were saints in ancient days,
Who had such terror of human praise
That, but to gain the contempt they prized,
They did such things as are most despised;
Feigned even madness; and more than one,

Accused of sins he had never done,
Had willingly borne disgrace and blame,
Nor said a word for his own good name!

In thoughts like these had the day gone by;
The sun was now in the western sky:
The road, grown level and hot and wide,
With dusty hedges on either side,
Had led him close to the city gate,
Where he must enter to learn his fate.

Now fear did over his hope prevail:
He almost wished in his search to fail,
And find no mountebank there at all!
For then his vision he well might call
A dream that came of its own accord,
Instead of a message from the Lord!
A few more minutes, and then he knew
That all which the angel said was true!

A mountebank, in the market square,
Was making the people laugh and stare.
With antics more befitting an ape
Than any creature in human shape!
The hermit took his place with the rest,
Not heeding the crowd that round him pressed,
And earnestly set his eyes to scan
The face of the poor, unsaintly man.
Alas, there was little written there

Of inward peace or of answered prayer!
For all the paint, and the droll grimace,
'T was a haggard, anxious, weary face.

The mountebank saw, with vague surprise,
The patient, sorrowful, searching eyes,
Whose look, so solemn, and kindly too,
Seemed piercing all his disguises through.
They made him restless, he knew not why:
He could not play; it was vain to try!
His face grew sober, his movements slow;
And, soon as might be, he closed the show.

He saw that the hermit lingered on,
When all the rest of the crowd were gone.
Then over his gaudy clothes he drew
A ragged mantle of faded hue;
And he himself was the first to speak:
"Good Father, is it for me you seek?"
"My son, I have sought you all the day;
Would you come with me a little way,
Into some quiet corner near,
Where no one our words can overhear?"

Not far away, in a lonely street,
By a garden wall they found a seat.
It now was late, and the sun had set,
Though a golden glory lingered yet,
And the moon looked pale in it overhead.

They sat them down, and the hermit said:
"My son, to me was a vision sent,
And as yet I know not what it meant;
But I think that you, and you alone,
Are able to make its meaning known.
Answer me then – I have great need —
And tell me, what is the life you lead?"

"My life's a poor one, you may suppose!
I 've many troubles that no one knows;
For I have to keep a smiling face.
I wander, friendless, from place to place,
Risking my neck for a scanty gain;
But I must do it, and not complain.
I know, whatever may go amiss,
That I have deserved much worse than this."

To the hermit this a meaning bore
Of deep humility, nothing more.
So, gaining courage, "But this," he said,
"Is not the life you have always led.
So much the vision to me revealed;
I know there 's something you keep concealed."

The mountebank answered sadly: "Yes!
'T is true: you ask, and I must confess.
But keep my secret, good Father, pray;
Or my life will not be safe for a day!
Alas, I have led a life of crime!

I've been an evil man in my time.
I was a robber – I think you know —
Till little more than a year ago;
One of a desperate, murderous band,
A curse and terror to all the land!"

The hermit's head sank down on his breast;
His trembling hands to his eyes he pressed.
"Has God rejected me?" then he moaned:
"Are all my service and love disowned?
Have I been blind, and my soul deceived?"

The other, seeing the old man grieved,
Said: "Father, why do you care so much
For one not worthy your robe to touch?
The Lord is gracious, and if He will,
He can forgive and save me still.
And as for my wicked life, 't is I,
Not you, who have reason to weep and sigh!
Your prayers may help me, and bring me peace."

The hermit made him a sign to cease;
Then raised his head, and began to speak,
With tears on his wrinkled, sun-browned cheek.
"If you could remember even one
Good deed that you in your life have done,
I need not go in despair away.
Think well; and if you can find one, say!"

"Once," said the mountebank, "that was all,
I did for the Lord a service small,
And never yet have I told the tale!
But if you wish it, I will not fail.
A few of our men had gone one day —
'T was less for plunder, I think, than play —
To a certain convent, small and poor,
Where a dozen sisters lived secure
For very poverty! dreaming not
That any envied their humble lot.
There, finding the door was locked and barred,
They climbed the wall of a grass-grown yard.
Some vines were planted along its side,
Their trailing branches left room to hide;
Where, neither by pity moved nor shame,
They crouched, till one of the sisters came
To gather herbs for the noonday meal;
Then out from under the leaves they steal!
So she was taken, poor soul, and bound,
And carried off to our camping ground.
A harmless creature, who knew no more
Of the world outside her convent door,
Than you or I of the moon up there!
A shame, to take her in such a snare!

"But, Father, I wished that I had been
Ten miles away, when they brought her in,
To hold for ransom; or if that failed —
Oh, well, we knew when the pirates sailed!

We knew their captain, who paid us well,
And carried our prisoners off to sell.
They never beheld their country more,
Being bought for slaves on a foreign shore.

"But oh! 't was enough the tears to bring,
To see that innocent, frightened thing,
Looking, half hopeful, from face to face,
As if she thought, in that wicked place,
There might be one who would take her part!
She looked at me, and it stung my heart.
But I, with a hard, disdainful air,
Turned from her as one who did not care,
I heard her sighing: she did not know
That her gentle look had hurt me so!

"That night they set me the watch to keep;
And when the others were all asleep,
And I had been moving to and fro,
With branches keeping the fire aglow,
I crept along to the woman's side, —
She sat apart, and her arms were tied, —
And said, — 't was only a whispered word;
We both were lost if the others heard, —
'If you will trust me and with me come,
I'll bring you safe to your convent home.'
She started, into my face she gazed;
Said she, 'I'll trust you — the Lord be praised!'

"I very quickly the cords unbound.
She rose; I led her without a sound
Between the rows of the sleeping men,
Till we left the camp behind; and then
I found my horse, that was tied near by.
The woman mounted, and she and I
Set off in haste, through the midnight shade,
On the wildest journey I ever made!
By wood and thicket the horse I led,
And over a torrent's stony bed, —
For along the road I dared not go,
For fear that the others our flight should know,
And follow after; the woman prayed.
I, quick and cautious, but not afraid,
Went first, with the stars for guide, until
We saw the convent, high on a hill.
We reached the door as the east grew red.
'God will remember!' was all she said;
Her face was full of a sweet content.
She knocked, they opened, and in she went.
The door was closed — she was safe at last!
I heard the bolt as they made it fast —
And I in the twilight stood alone,
With the lightest heart I had ever known!

"So, Father, my robber days were o'er;
I could not be what I was before.
I wandered on with a thankful mind,
For I left the old bad life behind,

And tried, as I journeyed day by day,
To gain my bread in an honest way.
But little work could I find to do;
And so, as some juggling tricks I knew,
I took this business which now you see:
'T is good enough for a man like me!"

While yet the story was going on,
The cloud from the hermit's face had gone;
And if his eyes in the moonlight shone,
They glistened with thankful tears alone.
He listened in solemn awe until
The mountebank's tale was done; and still,
Some moments, he neither spoke nor stirred,
But silently pondered every word.

Then humbly speaking, "The Lord," said he,
"Has had great mercy on you and me!
And now, my son, I must tell you why
I came to speak with you – know that I
Have tried with the Lord alone to dwell,
For forty years, in my mountain cell;
In prayer and solitude, day and night,
Have striven to keep my candle bright!
And there, but yesterday, while I prayed,
An angel came to my side, and said
That I should seek you, – and told me where, —
And should your life with my own compare;
For in God's service and love and grace

Your soul with mine has an equal place,
We both alike have his mercy shared,
The same reward is for both prepared.
I came; I sought you – and you know how
I found you out in the square just now!
At which – may the Lord forgive my pride! —
At first I was poorly satisfied.
But now I have heard your story through —
What you in a single night could do! —
And know that this to the Lord appears
Worth all my service of forty years;
I can but wonder, and thank His grace
Which raised us both to an equal place,"

"But, Father, it never can be true!
What? – I by the side of a saint like you?
Ah no! You never to me were sent.
'T was some one else whom the angel meant!"

"No! Listen to me – 'T was *you*, my son!
Our Master said that a service done
To a child of His in time of need
Is done to Himself in very deed,
And is with love by Himself received!
So do not think I have been deceived,
But keep those words on your heart engraved
Of the humble woman whose life you saved,
God will remember, and trust His care.
He will not forget you here nor there!"

"O Father, Father! And can it be
That the Lord in heaven remembers me?
And yet I had felt it must be true,
For the woman spoke as if she knew!
But when was ever such mercy shown,
And is this the love He bears His own?
Are these the blessings He holds in store?
Oh, let me serve Him for evermore!"

And when, at the close of another day,
The hermit wearily made his way
Up the mountain path, from stone to stone,
He did not climb to his cell alone.
The mountebank, still with wondering face,
Came with him up to that peaceful place!

Together with thankful hearts they went,
Thenceforth together their lives were spent.
And, ere the summer had reached its close,
Another cell from the rocks arose;
The beech, in its strong and stately growth,
Spread one green canopy over both.
On summer evenings, when shepherds guide
Their flocks to rest on the mountain side,
They heard above, in the twilight calm,
Two voices, chanting the evening psalm;
And one was agèd, and one was young,
But never was hymn more sweetly sung!

In love and patience, by deed and word,
They helped each other to serve the Lord, —
Together to pray, to learn, to teach, —
Till a deeper blessing fell on each.
Their souls grew upward from day to day;
But he who farthest had gone astray,
Who, lowest fallen, had hardest striven,
Who most had sinned and been most forgiven,
Erelong in the heavenly race outran
The older, milder, and wiser man.
Two years he dwelt with his agèd friend,
Then made a blessèd and peaceful end;
And, when his penitent life was done,
The hermit wept as he would for a son!

Ten years had over the mountain passed,
Since that poor mountebank breathed his last,
Helped, to the end, by a woman's prayer,
Ten years; and the hermit still was there.
Grown older, thinner, with shoulders bent,
He seldom forth from his shelter went.
But those he had helped in former days
With prayers and counsel, in thousand ways,
Were mindful of him, and brought him all
He needed now, for his wants were small.
And happy they were their best to give,
If only their mountain saint would live!
For in his living their lives were blest;

And if he longed for the perfect rest,
Patient he was, and content to wait,
While God should please, at the heavenly gate.
Beautiful now his face had grown,
But the beauty was something not his own, —
A solemn light from the blessèd land
Within whose border he soon must stand.
Little he said, but his every word
Was saved and treasured by those who heard,
To be a blessing in years to come,
When he should be theirs no more; and some
Who brought their little to help his need,
Went home with their souls enriched indeed!

One autumn morning he sat alone,
Outside his cell; and the warm sun shone
With a friendly light on his silver hair,
Through the branches, smooth and almost bare,
Of the beech-tree, now, like him, grown old.
The night before had been sharp and cold;
And the frost was white on leaf and stem
Wherever the rocks still shaded them,
But where the sunbeams had found their way,
In glittering, crystal drops it lay;
And fallen leaves at his feet were strewn,
Yellow and wet, over turf and stone.

He sat and dreamed, as the agèd do,
While, drifting backward, he lived anew

The years that never again should be.
A placid dream – for his soul was free
From all the troubles of long ago,
The doubts, the conflict he used to know!
Doubts of himself, and a contest grim
With evil spirits that strove for him.
Now all was over; that troubled day
Was like a storm that had passed away.

It seemed to him that his voyage was o'er;
His ship already had touched the shore.
Yet once he sighed; for he knew that he
Was not the man he had hoped to be,
And, looking back on his journey past,
He felt – what all of us feel at last!
And his soul was moved to pray once more
The prayer he had made twelve years before,
Only to know, before he died,
If he were worthy to stand beside
One of God's children, or great or small,
Who served Him truly; and that was all!

It was not long ere the angel came,
Who, gently calling the saint by name,
Said: "Come, for thou hast not far to go.
One step, and I to thine eyes will show
The very dwelling that shelters now
Two souls as near to the Lord as thou!"

The hermit rose; and with reverent tread
He followed on as the angel led.
Where a single cleft the rocks between
Gave passage out of the valley green
They passed, and stood in the pathway steep:
The rocks about them were sunken deep
In fern, and bramble, and purple heath,
That sloped away to the woods beneath;
While far below, and on every side,
Were endless mountains, and forests wide,
And scattered villages here and there,
That all looked near in the clear, dry air.
And here a church, with its belfry tall;
And there a convent, whose massive wall
Rose grave and stately above the trees.
The hermit willingly looked at these;
For hope they gave him that now, at least,
Some praying brother or toiling priest
Might be his mate; but it was not so!
The angel showed him, away below,
A slope where a little mountain-farm
Lay, all spread out in the sunshine warm,
Along the side of a wooded hill.
It looked so peaceful and far and still!
And when his eye on the farmhouse fell,
The angel said: "It is there they dwell!
Two women in heart and soul like thee.
Go, find them, Brother, and thou shalt see
All that thou art in their lives displayed."

Before the hermit an answer made,
The angel back to the skies had flown;
He stood in the rocky path alone.

Along the broken and winding way
Between the heath and the boulders gray;
Through lonely pastures that led him down
To oaken woods in their autumn brown;
And o'er the stones of a rippling stream,
The hermit passed, like one in a dream!
As though the vision, had made him strong:
He hardly knew that the way was long.

'T was almost noon when he came in sight
Of the little farmhouse, low and white:
A sheltered lane by the orchard led,
Where mountain ash, with its berries red,
Rose high above him; and brambles, grown
All over the rough, low wall of stone,
And tangled brier with thorny spray,
And feathered clematis, edged the way.
Then, turning shortly, a view he caught
Of both the women for whom he sought.

One, spinning, sat by the open door;
Her spindle danced on the worn stone floor.
The other, just from the forest come,
Had brought a bundle of branches home,
And spread them now in the sun to dry;

But both looked up as the saint drew nigh.
Then, on a sudden, the spindle stopped,
The branches all on the grass were dropped.
He heard them joyfully both exclaim,
"The Saint! The hermit!" And forth they came
To bid him welcome, and made request
That he would enter their house to rest.

But when a blessing they both implored,
He had not courage to speak the word.
The only blessing his lips let fall
Was this: "May the good Lord bless us all,
And keep our hearts in His peace divine!"
With hand uplifted, he made the sign,
Then entered in (to their joy complete!)
And willingly took the offered seat.

And soon before him a meal was spread,
Of chestnuts, of goat's milk cheese, and bread;
While one with her pitcher went to bring
Some water fresh from the ice-cold spring.

He could not taste of the food prepared
Till he his errand to both declared.
Said he: "My friends, I have come to-day
With something grave on my mind to say,
And more to hear; and I pray you now
To answer truly, and not allow
A feeling, whether of pride or shame,

Or any shrinking from praise or blame,
To change the answer you both may give,
Of what you are and of how you live."

Then she with distaff still at her side,
Of speech more ready, at once replied.
In years the elder, but not in face,
She kept a little of youthful grace:
The dark eyes under her snow-white hair
Were keen and clear as the autumn air!

"We are but what we appear to be:
Two toiling women, as you may see!
And neither so young nor strong as when
In field and forest we helped the men.
We now have only the lesser care,
To keep the house, and the meals prepare,
And other labours of small account,
Yet something worth in the week's amount.
But in our youth, and a lifetime through,
We laboured, much as the others do!
Through storm and sunshine we still have tried
To do our best by our husbands' side.
And keep their hearts and our own at rest
When sickness came or when want oppressed.
For even famine our house assailed
That year when the corn and chestnuts failed.
And once – that winter ten years ago —
Our house was buried beneath the snow,

And ere it melted and light returned,
The very benches for warmth we burned!
Nor is there want, in our busy hive,
Of children keeping the house alive:
For she has seven, and I have nine;
But three of hers and the first of mine
Are safe with Jesus, – more happy they!
Two more have married and gone away.
My son's young wife, with her infant small,
Make up the household – fourteen in all."

"In this," he said, "there is much to praise:
In humble service you pass your days,
And spend your life for your children's needs.
But tell me now of the pious deeds
(For such there are) that you seek to hide,
To me in a vision signified!"

"But, sir, we are just two poor old wives.
Who never have done in all our lives
A pious deed that was worth the name!"
She said; and her white head drooped with shame.

Then said the other: "And yet, 't is true,
We help in all that our husbands do.
When twice a year they have killed a sheep,
'T is only half for ourselves we keep;
Our poorer neighbours have all the rest.
And this, I fear, is the very best

We ever do!" "And," said he, "'t is well!
But think – is there nothing more to tell?"

They both were silent a little space,
And each one questioned the other's face,
Till, doubtful, when she had thought awhile,
The elder said, with a modest smile:
"This summer have forty years gone by,
Since she – my sister-in-law – and I
Together came in this house to dwell;
And, Father, it is not much to tell,
But in all these years, from first to last,
No angry word has between us passed,
Nor even a look that was less than kind.
And that is all I can call to mind."

Enough it was for the hermit's need!
He rose, like one from a burden freed.
"Thank God!" he said; "if indeed He sees
My soul as worthy and white as these!
And great the mercy He doth bestow,
That I should His hidden servants know!"

A sudden flash, as of heavenly light,
Then shone within him, and all was bright;
And in a moment were things made clear
Had vexed him many a weary year!
For he, who had thought on earth to view
God's people only a scattered few,

Saw now, in spirit, an army great
Of hidden servants who on Him wait.
No saintly legends their names disclose,
And no man living their number knows,
Nor can their service and place declare.
The hidden servants are everywhere!
And some are hated, despised, alone;
And some to even themselves unknown.
But the Father's house has room for all,
And never one from His hand can fall!
The one brave deed of a desperate man,
Grown hard in crime since his youth began,
Who yet, for a helpless woman's sake,
Had strength to rise, and his chain to break;
The holy sweetness that fills the heart
Of him who dwells from the world apart,
His life one dream of celestial things,
Till almost heaven to earth he brings;
Or yet the humble, unnoticed life
Of toiling mother and patient wife,
Who, year on year, has had grace to bear
Her changeless burden of daily care, —
Are all accepted with equal love,
And laid with treasures that wait above
Until the day when we all believe
That every man shall his deeds receive.

And when, that evening, with weary feet
The hermit stood by his lone retreat,

And watched awhile, with a tranquil gaze,
The mountains soft in the sunset haze,
And sleeping forest, and field below,
He said, as he saw the star-like glow
Of lights in the cottage windows far,
"How many God's hidden servants are!"

The Bag of Sand

THE BAG OF SAND was written by St. Heradius, who visited, some time in the fifth century, the hermit fathers of the desert and mountains, and collected many interesting stories about them.

The Bag of Sand

In that land of desolation
Where, mid dangers manifold,
Lost in heavenly contemplation,
Desert fathers dwelt of old,

Lay a field where grass was growing
Green beneath the palm-trees' shade;
And a spring, forever flowing,
Life amid the stillness made.

There a brotherhood, incited
By one hope and purpose high,
Came to dwell in faith united,
Pray and labour, live and die.

Mighty was the love that bound them.

Each to each, in that wild land,
Where the desert closed around them,
One dead waste of rocks and sand,

Saving where, to rest their eyes on,
While they dreamed of hills divine,
Blue, above the low horizon,
Stretched the mountains' wavy line.

There could nought of earth remind them,
Nor disturb their dreams and prayers;
They had left the world behind them,
Felt no more its joys and cares.

Far from all its weary bustle,
Will subdued, and mind at ease.
They could hear the palm-trees rustle
In the early morning breeze.

When the bell, to prayer inviting.
From the low-built belfry rang,
They could hear the birds uniting
With them while the psalms they sang.

From the earth their labour brought them
All they needed – scanty fare.
Life of toil and hardship taught them,
Though at peace, the cross to bear.

This is all their record: never
Can we hope the rest to know!
Names and deeds are lost forever,
In the mist of long ago;

And of all that life angelic
Neither shadow left, nor trace.
Save this tale, – a precious relic,
In its wise and saintly grace!

This, above the darkness lifted
By the truth that in it lay,
On the sea of time has drifted,
And is still our own to-day.

Listen to it, it may teach us
Wisdom, with its words of gold!
Let this far-off blessing reach us
From the desert saints of old.

Underneath the vines they tended
Where the garden air was sweet,
Where the shadows, softly blended,
Made an ever cool retreat, —

These good brethren had assembled,
On their abbot to attend;
All were sad, and many trembled,

Thinking how the day would end.

Of their little congregation
One who long had faithful been,
Had, beneath a sore temptation,
Fallen into grievous sin.

What it was they have not told us,
But we know, whatever the blame,
If God's hand should cease to hold us,
You or I might do the same.

And for judgment's wise completing
(Now the crime was certified),
All were called in solemn meeting
On the sentence to decide.

Much in doubt, they craved assistance,
Sent to convents far away,
Even to that fair blue distance
Where their eyes had loved to stray.

Fathers learnèd, fathers saintly,
Abbots used to think and rule,
Gathered where the brook sang faintly
In the shadow, green and cool.

Oh the beauty that was wasted
On that day, remembered oft!

Oh the sweetness, all untasted,
Of the morning, still and soft!

At their feet the water glistened,
Birds were nesting overhead;
No one saw, and no one listened
Save to what the speakers said.

Long and sad was their debating,
Voices low and faces grave,
While, the gloomy tale relating,
Each in turn his judgment gave.

"Send him from you!" one was saying
Calmly, as of reason sure;
"All are tainted by his staying,
Let men know your hands are pure!

"For the shame and sorrow brought you,
Let him be to all as dead!
Harm sufficient has he wrought you!"
But the abbot shook his head.

For the sin which had undone him,
For much evil brought about,
He would lay a burden on him,
But he could not cast him out!

All night long the distant howling,

While he waked, of beasts of prey,
Made him think of demons prowling,
Come to snatch that soul away.

Said another: "I would rather
That his shame by all were seen.
Do not spare him, O my Father;
Let the blow be swift and keen!

"Let not justice be evaded!
Keep him, bound to labour hard,
With you, but apart degraded,
And from speech with all debarred!"

This the abbot not refusing,
Only wondered, while he thought,
Was there no one feared the losing
Of a soul the Lord had bought?

One, more thoughtless, recommended
That in prison closely pent
He should stay till life was ended!
But to this would none consent.

In the cell where first they closed him,
Shrinking back, as best he might,
From a window that exposed him
Sometimes to a passer's sight,

He, the black offender, waited,
From them parted since his fall:
Once beloved, now scorned and hated
By himself, he thought by all!

Nothing asking, nothing pleading,
Speechless, tearless, in despair;
But, like one in pain exceeding,
Moving ever here and there.

Little did his fate alarm him:
What had he to fear or shun?
What could others do to harm him
More than he himself had done?

But without were minds divided,
And the morning wore away;
Noon had come, and undecided
Still the heavy question lay.

Though they looked so stern and fearless,
Some with sinking hearts had come, —
Hearts that wept when eyes were tearless,
Pleaded when the lips were dumb.

One who had that morning seen him,
Seeking from their gaze to hide,
Tried from heavy doom to screen him;
But his reasons were denied.

He of other days was thinking, —
Happy days, and still so near! —
When that brother, shamed and shrinking,
Had to all their souls been dear.

Others tried their hearts to harden,
Felt their pity to be sin;
Silent, prayed the Lord to pardon
Kinder thoughts that rose within.

Some proposed and some objected,
While, the long debate to end,
One old Father they expected,
And on him would all depend.

He – their honoured, best adviser —
Dwelt in desert cave retired;
Older than the rest, and wiser:
Many thought his words inspired;

Said he knew what passed within them
When by sin or doubt assailed;
True it is, his words could win them,
Often, when all else had failed.

He would find what all were seeking,
Justice pure, and judgment right!
Still the abbot, seldom speaking,

Pale and sober, prayed for light.

Light was sent! For, toiling slowly
O'er the sun-baked desert road,
Came that Father, wise and holy,
Bent beneath a weary load!

Scarce his failing limbs sustained him,
For the burden sorely pressed:
Many times, as though it pained him,
Would he stand to breathe and rest.

One who watched for his arriving,
Went and told them he was near.
Up they rose, and ceased their striving,
In their joy such news to hear!

Then they all went forth and met him,
By their reverent love compelled:
Nevermore could one forget him,
Who that day his face beheld!

Wasted, worn, yet strong to aid them;
Peaceful, though by conflict tried;
Shining with a light that made them
Feel the Lord was by his side!

But it grieved their souls to see him
By that burden bowed and strained!

Many stretched their hands to free him,
Wondering what the sack contained.

"Why this burden?" one addressed him;
"All unfit for arms like thine!"
He, while yet the weight oppressed him,
Answered: "These are sins of mine.

"I must bear them all, my brother,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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