## The Dream 53

Francis tossed in his bed, straining his mind, begging it to relax, asking it to sleep, coaxing his body gently, then violently, to drop off into slumber.

"Quit thinking. Please sleep, mind. I have to rest, to sleep, or I'll never recover from this madness, this despair that's clutching at me here in the dark." He got up and paced the room, his hands ruffling his tangled black hair.

"What's the matter with me? This is so crazy. How can I be afraid and upset when there is nothing to be afraid of? It's so silly. Get back into bed, Francis. Relax."

He dove onto the bed and lay face down, trying to feel exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. All night he tossed and sweated and asked himself why sleep never came easily anymore. It had been this way since his illness and the strange feeling of loneliness he'd experienced walking the hills of Assisi that first day he dared leave his sickbed and venture outside into the sun. Now his nights were filled with terror and preciously snatched moments of half-sleep.

Finally, when the first rays of morning were streaking across his bare back, Francis dozed off. And then it was he had the Dream. He was led into the great hall of a dazzling Palace, where a radiant Princess-Bride held court. The walls were covered with shields and trophies of battles won. And when he asked aloud who the Lord of the castle was, a voice sang out: "It's the high court of Francis Bernardone and his followers."

When Francis awoke, something had changed. It was not the message of the Dream that moved him so, not the announcement that he was going to be a great lord. No, it was the fact of the Dream, that it had happened, that he now had a sense of direction, something to live for. There was a certainty about his Dream, like that of a vision. Even had the Dream been of Francis losing his money and position and becoming a beggar, it would have pleased him, because then he would at least have known which way to go. A sense of goal and purpose were more important, it seemed, than what direction he was going in. Maybe it had something to do with his own worth or who he was, but most of all, it meant that he was going somewhere, anywhere. His will was no longer paralyzed, the dream had freed him from his own frozen will.

So Francis had determined to make his Dream come true, knowing that it was the setting-out that mattered. He remembered so clearly his lightness of heart as he left Assisi to join the papal armies of Walter of Brienne, the Norman captain who was winning brilliant battles in the service of Pope Innocent III. But the pattern of highs and lows in his life wasn't to be altered so easily, even by visions and dreams. He'd only been on the road a day or so when, in the city of Spoleto, he began again to hear voices in the night.

## End Dream at Spoleto

"Francis, is it better to serve the Lord or the servant?"

"Oh, sir, the Lord, of course."

"Then, why are you trying to turn your Lord into a servant?"

And Francis, trembling in recognition, replied, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

"Go home, Francis, and think about your first vision. You have seen only the appearances and not the heart of glory and fame. You are trying to make your vision fit your own impatient desire for knighthood."

And Francis, shaken and fully awake, understood now that he had taken too much into his own hands. He realized that impatience had driven him to act too quickly and that he must wait and listen and purify his heart to hear deeper words than he had imagined. He had tried to make God's will serve his own impatient desire for glory. He had not really listened.

The road back to Assisi seemed to shake beneath him. As a knightly figure returning home alone, he seemed to shout, "I am retreating," for the world to hear. But he didn't mind the quizzical looks and the scorn on the faces of the peasants who stared at him.

Somehow, that was how it should be now. He should, in fact, be walking as they were, and not sitting on a magnificent war horse.

He was returning to Assisi on the Roman Flaminian Way. The Roman legions had marched this same way, bold and confident of the power of Rome. They stopped and drank from the sacred spring of Clitunno near Foligno. They asked the water nymphs there to strengthen them in battle, to give them courage and victory.

As Francis passed that same clear pool of water, the dream of glory drained from his heart, and war and victory were empty words rattling in his brain. He felt empty. Something told him he was leaving the Roman way forever.

## End A New Birth Finds

Francis' unexpected return from Spoleto was the most terrible experience of his early life. The utter scorn of Assisi's citizens drove him into himself as nothing before had ever done. The rumor of his supposed cowardice swept through the city like a wind-fanned fire. Some suspected that two years before when he had been taken prisoner at Ponte San Giovanni, he had actually surrendered himself out of fear. Others pointed out that the long illness after his release from prison at Perugia was really guilt and remorse for what he had done.

His father, Pietro, was crestfallen. He loved Francis dearly, and he did not believe that his son was a coward, but he was hard put to explain why Francis had returned from Spoleto. His mother, Lady Pica, grieved terribly for him and longed to soothe the secret spot of his hurt, but she did not know how. And Francis himself tried desperately to explain, but he only further convinced his parents that he had not fully recovered from the strange melancholy and delusions of his illness.

Francis walked the streets of Assisi in a daze. He lived in constant guilt, wondering, as he trudged along, if his cheeks were flushed with

shame. His friends were away with the army of Walter of Brienne; and he alone, among the able young men, remained behind with women and children and older men who had long since proven themselves in battle. Yet he knew he could not return to battle, for that would only prove what everyone suspected: that he was a coward and had finally recovered his nerve.

To listen to one's own heart when others are saying something different is the hardest test of one's spirit. And Francis thought he would not survive it. He prayed as he had never prayed before, begging Jesus to tell him why He had asked him to return to Assisi. But there was no answer.

During these long, terrifying months, Francis used to go to a little cave in the hill opposite Mount Subasio and try to think out what was happening to him. He went to the cave every day until it became a home for him, the only place in which he felt comfortable. And he came to think of himself as a man acquainted with the dark holes of the earth. It was there in the womb of the mountain that he finally found peace of heart and the courage to stand upright again. It was there that he was born again.