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 Walter W. Seton
 Excerpt
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BLESSED GILES OF ASSISI.

CHAPTER I.

THE CALL TO POVERTY.

“ Ille homo, beatus Franciscus, nunquam deberet nominari, quin homo prae gaudio lamberet labia sua; tantum modo sibi defuit unum, scilicet corporis fortitudo; si enim habuisset tale corpus, quale ego habeo, scilicet ita robustum, proculdubio totus mundus eum sequi minime potuisset.”—ÆGIDIUS.

“ TELL the Perugians that the bells shall never ring for my canonisation, nor for any great miracles wrought by me.” And yet, after the lapse of more than six centuries, it appears probable that these, the last recorded words of the humble Giles of Assisi, may be disproved, and he may be the first of the original disciples of Saint Francis of Assisi to receive the full honours of canonisation. From among the little group of simple-minded, single-hearted men who at the dawn of the thirteenth century were the first to receive the message of evangelical perfection and to cluster around St. Francis, it is almost invidious to point to any one as the most fascinating and attractive of those Knights of his Round Table, as the Saint himself called them. The “Little Flowers of St. Francis,” now fortunately so well known to modern readers, has endeared them one and all to us: and each of them, Leo, Bernard, Juniper, Giles, has his own place in our affections. But Blessed Giles of Assisi might, if he had not been the humblest and most retiring of men, have claimed a place second to none among the apostolic founders of the movement, which stirred the dry bones of Western Christendom in the thirteenth century.

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Blessed Giles of Assisi has hitherto been known in this country in two ways: by the chapters included in most editions of the "Little Flowers," which give episodes in his life which are very beautiful, but not perhaps all of unquestionable authenticity; and by his "Golden Sayings," which have been admirably translated into English and edited by Father Paschal Robinson, O.F.M. This work is a completely satisfactory edition of the "Golden Sayings," and those who are primarily interested in Blessed Giles on account of his ascetic philosophy and of the contribution which he made to the religious philosophy and to the literature of the Middle Ages may not need to go further afield. But others, to whom the human document is of even greater fascination, will want to know Blessed Giles himself. As far as the present writer is aware, there is as yet no critical version of the Life of Blessed Giles published in this country, nor any translation of his life into English. To combine as far as is practicable the critical and the popular—never an easy task—is the object of this work.

The impulse to study and then to write about Blessed Giles came from the chance consultation of the catalogue of the *Canonici Manuscripts* in the Bodleian Library, the finding of a hitherto unknown copy of the life in *Cod. Misc. 528*, and the investigation of that MS., which has formed the basis of this edition. It is impossible to make a careful study of the manuscript sources of the Life of Blessed Giles without becoming immersed in the many complex problems which are interwoven with one another in early Franciscan literature. To a number of these it will be necessary to allude: but it would be going far beyond the scope of this work to attempt to solve some of these problems, for the complete settlement of which we still are and perhaps always shall be without sufficient material. The primary aim will be to get at the most primitive version of the Life, to discuss the position of Brother Leo as its author, and to make the personality of Giles real and living to British readers. Giles first appears in the Franciscan story about two years after St. Francis himself had

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made the great surrender, and, deliberately choosing a life of poverty, had embarked upon that venture of faith which was to earn for him first the ridicule and contempt of his relatives and friends in Assisi, then the affectionate regard and esteem of the dwellers in the towns and villages of the Umbrian plain, and now the devotion of the Faithful throughout the world. "The day will come," said the young Francis when in prison bonds in Perugia in 1202, "when the world will fall down and pray to me."¹ The words have come true, but nothing seemed more unlikely at the time when Giles, hearing from his friends and kinsmen of the eccentric and fanatical son of the merchant Peter Bernardone, and of his two disciples, Bernard of Quintavalle and Peter Cathanius, resolved to throw in his lot with them. The chronicles are silent concerning the earlier life of Giles: we do not know whether he was younger than Francis or older, but we get some impression of him from Thomas of Celano's description:² "a simple, upright, God-fearing man, who for a long time, perfect in obedience, lived a holy and devout life, by the labour of his hands, giving us an example of solitary life and of holy contemplation".

On 23rd April, the day of England's Patron Saint, St. George, Giles took his resolve to leave the world and seek out St. Francis and his two disciples. It is not easy to determine the year in which his conversion and that of Bernard and Peter took place. It is equally difficult to determine the year of his death: and the two events must be calculated, the one in relation to the other.

Some MSS. of the life contain no dates: others contain dates which cannot be taken without reserve. The version which we believe to be the most primitive at present known, contains no date either of his conversion or of his death: the longer version gives in most MSS. the date 1209 for his conversion and 1262 for his death.

This, however, is clear from the early narratives of the foundation of the Order, that the call of the first disciples

¹"Adhuc sanctus adorabor per seculum totum," II Cel. i. 4.

²I Cel. x. 25.

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was about a year before the journey of St. Francis and his followers to Rome for the approval of their primitive Rule by the Pope. There has been much controversy as to the year to which the approval of the First Rule should be assigned. It was either 1209 or 1210: and if that is so, the conversion of Giles took place either in 1208 or 1209. A strong argument for the later date, 1209, is reached in a somewhat indirect way. All the versions agree in recording that Giles died on the Vigil of the Feast of St. George, at the hour of the early morning office: in other words, early on 23rd April. Now his death occurred either in 1261 or 1262. The MSS. which contain a date say 1262. The year 1261 is extremely improbable, because in 1261 Easter Sunday fell on 24th April: that being so, the 23rd April, being Easter Eve, would certainly not have been observed that year as the Feast of St. George, and if Giles had died on 23rd April, 1261, it seems certain that reference would have been made to that date as Easter Eve. On this basis, admittedly not very conclusive, it appears best to accept the statement of the best MSS. of the Chronicle of XXIV Generals—that Giles died on St. George's Day, 23rd April, 1262. The same MSS. say that he died in the fifty-second year from his conversion, while the MSS. of the Short Life¹ (including the one here edited) speak of his death as occurring "when fifty-two years had been completed".² It would thus appear that the conversion of Giles could not have taken place earlier than in 1209.

A confirmation of this date is found in the fact that all the MSS. agree in referring to the death of St. Francis (4th Oct., 1226) as having taken place in the eighteenth year of Giles' conversion, that is seventeen years before April, 1226: which again brings us to 1209.³

Rising early on the morning of St. George's Day, Giles

¹ For explanation of the terms Short Life and Long Life, see p. 28.

² It is not very apparent on what authority Father Paschal Robinson states that Giles lived fifty-three years in the Order. "Golden Sayings," p. xl.

³ In the narrative which follows the conclusions reached on certain critical questions discussed in detail in later chapters are assumed.

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betook himself first of all to the Church of St. George, now part of Santa Chiara ; and, having heard Mass, he set out to find St. Francis.

Leaving Assisi by the East Gate, now known as the Porta Nuova, he made his way past San Damiano to the leper settlement of Rivo Torto, which stood on the main road running from Perugia through Spello to Foligno. It was at the cross-roads, where the track from San Damiano joined the main road, that Giles prayed for guidance in his search for the Portiuncula and for St. Francis. The Portiuncula, or as it was then called Sancta Maria, lay surrounded by woods a little off the highway in the direction of Perugia. Giles soon found his prayer answered, for at that very moment Francis himself, making his way to the wood for prayer, came to meet him. Giles fell down at his feet and begged to be allowed to join his company. The answer of Francis to his appeal shows his burning conviction of the dignity of the life to which he had himself been called and to which he was to call others. "A great gift it is, dearest brother, which the Lord hath given thee. If the Emperor were to come to Assisi and choose one from the city to be his knight or his chamberlain, many would there be who would fain be chosen. How much greater a gift oughtest thou to count it, that God hath chosen thee and called thee to His court!" And with these words he raised Giles and took him to the little church hidden in the woods, and, calling Brother Bernard, said, "The Lord hath sent us a good brother". Thus did Giles cast in his lot with the little poor man of Assisi and join himself to a movement which was destined to purge, even to save, the Church.

There was no delay in giving Giles the outward and visible sign of his new vocation, the plain habit of coarse brown cloth which has persisted for seven centuries as the distinctive garb of those of the Order who have most closely followed their Founder. Leaving their humble dwelling in the woods at Sancta Maria, Francis and Giles set out for Assisi, doubtless following the long dusty road which still leads from the Portiuncula up to the gate now known as

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Porta San Pietro, though it is likely that at that time the lower part of the road was nothing but a track in the woods. That afternoon walk was to be the first test of the new disciple's resolve. A poor woman accosted Francis and begged an alms for the love of Christ, an appeal which Francis never could resist. Giles, who was of course still in his worldly attire, rose to the occasion. Scarcely had his master bidden him divide his mantle and give the poor woman a share, than he hastily removed his garment and gave her not half but the whole. Immediately Giles was filled with the keenest joy: by this outward act of renunciation he had won his spurs as a Knight of the Round Table.

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CHAPTER II.

THE MISSIONARY JOURNEYS.

“Quis magis meretur vadens ad sanctum Jacobum vel ad sanctum Jacobum ostendens viam ?”—ÆGIDIUS.

THE first year of Giles' life as a Friar was spent in close association with St. Francis. It is difficult to know whether to accept the account given by the compiler of the Long Life and based upon the “Legend of the Three Companions,” how immediately after the reception of Giles, Francis and his new follower set off on a tour in the March of Ancona. The critical aspects of the matter are discussed later. It seems probable that there were tours during the time following the reception of Giles and while the number of Friars was still but four; not exactly for public preaching, but for private hand-to-hand work with individuals.¹ One of these may well have been the occasion when Francis and Giles went on foot to the March of Ancona. But wherever the incident is placed in that first year, it is one of the most beautiful and characteristic episodes of early Franciscan days. Francis, who, as the “Mirror of Perfection” tells us, used the French tongue when carried away with the exuberance of his feelings, went along singing aloud in French and praising God. Turning to his wondering companion he said: “Our Order will be like a fisherman, who casts his nets into the waters, catching a great multitude of fishes: the big ones he chooses out, but the small he leaves in the water.” Such optimism was a test of the new disciple, seeing that at that time the Order numbered

¹ Anal. Franc., Tom. iii. p. 76. “*Licet autem Sanctus adhuc populo non plene prædicaret.*”

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but four : but, recognising instinctively the spiritual genius of the man whom he was following, he wondered but believed and exhorted others to do the same. And so they returned to the Portiuncula and rejoined Bernard and Peter.

Months passed, during which the band of followers was raised first to six by the reception of Sabbatino, Morico, and John of Capella, and a little later to seven when Philip the Long joined them. It was then that the first regular preaching mission of the whole band was undertaken. St. Francis called them together and exhorted them to go out two and two into the great world which lay outside Umbria, bidding them lead men to repentance by their lives rather than by precept. His unconquerable spiritual optimism and his never-failing confidence in his mission were infectious and irresistible. And thus they went out, as he bade them ; and whenever they came to a Church or to a wayside Calvary, they bowed themselves, devoutly saying : “We adore Thee, O Christ, and bless Thy Name for all the churches which are in all the world, because by Thy holy Cross Thou hast redeemed the world”.

This time Bernard of Quintavalle was the companion of Giles, and their goal was the shrine of St. James at Compostella, a renowned place of pilgrimage. Probably it was the late autumn when they set out on their journey and the year was that of Giles' conversion, either 1208 or 1209. We learn very little as to this journey in either of the lives of B. Giles : except that it was a time of intense hardship, when they suffered hunger, cold, thirst, and persecution. But love of his fellow-men carried Giles through these experiences : meeting a poor man he wanted to give him his garment, but as he had only his one tunic, he could merely take off the hood and give it to him : and this he did, going himself for twenty-one days without a hood.

The “Legend of the Three Companions ” helps to fill in the details of this pilgrimage. For though the name of Giles is not mentioned in those paragraphs, it is clear that the account relates to Bernard's tour with Giles. At any rate they reached

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Florence and could find no one to give them shelter. One night they spent in the porch of a house, for the lady of the house mistrusting them and their errand, would not allow them to come inside. Next morning, after a night spent in the intense cold of a Northern Italian winter, Bernard and Giles betook themselves to Church to hear Mass: and the mistress of the house went to the same Church. While at Church the brothers were offered an alms by one Guido, but Bernard refused to receive it, explaining that they had given up all for the love of God. The lady, wondering at their refusal of the proffered alms and discovering how she had misjudged them, took Bernard and Giles into her house and entertained them hospitably for some days. One other incident is recorded concerning this pilgrimage. At Ficarollo, a small place on the Po between Mantua and Ferrara in the plain of Lombardy, a man called to Giles, who went to him expecting to receive an alms from him: but the man mocked him instead, by placing dice in his hand and inviting him to play. "The Lord forgive thee" was the reply of the humble, self-restraining Giles.

The records do not make it clear whether it was at the end of an agreed period or as a result of a divine interposition that the eight returned to Sancta Maria at the same time, but it would seem to have been early in 1210: the pilgrimage had occupied the winter of 1209-1210. Fr. Paschal Robinson and the Editors of the "Chronicle of XXIV. Generals" assign this visit to St. James at Compostella to the year 1212, i.e. after the journey to Rome for the approbation of the Rule: but this is difficult to maintain against the evidence of Thomas of Celano and of "The Three Companions": especially the latter, which in dealing with the conditions of that time definitely states that "their band was not yet called an Order".¹

Both versions of the Life of B. Giles are silent as to the next great event in his career—the visit along with Francis and the ten other disciples to Rome: but there can be no doubt that he was then with them. The consensus of critical opinion

¹ "Three Comp." x.: "nondum enim Ordo eorum dicebatur Religio".

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assigns the visit to Rome to the summer of 1210. It is scarcely necessary to describe it in detail, both because Giles himself is not even mentioned in the whole story and because the visit to Rome is one of the episodes most familiar to all who care for the narrative of the early days of the Franciscan Order. It was the occasion of the meeting of two of the greatest but most widely different personalities of the thirteenth century—Innocent III and Francis. Suffice it to say that the earnestness, piety, simplicity, and utter conviction of his calling shown by Francis overcame the caution and statesmanship of one of the greatest men who has ever occupied the Papal throne and who, beneath his exalted rank as a spiritual and temporal potentate, was a lover of true religion and ardently anxious for the reform of the Church. Innocent and Francis understood each other: and Francis left Rome with the Papal approbation of his Primitive Rule and with the Papal authority to preach repentance. Before they left on their homeward journey, Giles, along with St. Francis and the other ten, received the small tonsure as authority to preach the word.

Leaving Rome, St. Francis with his little band, including Giles, made his way back by slow stages to Assisi, where he appears to have taken up his abode at or close to the leper settlement of Rivo Torto.

Some obscurity rests over the events of the next few years in the life of B. Giles. It is difficult to fix the order in which he undertook some more distant journeyings. The records agree in telling us that he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and also that he visited the well-known shrines of St. Michael the Archangel at Gargano and St. Nicholas at Bari. On the whole it seems likely that it was either on his way to the Holy Land or on his return journey that he visited the two shrines in Apulia. The Short Life, which for reasons to be discussed later may be regarded as the more primitive and authoritative, speaks of his visit to the two shrines first and of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem second; the order is reversed in the Long Life. There can, however, be no doubt that Giles did visit the Holy Land and make his way to the Holy