

**THE HIDDEN SERVANTS
AND OTHER VERY OLD
STORIES**

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The hidden servants and other very old stories by Francesca Alexander

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FRANCESCA ALEXANDER

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THE HIDDEN SERVANTS

and OTHER VERY OLD
STORIES · *Told Over*

Again by FRANCESCA ALEXANDER

AUTHOR OF "THE STORY OF IDA,"
"ROADSIDE SONGS OF TUSCANY," Etc.



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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

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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

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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

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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