

THE REJOICING DESERT

BLESSED Albertus Magnus was one of those unfortunate saints who get covered up with odd stories like an old castle with ivy. The castle is as solid as the rock on which it is built, but what with the thickness of the ivy and the chattering of the jackdaws that live in it, you hardly get a chance of seeing it or speaking about it sensibly, and it runs the risk of getting forgotten altogether. There was an amazing quantity of such overgrowth and bickering about Blessed Albertus, even in his own lifetime. People even said he was a wizard. As if a Blessed could be a wizard! They painted a white horse on the side of a tower in the market-place of his native town and said that as a little boy Albert, and Albert alone, could lead that horse about. They made out that he had a magic cup in which he had but to pour wine or water and the sick man who sipped it was cured. They pretended that beside his own cell, in the Convent of Cologne, he had a little room hidden away and full of strange animals and fantastic instruments and uncanny vessels of glass. They said there was a scarlet curtain in one corner of it behind which stood a Talking Figure which could say "Salve! Salve! Salve!" and had taken Blessed Albertus thirty years to make. They boasted that the Four Crowned Martyrs, the patron saints of masons, had traced him out the plans of Cologne Cathedral—though all the world knows that it was Gerard of Riel, who travelled in France first and worked in a timber-yard afterwards—to whom the plans of Cologne Cathedral are owing. Finally they told the story of the Magic Garden. And this is every bit as true, and no more so, as the story of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal which begins: "The trees went forth to anoint themselves a king." That story—which you

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will find in the ninth chapter of the Book of Judges—is what Origen calls an enigma. It is true underneath ; but it could not possibly have been true on top, though it is told as if it had been. And it is to help you to find the key to this enigma of mine that I have called it “The Rejoicing Desert,” instead of, quite simply, “The Garden of Blessed Albertus.”

In the year twelve hundred and forty-nine, just after Christmas, young William the Emperor arrived at Cologne, with a great train, to venerate the relics of the Three Kings and lay on their shrine an offering towards the new cathedral. For the old Roman church which held the bodies of the Magi had been partly burnt the year before, and all Christendom was concerned that the new one should be finer than the old. Everyone loved the Three Kings of Cologne : Kings because they were Kings ; and Sages because they were Sages ; and ordinary folk because they were the first people outside Jewry to find the King of kings in His stable. It was only befitting then that their bodies should be surrounded by gold and myrrh and frankincense in a fine cathedral till the Last Day, seeing that they had brought gold and myrrh and frankincense to the unknown Baby of Bethlehem.

Well, the Emperor heard his Mass in the half-burnt Cathedral ; and when they asked him what he would like to do afterwards, he said he had thought of calling on Blessed Albertus in his cell in the Stolkstrasse. Hither he accordingly turned—it was only a step from the Cathedral—with his knights and his nobles and his pages in attendance, and they all jangled up the stairs and knocked at the friar’s door. Blessed Albertus opened it at once, and the Emperor saluted him courteously ; and with some trepidation—for it is a fearful thing to tamper with the powers of darkness—hinted that they had come to see a sample of his magic. Blessed Albertus put aside the suggestion in the most

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deferential and tactful manner ; and proposed a gentle saunter in the Convent grounds, as the best way of passing the half-hour between then and dinner-time.

Well, you can imagine what the sixth of January was likely to be like in north Germany ! The Emperor looked over the friar's shoulder at the little oblong of freezing sky outside the cell-window and hesitated ; the nobles in the passage (who were out of sight, but could hear all that was going on inside) shrugged their shoulders and tapped their foreheads suggestively. A few of the less polite had the impudence to stamp on the flag-stones to show that *they* were none too warm where they were. Judge of their disgust when the Emperor's voice said cheerily, " With all my heart, Reverend Sir." And they had to flatten themselves against the walls of the corridor to let the Friar pass, with the Emperor after him ; and then close in behind and follow, as best they might, higgledy-piggledy, downstairs.

Once on the ground-floor, they traversed a freezing cloister which evidently ran round the four sides of a courtyard : though, for the matter of that, they could not see out at all, for the outside arches of the cloister were glazed and the glass was covered with frost. The hindermost nobles pulled their furred hoods over their heads ; and those who had hitherto carried them over their arms, put them on. The grandees, however, who were nearest to the Emperor had to suffer for their gentility and stay bareheaded, as was only right. All of a sudden the company stopped—Blessed Albertus was unbolting the huge iron-clamped door that led from the cloister to the quadrangle. It opened outwards : and a great blaze of scent and sunlight and the songs of birds streamed into that sepulchral place. The Friar stood back, with a grave inclination, against the door ; and the Emperor and

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his suite stepped out into the most wonderful garden that was ever seen.

Now it takes Lord Bacon to describe a garden properly. I am no hand at it at all. So you can each make up the garden for yourselves. But you must not forget a single flower you like, for you may be sure it was there. There was every sort of fruit and that "dead mellow," as my old nurse used to say; and the very butterflies were so drowsy with honey that they would have been taken for petals themselves, if they had not opened and shut their wings. Seven fountains were drizzling musically into their marble basins and rare swans and little crested ducks were steering about under the spray. But what took that company's fancy most was a fine banquet spread out in front of a grove of lemon-trees; and when Blessed Albertus had said grace (to the great reassurance of not a few of his guests) they all sat down, and pages in scarlet and camel-coloured hose (*tibialibus scarlatis camelinisque* says the chronicler) came out from behind the bushes with course after course of dainties.

What a banquet it was! There was a roasted peacock, tail and all, opposite the Emperor, and the mightiest salmon ever cooked in front of Blessed Albertus. The sound of viols and citholes and other sweet-stringed instruments mingled with the trills of the birds and the tinkling of the fountains, and the revelry of the nobles rose higher and higher as the feast proceeded. But at last the grace-cup went round and the Emperor got up to leave the table. The nobles rose simultaneously. And then, lo and behold, the whole thing went out like a candle! Flowers, butterflies, birds, fountains, pages, and banquet—all vanished. They stood in a gaunt quadrangle like two rows of children ready for "Nuts and May," with nothing whatsoever between them, or around them, but the drifting snow.

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Such is the story of the Garden of Blessed Albertus, or (as I prefer to call it) "The Rejoicing Desert"; for I think myself it is no lie, but an enigma of the Grace of God according to the saying of the Prophet Isaias: "The land that was desolate and impassible shall be glad and the desert shall rejoice and blossom like a lily." And if you tell me that it should not be "lily" but "rose," I can only answer that you are using the Authorized Version of King James and I the Vulgate of St. Jerome; and there is no sense in falling out about the blossoms as long as we both agree about the desert. For the desert, as St. Augustine says, is the solitude of a man's soul, and only the magic of sanctity can make it blossom. And the magic of sanctity is nothing but the goodwill of a mortal added to the Grace of God.

HELEN PARRY EDEN.



FEAR

Timeo Jesum Praetereuntem.

NOT when He wills to stay
And look my way,
Does fear awake within
For any sin.

Only am I afraid
When He, dismayed,
With sad averted eye
Passes me by.

EDWIN ESSEX, O.P.