

**SAINT BERNADINE
OF SIENA**

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Saint Bernadine of Siena by Paul Thureau-Dangin

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PAUL THUREAU-DANGIN

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SAINT BERNARDINE OF SIENA

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PREFACE

THE Italian Renaissance, although not yet at the zenith of its splendour, had nevertheless during the fifteenth century attained perhaps a degree of greater freshness and spontaneity, of a superior and more exquisite charm. The star of antiquity was slowly rising with a lustre hitherto unknown, piercing the clouds of medieval obscurantism, and enthraling the minds of men to the sole doctrine, which purported to have rediscovered the lost secret of æsthetic beauty, and to have paved the way for intellectual emancipation. And yet Humanism can scarcely, strictly speaking, be looked upon as a new movement in Italy, since it arose there rather as a revival of a classic past never wholly obliterated from memory and traces of which still covered the soil.

All the peculiar circumstances of the time tended to absorb the country in the pursuit of one idea. The great schemes which had engrossed Italy during the Middle Ages had ceased to occupy her attention. The long struggle between the Papacy and the Empire, in which not only universal liberty of conscience but also national independence were at stake, had been brought to a close by the defeat of the house of Hohenstaufen, when the limits of the vanquished Empire had been definitely thrown back

upon Germany. And now, by a strange coincidence, it was the turn of the victorious Papacy to cross the Alps and repair to Avignon, thereby dealing a blow at its own prestige, which was destined to suffer still further aggravation by the scandal of the Great Schism. Indeed, the Italy of that day, freed from the yoke of the emperors and practically also from that of the Pope, must have contrasted oddly enough with the former home of Guelf and Ghibelline, of a ceaseless and bloody feud. Even the passion for liberty which used to lend so varied and agitated a life to the innumerable republics of the peninsula seemed to have become extinct, as one by one the people abdicated their rights in favour of some tyrannical despot, and court conspiracy and petty intrigue were soon all that remained of the vigorous public life formerly centring on the Forum.

A more propitious moment, then, than the fifteenth century could scarcely be conceived for the outburst of that new cultus of antiquity which was to fill the void made suddenly apparent in Italian life. No longer engrossed in the formation of a league against the "barbarians," nor absorbed in the fortunes of some democratic revolt, Italy now sought to dispel the monotony of existence by riveting her attention on the choice of an architect able enough to undertake the novel and daring enterprise of raising the cupola of *Santa Maria dei Fiori*. Ghiberti, on his completion of the gates of the Baptistery, wins her unqualified applause, while rapt attention is bestowed on Æneas Sylvius' or Manecus' ponderous Latin eloquence.

And how could Poggio's discovery of a treatise of Quintilian or of a book of Tacitus produce other than a popular sensation, in a day when diplomatists were called upon to contend for governmental rights to particular manuscripts, and when we find the King of Naples stipulating for the grant of a fine Livy MS. as a condition of his peace with Florence!

Princes and republican magistrates vied with one another in paying homage alike to humanists and artists, and this not merely from personal, but from political motives. For to curry favour with the people, and console them for their loss of liberty, it was deemed necessary to embellish the towns, enrich the libraries, and afford the inhabitants the opportunity of profiting by the discourse of some famous wiseacre. This system of universal patronage had been adopted by the popes, as a means of maintaining and heightening their authority, nearly a century before Leo X, when we find them already actively in pursuit of artists willing to labour for their interest; nay, to attract humanists to their court, they occasionally went so far as to confer ecclesiastical dignities on men of very indeavour life.

Thus, on all sides we are met by the novel and unwonted spectacle of a nation devoted entirely to literary and artistic dilettantism. Holding that, together with that of beauty, the secret of happiness had been rediscovered, men turned scornfully away from what they now deemed the mournfulness of the Middle Ages, with its sombre thoughts of penance and renunciation, to a quasi-epicurean conception

of life, abandoning themselves unrestrainedly to the joy of living. Dante's "inn of sorrow" had indeed been converted into a fairy palace teeming with every sensual and intellectual delight.

Yet the reader has so far obtained but an inadequate, if a traditional, view of the brilliant *quattrocento*. And, he may ask, is this the only side to the picture? Is there naught to discover but a somewhat pagan dilettantism? We should do well to beware of those who would fain simplify so complex a matter as history, and certainly in the present instance a somewhat closer study of the period would suffice to convince us of the existence of a great and powerful ascetic revival, running counter to that other literary and artistic Renaissance, forming, in truth, a counter-movement of the kind which historians are too apt to ignore. But does not this very knowledge that we are breaking somewhat new ground add to the attraction of our task, making us the more ready to turn from a society composed of refined pleasure-seekers to that mortified band of penitents, and to testify to the extent of their fame and influence?

Curiously enough, this movement originated, not with the high dignitaries of the Church, but with the poor and humble votaries of St. Francis. It sprang up within the Franciscan Order as a revival of that heroic spirit of renunciation and ardent charity, of that simple and sublime poesy which, two centuries previously, had animated the soul of Francis of Assisi, spreading from the heights of