The little flowers
of Saint Benet

by
Gregory I, Pope, ca. 540-604

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THE LITTLE FLOWERS OF SAINT BENET
GATHERED FROM THE DIALOGUES OF SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT

WITH EIGHT DRAWINGS AND OTHER DESIGNS THROUGHOUT
BY PAUL WOODROFFE
LONDON: KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH TRÜBNER & CO.
MDCCCL"
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Publisher's Note

St Benedict was born at Nursia, near Spoleto, in 480, and died on March 21, 543. His biography, as here printed, is taken from the second of the four books of "The Dialogues of S. Gregorie, surnamed the Great, Pope of Rome, and the first of that name. Translated into our English tongue, by P. W. Printed at Paris, 1608." The translator, P. W., has not been identified, though his version was twice reprinted during the last century. The present text follows that of the 1608 Edition, with which it has been collated, except in its spelling and the correction of one or two misprints.
Little Flowers of St Benet

Introduction

There was a man of venerable life, blessed by grace, and blessed in name—for he was called Benedictus, or Benet—who, from his younger years, carried always the mind of an old man; for his age was inferior to his virtue. All vain pleasure he contemned; and though he were in the world, and might freely have enjoyed such commodities as it yieldeth, yet did he nothing esteem it, nor the vanities thereof. He was born in the province of Nursia, of honourable parentage, and brought up at Rome in the study of Humanity.

But, forasmuch as he saw many by reason of such learning to fall to dissolute and lewd life, he drew back his foot, which he had, as it were, now set
forth into the world, lest entering too far into acquaintance therewith, he likewise might have fallen into that dangerous and godless gulf. Wherefore, giving over his books and forsaking his father's house and wealth, with a resolute mind only to serve God, he sought for some place where he might attain to the desire of his holy purpose: and in this sort he departed, instructed with learned ignorance, and furnished with unlearned wisdom. All the notable things and acts of his life I could not learn; but those few which I mind now to report, I had by the relation of four of his disciples, to wit, of Constantinus, a most rare and reverend man, who was next abbot after him; of Valentinianus, who many years had the charge of the Lateran Abbey; of Simplicius, who was the third General of his Order; and lastly, of Honoratus, who is now abbot of that monastery in which he first began his holy life.
Chapter I

How he made a broken sieve whole and sound

Benet, having now given over the school, with a resolute mind to lead his life in the wilderness, his nurse alone, which did tenderly love him, would not by any means give him over. Coming, therefore, to a place called Enside, and remaining there in the Church of St Peter in the company of other virtuous men, which for charity lived in that place, it fell so out that his nurse borrowed of the neighbours a sieve to make clean wheat, which, being left negligently upon the table, by chance it was broken in two pieces; whereupon she fell pitifully aweeping, because she had borrowed it. The devout and religious youth Benet, seeing his nurse so lamenting, moved with compassion, took away
with him both the pieces of the sieve, and with tears fell to his prayers; and after he had done, rising up, he found it so whole that the place could not be seen where before it was broken; and coming straight to his nurse, and comforting her with good words, he delivered her the sieve safe and sound; which miracle was known to all the inhabitants thereabouts, and so much admired that the townsmen, for a perpetual memory, did hang it up at the Church door, to the end that not only men then living, but also their posterity, might understand how greatly God's grace did work with him upon his first renouncing of the world. The sieve continued there many years after, even to these very troubles of the Lombards, where it did hang over the Church door.

But Benet, desiring rather the miseries of the world than the praises of men, rather to be wearied with labour for God's sake than to be exalted with transitory commendation, fled privily from his nurse, and went into a desert place, called Subiaco,
of St Benet

distant almost forty miles from Rome, in which there was a fountain springing forth cool and clear water, the abundance whereof doth first in a broad place make a lake, and afterwards, running forward, cometh to be a river. As he was travelling to this place, a certain monk, called Romanus, met him, and demanded whither he went; and, understanding his purpose, he both kept it close, furthered him what he might, vested him with the habit of holy conversation, and, as he could, did minister and serve him.

The man of God, Benet, coming to this aforesaid place, lived there in a strait cave, where he continued three years, unknown to all men except to Romanus, who lived not far off, under the rule of Abbot Adeodatus, and very virtuously did steal certain hours, and likewise sometimes a loaf given for his own provision, which he did carry to Benet. And because from Romanus' cell to that cave there was not any way, by reason of an high rock which did hang over it, Romanus, from the top thereof
upon a long rope, did let down the loaf, upon which also with a band he tied a little bell, that by the ringing thereof the man of God might know when he came with his bread, and so be ready to take it; but the old enemy of mankind, envying at the charity of the one and the refection of the other, seeing a loaf upon a certain day let down, threw a stone, and brake the bell; but yet, for all that, Romanus gave not over to serve him by all the possible means he could.

At length, when Almighty God was determined to ease Romanus of his pains, and to have Benet's life for an example known to the world, that such a candle, set upon a candlestick, might shine and give light to the Church of God, our Lord vouchsafed to appear unto a certain priest dwelling a good way off, who had made ready his dinner for Easter Day, and spake thus unto him: "Thou hast provided good cheer for "thyselv, and My servant in such a place is "afflicted with hunger;" who, hearing this, forthwith rose up, and upon Easter Day
of St Benet

itself, with such meat as he had prepared, went to the place, where he sought for the man of God amongst the steep hills, the low valleys, and hollow pits, and at length found him in his cave, where, after they had prayed together, and sitting down, had given God thanks, and had much spiritual talk, then the priest said unto him: "Rise "up, brother, and let us dine, because to-day "is the feast of Easter." To whom the man of God answered, and said: "I know that "it is Easter with me, and a great feast, "having found so much favour at God's "hands as this day to enjoy your company" (for by reason of his long absence from men, he knew not that it was the great solemnity of Easter); but the reverend priest again did assure him, saying: "Verily, to- "day is the feast of our Lord's Resurrec- "tion; and therefore meet it is not that "you should keep abstinence; and besides, "I am sent to that end that we might eat "together of such provisions as God's good- "ness hath sent us." Whereupon they said grace and fell to their meat; and after they
had dined, and bestowed some time in talking, the priest returned to his Church.

About the same time, likewise, certain shepherds found him in that same cave: and at the first, when they espied him through the bushes, and saw his apparel made of skins, they verily thought that it had been some beast: but after they were acquainted with the servant of God, many of them were, by his means, converted from their beastly life to grace, piety, and devotion. And thus his name in the country thereabout became famous, and many, after this, went to visit him, and for corporal meat, which they brought him, they carried away spiritual food for their souls.
Chapter II

How he overcame a great Temptation of the Flesh

Upon a certain day, being alone, the tempter was at hand: for a little black bird, commonly called a merle, or an ousel, began to fly about his face, and that so near as the holy man, if he would, might have taken it with his hand: but after he had blessed himself with the sign of the cross the bird flew away: and forthwith the holy man was assaulted with such a terrible temptation of the flesh as he never felt the like in all his life.

A certain woman there was, which some time he had seen, the memory of which the wicked spirit put into his mind, and by the representation of her did so mightily inflame with concupiscence the soul of God's servant, which did so increase, that
almost overcome with pleasure he was of mind to have forsaken the wilderness. But, suddenly assisted with God's grace, he came to himself; and seeing many thick briers and nettle-bushes to grow hard by, off he cast his apparel, and threw himself into the midst of them, and there wallowed so long, that when he rose up all his flesh was pitifully torn: and so by the wounds of his body he cured the wound of his soul, in that he turned pleasure into pain, and by the outward burning of extreme smart, quenched that fire which, being nourished before with the fuel of carnal cogitations, did inwardly burn in his soul: and by this means he overcame the sin because he made a change of the fire. From which time forward, as himself did afterward report unto his disciples, he found all temptation of pleasure so subdued, that he never felt any such thing.

Many after this began to abandon the world, and to become his scholars. For being now freed from the malady of temptation, worthily and with great reason is
he made a master of virtue: for which cause, in Exodus, commandment is given by Moses, that the Levites from five-and-twenty years and upward should serve, but after they came to fifty that they should be ordained keepers of the holy vessels.

Peter.—Somewhat I understand of all this testimony alleged: but yet I beseech you to tell me the meaning thereof more fully.

Gregory.—It is plain, Peter, that in youth the temptation of the flesh is hot: but after fifty years the heat of the body waxeth cold, and the souls of faithful people become holy vessels. Wherefore necessary it is that God's elect servants, whilst they are yet in the heat of temptation, should live in obedience, serve, and be wearied with labour and pains. But when, by reason of age, the heat of temptation is past, they become keepers of holy vessels; because they then are made the doctors of men's souls.

Peter.—I cannot deny but that your
words have given me full satisfaction: wherefore, seeing you have now explained the meaning of the former text alleged, prosecute, I pray, as you have begun, the rest of the holy man's life.
Chapter III

How Benet, by the sign of the holy Cross, brake a drinking-glass in pieces

GREGORY.—When this great temptation was thus overcome, the man of God, like unto a piece of ground well tilled and weeded, of the seed of virtue brought forth plentiful store of fruit: and by reason of the great report of his wonderful holy life, his name became very famous. Not far from the place where he remained there was a monastery, the Abbot whereof was dead: whereupon the whole Convent came unto the venerable man, Benet, entreatimg him very earnestly that he would vouchsafe to take upon him the charge and government of their Abbey: long time he denied them, saying that their manners
were diverse from his, and therefore that they should never agree together; yet at length, overcome with their entreaty, he gave his consent. Having now taken upon him the charge of the Abbey, he took order that regular life should be observed, so that none of them could, as before they used, through unlawful acts decline from the path of holy conversation, either on the one side or on the other: which the monks perceiving, they fell into a great rage, accusing themselves that ever they desired him to be their abbot, seeing their crooked conditions could not endure his virtuous kind of government: and therefore when they saw that under him they could not live in unlawful sort, and were loath to leave their former conversation, and found it hard to be enforced with old minds to meditate and think upon new things, and because the life of virtuous men is always grievous to those that be of wicked conditions, some of them began to devise how they might rid him out of the way: and therefore, taking counsel
together, they agreed to poison his wine: which being done, and the glass wherein that wine was, according to the custom, offered to the Abbot to bless, he, putting forth his hand, made the sign of the cross, and straightway the glass, that was holden far off, brake in pieces, as though the sign of the cross had been a stone thrown against it: upon which accident the man of God by-and-by perceived that the glass had in it the drink of death, which could not endure the sign of life: and therefore rising up, with a mild countenance and quiet mind he called the monks together, and spake thus unto them: "Almighty "God have mercy upon you, and forgive "you: why have you used me in this "manner? Did not I tell you beforehand, "that our manner of living could never "agree together? Go your ways, and seek "ye out some other Father suitable to your "own conditions, for I intend not now to "stay any longer amongst you."

When he had thus discharged himself, he returned back to the wilderness which
he so much loved, and dwelt alone with himself, in the sight of his Creator, Who beholdeth the hearts of all men.

PETER.—I understand not very well what you mean, when you say that he dwelt with himself.

GREGORY.—If the holy man had longer, contrary to his own mind, continued his government over those monks, who had all conspired against him, and were far unlike to him in life and conversation, perhaps he should have diminished his own devotion, and somewhat withdrawn the eyes of his soul from the light of contemplation; and being weary daily with correcting of their faults, he should have had the less care of himself, and so haply it might have fallen out that he should both have lost himself, and yet not found them: for so often as by infectious motion we are carried too far from ourselves, we remain the same men that we were before, and yet be not with ourselves as we were before: because we are wandering about other men's affairs, little considering and looking into the
state of our own soul. For shall we say that he was with himself, who went into a far country, and after he had, as we read in the Gospel,\(^1\) prodigally spent that portion which he received of his father, was glad to serve a citizen, to keep his hogs, and would willingly have filled his hungry belly with the husks which they did eat? who notwithstanding, afterward when he thought with himself of those goods which he had lost, it is written of him, that returning into himself, he said: "How many hired "men in my father's house do abound with "bread!" If, then, before he were with himself, from whence did he return home unto himself? and therefore I said that this venerable man did dwell with himself, because, carrying himself circumspectly and carefully in the sight of his Creator, always considering his own actions, always examining himself, never did he turn the eyes of his soul from himself to behold aught else whatsoever.

Peter.—Why, then, is it written of the

\(^1\) St Luke xv.
Apostle, St Peter, after he was by the Angel delivered out of prison, that returning to himself, he said: "Now I know verily, that our Lord has sent His Angel, and hath delivered me from the hands of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews?"¹

GREGORY.—We are two manner of ways, Peter, carried out of ourselves: for either we fall under ourselves by sinful cogitation, or else we are, by the grace of contemplation, lifted above ourselves: for he that kept hogs, through wandering of his mind and unclean thoughts fell under himself: but he whom the Angel delivered out of prison, being also rapt by the Angel into an ecstasy, was in truth out of himself, but yet above himself. Both of them, therefore, did return unto themselves; the one when he recollected himself, and forsook his lewd kind of life; and the other from the top of contemplation to have that usual judgment and understanding which before he had: wherefore venerable Benet in that soli-

¹ Acts xii.
tary wilderness dwelt with himself, because he kept himself, and retired his cogitations within the closet of his own soul: for when the greatness of contemplation rapt him up aloft, out of all question he did then leave himself under himself.

Peter.—Your discourse doth very well content me, yet I beseech you to answer me this question; whether he could in conscience give over those monks, whose government he had now taken upon him?

Gregory.—In mine opinion, Peter, evil men may with good conscience be tolerated in that community where there be some good that may be holpen, and reap commodity. But where there be none good at all, that may receive spiritual profit, oftentimes all labour is lost that is bestowed in bringing of such to good order, especially if other occasions be offered of doing God presently better service elsewhere: for whose good, then, should the holy man have expected, seeing them all to persecute him with one consent? and (that which is not to be passed over with silence) those
that be perfect carry always this mind, that when they perceive their labour to be fruitless in one place, to remove straight to another, where more good may be done. And for this cause, that notable preacher of the world, who was desirous to be dissolved, and to be with Christ, unto whom "to live is Christ; and to die is gain,"¹ and who not only desired himself to suffer persecution, but did also animate and encourage others to suffer the same, yet being himself in persecution at Damascus, got a rope and a basket to pass over the wall, and was privily let down. What then? shall we say that Paul was afraid of death,whenas himself said that he desired it for Christ's sake? No so: but when he perceived that in that place little good was to be done by great labour, he reserved himself to further labour, where more fruit and better success might be expected: and therefore the valiant soldier of Christ would not be kept within walls, but sought for a larger field where he might more freely

¹ Philipp. i. 21.
labour for his Master. And so, in like manner, you shall quickly perceive, if you mark well, that venerable Benet forsook not so many in one place, that were unwilling to be taught, as he did in sundry other places raise up from the death of soul many more that were willing to be instructed.

PETER.—It is so as you say, and plain reason teacheth it, and the example of St Paul doth confirm it. But I beseech you to return unto your former purpose, and to prosecute the life of the holy man.

GREGORY.—Whenas God's servant daily increased in virtue, and became continually more famous for miracles, many were by him in the same place drawn to the service of Almighty God, so that by Christ's assistance he built there twelve Abbeys, over which he appointed governors, and in each of them he placed twelve monks; and a few he kept with himself, namely, such as he thought would more profit, and be better instructed by his own presence. At that time, also, many noble and religious men
of Rome came unto him, and committed their children to be brought up under him, for the service of God. Then also Aëquitius delivered him Maurus, and Tertullus the Senator brought Placidus, being their sons of great hope and towardness, of which two, Maurus, growing to great virtue, began to be his master's coadjutor; but Placidus, as yet, was but a boy of tender years.
Chapter IV

How Benet reformed a monk that would not stay at his prayers

In one of the monasteries which he had built in those parts, a monk there was which could not continue at prayers; for when the other monks knelt down to serve God, his manner was to go forth, and there with wandering mind to busy himself about some earthly and transitory things. And when he had been often by his Abbot admonished of this fault without any amendment, at length he was sent to the man of God, who did likewise very much rebuke him for his folly; yet notwithstanding, returning back again, he did scarce two days follow the holy man's admonition; for upon the third day he fell again to his old custom, and would not abide within
at the time of prayer; word whereof being once more sent to the man of God, by the father of the Abbey whom he had there appointed, he returned him answer that he would come himself and reform what was amiss which he did accordingly, and it so fell out that when the singing of psalms was ended, and the hour come in which the monks betook themselves to prayer, the holy man perceived that the monk, which used at that time to go forth, was by a little black boy drawn out by the skirt of his garment, upon which sight he spake secretly to Pompeianus, father of the Abbey, and also to Maurus, saying: “Do you not see who it is that draweth this monk from his prayers?” and they answered him that they did not. “Then let us pray,” quoth he, “that you also may behold whom this monk doth follow;” and after two days Maurus did see him, but Pompeianus could not. Upon another day, when the man of God had ended his devotions, he went out of the oratory, where he found the aforesaid monk standing idle,
whom for the blindness of his heart he struck with a little wand, and from that day forward he was so freed from all allurement of the little black boy, that he remained quietly at his prayers, as others of the monks did, for the old enemy was so terrified, that he durst not any more suggest any such cogitations: as though by that blow not the monk, but himself had been stricken.
Chapter V

Of a Fountain that sprung forth on the top of a Mountain, by the prayers of the man of God

AMONGST the monasteries which he had built in those parts, three of them were situate upon the rocks of a mountain; so that very painful it was for the monks to go down and fetch water, especially because the side of the hill was so steep that there was great fear of danger; and therefore the monks of those Abbeys with one consent came unto the servant of God, Benet, giving him to understand how laborious it was for them daily to go down unto the lake for water: and therefore they added that it was very necessary to have them removed to some other places. The man