

**KNIGHTS OF ART**  
STORIES OF THE ITALIAN PAINTERS  
AMY STEEDMAN

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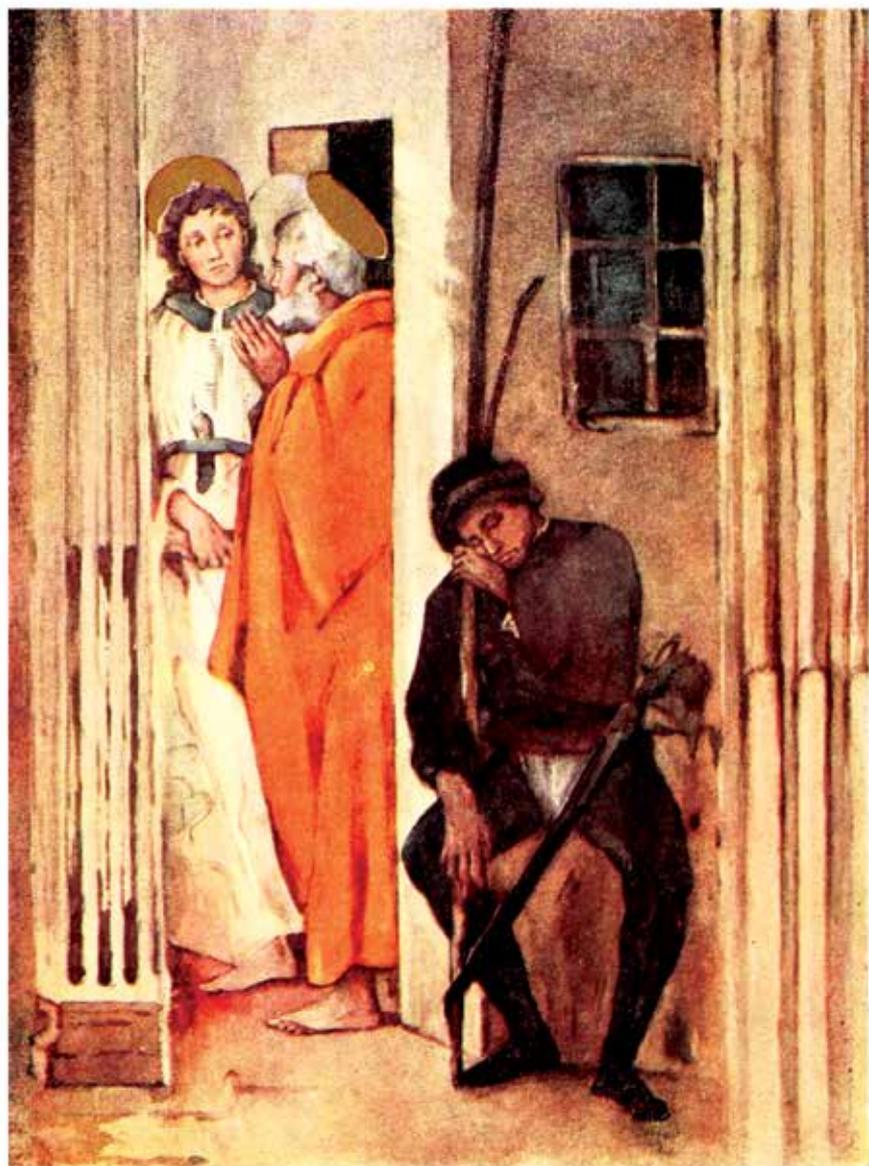
# Knights of Art

Stories of the Italian Painters

by

AMY STEEDMAN





THE RELEASE OF S. PETER. BY FILIPPINO LIPPI  
"THE TALL ANGEL IN FLOWING WHITE ROBES  
GENTLY LEADS S. PETER OUT OF PRISON"

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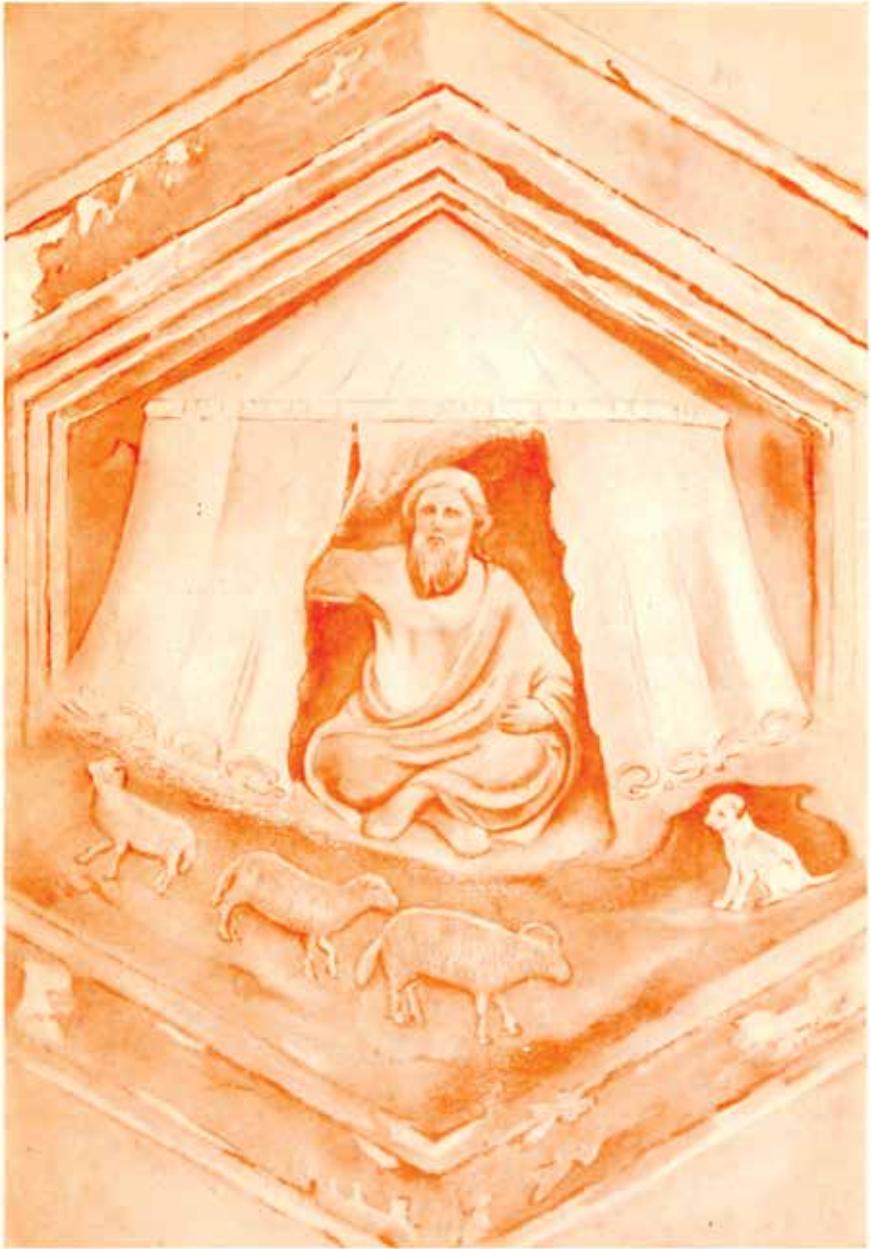


# GIOTTO

It was more than six hundred years ago that a little peasant baby was born in the small village of Vespignano, not far from the beautiful city of Florence, in Italy. The baby's father, an honest, hard-working countryman, was called Bondone, and the name he gave to his little son was Giotto.

Life was rough and hard in that country home, but the peasant baby grew into a strong, hardy boy, learning early what cold and hunger meant. The hills which surrounded the village were grey and bare, save where the silver of the olive-trees shone in the sunlight, or the tender green of the shooting corn made the valley beautiful in early spring. In summer there was little shade from the blazing sun as it rode high in the blue sky, and the grass which grew among the grey rocks was often burnt and brown. But, nevertheless, it was here that the sheep of the village would be turned out to find what food they could, tended and watched by one of the village boys.

So it happened that when Giotto was ten years old his father sent him to take care of the sheep upon the hillside. Country boys had then no schools to go to or lessons to learn, and Giotto spent long happy days, in sunshine and rain, as he followed the sheep from place to place, wherever they could find grass enough to feed on. But Giotto did something



RELIEF IN MARBLE BY GIOTTO  
"THE SHEPHERD SITTING UNDER HIS TENT. WITH THE SHEEP IN FRONT"

else besides watching his sheep. Indeed, he sometimes forgot all about them, and many a search he had to gather them all together again. For there was one thing he loved doing better than all beside, and that was to try to draw pictures of all the things he saw around him.

It was no easy matter for the little shepherd lad. He had no pencils or paper, and he had never, perhaps, seen a picture in all his life. But all this mattered little to him. Out there, under the blue sky, his eyes made pictures for him out of the fleecy white clouds as they slowly changed from one form to another. He learned to know exactly the shape of every flower and how it grew; he noticed how the olive-trees laid their silver leaves against the blue background of the sky that peeped in between, and how his sheep looked as they stooped to eat, or lay down in the shadow of a rock.

Nothing escaped his keen, watchful eyes, and then with eager hands he would sharpen a piece of stone, choose out the smoothest rock, and try to draw on its flat surface all those wonderful shapes which had filled his eyes with their beauty. Olive-trees, flowers, birds and beasts were there, but especially his sheep, for they were his friends and companions who were always near him, and he could draw them in a different way each time they moved.

Now it fell out that one day a great master painter from Florence came riding through the valley and over the hills where Giotto was feeding his sheep. The name of the great master was Cimabue, and he was the most wonderful artist in the world, so men said. He had painted a picture which had made all Florence rejoice. The Florentines had never seen anything like it before, and yet it was but a strange-looking portrait of the Madonna and Child, scarcely like a real woman or a real baby at all. Still, it seemed to them a

perfect wonder, and Cimabue was honoured as one of the city's greatest men.

The road was lonely as it wound along. There was nothing to be seen but waves of grey hills on every side, so the stranger rode on, scarcely lifting his eyes as he went. Then suddenly he came upon a flock of sheep nibbling the scanty sunburnt grass, and a little brown-faced shepherd-boy gave him a cheerful 'Good-day, master.'

There was something so bright and merry in the boy's smile that the great man stopped and began to talk to him. Then his eye fell upon the smooth flat rock over which the boy had been bending, and he started with surprise.

'Who did that?' he asked quickly, and he pointed to the outline of a sheep scratched upon the stone.

'It is the picture of one of my sheep there,' answered the boy, hanging his head with a shame-faced look. 'I drew it with this,' and he held out towards the stranger the sharp stone he had been using.

'Who taught you to do this?' asked the master as he looked more carefully at the lines drawn on the rock.

The boy opened his eyes wide with astonishment 'Nobody taught me, master,' he said. 'I only try to draw the things that my eyes see.'

'How would you like to come with me to Florence and learn to be a painter?' asked Cimabue, for he saw that the boy had a wonderful power in his little rough hands.

Giotto's cheeks flushed, and his eyes shone with joy.

'Indeed, master, I would come most willingly,' he cried, 'if only my father will allow it.'

So back they went together to the village, but not before Giotto had carefully put his sheep into the fold, for he was never one to leave his work half done.

Bondone was amazed to see his boy in company with such a grand stranger, but he was still more surprised when he heard of the stranger's offer. It seemed a golden chance, and he gladly gave his consent.

Why, of course, the boy should go to Florence if the gracious master would take him and teach him to become a painter. The home would be lonely without the boy who was so full of fun and as bright as a sunbeam. But such chances were not to be met with every day, and he was more than willing to let him go.

So the master set out, and the boy Giotto went with him to Florence to begin his training.

The studio where Cimabue worked was not at all like those artists' rooms which we now call studios. It was much more like a workshop, and the boys who went there to learn how to draw and paint were taught first how to grind and prepare the colours and then to mix them. They were not allowed to touch a brush or pencil for a long time, but only to watch their master at work, and learn all that they could from what they saw him do.

So there the boy Giotto worked and watched, but when his turn came to use the brush, to the amazement of all, his pictures were quite unlike anything which had ever been painted before in the workshop. Instead of copying the stiff, unreal figures, he drew real people, real animals, and all the things which he had learned to know so well on the grey hill-side, when he watched his father's sheep. Other artists had painted the Madonna and Infant Christ, but Giotto painted a mother and a baby.

And before long this worked such a wonderful change that it seemed indeed as if the art of making pictures had been born again. To us his work still looks stiff and strange,

but in it was the beginning of all the beautiful pictures that belong to us now.

Giotto did not only paint pictures, he worked in marble as well. To-day, if you walk through Florence, the City of Flowers, you will still see its fairest flower of all, the tall white campanile or bell-tower, 'Giotto's tower' as it is called. There it stands in all its grace and loveliness like a tall white lily against the blue sky, pointing ever upward, in the grand old faith of the shepherd-boy. Day after day it calls to prayer and to good works, as it has done all these hundreds of years since Giotto designed and helped to build it.

Some people call his pictures stiff and ugly, for not every one has wise eyes to see their beauty, but the loveliness of this tower can easily be seen by all. 'There the white doves circle round and round, and rest in the sheltering niches of the delicately carved arches; there at the call of its bell the black-robed Brothers of Pity hurry past to their works of mercy. There too the little children play, and sometimes stop to stare at the marble pictures, set in the first story of the tower, low enough to be seen from the street. Their special favourite is perhaps the picture of the shepherd sitting under his tent, with the sheep in front, and with the funniest little dog keeping watch at the side.

Giotto always had a great love for animals, and whenever it was possible he would squeeze one into a corner of his pictures. He was sixty years old when he designed this wonderful tower and cut some of the marble pictures with his own hand, but you can see that the memory of those old days when he ran barefoot about the hills and tended his sheep was with him still. Just such another little puppy must have often played with him in those long-ago days before he became a great painter and was still only a merry, brown-faced boy, making pictures with a sharp stone upon the smooth rocks.

Up and down the narrow streets of Florence now, the great painter would walk and watch the faces of the people as they passed. And his eyes would still make pictures of them and their busy life, just as they used to do with the olive-trees, the sheep, and the clouds.

In those days nobody cared to have pictures in their houses, and only the walls of the churches were painted. So the pictures, or frescoes, as they were called, were of course all about sacred subjects, either stories out of the Bible or of the lives of the saints. And as there were few books, and the poor people did not know how to read, these frescoed walls were the only story-books they had.

What a joy those pictures of Giotto's must have been, then, to those poor folk! They looked at the little Baby Jesus sitting on His mother's knee, wrapped in swaddling bands, just like one of their own little ones, and it made Him seem a very real baby. The wise men who talked together and pointed to the shining star overhead looked just like any of the great nobles of Florence. And there at the back were the two horses looking on with wise interested eyes, just as any of their own horses might have done.

It seemed to make the story of Christmas a thing which had really happened, instead of a far-away tale which had little meaning for them. Heaven and the Madonna were not so far off after all. And it comforted them to think that the Madonna had been a real woman like themselves, and that the Jesu Bambino would stoop to bless them still, just as He leaned forward to bless the wise men in the picture.

How real too would seem the old story of the meeting of Anna and Joachim at the Golden Gate, when they could gaze upon the two homely figures under the narrow gateway. No visionary saints these, but just a simple husband and wife,

meeting each other with joy after a sad separation, and yet with the touch of heavenly meaning shown by the angel who hovers above and places a hand upon each head.

It was not only in Florence that Giotto did his work. His fame spread far and wide, and he went from town to town eagerly welcomed by all. We can trace his footsteps as he went, by those wonderful old pictures which he spread with loving care over the bare walls of the churches, lifting, as it were, the curtain that hides Heaven from our view and bringing some of its joys to earth.

Then, at Assisi, he covered the walls and ceiling of the church with the wonderful frescoes of the life of St. Francis; and the little round commonplace Arena Chapel of Padua is made exquisite inside by his pictures of the life of our Lord.

In the days when Giotto lived the towns of Italy were continually quarrelling with one another, and there was always fighting going on somewhere. The cities were built with a wall all round them, and the gates were shut each night to keep out their enemies. But often the fighting was between different families inside the city, and the grim old palaces in the narrow streets were built tall and strong that they might be the more easily defended.

In the midst of all this war and quarrelling Giotto lived his quiet, peaceful life, the friend of every one and the enemy of none. Rival towns sent for him to paint their churches with his heavenly pictures, and the people who hated Florence forgot that he was a Florentine. He was just Giotto, and he belonged to them all. His brush was the white flag of truce which made men forget their strife and angry passions, and turned their thoughts to holier things.

Even the great poet Dante did not scorn to be a friend of the peasant painter, and we still have the portrait which

Giotto painted of him in an old fresco at Florence. Later on, when the great poet was a poor unhappy exile, Giotto met him again at Padua and helped to cheer some of those sad grey days, made so bitter by strife and injustice.

Now when Giotto was beginning to grow famous, it happened that the Pope was anxious to have the walls of the great Cathedral of St. Peter at Rome decorated. So he sent messengers all over Italy to find out who were the best painters, that he might invite them to come and do the work.

The messengers went from town to town and asked every artist for a specimen of his painting. This was gladly given, for it was counted a great honour to help to make St. Peter's beautiful.

By and by the messengers came to Giotto and told him their errand. The Pope, they said, wished to see one of his drawings to judge if he was fit for the great work. Giotto, who was always most courteous, 'took a sheet of paper and a pencil dipped in a red colour, then, resting his elbow on his side, with one turn of the hand, he drew a circle so perfect and exact that it was a marvel to behold.' 'Here is your drawing,' he said to the messenger, with a smile, handing him the drawing.

'Am I to have nothing more than this?' asked the man, staring at the red circle in astonishment and disgust.

'That is enough and to spare,' answered Giotto. 'Send it with the rest.'

The messengers thought this must all be a joke.

'How foolish we shall look if we take only a round O to show his Holiness,' they said.

But they could get nothing else from Giotto, so they were obliged to be content and to send it with the other drawings, taking care to explain just how it was done.

The Pope and his advisers looked carefully over all the



THE VISIT OF THE MAGI. BY GIOTTO  
“THE LITTLE BABY JESUS SITTING ON HIS MOTHER’S KNEE”

drawings, and, when they came to that round O, they knew that only a master-hand could have made such a perfect circle without the help of a compass. Without a moment's hesitation they decided that Giotto was the man they wanted, and they at once invited him to come to Rome to decorate the cathedral walls. So when the story was known the people became prouder than ever of their great painter, and the round O of Giotto has become a proverb to this day in Tuscany.

'Round as the O of Giotto, d' ye see;  
Which means as well done as a thing can be.'

Later on, when Giotto was at Naples, he was painting in the palace chapel one very hot day, when the king came in to watch him at his work. It really was almost too hot to move, and yet Giotto painted away busily.

'Giotto,' said the king, 'if I were in thy place I would give up painting for a while and take my rest, now that it is so hot.'

'And, indeed, so I would most certainly do,' answered Giotto, 'if I were in your place, your Majesty.'

It was these quick answers and his merry smile that charmed every one, and made the painter a favourite with rich and poor alike.

There are a great many stories told of him, and they all show what a sunny-tempered, kindly man he was.

It is said that one day he was standing in one of the narrow streets of Florence talking very earnestly to a friend, when a pig came running down the road in a great hurry. It did not stop to look where it was going, but ran right between the painter's legs and knocked him flat on his back, putting an end to his learned talk.

Giotto scrambled to his feet with a rueful smile, and

shook his finger at the pig which was fast disappearing in the distance.

‘Ah, well!’ he said, ‘I suppose thou hadst as much right to the road as I had. Besides, how many gold pieces I have earned by the help of thy bristles, and never have I given any of thy family even a drop of soup in payment.’

Another time he went riding with a very learned lawyer into the country to look after his property. For when Bon-done died, he left all his fields and his farm to his painter son. Very soon a storm came on, and the rain poured down as if it never meant to stop.

‘Let us seek shelter in this farmhouse and borrow a cloak,’ suggested Giotto.

So they went in and borrowed two old cloaks from the farmer, and wrapped themselves up from head to foot. Then they mounted their horses and rode back together to Florence.

Presently the lawyer turned to look at Giotto, and immediately burst into a loud laugh. The rain was running from the painter’s cap, he was splashed with mud, and the old cloak made him look like a very forlorn beggar.

‘Dost think if any one met thee now, they would believe that thou art the best painter in the world?’ laughed the lawyer.

Giotto’s eyes twinkled as he looked at the funny figure riding beside him, for the lawyer was very small, and had a crooked back, and rolled up in the old cloak he looked like a bundle of rags.

‘Yes!’ he answered quickly, ‘any one would certainly believe I was a great painter, if he could but first persuade himself that thou dost know thy A B C.’

In all these stories we catch glimpses of the good-natured kindly painter, with his love of jokes, and his own ready answers, and all the time we must remember that he was



THE MEETING OF ANNA AND JOACHIM. BY GIOTTO  
“TWO HOMELY FIGURES OUTSIDE THE NARROW GATEWAY”

filling the world with beauty, which it still treasures to-day, helping to sow the seeds of that great tree of Art which was to blossom so gloriously in later years.

And when he had finished his earthly work it was in his own cathedral, 'St. Mary of the Flowers,' that they laid him to rest, while the people mourned him as a good friend as well as a great painter. There he lies in the shadow of his lily tower, whose slender grace and delicate-tinted marbles keep his memory ever fresh in his beautiful city of Florence.

## FRA ANGELICO

Nearly a hundred years had passed by since Giotto lived and worked in Florence, and in the same hilly country where he used to tend his sheep another great painter was born.

Many other artists had come and gone, and had added their golden links of beauty to the chain of Art which bound these years together. Some day you will learn to know all their names and what they did. But now we will only single out, here and there, a few of those names which are perhaps greater than the rest. Just as on a clear night, when we look up into the starlit sky, it would bewilder us to try and remember all the stars, so we learn first to know those that are most easily recognised—the Plough, or the Great Bear, as they shine with a clear steady light against the background of a thousand lesser stars.

The name by which this second great painter is known is Fra Angelico, but that was only the name he earned in later years. His baby name was Guido, and his home was in a village close to where Giotto was born.

He was not a poor boy, and did not need to work in the fields or tend the sheep on the hillside. Indeed, he might have soon become rich and famous, for his wonderful talent for painting would have quickly brought him honours and wealth if he had gone out into the world. But instead of this,

when he was a young man of twenty he made up his mind to enter the convent at Fiesole, and to become a monk of the Order of Saint Dominic.

Every brother, or frate, as he is called, who leaves the world and enters the life of the convent is given a new name, and his old name is never used again. So young Guido was called Fra Giovanni, or Brother John. But it is not by that name that he is known best, but that of Fra Angelico, or the angelic brother—a name which was given him afterwards because of his pure and beautiful life, and the heavenly pictures which he painted.

With all his great gifts in his hands, with all the years of youth and pleasure stretching out green and fair before him, he said good-bye to earthly joys, and chose rather to serve his Master Christ in the way he thought was right.

The monks of St. Dominic were the great preachers of those days—men who tried to make the world better by telling people what they ought to do, and teaching them how to live honest and good lives. But there are other ways of teaching people besides preaching, and the young monk who spent his time bending over the illuminated prayer-book, seeing with his dreamy eyes visions of saints and white-robed angels, was preparing to be a greater teacher than them all. The words of the preacher monks have passed away, and the world pays little heed to them now, but the teaching of Fra Angelico, the silent lessons of his wonderful pictures, are as fresh and clear to-day as they were in those far-off years.

Great trouble was in store for the monks of the little convent at Fiesole, which Fra Angelico and his brother Benedetto had entered. Fierce struggles were going on in Italy between different religious parties, and at one time the little band of preaching monks were obliged to leave their peaceful home

at Fiesole to seek shelter in other towns. But, as it turned out, this was good fortune for the young painter-monk, for in those hill towns of Umbria where the brothers sought refuge there were pictures to be studied which delighted his eyes with their beauty, and taught him many a lesson which he could never have learned on the quiet slopes of Fiesole.

The hill towns of Italy are very much the same to-day as they were in those days. Long winding roads lead upwards from the plain below to the city gates, and there on the summit of the hill the little town is built. The tall white houses cluster close together, and the overhanging eaves seem almost to meet across the narrow paved streets, and always there is the great square, with the church the centre of all.

It would be almost a day's journey to follow the white road that leads down from Perugia across the plain to the little hill town of Assisi, and many a spring morning saw the painter-monk setting out on the convent donkey before sunrise and returning when the sun had set. He would thread his way up between the olive-trees until he reached the city gates, and pass into the little town without hindrance. For the followers of St. Francis in their brown robes would be glad to welcome a stranger monk, though his black robe showed that he belonged to a different order. Any one who came to see the glory of their city, the church where their saint lay, which Giotto had covered with his wonderful pictures, was never refused admittance.

How often then must Fra Angelico have knelt in the dim light of that lower church of Assisi, learning his lesson on his knees, as was ever his habit. Then home again he would wend his way, his eyes filled with visions of those beautiful pictures, and his hand longing for the pencil and brush, that he might add new beauty to his own work from what he had learned.



THE ANNUNCIATION. BY FRA ANGELICO  
‘THE GENTLE VIRGIN BENDING BEFORE THE ANGEL MESSENGER’

Several years passed by, and at last the brothers were allowed to return to their convent home of San Dominico at Fiesole, and there they lived peaceably for a long time. We cannot tell exactly what pictures our painter-monk painted during those peaceful years, but we know he must have been looking out with wise, seeing eyes, drinking in all the beauty that was spread around him.

At his feet lay Florence, with its towers and palaces, the Arno running through it like a silver thread, and beyond, the purple of the Tuscan hills. All around on the sheltered hillside were green vines and fruit-trees, olives and cypresses, fields flaming in spring with scarlet anemones or golden with great yellow tulips, and hedges of rose-bushes covered with clusters of pink blossoms. No wonder, then, such beauty sunk into his heart, and we see in his pictures the pure fresh colour of the spring flowers, with no shadow of dark or evil things.

Soon the fame of the painter began to be whispered outside the convent walls, and reached the ears of Cosimo da Medici, one of the powerful rulers of Florence. He offered the monks a new home, and, when they were settled in the convent of San Marco in Florence, he invited Fra Angelico to fresco the walls.

One by one the heavenly pictures were painted upon the walls of the cells and cloister of the new home. How the brothers must have crowded round to see each new fresco as it was finished, and how anxious they would be to see which picture was to be near their own particular bed. In all the frescoes, whether he painted the gentle Virgin bending before the angel messenger, or tried to show the glory of the ascended Lord, the artist-monk would always introduce one or more of the convent's special saints, which made the brothers feel that the pictures were their very own. Fra Angelico had a kind word and smile for all the brothers. He was never impatient, and