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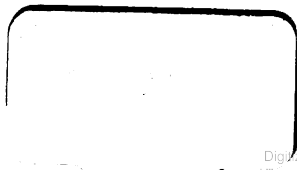
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Life of St. Rita of Cascia, O.S.A.

Richard Connolly



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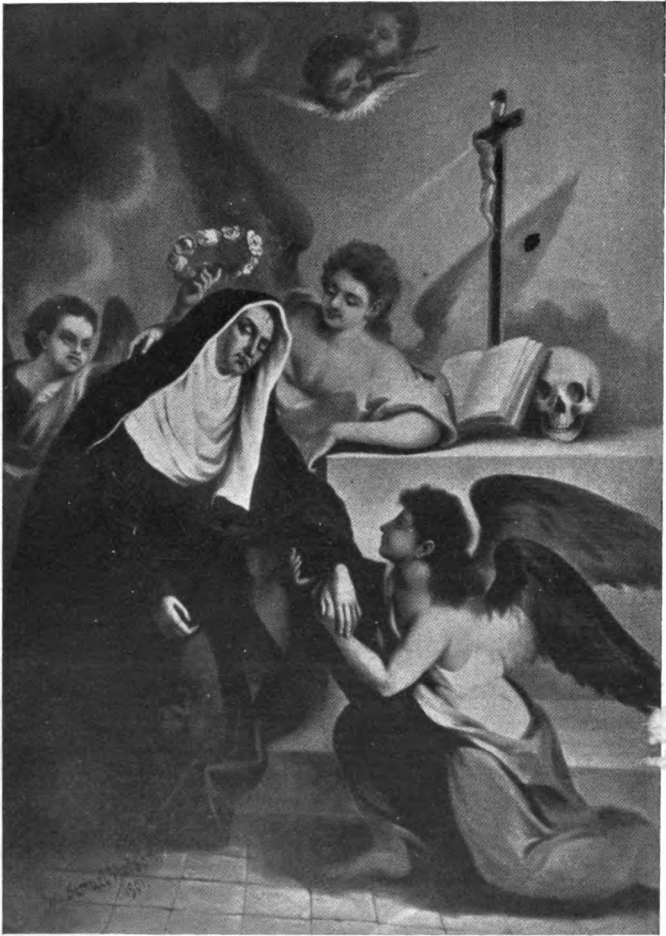
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LIFE OF ST. RITA OF CASCIA

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(Rita de Cascia, 1542)





ST. RITA RECEIVES HER MIRACULOUS WOUND

[Frontispiece

LIFE OF ST. RITA OF CASCIA

From the Italian

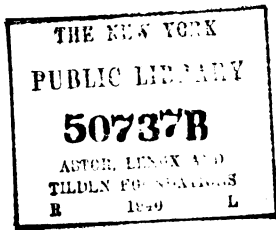
BY

VERY REV. RICHARD CONNOLLY
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Part I

RITA IN THE WORLD

LIFE OF ST. RITA OF CASCIA

CHAPTER I

CASCIA : A GLANCE AT ITS HISTORY

ST. BERNARD observes that the place in which our Saviour died attracts our devotion in a greater degree than any of those places in which He dwelt during His life, and can therefore boast of a certain pre-eminence. Speaking of St. Rita, we can say the same of Cascia compared with Rocca Porena, her birthplace. Cascia governed Rocca Porena as did Jerusalem Nazareth, but it is not on this account we claim its superiority, but because our saint lived there for many years and died there, and there her relics are venerated. Cascia is therefore looked upon as St. Rita's home, and hence she is called St. Rita of Cascia. Were we but to give a cursory sketch of the history of Cascia from its annals, which still exist, the present volume could not contain what we should

be forced to write, so important did it become ; we will therefore content ourselves with alluding to a few of the more salient points in its story.

This ancient and illustrious town is built under the shadow of the Apennines, at a point in that chain of mountains almost midway between the Alps and the Mediterranean. It is on the borders of Umbria, seven miles from Norcia, ten from Leonessa, thirty from Rieti, and twenty-three from Spoleto. It stands on the site of the ancient *Cursula*, which is believed to have been a Roman free-town—that is, its people enjoyed the honours, rights, and privileges of Roman citizenship, and their town was governed by its own laws. That *Cursula* was a town of some importance is attested by its remains, which are still extant, notably by the Temple of the Augurs, the Temple of Mars, and the House of the *Duumviri*.

We have nothing else than these remains to guide us in inquiring into the history of *Cursula*, nor can we surmise the epoch from whence to date its existence. We know from *Dionysius of Halicarnassus* that it was destroyed, and that a new town rose on the ruins of the original one, but the dates of these events cannot be fixed with certainty. The date of the rebuilding of *Cursula* may, with some probability, be placed at something more than ten years before the birth of



our Saviour, and hence its pagan inhabitants were strengthening the foundations of its future greatness when Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, was laying the *foundation of the Redemption of man*. We know, too, that it was a republic, but are left in the dark as to how it managed to achieve and preserve its independence. It is credible that, like other Italian cities, it acquired its liberty at the time of the second fall of the Roman Empire, after the death of the Emperor-Saint Henry, during the Pontificate of John XIX., or about the year 1025. This independence it retained till 1260, in which year, through the ambition of rival leaders, the seeds of civic dissension were sown, and the republic was exposed to dangers from without. It was at this time that the people of Cascia determined to put themselves under the authority of Alexander IV., who then occupied the Papal chair. They were induced to this action by what they saw of the peaceful nature of the Papal government, and because they adhered to the Guelph party, which was favourable to the Holy See. Alexander IV. was the great Pontiff who, uniting the greatest virtues to the highest mental attainments, contrived during the height of the sanguinary quarrels between Guelphs and Ghibellines, which had for twenty years torn and divided Italy,

to stamp out incendiarism, to crush tyranny, and cause peace and happiness to flourish again in the distracted peninsula. Cascia had no reason to regret the changed state of affairs, for the monarchical system which its submission to the Pope introduced by no means destroyed its republican form of government. Hence it retained the right of regulating its own affairs by its own laws; hence its mayor, elected every six months, retained his authority; hence it retained those chiefs of the people, at first called 'Ateposti,' then 'Gonfalonieri,' and finally 'Consuls.' To these latter a troop of soldiers, called the people's jury, was subject, who had the duty not only of defending the people, but of acting on the offensive when necessary. The court of justice, the guards and robes of the consuls, the stately retinue of the mayor, the fortifications with their garrisons, the number of subject towns and villages—of which more than forty recognise Cascia as their chief at present, without speaking of the many which the ravages of time have destroyed—the right of peace and war left, at least in part, to the brave people of Cascia—these and other memories of the past, which even now may be seen in the consular registers, constitute a proof of the liberty which Cascia enjoyed under the Popes and of the fame which it acquired.

But at the beginning of the disastrous and prolonged schism of the anti-Popes, Cascia unfurled the standard of rebellion, either through a desire of complete independence, or, as some say, on account of the insolent conduct of the Papal soldiers, and for a period of about 131 years—till the year 1517—it remained under a sort of mixed government. This interval of complete independence was filled up by an uninterrupted series of wars waged with its neighbours of Norcia, of Leonessa, of Monreale, of Aquila, or of Cerreto. But after the first outburst of enthusiasm for complete independence, and in the midst of quarrels with its neighbours, the republic of Cascia took occasion to show its pristine reverence and love for the See of Rome: A clear proof of the correspondence between Cascia and the Papal See is the formal announcement, made by the Cardinals met together in council at Constance, to the commune of Cascia, of the election of Pope Martin V. to the Pontifical throne. The prompt assistance given by the people of Cascia to Eugene IV., successor to Martin V., against Corrado Trinci, Governor of Foligno, who tried to make himself lord and master of that city, is another proof of their loyalty to the Holy See. When the wise and great-minded Leo X. ascended the Papal throne he brought back Cascia to its

obedience to the Holy See by a brief dated 1517. All its ancient privileges and distinctions were confirmed by him, and a Cardinal was appointed to govern the city; for Cascia still continued to have the title 'city,' as it had till 1600 at least. Some speak of money coined there, of its coats of arms, of printing done there, of its prosperity and commerce, of the cultivation of the fine arts; but the cultivation of souls is what chiefly adorns it.

And, in the first place, if nobility presupposes the talents or merits of ancestors either in field or court, what must we say of Cascia, which reckoned in its environs 200 famous families, which are extinct only within the last two centuries, without speaking of others that betook themselves elsewhere, or of the ancient patrician families that still dwell in the homes of their ancestors?

There is no need to go back to remote antiquity to catch a glimpse of the great men who had their origin in Cascia in the splendour of its greatest glories. The great ones born there, even in the latest years of its decadence, are a proof of what it produced in the past, and are sufficient to renew the honours it merited in its beginnings.

The Cardinals, the Bishops, the Prelates, the names distinguished in science and in arms of

the Poli, Frenfanelli, Benenati, Cruciani, Squaricipani, Colangeli, Negroni, Graziani, Franceschini, Leonetti, Giudici, Elemosina, Girolami, Gregorietti, and of other illustrious families, would supply ample material to whosoever would wish to pronounce the praises of Cascia. We, who have for our study a nun and a saint, shall content ourselves with going into the shadow of the cloister and of the sanctuary. We find Andrew of Cascia, a Franciscan who lived at the same time as St. Rita, who had the happiness of bringing the Gospel to the Turks at Fez, where he suffered martyrdom after converting many to Christ and working many miracles. The glory of this humble friar outshines the glory which the honours of the world can give. Blessed Pace, a Minor Conventual, born in Cascia, great in virtue and by the miracles he worked, raised himself above every earthly greatness.

But what must have most drawn the soul of our St. Rita to desire from her childhood the life of the cloister, and to follow it in her mature years, were the singular models of sanctity which the Augustinian institute in Cascia could furnish. The memory of the saintly heroes, followers of the great Augustine, who dwelt in the woods about Cascia, was to her the memory of a recent event. The first of these recluses is Blessed John,

who from being lord of three towns shut himself in the Valley of Attino, not far from Cascia, in order to lead a life hidden in God in the deepest contemplation. Then comes Blessed Ugolino, who imitated the example of Blessed John in renouncing the pleasant things of this world to engage himself entirely with heavenly things in the hermitage of St. Anatolia, in the territory of Cascia, where, living in misery, he prepared for himself a way to a high degree of glory in heaven. The third is Blessed Simon Fidati, whom the shades of the hermitage could not hide from the world. For the books on the ascetic life which this very learned hermit of St. Augustine wrote in these solitudes began to make him known ; then his unwearied and fruitful preaching through the chief cities of Italy, especially Florence and Siena ; the conversions of which he was the instrument ; the number of enemies he reconciled ; his spirit of prophecy ; his unconquerable charity on most difficult occasions ; the foundation of two monasteries in the city of Florence ; the other works written by him, whence he deserved to be reckoned the brightest ornament of the Augustinian Order at that time, both by his eloquence and profound learning, more infused than acquired, as well as for the piety and fervour which animated him in writing—these and many other

of his merits made him glorious in this world, and still more glorious in heaven.

Contemporary with Blessed Simon were many other remarkable men of the same Order, and born in the same place, as Fr. Bartolo, Vicar of the Lateran Basilica, who enriched his convent of Cascia with more than 600 relics; the Venerable Andrew, noble standard-bearer of the Gospel in Turkey; another Venerable Andrew, of the Capози family, rendered famous his country, his name, and the Augustinian Order by his fruitful preaching and his learning. Fr. Nicholas, of the noble family of the Saracini of Cascia, was also a contemporary of St. Rita. After leaving the pomp of the world to follow Jesus Christ in poverty and humiliation, he was raised through all the ranks of the monastic hierarchy till he was elected and re-elected General of his Order, and then promoted by Pope John XXIII. to the episcopal See of Macerata and Recanati, where he died in the odour of sanctity in the arms of the people whom he had reformed and whom he loved. In those times, too, Stephen of Castel San Giorgio, in the district of Cascia, by his virtues and talents, obtained the highest honours in his Order, and became Procurator-General. We might mention the names of many other famous men of the convent and city of Cascia, either contemporary with St. Rita or

nearly so, as Angelus and Louis of Cascia, Cherubinus Lavosi (Bishop of Telesia), Paoletti, Squaricipani, Amici, three of the Simonetti family—all either theologians of some eminence or famous preachers, or remarkable for their writings; but the notice of these and of others, however praiseworthy for virtue or honourable to their native city of Cascia, might seem beside our purpose and be tedious to those who wish to read the life of St. Rita. At all events, it may be deduced from what we have written that Cascia was not without honour in its history and in its inhabitants.

Still, what is Cascia in the sight of God? What is even Jerusalem before Him and in the light of His inscrutable judgment? Human greatness, which dazzles our eyes, disappears in the glance of God, and is lost in its own nothingness. There is no distinction of persons with Him, nor is there distinction of places. The little town of Nazareth, out of which, in the common very poor opinion of it, it seemed nothing good could come, was, in the Divine councils, preordained to be the fatherland of the Saviour of the world; and the still meaner town of Bethlehem—even a stable in Bethlehem—was chosen as His place of birth. Thus it often happens that God chooses the weak things, the lowly,

the despicable, the things of naught to confound the goodly things and the strong, and to work great designs, in order that the creature may not have whence to vaunt himself before his Creator. Such was the case exactly with that humble spot Rocca Porena, which was destined to be the birth-place of St. Rita.

To give some idea of it, let us say it is two miles and a half from Cascia towards the west, where it is closed in, not to say buried. An overhanging mountain crushes it in on all sides and dominates it, and with difficulty gives access to it from the east by two narrow roads, one on either side of a precipitous rock. The river which flows to the base of this rock, famous in the life of the saint, does not approach the small piece of level ground which, together with the village, forms the bottom of a deep basin. The sun is tardy there in rising, and sets early, leaving the barren plain to its langour and sadness. One would say that a place so isolated and confined, where neither the beauty of nature nor of art appears, and where the sky is almost the only thing in view, was created for contemplation and to be the home of innocence. The two houses of St. Rita are still to be seen, almost at opposite ends of the village, the one in which she was born and lived until her marriage in that part called the Borghetto, and

the other where she lived a wife, and which is now turned into a little chapel in her honour, in the place called the Piazza. The saint's garden, now grown wild, is also shown to the pious traveller. Besides these there does not seem to be anything worthy of mention. We may therefore infer that as Bethlehem was styled the least amongst the cities of Judea, so, perhaps, is Rocca Porena the least amongst the towns of Cascia—the least, indeed, as a place, but memorable by reason of the favour shown it, which exalts it far above the others, since it has given to us that great saint who, by her singular example of innocence and virtue, is become the guide and model in the way of perfection to virgins, to married women, to widows, and to those living in the cloisters, in such a manner as Bethlehem—if we may lawfully make a comparison between the original and a faint copy—was exalted by the birth of Jesus Christ, where, as Blessed Simon of Cascia says, He made Himself the mystical and life-giving bread for our common nourishment and comfort on the way which leads to heaven.

CHAPTER II

RITA'S PARENTS

THE fortunate parents of Rita were Antonio Mancini, of Rocca Porena and Amata Ferri, who is believed to be from a village called Fogliano. Antonio was not noble, nor had he a title, but we may apply to him the praise which the Holy Spirit gives to Noah—that he was a just man and perfect in his times, and he walked with God. The Gracchi, the Scipios, the Cæsars among the number of their family honours cannot find a title greater or even equal to this.

Every other superiority is vanity, and if there be glory from other titles, it is the glory of another, which cannot pass to the posterity of those who merited it. Justice alone makes that real nobility which St. Augustine and other holy fathers call nobility according to the heart of God. And although even this cannot be passed on to descendants, as it did not pass from Noah to his son Cham, whom he cursed, yet it is not unusual

for God to recall the justice of parents, not only for a model, but to give a certain extrinsic glory to their descendants. Hence, when the Holy Spirit wished to record the praises of St. John the Baptist, He wished also for his honour that we should remember that his parents were both 'just before God, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord without blame.' So we can also say of Antonio and Amata, of whom was born St. Rita, who had a special devotion to St. John. They were not of noble blood, but they were noble in their works; they were not rich in temporal goods, but they were rich in the true treasures of Divine grace, which do not pass from those who possess them. They enjoyed the esteem of all who knew them, an esteem more precious than that which flattery offers to the rich and great of this world. Their fortune constituted that mediocrity which the wise man sought from God in order that abundance might not tempt him to forget his Creator, nor poverty to give himself a prey to any vice. The industrious and honourable labour, and the innocent pastoral life which in their time did not degrade the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, did not make the Mancini family less worthy of honour. Rather from the fruits of their labour did they acquire the means of exer-

cising a beneficent liberality towards the poor of Jesus Christ, whom they cherished with an ardent charity. Whether the fruits of their fields were abundant or scarce, these two happy ones, husband and wife, lived contented in their frugality, always giving thanks to the Giver of every good gift, and placing themselves entirely in conformity with the most just and providential dispositions of heaven. Perfect concord, which was their dearest virtue, since in it is the fulness of the law, always reigned in their home. And hence when they heard of divisions amongst others, which were only too frequent in that age and country, they were speedily present with them, and with their insinuating manners and holy zeal they insisted in their charitable offices till peace was restored. They were, on this account, commonly called the 'peacemakers of Jesus Christ.'

They corrected the erring according to the rules of the Gospel ; they interceded for them with so fervent prayers, with so great concern, and with so happy results, that, like Moses, they appeared to be constituted mediators between the people and God. They steadily hated vice, and practised every virtue. The book from which they learned and cherished sentiments so virtuous was none other than the Passion of the Redeemer.

It furnished them with inexhaustible matter for their meditations, for their liveliest compassion, and for that remarkable piety which, from her cradle, they instilled into the heart of Rita, and which they left her as a heritage. In a word, it may with reason be said of them what was said of the parents of St. John the Baptist—that they were both just to the eyes of God, walking without stain in the exact observance of the law. This was their nobility, this was their wealth, which it pleased God to pass to their daughter and to multiply in her in a singular way. Thus we may say, as Blessed Simon of Cascia writes, that the parents' goodness instilled the best dispositions even before her birth into her who was to be born from them, as the goodness of Zachary and Elizabeth went to exalt the holy precursor St. John.

Thus these two holy souls, husband and wife, lived a long series of years in these exercises of virtue and piety, without, however, seeing any fruit of their chaste union. God so disposed it that the desires of their youthful years should be vain, that they should labour to detach their minds still more from mortal things, and in order that the proofs of an extraordinary work of His providence should one day shine the brighter. Meanwhile, their desire of offspring, with which

nature innocently inspired them, had not only grown cold with advancing years, but was quite extinct ; no other care should remain with them now than that of ascending to the eternal heritage of the heavenly Father, instead of descending to the care of children and transmitting their temporal possessions to their posterity on earth.

CHAPTER III

RITA'S WONDERFUL CONCEPTION

THAT God, who is wonderful in His saints, and who, to use a sacred expression, seems at times to play sport with the world, and especially with those creatures that form His delight, wished in the end, and at a time when in the natural order offspring could least be expected from these old and barren consorts, to grant them in a prodigious manner the fulfilment of their ancient desires—a fulfilment the more acceptable as more unforeseen, and the happier and more certain inasmuch as it was marked and sealed with the seal of the Omnipotent. So great and so remarkable graces can foreshadow only great and remarkable sanctity.

Isaac was meant to be the type of Jesus Christ sacrificed for the human race ; he was intended to be a figure of the propagation of the faithful ; he should be great in the order of grace. Still, he was born out of the order of nature, of parents

also barren by reason of their age. He who was to prepare the way for the impending appearance of the Redeemer, and who was to be more than a prophet and the greatest amongst the saints, he also was miraculously born of parents aged and barren; not to speak of other distinguished personages, both of the Old and New Testaments, who in various ways were born in a supernatural manner to exalt the stupendous works of omnipotence and of grace. Not otherwise did the Lord, who in His lofty designs intended great things for our heroine, dispose that her conception should be most remarkable and above the order of nature.

Amata became conscious of the wonderful event, and, full of amazement, she dared not credit the evidence of it. In such a state she felt her heart agitated, now by fears that she was deceived, again by hope of the contrary; at one time by shame at so unusual an occurrence at such an age as hers, at another her feelings of wonder overwhelmed her; and again she experienced renewed struggles of fresh fears, emotions, and passions. But, as is the way with the just, the troubled woman had recourse to prayer to the Father of light, to the God of consolation, and whilst she persevered in her humble, fervent, and constant prayers, there appeared to her an

angel, a bearer of certainty, of peace, and of happy tidings, as an angel appeared to Abraham and Sara while they were employed in the charitable exercise of hospitality, and to Zachary amidst his prayers and offerings of incense. However joyful and consoling in itself was this angelic apparition, it did not fail to cause in her heart feelings of perturbation. Daniel and the other prophets had a like sensation in similar circumstances; Zachary had the same feelings, and so had the most holy Mother of God herself. The reason is, as Blessed Simon of Cascia wisely observes, that humanity is naturally disturbed and stricken with fear at the sudden sight of things extraordinary or greater than itself. But, as the same blessed writer adds, since those heavenly spirits, when they are sent for our relief, are accustomed to comfort the timid, thus, as the archangel told the father of the future Precursor not to fear, and by the announcement of his birth in the near future calmed his heart with efficacious words, so did another ambassador from heaven bring the same security and joy to the troubled mind of Rita's mother, and assure her that she should bring forth a child; and that nothing should be wanting to the fulness of her consolation, he made known to her in brief the eminent virtues and glory of the daughter that was to be born to her,

as the sanctity of the Baptist was likewise foretold to Zachary.

The miraculous pledge of grace which Antonio's happy wife bore already in her womb and her lively faith prevented her from smiling at announcements so wonderful; unlike Abraham's wife, who smiled at a not dissimilar announcement. Nor did she sin through incredulity, as did Elizabeth's husband, who was punished for his sin, but forewarned by fact, and full of that faith which teaches that God can raise up children to Abraham even from the very stones, she instantly believed in the words of the angel. The angelic vision disappeared, and Amata, considering her own unworthiness, was seized with fresh wonder and profound humility. Thinking at the same time on the signal favour, she retired, with great contentment and singular gratitude and love towards the Divine goodness, to pour out the fulness of her pure and fervent affection at the feet of her most beneficent God. It is easy to think what a new stimulus to piety in herself and her virtuous husband was this great grace. Thus they remained happy in their virtue and secure in the hands of Divine providence, joyously awaiting the happy day of Rita's extolled birth.

CHAPTER IV

RITA'S BIRTH

NOW that we are about to describe Rita's birth, it will not be out of place to cast a passing glance at the unhappy state of those times, in order to see things more clearly as we progress with our history, and in order that the providence of God and His grace may more clearly be discerned to His honour and glory. The memories are still fresh in our minds, or, rather, the wounds which the avenging sword of the God of armies inflicted on us. There is not a moment in which we do not recall with horror the mournful losses inflicted by arms on property, commerce, arts, study, families, States, good order, morals, on religion and the Church. But however true and just our regrets may be, it is a fact that Italy was much more harassed and afflicted at the period about the birth of Rita. To read of the extortions of the Visconti through the wide extent of their dominions in

Lombardy, the cruelty exercised by them on the pretext of punishing treason, their unbridled lust, and their most unworthy harassing of the clergy, excites our horror. At the other extremity of Italy, in the kingdom of Naples, a territory of equal importance, wrongs and scandals of every description, and the most deplorable calamities, caused by the parties of the Dukes of Anjou and Surazzo, who laid claim to the kingdom, spread themselves and took root as the civil war that followed on the death of King Robert became more widespread. The different other States into which Italy was then divided were not anything better. For the luxury of these little Courts which tried to rival the great ones to the grave oppression of the people, their despotism, their rivalry and wars, their unbridled ambition to command which multiplied the domestic treasons and assassinations of brothers by brothers, of relatives by relatives (if we except the houses of Savoy, Monferrato, Saluzzo, and Este)—these and the other dominant vices and scandals served only to increase misery and sorrow. The cities of the Papal States were also, for the most part, groaning under the yoke of rebels—bloody, inexorable, lewd tyrants—and especially before Gregory IX. re-established his throne in Rome after his return from Avignon. And, as if these

Italian tyrants were not sufficient to cause public misery, hordes of devastating soldiers issued from Germany, Hungary, and England to complete the confusion. Warner, Muriale, Sando, Anchino, Augustus, and others—all captains of the dissolute soldiers of fortune—were the stubborn arbiters of Italian affairs from the middle of the fourteenth century till the time of Charles V., although they were not owners of even a perch of land. These gave their services in the perpetual wars to whoever paid them best, and went about pillaging, imposing tribute and subsidies—and woe to him who was slow in satisfying their demands!—laying waste fields, besieging towns, and universally exercising their pitiless power. Hence, as the people model themselves after the manners of kings and nobles, it is easy to divine the general state of morals in the midst of such depravity. Let us draw a veil over that picture, the sight of which would move to horror humanity, religion, and especially modesty.

Let it suffice to say that so deeply rooted was this universal depravity that not even the pestilence, that so evident sign of the anger of heaven, which in the middle of that century carried off more than half the inhabitants of Italy, was able to check it. And that which the prophet Isaias seems to have foreseen in his time, but in another

sense, was fulfilled here too: such as the people is, so shall the priest be—so strong was the influence of the bad example and want of discipline introduced into Italy by the abandoning of their Apostolic See in Rome by the Popes. The prevailing depravity afterwards opened the way to still greater evils.

For the zeal with which Urban VI., successor of Gregory XI., sought to remedy the evils which afflicted the Church was intolerable to some, and hence followed the election of an anti-Pope, which gave rise to that terrible schism which burst forth a little before the birth of Rita, and ended only a short time before her death.

Who can recall without tears the separations between friends, princes taking opposing sides, the spiritual and temporal arms put in antagonism, the neglect of the canons, the numberless scandals and losses of the Church, which would at that time have been threatened with absolute ruin, but that the gates of hell can never prevail against the unshakable edifice founded on the rock of Peter, which can never fail? The Church was at that time, moreover, filled with sorrow by the heresies of the Beguins, the Flagellants, the Adamites, the Waldensians, the Wickliffites, and others, and by the rapid successes of Amurath I., who, to the loss of the Christian name, took

possession of Thessaly and Macedonia about the time of Rita's birth. Neither in the Eastern nor in the Western Church was there an Emperor either fitted to oppose a bulwark against the inrush of such evils or disposed to oppose them. John Paleologus in the East had lost heart through his frequent defeats, and was leagued against the powers of Christendom; and in the West, Wenceslaus, given to the wine-cup and to luxury, was become good for nothing.

The republics of the time, amongst which was Cascia, were not much more fortunate than the kingdoms. Genoa and Venice, which only a short time previous might have been compared in their rivalry to Rome and Carthage in the ancient world, had now both become exhausted of all their strength through a long series of stubborn wars undertaken against one another, and although they were now mutually at peace and also with the other Powers, through the intervention of the Duke of Savoy, they were unable to show any opposition to the common enemy of Christendom. Nor did the avarice and ambition of these States fail to bring in their train a fruitful crop of all other vices. Florence, too, although happy in the cultivation of the fine arts, was infected with the general depravity. The city was torn by faction, and weakened by those other vices

against which Blessed Simon of Cascia had so strenuously preached a few years earlier. And although these exhortations brought about a reform, it was but half-hearted and short-lived. Vicious practices increased in the city, and open rebellion against the Holy See was their eventual outcome. Of Cascia itself we read that in 1380 the Guelphs and the Ghibellines committed horrible atrocities throughout the city and its dependent territory. And although the opposing factions patched up a peace between them in that year, it was of no long duration, since, as we have said in the first chapter, the people of Cascia rebelled against the Holy See during the first years of the schism of the anti-Popes, just after the birth of Rita. Murder and robbery, pillage and incendiarism followed in the wake of rebellion, and brought ruin to many families in Cascia and destruction upon her religious places. A war soon broke out between Cascia and Leonessa, which lasted for twelve months, and would have continued much longer but for the friendly intervention of the Trinci of Foligno, through whose efforts peace was made. Such was the wretched condition of affairs in Italy at that time.

It is truly wonderful, as St. John Chrysostom says of a somewhat similar case, how so fair a rose as St. Rita was could have bloomed amid so

many thorns. Yet such was the disposition of Divine providence, which decreed that where sin superabounded grace should abound in that chosen soul who, from the miraculous events that preceded her birth and her innocence, which she preserved intact, seemed almost to have been sanctified in her mother's womb. Rita, then, was born in the village of Rocca Porena in the year 1381, during the pontificate of Urban. Her parents were Antonio Mancini and Amata Ferri, the child of whose old age she was, the first and only fruit of their chaste love, or, rather, of their remarkable virtue. The pure joy which filled Amata's heart at the sight of the infant, which heaven itself had extolled, must have made her forget those trials which every mother has experienced since our first mother Eve committed original sin. Antonio, too, as he gazed tenderly on the predestined child, must have exulted in the Lord, and must, like Simeon of old, have felt himself ready to die content ; he, too, could now sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God, who had granted him the happiness of seeing the glory of his family, of his country, and of the new house of Israel. The general joy and universal congratulation of relatives and neighbours added to the happiness of the pious couple, whose virtue and charity had made them esteemed by all. Thus

did the relatives and neighbours of the holy Elizabeth rejoice at the equally wonderful birth of St. John the Baptist, for the Lord desired to make known the mercy he had shown in the first appearance of the Precursor. 'All who love goodness,' says Simon of Cascia, 'participate in the joy that is occasioned by the birth of one destined to live for the common good.' Those who rejoice in grace, and in the sight of the fruits of justice, must let their sentiments be evident to all, as in the present case, in which a pious mother brought forth a saintly child. It is part of the spiritual life to be pleased at the prosperity of others, and to rejoice with those especially who have been marked by the favour of the Omnipotent God.

Meanwhile, the parents of the newly-born infant, in the midst of these rejoicings, were pondering on what name they should call her, and again that God, who had by an angel announced her birth, again in a vision of the night made them know that Rita was to be her name. It is a rare privilege of some saints, remarks St. Ambrose, to deserve to get their names from God Himself. Thus Jacob was named Israel by the Lord, thus was the Baptist named John by the angel, thus the Eternal Father called the Word made flesh by the name Jesus before He was born,

and thus did she who was to imitate the virtues of the Baptist and be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ get her name from heaven. The name Rita, as being quite an unusual name, must have been meant to signify the sanctity that was to mark the life of the child so designated, and if we were to give credence to the opinion of the Augustinian author Didacus, Rita signifies virtue and grace.

But this name foreshadowed only what Rita was to be, not what she was. For although she could be considered from then as a child of God in the order of predestination, yet according to the order of nature, and according to her actual state, she was, owing to original sin, a child of wrath; and to become an adopted child of God she needed to be cleansed from the hereditary stain of original sin in the sanctifying waters of the Redeemer. Her baptism took place on the fourth day after her birth, although we may believe her pious parents wished her to be baptized with all possible speed, and from the delay we may conclude that the time of her birth must have been in the winter season. There was no baptismal font at that time in Rocco Porena, and the child had therefore to be taken to the collegiate church of St. Mary in Cascia, where that grace which was to be the beginning and the seal of her

sanctification awaited her. There Rita put off the garb of sin, and came forth from the salutary bath of baptism clothed in the garment of innocence and enriched with the gifts of the Holy Ghost, who from the moment chose her to be His spouse. Thus did the regenerated babe return to her mother's bosom and the joyful embraces of her parents, fairer to the eyes of faith than her beauty made her to the eyes of men.

CHAPTER V

THE WHITE BEES OF ST. RITA

WHEN the godmother and her attendants returned from Cascia after the baptism, a feast was prepared for them and the relatives of the happy parents, to celebrate in a manner becoming their humble position the double birth of Rita in the order of nature and of grace. Meanwhile, the child had closed her eyes in a tranquil slumber. When the next day dawned, the fifth day of her existence, a swarm of bees, all of the fairest white colour, and such as were never before seen, made their appearance. They flew a-buzzing about the cradle of the child, and after alighting for a moment on her angelic face were seen to go in and come out of her slightly open mouth in a sort of regular order, as if to take from her lips the honey of Paradise. What feelings of wonder and awe must have been awakened in the heart of Amata and those who were present by so marvellous an occurrence !

The Gospel tells us that fear came upon all the neighbours of Elizabeth and Zachary as they considered the miraculous events that marked the birth of the Baptist, and that they noised abroad all these things that foretold his future extraordinary sanctity. In like manner similar sentiments were excited in those who witnessed the wonderful signs that were given at Rita's birth, for Divine providence so disposed it in order that honour should be rendered to her by those whose attention had been attracted by these extraordinary happenings, and that those who came in contact with her should be induced to order their own lives more exactly by following the salutary example she was to give. This incident of the appearance of the white bees in the cradle of our saint is the one which the painters and poets who have illustrated her life have vied most with one another in depicting. To avoid having to return again to the subject of the bees, which have ever been mentioned in connection with the life of St. Rita, we will here describe what seems to be a confirmation and perpetuation of the wonderful occurrence we have just related. Going from Rocca Porena to Cascia, and entering the convent where our saint resided, there, in an old wall opposite the convent gate, at a point midway between the cell which Rita

inhabited and the spot in which her body was laid to rest, we are met with a sight that cannot fail to move us to admiration. For there, even to the present day, the bees, commonly called St. Rita's bees, have their nest. They are called St. Rita's, for they have been there since her time, and have come there, we may believe, owing to her, and, as it were, to do her honour. There is only a small number of them—some twelve or fifteen—and everything connected with them is extraordinary and wonderful. In the first place, as we have hinted above, the species to which these bees belong has never, as far as we are aware, been determined. They live each one to itself in a hole which it has dug in the wall, and as often as these holes have been stopped up in the process of plastering the wall they have again excavated them. They spin a sort of white substance, with which they stop the entrance to their retreat, as if to hide themselves from view during their long retirement and fast of eleven months. They appear only on those days dedicated to the memory of our Lord's Passion, and, be it noted, these are mostly movable feasts; and they betake themselves to retirement about the time of the death of St. Rita, who was devoted, as we shall see, to meditation on the Passion of our Lord. For four centuries they have been found

in the same place, without ever having changed their place of abode. These ascertained facts seem to declare clearly enough that it has been the will of the Most High to extol through them the merit and the glory of His beloved servant. There is no need to add the many anecdotes of these bees, which are related in some lives of our saint, and which the nuns of Cascia still tell; let one suffice. Jacobilli says that one of these bees was sent to Pope Urban VIII. in a crystal vessel, and that it soon flew back again to the place it occupied in the convent wall.

Here it may be asked whether the bees we have described are the same that appeared when Rita was an infant in swaddling-clothes. It would be harder to give an answer to this question than to the riddle which Sampson proposed to his bridesmen. Sampson's faithless spouse was able to wrest his secret from him and then reveal it to her Philistine friends: that the sweetness that came forth out of the strong was the honeycomb that was made in the mouth of the lion that he had torn in pieces a short time before. But we can find no answer to our question. However, those biographers of St. Rita who, without hesitation, confused the bees that appeared at her birth with those in the convent may be excused, as they supposed both to be of the same white

colour. But they have been mistaken, for those at present in the convent wall are not white—in fact, they do not differ in colour from ordinary bees, except that they are of a deep red on the back and they want the sting. But perhaps these writers were not so far from the truth, since there is but the accidental variety of colour that distinguishes the present bees from the white ones that appeared first at Rita's birth. And who can say but that those once meant by God to symbolize by their whiteness the splendour of Rita's baptismal innocence may not, through the power of God, have taken on their present appearance to signify the humiliation and sadness of the penances she took upon herself? To change the appearance of a species already existing or to create a new species is easy to God. Let the truth of the matter be where it may, it is clear that both are marvellous, and worthy to be recorded in the history of our saint. But it is time we returned to gaze on her, surrounded in her cradle by those lilies of her incipient sanctity, and crowned with the bright circle of bees that still buzzed around her. We might now inquire whether the bees that entered her innocent mouth made a honeycomb in it, as is believed to have happened to St. Ambrose in his infancy, as if to forecast the mellifluous eloquence which he poured

forth in his manhood in defence of the Church. Although this anecdote as related of St. Rita is not sufficiently well proven, neither is it impossible ; for when there is question of miraculous events the difficulties of time and place do not form an insurmountable obstacle, as they did not in the case of St. Ambrose. At all events, we have two authors that assert it, and perhaps their opinion is supported by the farther statement that is made—that Rita abstained from her mother's milk on the day on which the bees appeared, the fifth day after her birth. God may have wished to give her for corporal food mystical or symbolical honey of unearthly origin, as He had fed her soul with the food of baptismal grace. In this way would be more clearly signified that which was foreshadowed by the appearance of the bees, the insinuating sweetness in word and manner which was afterwards the cause of the conversion of many sinners, which ever brought consolation to the afflicted, and spiritual profit to all who had the good fortune to converse with her.

CHAPTER VI

RITA'S CHILDHOOD

ST. AUGUSTINE in his Confessions takes up two chapters in describing his infancy, and he discovers in that period of his life only misery and vestiges of sin, but he recalls these evils that spring from our sinful origin only to extol the triumphs which Divine grace obtained in his mature years. The time of infancy is, however, one in which, since there can be no acts of reflection, nor exercise of will, there can be no demerit or actual sin, nor merit or virtue. It will not, therefore, be strange if our history passes over the infancy of Rita and proceeds to describe her childhood. From the extraordinary piety that distinguished her parents we can easily surmise what care they took in training and educating their child to instil into her mind the truths of religion. They had abundant proofs that Rita was especially dear to God, that she was born for heaven, and that Divine grace had

marked her for its own. But they knew also that God, who disposes all things wisely, wished them to co-operate in moulding the chosen child to virtue and in establishing her in holiness. They were well aware that even the chiefest vessels of election had for a time kicked against the goads of grace. Nor were they ignorant what a bulwark of defence is raised by education and by the example of parents—a fact which many unhappy parents either know not or are careless of, and hence by their neglect they become the cause of the eternal ruin of their children. It will not, therefore, be useless to remark the watchfulness, the care and anxiety, with which Rita's parents observed all the movements, words, and actions of a child so dear to them, lest she should take a step to the right or to the left of the way that leads to heaven, and which, with the dawning of reason, she began to discern for herself. But these happy parents had no cause for anxiety during the process of instructing and moulding the character of their child, for she had, through God's grace, acquired a disposition marked by uncommon submission and precocious wisdom. Let it suffice to say that even then she could not bear those pastimes and sports which are proper to that tender age, and which are universally regarded as innocent. She had an example in

Tobias, who, although he was the youngest in his tribe, showed himself to be the wisest, and never did anything that was childish.

Another failing, which is dear not only to children, but to all, and especially to the female sex, the love of fine clothes, was an abomination to Rita. We must not believe that a virtuous mother like Amata, especially considering her lowly condition, could allow her daughter to appear in anything savouring of pride or ostentation. On the other hand, Rita, although scrupulously obedient in other things to the slightest wish of her parents, became uneasy whenever they wished her to put on some pretty ornament ; she used even to run away and hide herself at such times, till she saw that her disinclination provoked a smile. Thus, satisfied with her humble dress, she took more pains to adorn her soul than to improve her appearance by the addition of the least ornament. To simplicity in dress she joined a sedateness of manner so beyond her years that it attracted universal respect, admiration, and love, and set a salutary example not only to those of her own age, but to older people also. She restrained to a wonderful degree that common tendency of women to curiosity and gossip, and having her thoughts occupied with higher subjects she avoided all human conversation as far

as good manners and obedience permitted. Obedience was the virtue according to which she regulated all her actions. She regarded a beck of her parents as a command of God which she could not violate ; and her obedience was all the more willing as it accorded with the impulse of grace which impelled her to the practice of all other virtues. For obedience, as Blessed Simon of Cascia observes, is the gate of the virtues. Rita's love of retirement and of prayer had already risen to the heroic point. Whoever wished to see her was certain of finding her either at home or in the neighbouring parish church, which was her favourite place of prayer, where she spent entire hours in meditation and devotion, to the great edification of all. Although penance is a virtue hardly suitable to so tender an age or to such perfect innocence, yet Rita began from her earliest years to chastise her body by different mortifications, and especially by fasting ; and to render her abstinence more meritorious and acceptable to God she distributed to the poor children of the neighbourhood that food which she denied herself, thus bringing forth fruits of mercy and charity from the root of penance. This was the only way in which her loving goodwill and tender compassion could show themselves in action ; poverty made anything further im-

possible. But the Lord, who searches the heart, and delights in men of goodwill, sought nothing more from Rita then. But she was unconsciously increasing in charity and in merit as she grew in years, so that she could apply to herself the saying of Job—that mercy came out with him from his mother's womb, and from his infancy grew up with him.* Not only did her spirit grow, as it were, and become strong by the exercise of these beautiful virtues, but her progress in all virtue was extraordinary.

* Job xxi. 18.

CHAPTER VII

RITA'S LOVE OF RETIREMENT

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST experienced a similar strengthening of the spirit, as we read in that place in which it is also written that he went into the desert, where he hid himself, as Blessed Simon says, in order to give himself up entirely to prayer, contemplation, and penance. The comparison between these saints is often a fitting one, for Rita always follows closely in the footsteps of her great model. It is true that, according to the example of the Psalmist, she walked in the innocence of her heart, in the bosom of her virtuous family, for she found nothing abroad that could distract her spirit from the affairs of her home, whilst her gravity, modesty, and habitual seclusion opened to her a wide field for the exercise of her love of prayer. Yet she was so enamoured of heavenly things that she wearied of the things of earth, and desired, in a certain sense, to be out of the world; and since

this could not be, she regarded with a holy envy the lot of so many anchorites and heroines of solitude, who, in deserts and in the depths of woods, lived lives more like those of angels than of men. She had before her eyes the examples of Blessed Simon, of Blessed Ugolino, of Blessed John, and of the other saintly hermits of St Augustine, who had only recently passed to their reward in heaven, or were still living in the neighbourhood of Rocca Porena. The example of these models of holiness increased in her heart her dearest desire to serve her beloved Jesus amid the silence of the woods and on the mounts of myrrh. But the love of her aged parents, and obedience, more than any thought of her youth and sex, prevented her from fulfilling her generous design. The sacred love with which she was animated made her industrious, and suggested the thought of converting her home into the solitude she longed for. With the consent of her parents she chose a little room separated from the others, and turned it into an oratory. Its walls she decorated with pictures of our Lord's Passion, and there she shut herself in, as into the midst of all delights. Her Divine Lover awaited her there to speak to her heart, and there, far from the eyes of men, in perpetual silence and abstinence, she enjoyed those ineffable consola-

tions of grace which the profane know not of. The constant object of her thoughts, of her ecstasies of soul, of the most ardent love of her heart, was the Passion of her crucified Spouse ; and in the midst of the tears which accompanied her meditation, whilst her heart was filled with Divine compassion, she experienced that true peace and happiness of soul which only grace can produce—how we know not—from sorrow. She felt herself transformed into the Crucified One, for whom alone she now lived—rather, she no longer lived, but Jesus Christ lived in her. In that school of love, through that Divine teaching, she came to know more certainly the fallacy of all worldly things ; she saw how the world deceives us, and she saw also the charms and pomps and pleasures of this life, but she saw them as they really are, and could therefore say with the wise man that they are but vanity and affliction of spirit. She therefore resolved to have no part in this deceitful world, and since life in the desert was denied her, she resolved to bury herself in a cloister. But she had not yet reached the age in which to put her design into execution. · Meanwhile the holy child lived in her first place of retirement for a full twelvemonth, until the obligation of assisting her parents and the duties of charity and obedience forced her from the place

of her spiritual happiness. This happened probably when she was about eleven years old. Her parents were now beginning to feel the burden of their years, and Rita had perforce to enter upon an active life, and exercise works of mercy and justice, without, however, entirely abandoning her practices of meditation. Her history does not tell us how she performed the domestic duties that fell to her lot, perhaps because, from what we know of her life hitherto, that may more easily be imagined than described. Whilst fulfilling the parts of both sisters of Lazarus, she did not cease to envy John in the desert. Although the Holy Spirit had, through her prayers, made known to her many things, and although she continued still to be enlightened from above, yet she knew not what was written in the eternal decrees concerning herself, that Providence only put off to a better time the fulfilment of her thirst for solitude and for a cloistered life. Rita was intended to be an example to every age and condition; she should therefore live other lives before reaching the cloister she panted for.

CHAPTER VIII

RITA'S MARRIAGE

IN the year 1393 Italy, not to say the whole world, was suffering under the evils that proceed from political disturbance, and the state of morals throughout the peninsula was deplorable. Still, the honour of the Church was upheld by the many saints whose lives then adorned it, not the least of whom was Rita. Urban VI. was dead, and Boniface IX. ruled in his place. But the Holy See had to withstand many a rude shock, for the anti-Pope Robert, then near his end, continued to dispute the possession of the Apostolic keys, and at his death left to his more impious successor, Pietro di Luna, his sad legacy of obstinate schism. Heresy, fanaticism,—religious and political—and the utmost corruption of morals were not wanting to fill the cup of Italy's woes.

The weak hands of the cruel and dissolute Wenceslaus still held the sceptre of the West, and

John Paleologus, who had succeeded his father Emmanuel, could only weep over the impending ruin of his falling empire, that was shaken in every part by the infidel arms of the Sultan Bajazet. In Italy the rivalry of the different States, and, above all, the vaulting ambition of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Lord of Milan, served to keep alive disunion, antagonism, and wretchedness. At this very time the republic of Cascia, which, since its revolt against the Holy See, had hardly enjoyed a moment of peace or prosperity, was in arms against the Guelphs of Cerreto, and had at the same time to prosecute a stubborn war against Aquila. In these contests the military portion of Cascia, by their deeds of violence, their robberies, and their atrocities, trampled on every law of humanity and modesty. It is true that hostilities came to an end in 1395, when terms of peace were agreed on; but warlike Cascia could not remain long at rest, but took up arms against Monte Reale in a new war, which lasted till 1397.

Whilst Cascia and the other States we have mentioned were seeking by iniquitous means to widen the borders of the kingdom of confusion and sin, Rita, in Rocca Porena, was meditating only how she could best please God, that, as the Apostle says, she might be holy in body and in spirit. The lurid picture of universal disorder

rightly excited in her feelings of horror, and convinced her all the more of the vanity and cruelty of the world.

She saw the deceitful pleasures, the snares and thorns, the inevitable evils that show themselves at every step, and the dangers that at every moment threaten the soul with ruin. On the other hand, she perceived the great advantages that result from separating one's self from the world; she recalled all the spiritual joy and interior consolation she experienced during the time she lived in retirement in her home, and she therefore felt herself more firmly grounded in her determination to flee for ever from the tumult of worldlings. The solitude which formed the object of her desires, and in which she resolved to offer to God the holocaust of her virginity, was the convent of Cascia, where she afterwards lived and died, called at that time St. Mary Magdalen's, and occupied then, as well as now, by nuns of the Order of St. Augustine. This pious project had been for some time maturing in her mind, and although she was hardly twelve years of age she determined to carry it into effect without any of those wearisome delays which the grace of the Holy Spirit knows not of, which belong to certain weak and hesitating souls that cannot break the world's ties, or those of vain fear, when

God calls them to a state of perfection. Although Rita then heard the call of her Divine Lover, she did not know the time He had fixed for the fulfilling of her wishes, but, overcome by a holy impatience, she resolved to make known to her parents her desire for a religious life. Who can tell what struggles the voice of nature must have caused in her soul at this crisis, as she thought that she was for ever about to separate herself from the side of her dearly loved and aged parents? Even the saints feel the strength of nature, but, like giants, they pass on to triumphs in the kingdom of grace. Thus Rita acted. She shut her ears to the insinuating voice of flesh and blood, informed her parents of her religious vocation, and humbly and fervently begged their leave to obey the voice of God. When they heard their daughter express such a wish, Antonio and Amata, pious though they were, did not hide their sorrow and the trouble they felt. They besought with tears that their only child, the one object of their tenderest love, their only prop and consolation, should not abandon them in their old age. Their tearful pleading, acting on the filial love and obedience which filled Rita's heart, prevailed on her to put off for a better time the fulfilment of her noble purpose. Being so far successful, her parents turned their attention to providing a

husband for her, in order both to make sure of retaining her society and her assistance that had become necessary to them, and to save their family from extinction ; and they fixed their eyes on a young man called, according to some, Ferdinand, and to others Paul. But old eyes do not always see clearly. The young man whom they selected was impulsive and irascible, with a character formed amid the savage surroundings of that time and place—in a word, he was well fitted to try the patience and virtue of Rita. He was proposed as a husband to the saintly girl, and all the weight of parental authority, and every motive that human nature could suggest, were adduced to win her consent. We do not know with what prayers and entreaties the distressed girl opposed the suggestion, but we do know that she showed the repugnance her soul felt. It was not, however, the disposition of her intended husband that made her hate the idea of marriage, for if the knowledge of it were hidden from her parents, it could scarcely be known to a young girl so fond of retirement. All Rita's aversion and complaining sprang from the fear of seeing closed to her the road that led to the conventual life to which she aspired, and the dread of having to dwell in the midst of an evil and destroying world, in which she would be

plunged into the dangerous cares of married life. Seeing at last that her tears could not bend her parents to her wishes, and feeling somewhat shaken by considerations of filial piety and obedience, she had recourse in her hard trial to the Father of light. During her prayer she became conscious of an inspiration that told her to bend her neck to the yoke of matrimony, and thus understood that what she took to be a suggestion of paternal love, purely human and the voice of flesh and blood, was in reality a disposition of heaven. Resignation to the Divine will partly restored her peace of mind, and the consent to her marriage which she announced to her parents filled them with satisfaction. Rita gave her consent through an impulse of obedience, and since perfect obedience to the Divine will requires a holy blindness, she took no care to inquire about the fortune, appearance, or other qualities of her future husband. Rita was therefore in the first flower of her youth, her beauty, and virtue when, under the nuptial veil of her modesty, she stood before the altar to become a party to that indissoluble contract which Jesus Christ raised to the dignity of a Sacrament, and which gives children to the people of God. The relatives and friends on both sides were resolved to celebrate the nuptials with feasting, but the

common joy did not reach the heart of the pious bride, for that was fixed on nobler objects. To the hour of her marriage Rita had been an excellent example to all virgins. In those few years she had given enough lessons to show how virginal candour and pure innocence should be preserved ; she had now to follow another path to become a bright example of virtue to all who live in the married state.

CHAPTER IX

RITA AS WIFE

THE Apostle's saying, that 'all things work together for good to those who love God,' remains always true. Rita had passed from the state of virginity to that of matrimony, yet this step towards a lower state was destined to lead her to a higher grade of glory. Thus St. Monica, whose faithful follower our heroine was ever to be, would not have been St. Augustine's mother by nature, and in the order of grace would not have drawn the erring Patrizio, her husband, to God, would not have so wide a field wherein to exercise her patience and fortitude, would not have left all those examples of virtue which her son Augustine admires and exalts in his book of 'Confessions,' if Divine Providence had not led her by that path which, long after, her daughter Rita followed.

The ways are diverse and diverse are the gifts, but the Spirit is the same which guides souls in

a wonderful manner towards greater good. The way of tribulation was that which the Lord opened to our saint, and by the means of matrimony He wished her to pass through fire and water—in other words, through every sort of danger, temptation, and persecution, in order to prove and purify her, as gold is purified in the furnace, and thence to receive her into heaven as a most pure holocaust. Hence the God whose wish placed her in the married state so disposed it that she should pass from her original life of filial submission to that of slavery under a tyrannical husband. Thus it was that hardly had a few days passed after the marriage than her unworthy husband began to illtreat the innocent Rita with reproaches, abuse, threats, and even blows, of which the only cause was his own brutal inclination. But our gentle heroine had studied in the school of the Crucified One ; she had already learned how to conquer her passions even to the extent of rejoicing in the midst of tribulation, for she was convinced that tribulation is the food of Christian patience, that penitence is the great proof of real virtue, and that on the exercise of it is based our priceless hope of eternal good that shall not fail us.

Yet because she was aware that not all who suffer are blessed, but only those who suffer for

justice' sake, she took every care and tried every means to please her husband, whom nothing could satisfy. She waited on him, tried to discover his wants, sought to interpret his unspoken wishes, studied his temper—in a word, she did her utmost never to give him the least cause to complain, at least in everything in which her duty as a Christian permitted. She was well aware that a wife ought to regard her husband as a master to whom that obedience and reverential fear are due which the Church owes to her head, Christ Jesus. She not only knew, but practised it in a way that astonished all who were acquainted with the natural brutality of her husband and her own heroic submission, meekness, and invincible constancy. She obeyed his every beck, and undertook no duty without first seeking his approval. So far did she carry this submission that she did not go out of her house even to attend the Divine offices in church without having first obtained his permission. With all this the contest was a long one between the husband's cruelty and the wife's sweetness of temper, between his vicious nature and her virtue, between his pride and her humility, his ferocity and her meekness, his arrogance and her tractableness, between his power to give pain and her ability to suffer.

But the victory was gained by Rita's virtues,

for her long-suffering at length won her husband's heart, and brought unity and love into their home. Whenever afterwards Ferdinand felt inclined, as he sometimes did, to have recourse to cutting words or unseemly acts, at the sight of her humility and patience, and the memory of her gentle admonitions, he adopted the expedient of going out of the house till his mind recovered its tranquillity. We read, too, that, completely overcome by her sweet gentleness, he one day threw himself at her feet to ask pardon from her for his faults and to promise to correct them. To the unspeakable consolation of Rita he kept this promise, nor was she slow to refer all the praise of this conversion to the Giver of all good things, who alone is Lord of the human heart. When fraternal correction is not the outcome of irritation or pride, it is an instrument of Divine grace, and we know that it has no other object than the salvation of him who is corrected when the word and manner which convey it are marked by moderation and kindness. Rita therefore brought into action all the graces, natural and supernatural, which she possessed, in order to bind closely to her that unquiet heart of her husband, and to draw him to the Lord, and induce him to fulfil his Christian obligations.

Two sons were born to them, the elder of whom

was named Gian Giacomo, and the other Paolo Maria. Both of them inherited their father's quarrelsome and irascible temperament, and his example did not help to improve them. We may easily imagine the trouble, the watchfulness, the uneasiness, the fear, and anxiety which a devoted Christian mother like Rita must have experienced in rearing, educating, and, above all, in forming the minds of her young children. The words which she kept continually repeating in their ears, and which she would have wished to impress indelibly on their hearts, were words of the holy fear of God, of piety and devotion. But not so much with words did the pious mother endeavour to instil into them the pure maxims of the Gospel as by the example of her own exalted virtues. Would that fathers and mothers would learn once for all from the saints, and become convinced of the undeniable truth that their children are moulded more by their example than by their words, even when these are not contradicted by their deeds! Rita, however, in her vigilance spared nothing, neither words nor actions, nor advice nor blame, nor threats nor chastisements, to train these tender plants heavenwards; but their natural and more easy tendency was downwards, and this was her greatest cause of sorrow amongst so many causes,

and the worst of all her troubles. We do not mean to say that Gian Giacomo and Paolo were like David's sons Amnon and Absalom, yet it is a fact that the children of holy people are sometimes self-willed and wicked, however holy their upbringing may have been. Rita, however, knew what a mother's duty was, and she therefore, in bringing up her children, never allowed her zeal to slacken, nor her patience to wear out, nor her watchfulness to grow weary.

The trials were severe enough which our heroine had to undergo from the society of an irascible husband, whose virtue was none of the most steadfast, but they were redoubled by the evil inclinations she saw appear in her children, and their hatred of all good instruction. The citizens of the heavenly kingdom, whilst they live in this world amongst the sinful and the wicked, must, as St. Augustine teaches, be tossed about by temptations, in order that they may keep themselves in the practice of virtue, and be proved as gold is proved in the crucible. Tried by such afflictions, Rita seemed to have come to such a pass that she could do nothing else than, with the prophet, raise her pure hands to heaven night and day, to seek in God alone some relief in her troubles and some defence against the evils of her house.*

* Ps. lxxvi. 2.

If ever she deemed it necessary to have recourse to prayer, now assuredly was a time that called for redoubled prayer and the greatest fervour. She therefore prayed without ceasing. Her continued meditations on the sufferings of our Lord was a relief in her distress ; frequent communion brought comfort to her troubled state, and her particular devotion to our Blessed Lady, consoler of the afflicted, to St. John the Baptist, St. Augustine, and St. Nicholas of Tolentine, often brought forgetfulness of her woes. Women of the world enduring the like suffering and trouble would deem themselves dispensed from the practice of any other mortification, and in their love of ease, which readily flatters them, would find a thousand pretexts to exempt themselves even from the fasts that are commanded. But Rita, who was in the world but not of it, far from suspending the acts of penitence she was used to practise before her marriage, took refuge in works of greater austerity, in abstinence and fastings and in chastising her body. In spite of these acts of mortification, she still had sufficient strength and vigour to attend to all the needs of her house and assist the wants of her neighbours ; she relieved the necessities of the poverty stricken, and with her own hands prepared food for them ; by the bedsides of the sick she was unwearying,

and, in a word, made herself all things to all men. When she had to appear abroad, either in the performance of her works of charity or to be present at the Divine mysteries in the church, her angelic modesty and the goodness and interior peace which shone in her countenance served to edify all who saw her. These were her adornments, not the trappings of worldly show, which from childhood she abhorred, and which were more detestable in her eyes now that she had advanced so far on the way of perfection. She carefully avoided all unbecoming neglect in dress, and appeared in a garb free from everything savouring of vanity, not to say indecency—such a dress as would escape the eyes of the curious, and which, instead of luxuriousness, showed a contempt of the present life, and was exactly what necessity and Christian humility required. In her intercourse with others, whilst always well-mannered and agreeable, she possessed singular tact in avoiding all conversations which were not of God or of works of corporal or spiritual mercy to her neighbours. No one ever heard from her lips any of those complaints against her husband which are so frequent when women meet together. If ever any of her female acquaintances who knew how she was treated by her ill-tempered husband tried to provoke her to complain by affected pity,

as grumbling women not unfrequently did, she either turned the conversation to another subject or covered her husband's faults with the mantle of charity, and thereby gave a practical example of virtue which her neighbours might to their advantage imitate. In brief, St. Rita was another St. Monica: she was the strong woman of the parables of Solomon, and was in all respects the best model for married women.

CHAPTER X

DEATH OF RITA'S HUSBAND AND CHILDREN— RITA AS WIDOW

RITA had succeeded, as we have said, in assuaging the cruelty that seemed to have been natural to her husband. The means she employed to effect this change were the gentle manner which she naturally possessed, and which Divine grace made still more gentle; the good advice she ever gave, her kindness and unwearying patience, her good example, and, above all, her fervent prayers. But whether it was that his enemies, brooding over old causes of hate, resolved to take revenge for past offences, or that Ferdinand, in a fresh outburst of passion, had exposed himself to new quarrels and new dangers, the fact remains that when he had lived eighteen years with Rita he was barbarously murdered a short distance outside Rocca Porena (the place where the unfortunate victim fell is still shown). Hardly had the report of his tragic

death reached the ears of his widowed spouse than, despite her magnanimous heart, she paid the tribute of nature in an outburst of bitter, scalding tears. In the depths of her heart the holy woman felt the wounds that had taken from her side the husband she loved. But the thoughts that made her weep were not thoughts of temporal losses, or of her sorrow, or of being left alone to provide for her family, or of having to dwell with undutiful children with no one to support her. Far other sadder and more serious considerations were breaking her heart. A little human feeling and a weak grasp of faith are enough to fill us with horror at hearing of a violent death. We may, then, easily imagine what grief Rita felt as she considered in the light of her lively faith all the evil on the one part and the other that may have preceded and accompanied that homicidal attempt, or as she dwelt on the uncertainty of pardon or of her husband's penitence, or his having to appear before his Judge without having received the last Sacraments. Nevertheless, that lively faith which made her feel doubly the crushing force of the calamity that had overtaken her soon raised her above herself, above death and every human consideration. She raised the eyes of her soul to heaven and remembered, and was sure that Divine Providence,

whose designs are inscrutable, not only disposes all the good that is done, but permits all the evil which comes from man's free-will. This thought sufficed to bow her down before the throne of the Divine Majesty, to adore His just judgments, and hence came comfort to her bruised heart. The saints have no need of the barren consolations of the world; they find in religion that comfort which reason alone can never give. Our noble heroine did not for a moment hesitate to pardon sincerely from her heart the murderers of her unfortunate husband, but, mindful of the example of Jesus Christ, who prayed to the Eternal Father for those who crucified Him, and of St. Stephen, who interceded for those who were stoning him to death, she too offered fervent supplications to the Divine Mercy for those cruel murderers.

Hardly had Rita raised her mind above the stormy sea of her sorrows than a new trouble appeared to afflict her. She perceived with consternation that her sons, although yet of tender years, were plotting vengeance against those who were guilty of their father's blood. The afflicted widow exerted all her force by word and deed to excite in them sentiments of resignation and of forgiveness and of Christian charity. She ceased not to keep before their minds the eternal maxims,

the fear of judgment and of hell, the examples of the saints, and especially the example of our crucified Redeemer, who, in the extremity of His sufferings, interceded for His inhuman executioners. She took care, too, immediately to remove out of the sight of her sons the bloody garments of her slain husband. But in spite of all her advice and solitude, the sorrowing mother could not touch her children's vengeful hearts, or, if she did succeed in softening them, it was but for a moment they abandoned their wicked intentions. Amidst circumstances of such distress, and oppressed by her fears, the unhappy widow knew not whither to turn, and on earth she found only subjects of sorrow and vestiges of sin. She turned her weeping eyes once more to heaven, and there again she found the greatest comfort in her sufferings. Although she was a mother, and had a mother's affectionate heart, yet because she loved and sought God's honour more than her own flesh and blood, like a noble Christian heroine, she supplicated the Lord either to change her children's hearts or to take them out of this world before they could accomplish the vengeance they were meditating. Rita's vows were acceptable to heaven, and to her was granted to complete Abraham's sacrifice in a new way—for the patriarch's knife was arrested in

mid-air, and Isaac was saved; but she saw her two sons fall one after another victims to her prayers that pierced the heavens. Thus we may well hope that the most merciful Lord provided for their eternal salvation during their mortal illness, and then took them, lest wickedness should alter their understanding,* and at the same time provided for the mother by opening to her a way into a new life far removed from the world and so long the object of her wishes, a life altogether spiritual and by anticipation blessed. The brave woman did not weep, and although at the time of her husband's tragic end she was dissolved in tears through fear about the salvation of his soul and the souls of his murderers, yet at the deaths of her children she only thanked her God who had taken them away from the dangers of sin and the risk of another more dreadful death—that of the soul.

It is difficult to discover how long Rita had to struggle with her vengeful children, or how long she remained in the world after they had passed to eternity. It seems certain, however, that the time she lived as a widow was short. But we know that during that period she placed all her confidence in God, and that she was engaged night and day in the practice of most perfect

* *Wisd. of Sol. iv. 11.*

prayer,* according to St. Paul's instruction to widows. She bore the cross with Jesus Christ, and lived a life of perpetual self-denial. More than ever she kept her body in subjection by scourgings and continued fasting, and she distributed to the poor that part of her food which her abstinence spared. She rejoiced in performing works of mercy, and was, in a word, all love towards God and her neighbour, and in no way solicitous about herself. Amongst other instances of her heroic charity we read that, happening one day upon a poor man half naked and trembling with cold, she took one of her own garments and gave it to him, and went on her way rejoicing that God had given her the opportunity and the grace to deprive herself of what she herself needed in order to help one of the poor of the Lord. Her dress was of coarse serge, and was a dark blue in colour, and during the severity of the winter she added a rough cloak. She always wore sack-cloth that she might always be doing penance. In retirement alone she found her consolation and joy; and no sooner were her children dead than her old burning desire to enclose herself once for all within the cherished shadows of the cloister sprang into life again. We may relate an incident which gave a new impetus to her

* 1 Tim. v. 5.

vocation, as it is told by an ancient writer : Having gone one day from Rocca Porena to Cascia, she went into the church of the Augustinian nuns whilst Mass was being said, and there she felt as if those words of our Saviour were being imprinted on her mind, ' I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life '—words which then passed into her heart to pierce it with the Divine love which spoke to her and invited her.

We may well believe, too, that the worthy examples of other female saints then living or but recently gone to their reward offered new arguments to urge her not to delay entering on a conventual life. The memory of St. Bridget of Sweden and Blessed Angela of Foligno was still recent, whilst St. Margaret of Monferrato and St. Frances of Rome were then still living, all of them illustrious women raised up by God, as Rita was in Cascia, to oppose and bear testimony against the corruption of those times, and all of them predestined to become models to the virgins of the cloister after having adorned in the world the three states of virginity, married life and widowhood. But even without these examples Rita was sufficiently conscious of the interior voice of her heavenly Spouse, and she readily prepared to obey it. Thus Abraham had hardly heard the angel's voice when he arose in the dark-

ness of the night and went to sacrifice his son ; the shepherds who were watching their flocks when they heard the announcement of the Divine Infant's birth ran to offer Him their homage ; the Magi, as soon as they saw the new star, did not hesitate to undertake their long journey to adore the King of kings in His swaddling-clothes ; the Apostles, at the first call of the Redeemer, left their nets and followed Him ; the head of the Apostles, Peter, at a sign from the angel, rose quickly from his broken chains ; so Rita determined to hide herself without delay in that sacred retreat where her Divine Lover was awaiting her. That retreat, as we have said, was the convent in Cascia of the nuns who follow the rule of the great Augustine, who were called at that time nuns of St. Mary Magdalen, from the ancient title of their church, and who were remarkable for strict observance. We have said before that the Augustinian Order flourished there not only in the convent of the nuns, but in the wonderful sanctity of the worthy followers of the Blessed Simon, Blessed Ugolino, and Blessed John and Simon, all of whom had dwelt in the woods of Cascia. This, too, must have been a strong attraction to our saint, and a further inducement to fix her mind unchangeably on Cascia. The memory of the heroic virtues practised by St. Nicholas of

Tolentine, her special advocate, was still fresh in the minds of men, and the fame of his stupendous miracles had spread throughout the land. But the principal motive why she sought to wear the habit of St. Augustine was that God in His inscrutable decrees had called her to that state by the loving invitations of His grace. The pious widow approached the nuns, and, throwing herself at their feet, in simple words and with all the fervour of her heart expressed her desire to serve God within their walls and in that penitential garb they wore. But her request was vain ; it was not thought convenient to receive a widow in a convent intended for virgins, and it was against their custom. Rita took her refusal patiently, but she did not lose courage, and, like Abraham, she hoped against hope.* Some time after she went back again, represented that she had a vocation, renewed her prayers and sighs ; but she was rejected a second and, again, a third time. But the more the nuns persisted in refusing her admission, the more did Rita acquire the merit of humility, patience, and unalterable confidence in God. She attributed her refusal to her own unworthiness, and in her self-contempt she more and more conformed herself to her model, Jesus. This was the manner of life which

* Rom. iv. 18.

Rita led in the world, where she was a mirror of every virtue to virgins, to the married, and to widows. We shall see how she became an example of sanctity to religious in the cloister.

END OF PART I

Part II

RITA IN THE CLOISTER

CHAPTER I

RITA'S MIRACULOUS ENTRY INTO THE CLOISTER AND HER RECEPTION

ALL Rita's thoughts and all her affections were centred in heaven, and the reason why she desired to lead a more perfect life in the cloister was thereby to make more certain of attaining the object of her desires. But the world in that century of wickedness was engaged about far different things ; the vortex of worldly hopes and ambitions had engulfed almost all the aspirations of men. In the East, rapine, vice, violence, murder, irreligion, and a long train of irreparable wrongs, had followed quickly upon the victories of Sultan Bajazet and the defeats of the Emperor Emmanuel. The prolonged war was still being waged in the German Empire between Sigismund and the rebellious Hussites, who despised human life in their endeavours to spread their heresy and profane and overthrow the altar.

The government of the Church, then under Pope John XXIII., was most violently harassed by the anti-Pope Pietro di Luna, whose contumacy the Council of Constance failed to break down, as the Council of Pisa had failed before. Italy continued to be the laughing-stock of tyrants and of the resuscitated factions of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Of the two Visconti who governed the Cisalpine province, one was the slave of his vices and the other was the prisoner of his rebellious subject Facino Cane, tyrant of Alexandria, who was the formidable chief of a marauding band and the despoiler of the province. The tyrannous usurpations of Ottobono in Parma, Da Vignate in Lodi, Fondolo in Cremona, and Malatesta in Brescia still continued. The Romagna and the Marshes enjoyed no higher degree of liberty or prosperity under the yoke of despotism. The factions of Durozzo and of Anjou still disputed possession of the kingdom of Naples, and the ambitious Ladislaus, with designs on the whole Italian peninsula, began to threaten Rome with the fugitive Pontiff. The republics of Venice, Genoa, Florence, and Siena were either plotting against one another or actually at war. Cascia was the only one of the republics that had begun to taste the almost forgotten fruits of peace. But neither in Cascia nor

elsewhere were good morals to be found ; they seemed to have barely secured a refuge in the cloisters. Hence Rita was sighing night and day for the sacred shelter, and although she had till then bloomed as a stainless lily among thorns, yet she did not consider that she could live secure in the danger-laden atmosphere that surrounded her. But how could she aspire to a cloistered life when all hope seemed futile after the repulses she had received ? Yet to that life she aspired, and not in vain. For those undertakings which seem arduous and sometimes impossible become not only practicable, but easy to heroic faith. The invitations which Divine grace held out to her and the refusals with which Rita was met by the nuns were nothing more than the loving pleasantries of her heavenly Spouse, and but trials of her virtue and constancy. Therefore the more her wishes were frustrated, the more frequent became her prayers and the more fervent the sighs of her heart. She had recourse, too, to the mediation of the saints, and did not fear to make herself importunate to her protectors, St. John the Baptist, St. Augustine, and St. Nicholas. And the measure of the effect which her prayers produced was, as St. Augustine teaches, the fervour of the love that preceded them. She merited the favour she sought, and received it. Here is

how the incident is related by the writers of her life :

The saint was one night kneeling on the ground, rapt in prayer, her hands extended to heaven after her usual manner and as the royal prophet teaches, when she suddenly heard a knocking at the door of her house, and someone calling out her name. The first feeling of the lonely widow was one of trouble and fear, but she invoked the Divine assistance, took courage, and went to the window—but nothing was to be seen or heard. She returned to her prayer, but was interrupted by the same unknown voice calling her. Her fear increased, but she went to the window again—and again there was only darkness and silence without. She then began to think it might be some trick of the devil, and, puzzled between doubt and fear, she threw herself at the feet of Jesus Christ, and besought Him more fervently to enlighten and to help her, and that He would be pleased to make known His Divine will, whether what she had experienced was a delusion of the devil or a voice from heaven. Her short prayer was so pleasing to God that Rita soon felt herself rapt in ecstasy, and then she saw and heard clearly, and her fear was changed into joyful consolation. She saw her three holy patrons, and heard the joyous words with which

the spouse of the Canticles called his beloved, 'Arise, make haste, my love, and come—come, for it is time at last to enter the cloister from which thou hast been repulsed so many times.' As soon as these words had been uttered, the rapture of her ecstasy ceased, but she still retained, deeply impressed on her mind, a vivid picture of the entire vision. Then, by a Divine impulse, she went to the window a third time, and, enlightened by God, she saw, to her great surprise, a person of venerable aspect, who invited her by signs to follow him. Whether he appeared in his usual rough vesture of woven camel-hair, or clad in skins, or in other guise, we know not, but for certain it was no other than St. John the Precursor, as Rita was not slow to recognise, and he it was who was so clearly manifested to her in the preceding vision. She felt her heart overflowing with rapture, and hastened to obey the signs of her heavenly guide. Hardly had she reached the spot where he stood than her astonishment and joy were still further increased, for there, at either side of her great protector, stood her other patrons, Augustine and Nicholas, both ready and prepared to escort her towards the fate she desired so ardently for herself. It will not be out of place to remark here that the house in which Rita dwelt and out of which she went on the night in

which these extraordinary events occurred was built at the base of a steep shelf of rock anciently called the 'Gun' of Rocca Porena, and which it was almost impossible to climb. Yet, leaving the usual road, it was by way of this rock that her sainted guides led Rita, perhaps to indicate to her by the precipitous nature of the place the steepness of the mountain of monastic perfection which she was destined to scale, and by the chasm below the terrible nature of a fall from grace. Rita was seized by sudden fear at the sight here presented to her, but Divine grace and her holy companions brought her comfort, and enabled her to rise superior to herself, so that she mounted fearlessly through the darkness of the night over the rough stones and trunks of fallen trees till she reached the highest point of that beetling rock, which is now called the 'Saint's Rock,' from so memorable an occurrence. If the ascent of the rock is difficult, the descent on the side of Cascia is quite impossible, from whence it is believed that when the four saints had accomplished the difficult ascent they were either borne through the air from mountain to mountain, or else passed without pause to their intended goal, as if to signify the liberty enjoyed by all who reach the highest point of perfection and have climbed the mount of God. However the authors may differ in minor points in describ-

ing this event, we may well judge that everything connected with it is miraculous, as Rita's entry into the convent was also miraculous, for she entered whilst the gates were closed, or through a gate opened for her and closed when she had passed the portals by an invisible hand.

When Rita found herself within the sacred enclosure where she had so ardently desired to be, her glorious escort disappeared in a moment from sight, and she was abandoned and left all alone in the darkness, and had to pass the remainder of the night in an ecstasy of wonder, but tossed about on a sea of uncertainty by the rush of the thoughts that filled her mind. The nuns rose in the early morning to sing the praises of the Lord, and what was their surprise when they saw within their convent, and trembling with fright, the humble widow whom they had repeatedly rejected! They plied her with questions, and Rita replied simply and modestly by describing the whole history of the miraculous occurrence of the night. For the last time she begged them with the greatest fervour not to reject her any longer—and how could they refuse her in the face of so evident a miracle? The nuns, therefore, with common consent and unusual applause, received the holy widow into their number, and after joining with her in thanking

and praising the Most High, they put on her their penitential habit, and admitted her to the novitiate with all solemnity and every mark of general satisfaction. The nuns were delighted at the turn of events, and Rita's joy exceeded all bounds, till, comparing her unworthiness with the great goodness of God, she was abashed before Him. The more she thought on the greatness of the remarkable favours conferred on her, the more profound did her humility become, and she poured forth a thousand times her tribute of gratitude to heaven, but could never find words or thoughts able to express the thanks she owed to Divine Providence.

This miraculous entry into the convent occurred during the unhappy years we have before described, or about the year 1413, when Rita was nearly thirty-two years of age; for she was married in her thirteenth year, and lived eighteen years with her husband, and was a widow for about a year, when her second son died; whilst the interval between that event and her entry to the convent, the period of her repeated rejections, must have been short. In the same year the Augustinian Order could boast of another splendid addition to its members, for the reception of Alexander Oliva, called the Blessed, occurred then. He afterwards reached the highest honours

within the Order, and was raised to the dignity of Cardinal before he passed to the glory he had prepared for himself in heaven. But the Order has greater reason to be proud of Rita's reception, because, although her life was passed in obscurity and far from the eyes of the world, it certainly was not less bright with the splendour of the Saints, and after death she has acquired more of the veneration of the faithful.

CHAPTER II

RITA AS NOVICE : HER PROFESSION

FROM her early youth Rita had a great longing for a solitary life, but now that the Omnipotent God had placed her in the convent she had no further reason to sigh for the deserts of the Jordan, the solitudes of Tagaste, the silence of Valmanente, the groves of her native place, or any other home of hermits. The cloister constituted the fulfilment of all her desires, and her only remaining anxiety was to emulate the great virtues of her three holy patrons, the blessed hermits of Cascia, and the other holy ones whose lives had made the glory of the solitudes. To say truth, it must have cost her very little labour to follow in their footsteps, for there was no need for her to change her habits and manners when she put off a secular dress for the garb of a nun, and she had but to live the remainder of her life as she had hitherto lived in order to reach the highest point of per-

fection. Jesus Christ teaches us that the surest way of attaining perfection is by renouncing all earthly possessions, and our saint, although she had always lived completely detached from worldly things, hastened to practise the Saviour's teaching in the most effectual manner by distributing all her slender fortune amongst the poor. Thus, without property, without husband or children, and far from her relatives, Rita rejoiced to be an abject slave in the house of the King of Peace, and deemed herself to enjoy a nobler freedom, more ample wealth, and a happier lot than they who dwell in the sumptuous tabernacles of sinners surrounded by the riches, the pomp, and the glory of this world.

No one can tell us better than her companions in religion how she lived during the year of her noviceship, and they were astonished and confused at what they observed in her, and from the first regarded her as a model of the purest and most tried virtue. Poverty, chastity, and obedience had nothing to alarm her, for she was long accustomed to live in poverty in Rocca Porena; her body she had crucified with Christ in God; and she had lived subject not only to her prudent parents, but to a cruel husband. So also had the other virtues which she practised in her noviceship become familiar to her in the world, if we

except alone some prescribed corporal penances and the more abundant prayers which she was enabled to offer. Nothing else regarding her can be established from the scanty memorials of those obscure times, and we only know that as the time of noviceship went on she persevered in those holy practices of extraordinary piety and austere penance, and prepared to bind herself to her God with stronger ties on the day of her new regeneration. The learned Cardinal Seripando and others call the day of the formal profession of monastic vows the day of new regeneration, for through the sacrifice then made of one's will, of bodily pleasures, and of property, the total remission of all punishment due to sin may be merited. That day at length arrived, and the holy novice, having first made a rigorous examination of her whole life and marked all the stains on her pure conscience, which she removed by the fire of her sorrow and the blood of Jesus Christ, presented herself before the altar to vow perpetual observance of the evangelical counsels. She had no hesitation in placing her hand on the holy Rule of the great Augustine, for her heroic trust in the assistance of grace gave her courage, and for the rest, although the Rule may seem severe to the minds of worldlings, the saints regard it but as a law of love, and a cord to unite souls to God.

Therefore Rita preferred this sweet servitude to all the kingdoms of earth, and considered herself the happiest of women since she had at last reached the goal towards which from her earliest years she had felt herself drawn by heaven's gentle violence.

The exact date of the profession is unknown, but it very probably took place when Fr. Pietro di Vena Tolosano was General of the Order, and he succeeded in that office Fr. Saracini, who was from Rocca Porena, and who had been made Bishop of Macerata. The date of profession would therefore be about 1414. History leaves us to imagine also the feelings of the newly-professed nun, but we may well judge from her past that that solemn day was one of an outpouring of love and gratitude to God. But of one incident connected with the day we are informed, and it is that whilst Rita, never satisfied that she had sufficiently extolled the goodness of the Lord, was still kneeling late at night before the crucifix, she suddenly felt herself ravished out of her senses into a state of sublime ecstasy. She thereupon saw in spirit what was given Jacob to see in a dream—a ladder that reached from earth to heaven, and angels ascending and descending by it, and at the summit our Lord, who was inviting her to ascend. We may believe that this was

the mystic ladder of charity, whose steps, as St. Augustine says, God Himself prepares, so that those chosen souls which He wishes to exalt may ascend by them, and at whose top He stands to await them at the term of their journey to receive and introduce them into the possession of heaven. But no one could penetrate its meaning better than the ecstatic Rita. The holy woman awoke from her ecstasy enlightened by these heavenly instructions, and came out of the light of God to seek Him again and follow His leading with greater anxiety amidst the darkness of our mortal state.

CHAPTER III

RITA'S CHARITY

WHAT constitutes the greatness of the mystic city, the new Jerusalem, is not the number and variety of its inhabitants, or the fame of great undertakings, but charity alone. In fact, the Virgin Mary was exalted above all the choirs of heaven, and St. John the Baptist was called the greatest of the saints even before the testimony at the Jordan, although their lives were nothing more than a continuous exercise of charity. Hence, coming to speak of Rita, if she had charity she possessed all things,* since the fulness of the law is charity, and if she had it in an eminent degree she was a great saint, for perfect charity is perfect justice.† This is the sublime principle which St. Augustine, himself a great master of charity and evangelical perfection, proposes in that golden Rule of his, which so many religious Orders have adopted, and which Rita

* 1 Cor. xiii.

† St. Augustine.

observed to the last letter—a principle which, as Blessed Alphonsus of Oroza says, is a summary of the entire Christian religion, and which at the same time proves the excellence and the adaptability of the Rule to all ages.

It was to the attainment of charity that Rita even before her profession, but more determinedly afterwards, gave her undivided attention, and employed all the affections of her heart and the powers of her mind. We leave it to others to describe her heroic faith and hope; for us it will be enough to treat of that virtue which presupposes the other two—embraces them and gives them their life. The first proof that one possesses this virtue is fulfilling the will of God by observing His holy law, as Jesus Christ taught us when He said: ‘He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them: he it is that loveth Me. And He that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him.’* Now, all those who have written the life of our saint and the evidence of tradition regarding her assure us that she observed with the utmost exactness all the commandments of God, the precepts of the Church, and the commands of her superiors. The very manner with which she observed these precepts was perfect, for she always obeyed

* John xiv. 21.

cheerfully, and with joy readily and exactly sought to anticipate commands, and to exceed in fulfilling them. And this exact observance was extended not only to what is of command, but to the evangelical counsels also, and yet so light to her was the weight of this burden that she took upon herself very many works of supererogation to give an outlet to her burning piety. She was the first to rise from her bed at midnight, the first at prayer, in the choir, at instruction, at penitential observances and the works of mercy, in obedience, first at all the duties of the community, in which latter she was always best pleased the meaner the office entrusted to her to perform. In the midst of her uninterrupted occupations and vigils she had no other thought than to find the safest ways of seconding the holy will of God, a thought that produced in her that holy fear which is the offspring of love. She was always afraid of offending her most loving God even in the slightest matter, and so fearsome of it was she that the very name of sin was a horror to her. Hence, to remove as far as possible all danger of sin, she imposed on herself a law of rigorous silence, for she knew the truth of the saying of St. James the Apostle, that 'if any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.'*

* Jas. iii. 2.

In order more easily to carry out her design she remained shut up in her cell alone with her agonized Spouse Jesus, like a 'dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the wall.'* She never left her cell except to find her sovereign good either in the Blessed Sacrament or amongst the poor and sick, or in such other works of charity as her state permitted her to perform. Even in circumstances such as these she was on her guard to utter no word that she had not weighed well, and it is said of her that she even used to keep a pebble in her mouth to remind her to preserve the silence she loved.

Sometimes, of course, she had to speak, through necessity or politeness, or for convenience' sake, and in such cases her words were in accord with the feelings of her heart, and hence, since she was all spirit, her discourses were on things of the spirit; she was all charity, and her speech therefore tended to the greater glory of God and the salvation of her neighbours. She was not wanting in that easy fluency which springs from the heart and can reach hearts, which is proper to the saints and inspires sanctity, which feeds on love and draws souls to God. Whether Rita possessed this honied eloquence from the time the wonderful bees appeared over her cradle,

* Cant. ii. 14.

or acquired it by the practice of the greatest charity towards her neighbour, only God, who gave it to her, knows. We only know that she made use of the opportunities which this gift afforded her to give advice to doubting souls, to comfort the pusillanimous, to console the afflicted, to bring back the erring to the way of salvation, to practise these and other works of mercy with that happy success which the Giver of every good gift was wont to grant her.

Amongst her wonderful deeds of charity we find it recorded that having heard of two persons of the town who had been long living in a state of sin, and were thereby the cause of great public scandal, she wept for their sins, and then determined on the difficult task of making them separate and leading them to repent. Rita had had too many proofs of the Divine goodness not to be confident of success in her present undertaking. She first had recourse to prayer and to penance, which she offered in union with the sufferings of Jesus Christ for the conversion of the sinners, and then had each of the scandal-givers brought to her in turn, and, alone with them, by her gentle insinuating manner she brought them to see their deplorable condition, and she had the happiness of seeing them shed tears of compunction and afterwards perform constant

penance for their past transgressions. In very truth, such evils as those under which these two sinners laboured were what excited Rita's greatest compassion, but she was by no means wanting in compassion for those suffering from bodily ills, nor was her fervent charity slow in coming to their assistance. Never was anyone ill in the convent whom Rita did not nurse, often for whole days and nights. She saw in the sick Jesus Christ Himself, and therefore delighted to be by their bedsides. She pitied them, and sought to soothe their pains by the sweet considerations which religion, and especially the Passion of Christ, inspired her. With her own hands she gladly rendered them every service, even the meanest and most nauseating, and for this blessed work of charity she did not hesitate to forsake her usual devotional practices, and feared not to leave God for God's work. In a word, she was all things to all, for, as St. Paul, too, had experienced, her compassion made the infirmities of the suffering her own. And therefore all those who died in the convent during her forty years of life in it had the happiness of having her for their attendant and consoler, and drew their last breath in her holy arms, reclining against her tender heart. Her very charity was the reason which condemned her for many years to a

total separation from her beloved sisters in religion, lest, as we shall tell later, the offensive odour of a sore on her forehead, by which she was afflicted, might render her presence disagreeable to them. She then saw very well that she had become almost an outcast from the community, but she felt no resentment on that account, but lived as an exile, contented in her cell, since she knew that she was no inconvenience to her neighbour, and gave no offence to God. She even rejoiced in her humiliation and in her infirmities and her separation from creatures. We omit many other proofs of the greatness of the charity to God and her neighbour which filled Rita's heart. In order to know her charity we have but to recall how she lived with a cruel and ferocious husband, how she interceded for his murderers, how she offered her very children as a sacrifice to God, how she devoted her time in the world to deeds and prayers for her neighbour's good. Such was her charity, heartfelt, unbounded, kind, patient, strong, and unconquerable.

Hitherto we have spoken only of Rita's effective or working charity, or, at most, of her love to her neighbour, but what description dare we give of her internal love of God? It would never be possible for us to describe the ardour and fire of love which was ever consuming her heart. How

her affections soared towards heaven, how her soul was transformed through Divine love, how the interior life of that seraph of charity was lived, it would be impossible to describe. However, we shall try to convey an idea, though imperfect, of it, especially when we come to speak of her spirit of prayer. Meanwhile, the reader may form some notion of it by gauging the measure of Rita's charity to her neighbour, and from the consideration of what we have hitherto described of a life not only blameless and holy, but everywhere aided and distinguished by heaven's most singular favours.

CHAPTER IV

OTHER VIRTUES WHICH RITA PRACTISED IN THE CLOISTER

THAT truth to which St. Augustine draws our attention in many passages in his works—that charity is the source of all other virtues and their life-giving principle—is confirmed by St. Gregory, who illustrates it by comparing the virtues to the branches of a tree, which all spring from the same root, which root of the virtues is charity. In fact, the virtue of Christian prudence, for example, is nothing else than a continued eagerness, in those who love God, to distinguish good from evil, and to select the fittest means to please the Object of their love, and attain to Him as their last end; justice is but a constant desire in those who love God to render Him the worship due to Him and their neighbour whatever is theirs; temperance is a curb which they who prefer Divine to earthly love employ in order to keep their rebellious appetites under the sweet

yoke of that heavenly love ; fortitude is but the strength of charity which makes man superior to every trouble and suffering ; and the teaching of St. Augustine regarding the other virtues is the same, according to their various natures. Now, if Rita's charity was as great as we have described it, and as we shall afterwards see more clearly, to what a pitch of perfection must she not have reached in her practice of the other virtues !

Prudence, which is the first of the moral virtues, was quite characteristic of Rita, and invariably showed its presence in her exercise of all her other extraordinary gifts. This it was that taught her the saving art of examining and judging rightly and adopting the most suitable means for attaining that better part which, like another Mary, she had irrevocably chosen for herself ; this suggested to her the surest method of regulating her conduct, her appetites, and her very works of penance and devotion ; this made her sparing of conversation, diligent, circumspect, cautious, compliant and gentle-mannered ; and, finally, this virtue, through her long practice of it, or, rather, because its origin is in God, enabled her to give the solidest and holiest counsel to the advantage of her neighbour.

The virtue of justice also shone brightly in her

life, for her life was a continuous act of reverential homage to religion, the majesty of God, the greatness of the most holy Virgin Mary, the merits of the Saints, the authority of the Church, the laws of right, of friendship, of gratitude, and of truth.

Nor was she less remarkable for the virtue of temperance, for she had conquered her passions, and kept them subject to the spirit in a way entirely heroic, by her continued rigorous fastings and the uninterrupted practice of the most austere penances. It is wonderful to consider how her virtue of temperance, which increased and waxed strong amidst harsh and stern surroundings of penitential practices, brought in its train a pretty group of gentler virtues—modesty, purity, clemency, meekness, urbanity, graciousness.

Rita's fortitude also, which whilst she lived in the world was extraordinary, increased in the cloister in proportion with her other virtues, if we may not say it surpassed the others, since it was the distinguishing mark of her character. The devil, of course, tried, by insidious suggestions, to tarnish the purity of her heart and inspire her with a love of sensual pleasures and a distaste for perfection ; but although his infernal assaults were strong and long continued, our saint, who had prepared her mind against temptation from

her youth, and was now become an unconquerable heroine in the army of Christ, was so well able to defend herself and fight valiantly that temptation only served to multiply her triumphs and her laurels. It is said, too, that the tempter, seeing that he failed in his interior assaults, sought to frighten her by horrible phantoms; but in vain, for Rita, by the sign of the Cross, put him to flight, and showed her scorn for him as a powerless enemy. The flesh, too, tried to rebel against the law of the spirit; but the holy woman kept it as a slave in bonds of sackcloth, and brought it into subjection by sanguinary scourgings. Even the little world of her convent tried her virtue in some sense, especially during the years she suffered from the sore on her forehead. But Rita's fortitude made these little trials seem but playful caresses. The pain and the stench of the sore, the inconveniences of her poverty and mortification, the great length of her last illness, and other similar troubles with which the Lord tries the souls that are most acceptable to Him, instead of depressing her were rather as food to strengthen and increase her fortitude, magnanimity, patience, confidence in God, and final perseverance.

With all this precious equipment of wonderful gifts and sublime virtues, Rita had, nevertheless, the meanest opinion of herself, and spoke of herself

as if she were the vilest of creatures, thankless for the gifts which Divine goodness had bestowed on her, a miserable sinner, and unworthy to enjoy the companionship of so many sacred virgins of the Lord. She not only spoke in this manner, but wished everyone to have the same opinion which, in her heart, she had of herself. Hence she had a horror of praise, and when at meditation she felt those extraordinary lights and that spiritual ardour which preceded her ecstasies, she used to beseech God that He would condescend so to work in her soul that her companions might not be conscious of it, and might never be led to have a favourable opinion of her. But it was her humility that betrayed her expectations, for the more she humbled herself, the more was she exalted, not only in the eyes of God, but of men, and the deeper she sunk herself in the abyss of lowness, the higher was raised the edifice of her sanctity.

CHAPTER V

RITA'S OBSERVANCE OF THE RELIGIOUS VOWS

THERE is a love which is the soul of every virtue, and another love which is an incentive to every vice; the former we call charity, the latter concupiscence. Charity, since it comes from heaven, has for its aim three noble objects—God, ourselves, and our neighbours. Concupiscence, since it is altogether of the earth, has low aims, which are likewise threefold—the pomp of the world, self-interest, and pleasure. According as one or other of these is stronger in us we attain sanctification and happiness, or spiritual ruin and misery. To destroy the reign of perverse love and these three hostile passions there are no arms more reliable than those which attack their very foundations, and these arms are obedience, poverty, and chastity. These were the arms which Rita continued to wield until she received from her Divine Spouse the eternal crown prepared for her ripe and splendid virtues.

The strongest weapon of the perfect is obedience, and when it is employed by charity it opens up the way to every good object, as, on the other hand, disobedience lays open the way to every evil, visible and invisible, of the world. To begin with the consideration of this great virtue, which Rita made a solemn vow to practise, we can affirm that she possessed it in a most eminent degree. All her actions were so many acts of obedience, or, rather, her whole conventual life was an uninterrupted act of the humblest, truest, and readiest obedience. Following the principles of her enlightened piety, she knew only too well the truth declared to Samuel, that the sacrifice of the will is more acceptable to God than the sacrifice of victims.* She always kept before her eyes the example of a God who, for our instruction, willed to live subject to His own creatures. She felt moved to imitate the heroic virtue of so many sainted monks and nuns, and she saw clearly the great advantage which obedience gave in directing our steps through this world of darkness and sin. She therefore subjected herself not only to all the laws of the Gospel, of the Church, of the Rule and Constitutions of her Order, and not only obeyed with respect and alacrity all the commands of the different superiors she had, and carried out the

* 1 Kings xv. 22.

duties of the various offices she filled, but she eagerly desired to subject herself to her equals or juniors in the convent, and sought to anticipate the commands even of these, to follow their counsels and carry out their desires, esteeming herself only as the unworthy servant of all. Virtue so rare deserved to be put to the severest proof, since God often tries the virtue of the pious either Himself or through the means of others.

The trial of Rita's obedience was this: The Prioress, who had observed her great spirit of submission, commanded her to water every day a dried-up tree that was in the convent garden. Rita made no objection against so strange a command; she did not say that such an order was outside the matters to which the Rule obliged her; she did not even submit that it would be time lost, for she was convinced that the time in which any work of obedience is done is time well spent. Therefore, with her will in complete accord with the orders she received, she continued to obey them for several seasons, and in this she was imitating the example of the holy abbot John, of whom we read in the lives of the Fathers that, in order to follow the instructions of his director, he humbled himself so far as to carry a pail of water a considerable distance to water a dry trunk of a tree. So did St. Rita likewise, and

not in vain; for so pleasing to God were her acts of heroic obedience that, as tradition tells, the tree bloomed again, and began to bear flowers and fruit, and from that fact it was called the 'Saint's Tree.'

What chiefly concerned her was that her obedience should bear fruit unto eternal life, and hence the love which her heart felt for this beautiful virtue was ever increasing. She therefore sought the approval, direction, and restraining influence of another's will not only in her temporal undertakings, but also in her devotional and penitential exercises. When there was question of going to Rome to gain the indulgences of the jubilee year, and again when she was to be separated during the last years of her life from the pleasant society of her sisters in religion, she allowed no consideration of fervent piety, no personal reluctance, to come between her and her duty towards holy obedience, from which she would not swerve an iota. Thus our saint passed the rest of her life without a will of her own, or, if she had a will, it was one that desired to do nothing except what obedience ordered, in this way making certain of doing the will of God in all things, which was the single object of all her desires. This is how she conquered in herself and annihilated that great predominant passion of man, the love of worldly glory.

She conquered also the second strong passion—love of self-interest—by a generous love of evangelical poverty. We have already remarked how from her earliest years, and amongst the comforts of her father's house, she was enamoured of this holy poverty, and how she was accustomed to observe it in her humble manner of dress, in opposing all outward show, in the frugality of her living, in her abstinence, in depriving herself of her best garments for the poor, and in renouncing in their favour all her earthly possessions at her entrance into religion, whence it seems, there was nothing else that could be added except the vow and perseverance. Nevertheless, the spirit of poverty markedly increased in Rita whilst she lived in the convent, where she was chosen to dwell till her death. There, in truth, everything breathed humility and straitness of means, and she might well be satisfied that by ordinary observance she was fulfilling her vow. But saints are never satisfied unless they go beyond the goal of ordinary mortals and if they do not reach the heroic point of virtue. It happened thus in Rita's case, for although she loved uniformity and was opposed to those singularities which often deserve to be the subject of suspicion, yet she felt that she ought not to oppose God's inspirations, or confine herself solely to the usages

of the community, but, subject to obedience, she carried the rigours of religious poverty much farther. We might tell here of her protracted fastings and the small quantity of food of the poorest sort with which she kept herself alive, but we shall speak of these things in a subsequent chapter, and shall now only touch on the poverty of her dress and of her abode.

She did not show her poverty by wearing a coarser habit or one differing in any way from those of her sisters in religion, yet there is one particular that shows in a singular, not to say miraculous, manner her spirit of poverty; for, like the Hebrews in the desert, from the moment she put her foot in the convent till she entered the promised land of the blessed, a period of more than forty years, she had only one habit, which she wore night and day, and even during her illnesses. As regards the poverty of her dwelling-place, her little room, which may still be seen, declares it sufficiently, for it is only a narrow cell, the least of all, crushed into a corner of the dormitory, and with no light except a sort of twilight that filters into it from the common window. A few pictures representing the mysteries of our Lord's Passion were its only ornaments; the bed was hard and rough, and more adapted to give pain than rest; all other necessaries were wanting.

Yet the holy penitent lived there contented, and considered herself rich and wealthy, especially when she considered the nakedness of the Crucified One, for she regarded the Cross of Christ, her loving Spouse, as a mirror wherein to behold herself. The cold words 'mine' and 'thine' which have been the cause of division in families and kingdoms, and still divide hearts, never issued from her lips, and even the things most necessary to her she let depend on her Superior's will, and was always ready to deprive herself of them at the slightest beck of authority, for she never had the least desire to own anything.

There is related of her a singular fact, which proves her detachment from the things of earth. Going on a journey undertaken for reasons of devotion, of which we shall speak later, with some of the nuns of the convent, she threw into a river the money that had been given her to defray her expenses, or, as others say, which she accidentally found. Her companions thought that, considering their great necessity, this was an act of real imprudence, and could not refrain from blaming her. But Rita, who was full of confidence in the protection of heaven, assured them they would want for nothing; and so it happened, for they wanted for nothing throughout their journey. That God who feeds the birds of the air and the

fishes of the deep took care to provide His servant and her companions with every necessary on their long way. In such a way did Rita, poor in possessions and in spirit, advance with great strides on the way of perfection, and add new riches to the incorruptible treasures she had laid up in heaven.

By poverty and obedience she had overcome the two passions of self-interest and worldly glory; there remained the third passion, that for sensual pleasures, against which our saint had to wage a more bitter war, because, like the Apostle, she felt in herself that law that was contrary to the law of the spirit, and because, as St. Augustine writes, this is precisely the hardest fight that has to be fought by Christians and the perfect. It is true that this most virtuous woman was accustomed from her earliest years to watch over all her thoughts and to keep a careful guard on her senses, and that from her youth she had determined to preserve the candour of her virginity intact; that she constantly preserved the most exemplary modesty; that she avoided to the utmost of her power, even when in the world, all evil discourse and companions and other incentives to impurity; that she had lived most chastely and immaculately even as a wife. Yet with all this she was not free from temptations,

and to conquer them she had recourse to an extreme rigour of life.

The demon used all his power in attacking Rita's purity; at one time he tempted her by impure phantasms, at another by seductive apparitions. But she put him to flight by her lively faith and her austere penances. In the fiercest assaults of temptation she went so far as to burn her hand or foot, thus putting out one fire by the pain of another, in order to keep herself entirely pure in the sight of her most pure heavenly Spouse. Through love of this virtue she avoided all opportunities of seeing or being seen, and she adopted this safeguard even with her own relatives. When she had sometimes to appear abroad she showed such recollection, modesty, and gravity as to excite the wonder of others and attract universal veneration. So remarkable was her modesty on such occasions that when she came back to the convent (in those days the obligations of enclosure were not so strict as they now are) she was sometimes able to declare that she had not seen a single person. This circumspection which our saint employed in the custody of her eyes may seem excessive to worldly-minded people, but 'everyone hath his proper gift from God';* and besides, the means of attain-

* 1 Cor. vii. 7.

ing to extraordinary virtue like Rita's are not always ordinary; nor were her penances, which were a means to this end, ordinary penances. If such was the violence of her spiritual struggles, there is no doubt but that the victories she gained were remarkable and productive of many good results, and that the reward which God reserved for her in a happy eternity was passing great.

CHAPTER VI

RITA'S PENANCES

HOWEVER hard and sharp penance may appear at the first glance, yet it, too, is a daughter of love, love that gives strength to put a curb on carnal appetites, which are ever striving to rebel against the first uncreated love, and which incites to reparation of past offences and atonement for them. It is no wonder, then, that Rita, who was burning with the flame of Divine love, and who had the holiest horror of sin, should carry her austerities even to the point of heroism. True, such innocence did not deserve so great pains ; but she who, in her profound humility, thought herself full of defects and faults, who knew human frailty and the frequent dangers of falling into sin, and who was not exempt from the wicked suggestions of the world, the flesh, and the devil, did not consider herself exempt from those penances which she practised, for the good of sinners, as a defence against danger and

an assurance of victory in temptation. Her whole life, therefore, was one continued exercise of penance owing to the great self-denial which she exhibited from her early youth, but more markedly in her married life and her widowed state, and owing also to the fastings she practised in the world, and the other mortifications which we mentioned in former chapters, but, above all, owing to the severe and almost incredible chastising of the flesh, which she made a law that she observed during all the years she lived in the cloister.

To begin with her fastings, hardly had she embraced the Rule of St. Augustine, which exhorts all to conquer the flesh by fasting as much as health will permit, than she abandoned herself to a life of the most rigorous and prolonged fasting. She never admitted any of those exaggerated pretexts which the delicate sex finds it so easy to allege in order to be dispensed from the laws of fasting and abstinence. She only knew that God is not deceived, and that to desire to deceive one's self is impious folly. She therefore had no hesitation in fulfilling the most rigorous laws of abstinence without any ill-timed fear of injuring her health. Every year she fasted during three entire Lents, and also on the vigils of all holidays of obligation, of all the feasts of the Blessed

Virgin, of all the saints of the Order, and of her particular advocates, not to mention other extraordinary fasts which she observed. She took food only once a day, and never drank wine. Her condiments were often wormwood, ashes, and tears. For the greater part of the year she lived on bread and water, and as she advanced in years and progressed in sanctity she reduced her food to such scanty proportions that it was looked on as a miracle how she could in such a way support life. St. Augustine's most prudent Rule does not prescribe such things, and therefore Rita, by her heroic fasts, gave all the more glory to the Most High; and by imitating the abstinences of the Baptist, of St. Nicholas of Tolentine, and her other protectors, all well-known models of penitence, she rendered them the truest honour, for the best way of honouring the saints is to imitate their virtues. But not only did she try to follow their example by penances of this sort, but in all the other austerities of her life she endeavoured to imitate them as exactly as her condition allowed.

The very dwelling-place in which she hid herself proclaimed her penitential disposition, for it was only a little cell, bare and dark, and had rather the appearance of a prison to which she had been condemned for some serious crime. We do not

know for certainty whether even for appearance's sake there was a bed in it, but we do know very well that when Rita was overcome by natural weariness she took her short repose stretched on the ground, or, at best, on a board. She rose without fail from that hardest of couches at midnight to begin the infliction of greater torment on herself; for at that hour she scourged herself with a scourge of iron in order to appease Divine justice in favour of the souls in purgatory, who, though still of the communion of saints and participators in our suffrages, are left to suffer the greatest sorrow, deprived as they are of the Beatific Vision and tortured by the pain of their fires. Her great charity made her feel the holiest compassion for these unhappy souls, and it was charity that nerved her arm to continue these scourgings; but if she ever felt for herself charity, too, might have induced her to lay aside her ensanguined whip of iron. On two other occasions every day she took the discipline, once for the benefactors of her convent and Order, when she used thongs of leather, and again for the conversion of sinners, at which her whip was of twisted and knotted cords. With all this she was not satisfied if that rebellious enemy her flesh were not suffering continual pain, and hence she always wore next her skin a *cilicium* made of

rough bristles, and on the inner side of her habit she fastened thorns that pricked her painfully at every movement she made. Amongst these thorns and the painful practices of her life our saint lay hidden, like the mystic lily of the sacred Canticles, inaccessible to passions, guarded on every side, growing more beautiful and brighter every day, because more like her heavenly Spouse crowned with thorns.

CHAPTER VII

RITA'S SPIRIT OF PRAYER

IF Rita's body, oppressed by fastings, imprisoned in hair shirts and galling bonds, made livid by scourgings, was forced to groan and sigh, it was far otherwise with her spirit. The more the body was crushed under the weight of penances, the more were the spaces of the soul enlarged, the greater its liberty, the more readily might it raise itself above all earthly things, to be plunged into the sublime depths of heavenly things and taste of their ineffable sweetness. And if her spirit sighed, it was a far different sigh from that of the body; it was the sigh of the dove—a sigh of peace and love such as was foretold by the Holy Spirit the Consoler by the mouth of the Psalmist to all souls that devote themselves to penance and prayer—'Rise ye after ye have sitten, you that eat the bread of sorrow.'*

* Ps. cxxvi. 3.

The same wonderful effects of grace were experienced by St. Augustine, who in his exposition of that verse of the Psalms could not refrain from exclaiming, 'How sweet are the sighs and the tears of prayer! No pleasure of the theatres or of the world can equal the joy of such tears.'* We must not, however, come to the conclusion that this interior joy was the chief motive that made our saint love prayer, for she loved the God of consolations much more than she loved the consolations of God; but it was an innocent attraction to her God-loving heart, and on that account she never could interrupt exercises so dear to her without feeling pain.

We have already related that from her childhood she had received the gift of prayer, and which she developed in a striking way even in the years of her early youth; and we have told how she gave herself entirely to prayer during the year of her marvellous retirement in her father's house, and how she continued to make progress in devotional practices, especially when she was freed from the ties and cares of matrimony. Yet when we compare all these things with her advancement after she has embraced a conventual life, they seem but the very beginning of piety. As a nun, Rita's prayers were offered

* Ps. cxxvi.

in the darkness of the night, in the early morning, throughout the day—prayer, in a word, was her life, for not even for a moment could she withdraw herself from the presence of her uncreated Love. The hours between midnight and the break of day were the fullest of delight for her, and the most favourable in which to treat all alone with God the most important affairs of eternity and to pour out the fulness of her love at the feet of the Crucified One. In the winter time, however prolonged her vigils were, that time was always short to her, and daylight came unlooked for. It seemed to her, as once to St. Anthony the abbot, that the sun was doing her wrong by appearing too soon, for she feared that he was coming to scatter with his rays the beautiful light of her heavenly exaltations and seraphic thoughts. She never wanted matter whereon to meditate, for the attributes of God and His inexhaustible beneficence were to her subjects that she could never be weary of considering. The sole thought that she was in the presence of the majesty of God, that infinite majesty that fills with its being heaven and earth and the abysses, was sufficient to raise her above every created thing and transform her into God Himself.

One subject, nevertheless, beyond every other, occupied Rita's mind—that of the Passion of

Jesus Christ. It almost seems as if she had inherited from her parents this particular devotion, and that upon it she had laid the foundation-stone of her sanctity. It was to the Passion that she was accustomed from childhood to direct her thoughts and affections, her sighs and tears. The reader may remember how at a tender age she shut herself into the little room at home, and there continued to meditate on the sorrowful mysteries, which also were depicted in the pictures which hung on the walls, and, better still, were carved on her heart. The senses should do their part the better to assist the soul in its efforts after piety, and this was the reason why Rita procured and kept in her cell in the convent certain representations of the Passion of her dear Jesus.

To this end she kept in two distinct parts of her cell objects that recalled to her the history of the Passion. In one place she constructed a representation of a mountain, which, whenever she looked upon it, recalled Mount Calvary and all the torments which the Saviour of the world suffered there. She meditated with sighs and tears on her Divine Spouse arriving there, falling under the terrible weight of His torments, His cross, and all the sins of men. With an outburst of weeping she thought of Him deprived of His

garments and fixed to the cross with rough nails. She meditated with the liveliest compassion on the cruel strokes of the hammer that tore His hands and feet, and on all the other terrible torments that Jesus suffered for love of men. In another corner of her cell she had a representation of the Holy Sepulchre, and at sight of it she considered how the adorable body of Christ was placed in it, how for three days it remained buried, how His spirit went down to console the holy fathers in Abraham's bosom, and, finally, how the Redeemer rose again to a new life triumphant and glorious. During these meditations our saint was always alone; as Jeremias says, 'she sat solitary and held her peace, and was raised above herself';* in that sweet silence, in those loving soliloquies, in that intimate intercourse with God she was superior to passion, to nature, and to herself. So great was her mental exaltation during her meditation on the Divine mysteries that she was often raised above the life of the senses and rapt in delicious ecstasies, and on one occasion, so strong was the ecstatic influence, the nuns thought she was dead.

Now, seeing that she soared to such sublime heights in prayer, it will be no wonder that she possessed also as she did, and in a singular manner,

* Lam. iii. 28.

the gifts of wisdom and intelligence, so that she could reason on the perfections of God and on the most abstruse mysteries of faith with a subtle knowledge that could be acquired by no study nor any natural capacity. Thus God hides the secrets of His wisdom from the wise of this world and reveals them to His humble servants, to those who appear ignorant in the eyes of the world. All these things excited to rage the infernal enemy of all good and all sanctity, and in order to make the holy nun desist from her pious practice he tried to frighten her with horrible yells and dreadful apparitions. But she continued to be motionless in prayer, and by prayer itself triumphed over all the powers of hell. By the merit of her prayers, too, she acquired a certain authority over devils. A proof of this is that a woman who had for years been harassed by diabolical interference was freed from it by Rita. Through prayer, too, she obtained the grace of a supernatural healing for a young girl who was ill, whose mother had the consolation of seeing her cured after having brought her to the saint to ask the help of her prayers. We know that God was accustomed to grant whatever she asked for, and so great was the fame of her successful intercession and sanctity that devout people, confident in her advocacy, came to her in crowds, and of all

who came none went away dissatisfied. Yet these were but the first-fruits that appeared externally and to the eyes of men to testify to the extraordinary efficacy of her prayers. We shall see more clearly in the remainder of her life, and much more so after her death, in the many prodigious works that God performed through her intercession, how great was the merit of our saint's faith and of her prayers.

We may also mention at the conclusion of this chapter the most fervent prayers which she often offered before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and before the pictures of the most holy Virgin; but it was not the circumstance of place that chiefly enkindled her devotion, for at every instant and in all places she found Jesus and Mary, and a thousand objects adapted to excite her most fervent piety.

CHAPTER VIII

A THORN FROM THE SAVIOUR'S CROWN OF THORNS WOUNDS RITA'S FOREHEAD

RITA had lived thirty years in the convent, leading that saintly life we have described, and had attained her sixty-second year, when, in the year 1443, it pleased God to mark in a wonderful manner, and, as it were, put His seal on her merit by conferring on her a privilege that is well worthy to be described.

There lived at that time St. James of the Marshes, one of those Apostolic men whom God then raised up, like St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Laurence Giustiniani, St. Bernardine of Siena, and St. John of Capestrano, to be strong barriers against the depravity of the world, the rage of civil discord, the shock of schism, and the advance of rising heresies. After many years passed with great advantage to souls in the missions of Bosnia, Hungary, and the East, he was recalled in that year by Pope Eugene IV., who destined him to

preach the Crusade in the province of Aquila, against the infidel Sultan Amurath II., who had already penetrated into the heart of Hungary. On his return he had occasion to go through the territory and towns of Spoleto preaching the Gospel, and he expounded the word of God in Cascia amongst other places. His discourses in Cascia were on the subject of our Lord's Passion, and Rita was present at them. That a nun was present amongst the people to hear the holy preacher will cause no astonishment when we know that although the law of religious enclosure had been established by many Councils and by Pope Boniface VIII., yet its observance was not rigorously enforced until the time of the Council of Trent, and nuns might go out of their convents, especially when there was question of fulfilling religious duties or to hear the word of God preached.

Rita, then, with the other nuns of her convent, was present at the sermons, which she listened to with that purity of intention that casts out all curiosity, and has for its only objects the glory of God and the sanctification of the soul. The sanctity and zeal of the preacher, who had long known the secret of touching the most hardened hearts, will enable us to judge of the effects of his preaching. That his subject was our Lord's

Passion—the chief object of Rita's meditation, and which excited her to the highest point of the love of God—will be enough to tell us how deeply his discourses must have impressed her. A divine compassion filled her heart, and she only restrained her tears as she listened in order afterwards to pour them copiously forth when she knelt before the crucifix in the old oratory of the convent. One day, as she was there prostrated, wounded in spirit by the vehemence of her great sorrow, with much sobbing she prayed and besought her Love, who had been crowned with thorns, to permit her whilst still in the flesh to taste at least of the bitter chalice of His sufferings. Her heartfelt prayers were heard, and she saw one of the thorns of the crown of the crucifix detach itself, as it were, and strike her on the left side of the forehead with such force that it almost penetrated the bone, causing her exquisite pain. She fainted from the pain, and it seemed to her that only by a miracle could she survive such great suffering. But love was stronger than pain in her, and grace supported the weakness of nature itself. The wound, which by time grew larger, festered, and became wormy, was visible on her forehead for fifteen years. The worms and the offensive smell, similar to that which once tormented Job, increased the pain of the wound and

disgusted others. But these things formed the delight of the patient nun, whose one desire was to become like her Saviour, who, as the prophet Isaias says,* was become for her and for the human race the most abject of men and the Man of Sorrows, whose look was hidden and despised—a prophecy so exactly fulfilled that He was unrecognisable when the streams of blood flowed down His face from the wounds the thorns had made in His head. When Rita was asked, as she sometimes was, what the worms were that occasionally fell from her forehead, she used to reply, with a joyous smile, 'They are my little angels,' letting it thereby be seen that the more she was humbled and afflicted in the flesh, the more she rejoiced in spirit, as was also the case with St. Francis of Assisi and St. Catherine of Siena, whose great privilege of the *stigmata* is celebrated by feasts of the Church, and also with another Augustinian nun, St. Clare of Montefalco, on the living flesh of whose heart miraculous representations of the Passion were impressed. Rita rejoiced the more in this gift, inasmuch as it procured for her more frequent occasion of exercising herself in humility, patience, retirement, silence, prayer, and the love of that God who had conferred on her so marked a distinction. From

* Isa. liii. 3.

thenceforward as long as she bore that mark of the Redemption on her forehead, which was as long as she lived, she never ceased to thank Him for it and to praise and bless Him. She, too, was become an outcast from amongst men, but instead of being afflicted thereby she was only the more strongly united to God, in whom all her desires and all her hopes of consolation were centred. She considered that singular effect of Divine grace which is not offended by unsightliness of body as abundant compensation for any sufferings she had to bear and as a pledge of an ample eternal reward in heaven.

CHAPTER IX

RITA GOES TO ROME TO GAIN THE INDULGENCE OF THE JUBILEE

IF Rita's life till the time when she received the wound in her forehead may be called a hidden life, from thenceforward it was a buried life, and invisible to the eyes of men. On that account, passing in silence over an interval of eight years, our history proceeds to describe the events of her life in the year 1450. The intervening years were not, however, years of idleness for our holy nun, or if she did enjoy repose it was not very dissimilar from that of the blessed in heaven, and perhaps of more advantage to the Church than any active efforts of hers. The Western Church, as a matter of fact, had just then, through the prayers of the saints, arisen from its state of dejection and abasement.

The schism of the Greeks, Armenians, and Ethiopians had come to an end ten years before, and the glory of that happy event was attributed

principally to the merits of St. Nicholas of Tolentine, who was canonized at that time by Pope Eugene IV. The other schism, of the anti-Popes, died out, too, a few months later, when Felix V. voluntarily abdicated; and Rita's penances and prayers must have co-operated in bringing about so joyful a conclusion.

Nicholas V., who occupied the chair of Peter, was thus enabled to proclaim peacefully a solemn jubilee for the year 1450, to throw open the treasure-house of Divine indulgences for the advantage of the faithful. This was the sixth jubilee celebrated in the new Church of Jesus Christ, and seeing that the Church was enjoying the lately restored peace, and that piety had begun again to spring up, greater crowds of people than ever before, from all parts of the world, were flocking to Rome to participate in the extraordinary spiritual favours. When even the least devout were hastening thither, we may judge how ardent was Rita's desire of availing of so precious an occasion. She was aware that even her sisters in religion were preparing to set out for Rome, and she, who for many years and until that moment seemed in her retirement to hate the very light of day, was not afraid to leave her cell for a purpose so holy; and making light of the inconveniences of travel and of her advanced age,

she threw herself at the feet of the Superior, and begged leave to join the other nuns in their devout pilgrimage. But the Prioress did not think it prudent that Rita, owing to the offensive nature of the sore on her forehead, should appear in public or undertake a journey, and therefore sent her back to her cell, telling her that she should first think of curing her wound, and then she would grant the permission asked for. The condition imposed almost in jest was not long in being fulfilled, for Rita had recourse to fervent prayer to the Lord, who had inspired her with the desire of going on the pilgrimage, and who was accustomed to grant all her petitions, and she received instantly the favour she so ardently desired. It is to be remarked here that Rita, who always, in her profound humility, endeavoured to hide the favours of heaven, chose in this instance to make use of an ointment in order to conceal the miracle of her instantaneous healing. But the work of God was too evident, and the Superior had therefore no hesitation in granting the permission that Rita sought, and her blessing.

She set out on foot in the company of her sisters in religion without any consideration for her age, which was then about sixty-nine years, with no dread of the long journey or the inconveniences

of the season, and she pushed forward joyously towards the metropolis of the Catholic world.

It was on this journey that the incident occurred which was mentioned when speaking of her spirit of poverty, that when she was crossing over a river she threw into it the little sum of money that was given to her probably to supply their wants on the pilgrimage. Her companions blamed her for what she had done; but not God, who had secretly urged her to that act of generosity, and who afterwards provided herself and her companions with all they needed until their return to the convent. When she arrived at her journey's end she lost no time in gazing on those monuments of profane antiquity of which Rome is so proud, but directed all the feelings and sentiments of her body and soul towards those things that were the objects of her piety—the memories of the holy martyrs, the confessions of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, devout visits to the churches, and the gaining of the holy indulgences. It would seem, indeed, that having led such a stainless life, and after so great and so severe penances, that she had no need to have recourse to those extraordinary means of atonement for sin; but holiness is always deeply humble, and the same humility which led St. Briget and St. Catherine to the second jubilee brought

St. Rita a century later to the sixth. Enriched with new treasures of grace, and impatient to be free from the din of the streets and the perpetual crush of people, she with her companions, ever in the arms of Divine Providence, began the journey back to Cascia, and after walking four or five days arrived again at the convent and her beloved cell. She had hardly reached home when, wonderful to tell, the sore on her forehead, which had healed up by the power of God a little before she set out from Cascia, suddenly broke out again, and thereby made it more evident that the preceding cure had been miraculous. Never more, until the day of her death, was Rita to be deprived of a privilege so dear to her.

CHAPTER X

RITA'S LAST ILLNESS AND DEATH

RITA survived seven years after her return from Rome. The first three of these, like the eight preceding years, are hidden under the veil of God's deep designs, for it is not granted to us to discover anything of her exterior life during that period. Of her interior life, too, there is nothing left, if we except certain general knowledge of her spirit of penance, her continued love of prayer, and her union with God ever becoming closer.

Three years passed, and Rita had reached the seventy-second year of her age and the fortieth of her life in religion, when it pleased the Lord to visit her with an illness which afflicted her for four years, and ended only with her life. This is the first time after so many years that any illness of Rita's is mentioned, except the sore on her forehead, which goes far to prove that even long-continued and rigorous penances are not—

contrary to the opinion of the world's delicacy—opposed to bodily health or calculated to shorten life. It might seem, indeed, that, considering the great misfortunes she had to bear, the many humiliations, and the many voluntary penances she undertook, she ought to be exempted from this final suffering. With all that, God wished that this beautiful work of His hands should be marked by the greatest perfection, and desired to exalt her to the higher places in His glory, and He also willed to add to her past sufferings and the still present troubles of her wounded forehead the pain of this long illness. We do not know with certainty what malady she suffered from, but, whatever it was, it resisted all the remedies of science. It is not improbable that, as one of the writers of her life suggests, it was a wasting fever, one of those maladies that sap the vital strength by degrees through an obstinate and mortal languor, and finally causes death.

During all that time she remained confined to her hard bed, and the manner in which she bore all the pains and annoyances of her long illness was a cause of the greatest edification to all who assisted, for her face not only showed the resignation and serenity of her mind, but she was always desiring to suffer still greater pain, and was for

ever thanking Divine Providence that deigned to purify her in this world and give her some occasion of acquiring merit. But there was one pain she felt more than any other, and it was because through illness she was become useless to the community, and even a burden and trouble to her sisters, especially by reason of the deformity and offensiveness of the sore on her forehead; yet not even the grief of this could take away from her the merit of her most heroic resignation to the will of God and equally heroic humility and patience. Yet another matter there was which must have weighed heavily on her, when we compare the very lowly opinion she had of herself with that sublimest idea she had been enabled to form of God's infinite majesty, and that was that she could now no longer present herself at the Eucharistic table to receive her Jesus with that frequency with which she had been accustomed to partake of that heavenly bread, but was now, on the contrary, obliged to receive Him lying on her miserable pallet. But the holy soul supplied in ardent desire and in the intensest internal acts of adoration and love for that external veneration which her bodily weakness rendered impossible. As her disease progressed, or, rather, as her sanctity increased, so small was the quantity of food she consumed that it

could not be told how she was able to live, and therefore the nuns who were attending on her came to the conclusion that she was kept alive by the bread of angels. Nor was their idea so far from the truth, for Rita herself had to confirm it when, on their pressing her to take some more nourishment, she replied : ' My soul, fixed to the sacred wounds of Jesus Christ, is fed with other food.'

Now, it happened that whilst the saint was in this state, and not far from the end of her mortal life, a relative came to visit her, and after passing some time in condoling with her and giving her comfort, was about to go away. Before her departure she asked Rita if she wanted anything, and said she would willingly do her a service. ' Yes,' said Rita. ' I beg you to go to the garden of my house as soon as you reach Rocca Porena, and pluck a rose there and bring it to me.' It was then the month of January, the time in which the greatest rigour of winter is felt, especially in that valley, which is closed in on all sides by overhanging mountains, where the sun rises late and sets early, and where at that season all nature is buried under snow and ice. At the strange request the woman did not know what to think except that Rita was wandering in her mind through the severity of her illness. She

pitied her, and went back to Rocca Porena. When she reached home it happened that she went to the garden, either through curiosity or because God so disposed it, and she saw, conspicuous amidst the frozen bushes, a full-blown red rose. At the sight she was seized by various feelings of wonder, joy, and devotion, and ran to pluck the flower, with which she returned without delay to the convent of Cascia to deliver the wonderful gift to the saint. Rita took it as coming from the hands of her Divine Spouse, and with holy joy offered it to her sisters who were standing around. They, too, were seized with wonder and amazement, and joined with her in praising the goodness and omnipotence of God.

Another prodigious occurrence, not unlike that we have just related and not less wonderful, happened very soon after. The same woman who had brought the flower to the saint was bidding her farewell on another occasion, and asked her again if she needed anything. Rita thus answered the charitable question: 'Since you are so kind, I beg that you will go to the same garden, where you will find two figs, which you will have the charity to bring me.' This time the woman did not hesitate a moment, but as soon as she heard the words hurried home, and in a short time was in the garden mentioned.

There, on a leafless tree, she found the two ripe figs, which she plucked with renewed wonder and pleasure, and carried immediately to the sick nun. At the sight of this second wonder Rita broke forth into new acts of gratitude and love to the Lord, in which her sisters joined. The fame of these miraculous events was spread throughout the neighbourhood, and wonder seized on all the people, and they conceived a great veneration for the dying saint, whom they clearly perceived to be beloved by God.

Thus compassed about with flowers and fruit, like the bride of the sacred Canticles,* Rita felt that she was languishing with love, and by this growing weaker, she eagerly desired to be free from the ties of the body, and at last take flight to enjoy for all eternity her Uncreated Good. Her chaste sighs were not in vain, for her Divine Spouse Jesus, accompanied by the most holy Virgin, appeared to her to announce the joyous tidings that in three days she should be taken from the world and from pain, and received into Paradise to receive the reward due to her virtues and sufferings. The vision disappeared, and joy inundated Rita's heart, and well was this known from that extraordinary and angelic serenity of her countenance which she preserved till her last breath, in

* Cant. ii. 5.

spite of the pains and sorrows of death. The nuns alone wept as they stood around her bed. In these last moments of hers, profoundly moved by her tranquillity and the wonders they had seen, they had come to know her better, and to appreciate more perfectly her extraordinary virtues. In the midst of these tears the saint turned to her dear sisters, humbly asked pardon of all of them for any offence she might have given them and for the trouble she had caused, left them in remembrance of her beautiful words of peace, obedience, and piety, and then asked the blessing of the Superior. Her desolate sisters wanted, too, to get a blessing from her as a pledge of that charity with which she had always loved them, and with which they besought that she would love and protect them when she was in heaven. Rita blessed them, tried to console them, and then had no thought for anything but eternity.

Our heroine, it is true, was assured from above of the possession of future glory, yet she in no wise neglected to fortify herself with all the aids and comforts with which our holy Mother Church prepares us for the great passage. Gathering, therefore, all the strength of her spirit, she expressed her desire that the Holy Viaticum should be brought to her, and Extreme Unction administered. She received these holy Sacra-

ments with a fervour which cannot easily be imagined, much less described, and with these fresh pledges of grace, and with her eyes turned towards the home of the Blessed, her soul took its flight thither, where she lives an immortal life filled with ineffable joy, the reward of her heroic virtues. Her precious death took place during the Pontificate of Calixtus III., in the year 1457, when she had attained the seventy-sixth year of her age and the forty-fourth of her religious life, on the night of the 22nd of May, when Saturday was ending, a day specially consecrated to the honour of the Virgin Mary, to whom she was always most devout, and towards the beginning of Sunday, the day dedicated to the Lord and figurative of eternal repose.

END OF PART II

Part III

RITA IN HEAVEN

CHAPTER I

WONDERFUL EVENTS THAT HAPPENED AT RITA'S DEATH—BURIAL OF HER SACRED BODY

IN describing Rita's mortal life, we judged it expedient to give from time to time some idea of the trend of events and of the calamities of the times in which she lived, and we have hopes that it will not be displeasing to the reader nor outside the scope we proposed to ourselves if we continue to follow the same plan now that we are come to speak of her immortal life in so far as it may be said to be visible in those works in which God willed to give glory to His servant even on earth. For her, indeed, time was changed into changeless eternity, but the world was, as ever, in its instability, and was perpetually changing appearance. The short-lived peace which had been established at the Council of Florence had once more fled from the distracted East, and Mahomet II., destined by God to punish those relapsing schismatics, had at this

time overturned the Empire of Constantinople, and was threatening with ruin the newly-established Empire of Trebizond, as well as other kingdoms. It is true that in the year 1457—the year of Rita's death—the infidel usurper was driven back out of Hungary and Belgrade, and had been defeated by the brave Scanderbeg in Albania, by Cardinal de Aquileia on the Ægean Sea, and by Uson Cassano near the confines of Persia. But these losses caused only a temporary check, and were but the last flattering hope of the hardened and perfidious Greeks. Calixtus III. was then Pope, and from his Apostolic throne it was his sad lot to see the heritage of Jesus Christ despoiled, and could only weep over what he could not prevent. The wise Pontiff strained every effort to prevent still greater ruin, but the effeminacy, egoism, and rivalry of the Courts of Europe opposed his brave purpose, and left open a free passage to the progress of the conqueror. In the West the outlook was brighter for the Church and the world, for affairs were directed by the Emperor Frederick III., surnamed the Peacemaker, and Pope Calixtus, whose great desire was to see peace firmly established in Italy, from whence it had so long been banished. Indeed, it was only in the year before he ascended the Papal throne that the first signs of reviving

peace were seen in that troubled peninsula. It was through the means of a humble Augustinian friar that in the end was obtained that peace which princes and monarchs had in vain attempted to restore; for Fr. Simonetto of Camerino, a priest of extraordinary piety, is famous in history for being the pacificator of Italy. Good morals and piety began to gain vigour, and brought consolation to the Church for the irreparable losses it had sustained in the East. The reigning houses also that were least friendly to national concord, and which had not remained unstained by depravity, began again to give indications of sanctity. In this very year of 1457, Fr. Gabriel Sforza, Archbishop of Milan, styled the Blessed, passed to his heavenly reward, and a few months after his death Blessed Christina Visconti followed him to the kingdom of heaven. Like Rita, both of these were Augustinians. The Governments of the republics of Siena and of Genoa were the last to suffer from the disasters of war, the former having been attacked by the ambitious Picunino, and Genoa having been engaged with the maritime forces of Alphonsus, King of Naples; but even these wars had at last come to an end. Cascia, which still continued to be governed as a republic, in common with the other States was enjoying in prosperity the fruits of peace, and was now

about to acquire greater renown through the death of Rita, whose imperishable glory was soon to be proclaimed.

Scarcely, indeed, had she breathed her last when began a long series of prodigious events, which immediately spread her fame abroad. The first of these to excite wonder was that at the moment of her death the nun who had been her closest companion in life saw the soul of the saint take its flight to heaven, accompanied by angels, in the garb of brightness in which it had pleased God to clothe her. The second wonder was that at that same moment the bell of the convent rang out, tolled by no visible agency, and the saint's cell was radiating with an unaccustomed splendour. The sore on her forehead, too, which in life had been most offensive, was now giving forth an odour of heavenly fragrance, and that wound, which had been an unsightly deformity, now took on the appearance of a shining jewel. Her body, which before had exhibited all the wasting effects of continual mortification, but was the seat of a most pure soul and the temple of the Holy Ghost, was now transformed and clothed with almost super-human beauty. In a word, not only her soul, but her very body seemed as if it had been assumed into the splendour of the saints. At the manifesta-

tion of events so wonderful the nuns and the faithful who were present changed their sorrow into a holy joy, and ceased not to bless the Lord and recommend themselves to Rita's patronage. As the report of these prodigies spread about, the people flocked in crowds to see and to venerate that sacred body, and thus God was praised in the wonders He had worked, the virtues of His saint were published, and in the hearts of many there sprang up the desire of imitating her example.

The obsequies were to be solemnly celebrated on the following morning, and meanwhile the crowds arriving from all the surrounding country were continually increasing. Amongst the others came a woman who was a near relative of Rita, whose arm had been many years paralysed. This woman approached the sacred body, and, to relieve her feelings of love, sorrow, and devotion, clasped it around the neck. On the instant her withered arm suddenly regained feeling and strength. She began to cry out that a miracle was wrought for her, and all the bystanders took up the cry of 'A miracle! a miracle!' whilst she who was healed kissed again and again the body of her deliverer, and returned thanks to God for His great mercy. The body was brought from the cell into the ancient chapel, where it was quickly surrounded by a crush of impatient people, who

seemed as if they never could be satisfied with gazing on the sacred remains of the holy nun. The last solemn offices were celebrated, but the body had to be left visible for a long time to satisfy the pious curiosity and devotion of the faithful. At last it was placed in a coffin of poplar, which was enclosed in another of walnut wood, in order that one who was so honoured by God should receive honourable sepulture. This was but the beginning of Rita's renown. We shall see as we advance how God gave greater glory to His servant.

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CHAPTER II

MIRACLES WROUGHT BY GOD THROUGH RITA'S INTERCESSION BEFORE HER BEATIFICATION

THE primary object of miracles is to establish the Catholic religion, and this is the reason why the Son of God and His disciples performed so many miraculous works that filled the world with amazement and invited men to embrace the faith. Even when the kingdom of Christ had been established miracles did not altogether cease, but rather it pleased God for His greater glory to raise up miracle workers in every age for the edification of the faithful, to place a more distinctive mark on His Church, and to confirm His followers in the faith. A little before Rita's time there were chosen, amongst others, St. Nicholas of Tolentine, St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Bernardine of Siena, St. Francis of Paul to be famous ministers of His omnipotence and mercy. Then followed St. Rita, who, although during her life she did not perform marvels as did these

Apostolic men, yet after her death became celebrated, and is still celebrated throughout the whole world for the many great miracles with which it pleased the Lord to publish the merits of His beloved spouse.

But as St. John the Evangelist has said, speaking of our Lord, so very numerous were the miracles He wrought that only a small proportion of them is recorded in the Sacred Writings, we may say, preserving due proportion, much the same of Rita. For not only have lapse of time and carelessness deprived us of the memory of many of the miracles worked through her intercession, but even in the present, when nearly every part of the world is ringing with the fame of her great prodigies, authentic testimony is often wanting, and sometimes we are at a loss for a simple relation of the facts. We must therefore perforce be contented with recording a certain number of them taken from the process of her beatification, and we shall follow the order in which they are related by those writers of her life who have preceded us. The series of miracles of which we have authentic knowledge begins from the third day after the saint's death. We give it here in compendium.

On the 25th of the month of May in which St. Rita died a certain Baptist d'Angelo of Col

Giacone, in the territory of Cascia, who had completely lost his sight, having heard of the miracles which God was working through her intercession in those first days after her death, had his faith quickly aroused, and with confidence recommended himself to her patronage, and in an instant his sight was restored.

Two days later a woman named Lucrezia di Paolo, from Col Forcella, a village also in the territory of Cascia, whose body was swollen and doubled up through advanced years and owing to a sort of dropsy from which she suffered, went to where the saint's body was lying, and, having prayed there with strong faith, was enabled to return to her home free from disease and in perfect health.

On the same day another woman named Frances, the wife of Antonio Fucelli of Cascia, who had been deaf for five years, was praying before the body of the saint in the presence of a multitude of people. On a sudden she felt that her hearing was restored. The truth of this miracle is attested by the people who were present.

Two days later still a man named Salimbene d'Antonio, from Poggio-Primocaso, one of whose fingers had lost all power of motion and was dried up for many years, went to pray that he might

be cured, and touched the saint's sacred body with his powerless finger ; he, too, was instantaneously cured, and went back to his home rejoicing.

On the last day of May a woman called Giacomuccia di Leonardo, from Ocosce, a village quite close to Cascia, was miraculously cured of grievous pains, from which she had been tormented for two years, and which had reduced her to a state of extreme weakness. This grace was granted to her after having prayed most fervently for eight days, at the end of which her persevering faith was rewarded by her restoration to health.

Frances di Giovanni, from Bisella, in Nursia, who was deaf and dumb from birth, was brought on the same day to visit the miraculous body of the saint. She ardently recommended herself to her patronage, and performed the acts of devotion possible to a deaf mute. Speech and hearing were thereupon suddenly granted to her. The first words she uttered were 'Ave Maria,' a fact which amazed her parents and the people who witnessed the miracle.

Still another miracle was wrought by the omnipotence of God, through Rita's intercession, before the end of that month of May. A certain Lucrezia, wife of Ser Paolo of Golforalla, who was all swollen with dropsy, and whose case the

physicians judged incurable, had herself brought before the saint's body, and there with the strongest confidence begged that her heart's desire might be granted. She, too, was restored to health and strength.

On the 2nd of June in the same year a youth named Bernard, the son of Matteo Del-re, from Ocosce, who was suffering from the gravel and was in very great pain, was brought to where the saint's coffin was by his father, who besought for him the pity of the saint, and was granted the grace he prayed for.

The next day a man called Spirito d'Angelo, from Cascia, through the intercession of St. Rita, was cured of chronic sciatica, from which he had suffered grievous pain for four years.

Four days later a young girl from Rocca, in the territory of Nursia, whose name was Maria d'Angelo, who had been deaf and dumb from birth, went with her parents to do homage to the saint of Cascia, and, like Frances di Giovanni, she, too, obtained hearing and speech. When this miracle was made known the girl had to get into the pulpit to satisfy the pious curiosity of the people, and there for the first time she pronounced the sweet name of Mary and the names of other saints, and so great was the wonder of the people that a thanksgiving procession was formed, in

which the clergy took part, and a sermon was preached by Fr. Giovanni Paoletti of Cascia.

On the 13th of the same month Francesco, son of Antonio Pasquali, of the village of San Cipriano, in the district of Amatrice, who was also a deaf mute, was brought by his father and others to Rita's glorious tomb, and departed thence with the full use of his senses, astonished at the novelty of his sensations and the greatness of the miracle.

Another miracle took place five days after in favour of Lucia di Sante Lalli, from the town of S. Maria, in the territory of Nursia. One of her eyes was entirely blind for fifteen years, and the other was nearly so. She went, accompanied by her mother, to visit the holy body of the saint in Cascia, and remained there praying for fifteen days, at the end of which, through her faith and the intercession of the saint, she regained her sight, as she had ardently desired.

After describing the last-mentioned miracle there is a break in the ancient records, and we read of no other miracles till thirty years later. Under the date of the 3rd of June, 1487, we find that Pietro di Giovanni of Paganelli, and his wife, a native of Nursia, made a vow to St. Rita for the restoration to health of their son Pietro, who was so tongue-tied that he could not utter a word.

The saint consoled them, for in a short time their son was in perfect health, with full use of speech.

A daughter of Gregorio d'Antonio of Col Giacone, who had lost the power of speech after a severe illness, recovered it after being brought to the saint's tomb. This fact is mentioned under the date of the 22nd of June in the same year.

About the same time Sante di Mariano of Rocca Porena, whilst playing bull, was thrown violently against one of his companions, who had a knife in his belt, and was accidentally so severely wounded in the ventral region that the physicians despaired of curing him. He had recourse to the saint, and although he was not cured instantly, yet he immediately began to improve, and ultimately he was restored to perfect health.

On the 18th of May, about two years afterwards, Angela, wife of Domenico Berardi of Logna, a town in the territory of Cascia, whose arm was crippled and so diseased that it brought on feverish feelings every day, had recourse to the invisible virtue of that holy body, and was completely healed.

Father Nicola Galli, who had been confessor of the nuns in the convent in which the saint lived, and who wrote her life, which to a great extent we are making use of in this chapter, and

who declares that he took his account of Rita's miracles from the process of her beatification given him by the nuns, relates as the sixteenth of her miracles that a certain Giovanni di Rocca Porena was restored from death to life through the merits of the saint, but he mentions no circumstances.

A woman named Fior di Pier Antonio had a son named Spirito, who suffered from a sort of insanity, which doctors would call *lycanthropy* (a species of insanity in which the patient imagines himself to be a wolf), owing to which he was given to wandering through the woods and mountains, and felt a tendency to hurl himself from high places. His afflicted mother, seeing that all the remedies of science were useless, had recourse to St. Rita, and was consoled by her son's being restored to health and his right mind.

About the year 1491 a certain Vannetta, daughter-in-law of Ser Antonio di Nardo, from the town of Fogliano, near Cascia, was suffering from so dangerous an affection of the throat that she could swallow neither food nor drink, and therefore believed that she had reached the end of her days. Once, on being awakened from a heavy sleep, which her friends thought was the lethargy of death, she complained of being deprived by them of the beautiful vision she had

been enjoying. To their questions about her vision she replied that she had seen St. Rita, who had called to her and touched her throat with her finger and disappeared. It was found that the cure was not simply imaginary, but that the girl was freed from her disease.

About the same time a boy named Amico, the son of Antonio of Col Forcella, who was suffering great pain from gravel, was recommended by his mother to the powerful intercession of the saint, and her faith was rewarded by his instantaneous cure.

In the following year Giovan Marino, of Logna, was cured of a disease called *serpentina*, through which his whole body was paralysed, for it pleased God to hear, through the intercession of Rita, the fervent prayers offered in his behalf by his aunt Donna Santa.

Towards the end of the same year Pier Marino, son of Marino Bruchi of Nursia, who had received two mortal wounds in a scuffle, had recourse to the patronage of Rita, and not in vain, for he was seen to get better, and through persevering prayer was soon restored to health.

Three other miracles are described as having taken place about this time through Rita's intercession. The first was the healing of Donna Santa (perhaps the same as was mentioned before),

daughter of Domenico of Logna, who was suffering from headaches, and tumours, and swelling of the throat. She besought the saint to obtain her restoration to health, and vowed to send a florin as offering to her convent. Rita heard her prayers, and became her advocate before the Giver of every good gift, who instantly gave her back the health she prayed for.

The next was that wrought in favour of a certain woman named Giacoma, the wife of Martino of S. Anatolia, in the territory of Cascia, who broke her shoulder-blade and her thigh by falling from a height on a rock. She was tortured by most violent pains, against which she could find no better remedy than to have recourse to Rita, to whose convent she vowed to present a half-florin. Her prayers were heard, and she was instantly cured.

The third of the cases, registered under date of the 18th of November, happened thus : Antonio, the son of Giuliano and Gemma of Nursia, was lying mortally wounded and left for dead, having received fourteen wounds, one of which had almost severed his shoulder from his body. His mother and his sister Maria determined to trust themselves to the help of heaven, and had recourse to the intercession of St. Rita. They therefore made a vow to visit her venerated body and to bring a

waxen image. Hardly had they made the vow than the young man was cured of his wounds.

Lucchessa, the wife of Giovan Marino of Collecucioso, now destroyed, in the territory of Cascia, had been possessed by the devil for many days. She was brought to Rita's grave, and there was delivered from that molestation through the saint's intercession. When this favour was conferred there were many present, religious and seculars, who also bore witness to the horrible yells uttered by the infernal spirit as it left the body.

In 1494 Monica di Colantonio of Colle, in the district of Nursia, was cured of a fistula solely because her father, Domenico, had gone to Cascia to honour the saint, to whose efficacious patronage he had recommended himself.

Towards the end of the same year, on the 16th of December, a man named Giovanni Andrea, son of Giovannuccio, from Atri, a town in the territory of Cascia, came to Cascia to thank his protectress Rita, who, he affirmed, had formerly delivered him from a serious illness, and had saved him again from imminent danger of death when a chestnut-tree had fallen on him and threatened to crush him.

Two years later a certain Paolo, son of Giovanni, a native of Collecucioso, whose son Angelo was

suffering torture from the gravel, made a vow to bring his son to return thanks at the saint's tomb if he were cured, and to have the miracle painted on a tablet. His faith was rewarded by his son being cured.

In the same year Andrea d'Angelo, from Onelli, in the Cascia district, was cured, through the intercession of the saint, from an illness by which he was confined to bed for ten months.

In 1501 a woman named Perna, wife of Marino di Aliena, who was tormented by evil spirits, was delivered from them by favour of the saint, to whom she had had recourse.

At the same time Giovanni di Bartolomeo, from Roccatervi, in the neighbourhood of Cascia, who had cut a vein near his left instep eight years before, and whose case was considered incurable, besought St. Rita with fervent prayers to come to his aid. When he perceived that his prayers were heard, and that a cure impossible to human science had been effected, he made an offering on the 10th of June of a silver crown to the church that guards the saint's body.

Pier Angelo, son of Pier Domenico, from the neighbourhood of Spoleto, had fled in the year 1503 from that district to escape an epidemic that was raging there. When he thought the danger was past he returned, but one of his

daughters was seized by the malady. The afflicted father bethought him of seeking the protection of the miracle-worker St. Rita. He promised to visit her venerated tomb and to make an offering of four carlins. His faith was rewarded by his daughter's deliverance.

Vannuccio di Sante of Foligno, one of whose arms was withered, had recourse to the saint to obtain the favour of being cured, and made a vow to offer the figure of an arm in wax. The power of his arm was immediately restored. He determined thereupon to fulfil his vow on a certain Sunday, but when the day came he changed his mind, and meant to go to Nursia. But he paid the penalty of his ungrateful fickleness, for he was seized with such a pain in one of his feet that he could not walk. Thereupon he resolved to fulfil immediately his vow, and he added a second one of bringing also the waxen figure of a foot. He was relieved of the pain, and hesitated no longer to fulfil his double vow. This happened in 1506.

It happened about the year 1510 that a certain Messer Francesco of Monferrato, who was five years bedridden owing to gangrene of the throat, saw St. Rita appear to him in a dream. He paid no attention to the vision, but the saint appeared to him a second and a third time. On the third

occasion she informed him who she was and whence, and exhorted him to go to her tomb; she then touched his throat, and he was restored to health. He arose from his bed cured, and set out for Tuscany, and from thence he went to Rome, for he did not know where Cascia was, where Rita was buried. But in Rome he found a farmer from Nursia, who gave him the information he needed, and when he arrived at Cascia he made an offering of a box full of silver coins, had a procession of thanksgiving celebrated, and on the occasion of it a sermon was preached by Fr. Ludovico of Cascia, a Franciscan.

Giovan Angelo, the son of Leonardo, from Ocosce, in the district of Cascia, was freed on the 26th of April, 1525, from an evil spirit by which he was obsessed, and to express his gratitude for the favour, obtained through Rita's intercession, made an offering of four carlins to the convent, a thousand wooden stakes for the vineyard, and his own services as long as he lived.

In the same year and month another man obsessed by the devil, whose name was Bernardino, the son of Domenico Saccomadi, from the town of San Giovanni, in the Cascia district, was delivered from the infernal enemy after being brought to visit the body of St. Rita, before which public prayers were recited for his liberation.

On the 26th of December of the same year a son of Giovan Francesco of Nardi, in the suburbs of Cascia, a child three years old, after a very serious illness, which lasted for thirteent days, was become quite blind, and could take no nourishment, and was, in fact, at the point of death. The father went to Cascia to beg the intercession of St. Rita, and to his prayers were added those of the nuns, who also gave him a little piece of Rita's habit. He returned home, and with firm faith touched his son's eyes with the relic he had received, and invoked the name of Rita, and immediately it was seen that the grace he had sought had been granted. As a sign of gratitude he brought an offering of eight florins' worth of articles to be used in the services of the saint's church.

A similar miracle happened towards the year 1535, in the case of Constantino, the son of Scolastica and Giacomo di Pietro Zocchi, from Agriano, in the district of Nursia. He, too, was suffering from a mortal illness when his mother made a vow in his favour to St. Rita, and he was cured on the instant. To fulfil her vow and testify her gratitude, Scolastica presented a vestment to the church on the 1st of June.

About the same time it also happened that a little girl of ten years, called Antonia, who was

the daughter of Giovanni di Silvestro of Rocca Porena, fell into the river Corno, then very much swollen by floods, and was swept along in the strong current for nearly half a mile. Before losing consciousness she offered herself to St. Rita, and the waters bore her to the river bank as one returned to life from the dead.

Donna Brigida, wife of the noble Marsiglio di Marino of Nursia, was also the recipient of a singular favour from St. Rita in the year 1548. She was lying ill in bed, despaired of by the physicians and near death. A certain Girolamo di Giovanni, who occupied a room not far from where the sick woman was lying, twice heard a voice commanding her to make a vow to the saint. At the second time of hearing, he woke the servants, the vow was registered by the invalid, who instantly spoke. She was cured without the application of other remedies, and the same day the little silver crown she vowed to send to Cascia was despatched.

The year after a certain Ferrantino di Benedetto of Collecucioso, in the Cascia district, was so terrified by a phantom of the night that he fell into convulsions and became delirious. St. Rita, to whom he had remembered to pray, appeared to him in one of his lucid intervals and advised him to go to her tomb and pray there, and that

he would there regain his health. He went on St. James's Day, and although he was as ill as usual whilst going, no sooner had he reached the blessed tomb than he was cured in body and mind.

Nicola, the son of Francesco Cascianelli of Antrodoco, in October, 1562, had recourse to the saint to heal him of a chronic illness, promising to make an offering of three crowns at her sepulchre. He, too, was instantaneously cured.

On the last day of May, in the year 1563, there happened another noteworthy miracle wrought in favour of Donna Cheava di Paolo, of the Castle of Ucciafora. Two months before she had an apoplectic fit, and during all the intervening time her tender mother could obtain no relief for her, and was herself condemned to useless weeping, till she determined to make a vow to the saint. After two days she had the happiness of seeing her daughter restored to her former health. On the very day of the recovery the mother went to Cascia to perform her vow at Rita's tomb, and the assembled people celebrated the miracle with a procession.

Four years afterwards, on the 23rd of April, Angelina di Marco of Poggio-Primocaso was prostrate at the saint's tomb, returning thanks to her

for having saved her nephew, who had been at the point of death after falling down a precipice.

Many other wonderful cures are recorded in the process of beatification without a date being mentioned. We read, for example, that a woman from Monte Leone named Paziienza, who was obsessed by the devil, was freed from her great misfortune on being brought to the tomb of the saint; that Ristorio Sarsio from Amatrice, who was brought almost to death's door by pains in his sides, was cured whilst in the act of making a vow in the saint's honour; that a child of four years—Giovanni Andrea, son of Fabiano Fortunati—who had fallen into a vessel of boiling water, and thereby lost sight and speech, as soon as his mother had asked the saint's intercession for him, again spoke and recovered sight, and in a short time was as well as ever; that a certain Bernardino di Tiberio, who had become blind of an eye from a wound, was brought to the saint's tomb, and instantly regained the sight of his eye whilst the coffin was being uncovered; and that a woman from Logna, who was returning from Cascia after being cured there miraculously, suggested to another woman to make a vow to St. Rita in order that a daughter of hers who was blind might recover sight. The daughter promised St. Rita to become a nun in the Augustinian

convent in Cascia, and her vision was immediately restored. She was afterwards Prioress of the convent for thirty-five years. Fr. Galli, who wrote the saint's life, through fear of wearying his readers contented himself with simply alluding to many other like miracles and wonderful favours worked by St. Rita. Most other writers of her life have followed his example, except that a few have given some little additions. We, too, shall imitate these older examples, and close our list of miracles worked by St. Rita before her beatification.

CHAPTER III

EFFICACY OF RELICS OF ST. RITA

IT is quite certain that the power of working miracles belongs only to Omnipotence; nevertheless, the many wonderful works done at the tombs of the saints seem to indicate that in those holy places there breathes an air participated through that incommunicable virtue by means of which not only those sacred bodies, but everything that belongs to them, co-operates in performing the wonderful works of God and in celebrating and making known these wonders. This is the same power that first accompanied the shadow of St. Peter, as the Holy Spirit assures us it did,* and that afterwards, on the testimony of St. Augustine, was communicated to those renowned chains that were the instruments of his generous confession and his guide to martyrdom. The Church's history supplies us with innumerable examples of cases in which similar

* Acts v. 15.

virtue was annexed to relics of the saints and to objects connected with the veneration of them, and in St. Rita's case we have a special confirmation of this fact. And, to keep to our subject, the truth of this assertion as regards St. Rita is witnessed by immemorial report, by such examples being recorded in the process for her beatification, and by proven cases, some of which we here record.

Before the saint's body was removed to its new resting-place—that is, before the year 1745—it was the long-established custom of the nuns to cover it with a new veil every year, the old one being divided into minute portions and distributed to the faithful to satisfy their devotion. 'Many miracles were worked through them,' says Father Rabbi, who cites the following case as an example :

On the 27th of April, 1652, twenty-four years after an office in honour of St. Rita had been granted, a fire broke out in the house of Giovanni Polidori in Narni, and soon spread to an alarming degree. His wife Chiara, seeing that human aid was of no avail in overcoming the increasing flames, and recollecting that she had a little piece of the saint's veil, hurriedly sent her daughter to the roof of a house that had not yet taken fire to cast from there the piece of veil into the flames. The daughter did as she was told, and for fear

the relic, which was wrapped in a piece of paper, should not carry so far owing to its lightness, she tied it with a thread to a piece of mortar. As soon as she had done so, she threw it, and the fire immediately ceased. Then Chiara, her family, and the others who were living in the house, went directly to St. Augustine's Church to offer their thanks to God and His saint. They found in the church the woman who had given the piece of veil to Chiara, and who was of even greater faith than her. Chiara considered that the relic was burned, but the woman maintained that it must have escaped the fire, for the instrument of the miracle ought not to have become the food of the conquered flames, and told them to go and look for it amidst the ashes. They went, and Chiara soon had reason to wonder at a second marvel, for she found the relic just as it had been when it was thrown into the flames, and neither the paper around it nor the string was in the least burned. They then returned to the church to renew their thanksgiving for the wonderful works done in their favour. The report of the occurrence was soon spread abroad, and a public account of it was printed on the 25th of the following May.

It was also a pious custom of the nuns to distribute to the people the dust, the scrapings from

the walls, and such things, of the saint's cell, and of the first coffin in which her sacred body had been placed and in which it had lain until 1745, and many marvellous results were obtained also from the employment of these things. Amongst other wonders Father Rivarola relates this one: A servant of Cardinal Fachinetti, Bishop of Spoleto, had a daughter who was blind of one eye, and whose other eye was so diseased that no hope could be entertained of curing it. She recovered the sight of both eyes by the sole use of that dust, which her mother cast into her eyes, an act which would naturally have further injured her eyes if the dust had not been made salutary by the Omnipotent, who, as we read in the Gospel,* gave sight to the blind by using clay. A certain Francesco Armilli obtained a similar grace by the same means. Both of these afterwards went to Cascia to give public testimony of the facts, and to return heartfelt fervent thanks to St. Rita.

There are authentic documents in existence to prove that marvellous cures were also wrought through the means of the oil of the lamp that burns before the receptacle wherein the saint's body is placed. By means of that oil Alessandro Alessandrini of Amatrice, who had been stabbed

* John ix. 6.

in the side, and was almost at death's door, got better in a moment of the violent pain he was suffering, and was afterwards entirely cured without the use of any other remedy, nor did any sign of the wound remain on his body.

Granita, the wife of Antonio Vanatelli of Atri, was cured in the same manner of a large abscess on her side. Signor Pompeo Benenati of Cascia, who was a captain in Ferrara, was cured of a dangerous hemorrhage by the same marvellous remedy, and as a mark of his gratitude sent a silver lamp to the sepulchre of the saint of his native town, his deliverer. A son of Signora di Giovanni Andrea of Nursia, whose feet, legs, and arms were so crippled that he could not stir from his bed, was healed by the virtue of that same oil, and was afterwards as able to go about as if he had never been ill. Don Sante Mazzuti, parish priest of Castel San Giorgio, near Cascia, who was attacked by the plague, which was devastating many parts of Italy in the time of Pope Alexander VII., was also cured by applying the same wondrous oil.

It was also customary with the nuns, from the year 1500 at least, to bake little loaves on which they impress the image of St. Rita, and these, after having placed them in presence of the sacred body, they distribute in large quantities, and even

send them to distant countries. Devout people who are seeking favours from the saint in their necessities, after reciting a *Pater Noster* and *Hail Mary*, or some other prayer, eat a little of that bread, and they drink a little water, perhaps in memory or in honour of the very little food the saint was accustomed to use, for bread and water were her usual sustenance. Now, as many authors testify, on the authority of the process of beatification, and the witnesses cited for the canonization confirm them, the sick have often found this bread a very efficacious remedy in their illnesses, and especially those suffering fever. Moreover, in cases of storm by sea or land, it is a pious practice in some places to throw a bit of the bread towards the sky or into the sea whilst reciting a prayer to the saint, and it has often been observed that thereupon calm and tranquillity succeeded. It is, in fact, related that many sailors have been thereby delivered from shipwreck, and, amongst others, Pompeo Martini of Cascia and his companions whilst they were on a voyage to Sicily. They tell, too, that in time of pestilence many were either preserved from infection by using this bread, or else regained their lost health.

With regard to this matter, there is one fact at least which we ought not to pass over in silence.

We have already made mention of that contagious disease which was rife in the year 1656, to the great loss of many Italian cities, and which brought desolation to Rome itself. There lived in Rome at that time a girl of about twelve years of age, daughter of an innkeeper, whose house was near the Church of St. Blase, which had been dedicated about that time to St. Rita. The little girl, by reason of the great devotion which she had towards the saint, was accustomed to make use of these little loaves. It happened that whilst she was sleeping one night with her two aunts they were both unexpectedly attacked by the pestilence, and both of them died that night whilst she was asleep. When she awoke she was so frightened by what had happened that she fell off into a faint so deep that she, too, was thought to be dead, and she was put with the two corpses on a car and carried to the cemetery of St. Paul that had been arranged for those who died of that disease. When they were removing the bodies from the car she was found to be alive and conscious, and was carried back to her home amidst the astonishment and joy of all who were present. When she was asked at home how it was that she was alive, she answered, 'I do not know, except that when I awoke and saw that I was lying between two dead bodies I said,

“ Blessed Rita, help me.” ’ Now, let us ask how could a person of tender years, after being so long between two persons just then dead of the plague, escape the contagion without the special favour of heaven, or of that saint who had been the special protector of her devout client? How admirable, indeed, is God in His saints!

CHAPTER IV

MARVELS OF ST. RITA'S SEPULCHRE

IT was the Almighty's will that the body of the saint, born of a mother so long barren, visited by the wonderful bees, miraculously brought into the convent, marked by a wound from a thorn of the Crucified One, and in death crowned with splendour and clothed with a beauty almost heavenly, should also be glorified in a singular manner after death. And so it has remained for several centuries without showing the least sign of decay, and may be seen even to the present day miraculously preserved. Before the year 1628—that is, for a space of 171 years—its eyes were always seen to be closed, and so they appear in pictures taken before that date; but in that year there was a tumult excited in the church by an insignificant cause on a day on which ceremonies more solemn than usual were being observed to celebrate the granting of an Office in the saint's honour, and on that

occasion the eyes of the saint were seen to open, to the great amazement of all present. The scandalous conduct of those who caused the tumult, and through passion violated the laws of charity and the sanctity of the holy place, seems to have awakened that venerable body from its long repose; for it raised itself aloft out of its resting-place, whilst a perfume as from Paradise filled the church, its eyes opened, and thus struck terror into the hearts of the brawlers, and filled them with penitence for their deeds, so that the sacred offices were finished in peace.

The scene we have described calls us to consider a second prodigy, that of the odour which is often observed in the vicinity of the saint's body—an odour of unsurpassed sweetness, which invites to devotion and brings spiritual comfort and consolation. It lasts sometimes for a considerable period, sometimes is very transient; it diffuses itself to a great distance at times, or is only apparent in the vicinity of the body, and at different times has different degrees of pleasantness. This, which we might call an odour of Paradise, is sometimes so widely diffused as to be noticeable not only in the church where the body is preserved and in the adjacent convent, but also in the neighbouring houses and in the streets, and it is wonderful that it has never seemed unpleasant to anyone,

but, on the contrary, has brought spiritual consolation, and excited the devotion of those who have had the happiness of experiencing it.

There are many documents in existence which give the fullest testimony regarding this wonderful odour, and notably the processes of St. Rita's canonization, which put beyond all doubt the fact that it is really supernatural, for neither was Rita's body ever embalmed, as we have said, nor were any spices or other odoriferous substances ever placed either within or near the receptacle wherein it lies.

Moreover, it is an ancient tradition in Cascia, which is confirmed also by the writers of her life and by the processes of beatification and canonization, that on the occasions of the tridiums that are accustomed to be offered at the altar of the saint for the sick who have recourse to her, it is not hard to discover whether they are going to get back health or are going to die; for a sweeter perfume is given forth when the object of prayer is to be granted, whereas an odour somewhat like that of incense, or the absence of odour altogether, is an indication of death. Stranger still, the same wonderful fragrance has been experienced even in distant countries, when extraordinary graces have been obtained by the intercession and through the invocation of

St. Rita. So the constant tradition affirms, and the processes of canonization confirm tradition in this point. Fr. Rabbi quotes a specific case in proof of this belief. A medical doctor, Signor Andrea, came from Sinigaglia to Cascia with his wife Violante to thank the saint for her intercession and to present a silver votive offering for the healing of their son, who had been cured of a mortal illness. The healing of their son had been signified to them a little before they came to Cascia by the same wonderful fragrance. These sweet odours are also manifest, not to mention many other occasions, whenever the Bishop of Spoleto or the Augustinian Provincial come to hold their usual visitations.

Another fact calculated to cause still greater surprise is that Rita's body has been seen to raise itself in its coffin from the bottom of that receptacle up to the grating on its top, especially during the time of the Provincial's visitation. The same wonderful occurrence has also been remarked during the visitations of the Bishops of Spoleto in the convent, as if the saint thereby wished to renew her homage to her episcopal Superior. On these occasions the motion of the body is not always the same. Sometimes it has been remarked to be much slower than at other times, and it has on occasions been seen to raise

itself for a moment and then sink back again into its usual place. On many other occasions besides at times of visitation this spontaneous raising of the body has been noticed. In order not to make so seemingly incredible a statement without sufficient evidence, we transcribe a deposition sworn by some of the most prominent people in the town of Cascia.

NOTE TO CHAPTER IV

In the Name of God. Amen.

ON Saturday the 16th May, 1682, in the church called anciently St. Mary Magdalen's, but now called B. Rita's, we the undersigned, of the territory of Cascia, diocese of Spoleto, by means of our oath, etc., in the presence of me a notary and Chancellor forane of the bishop of the territory of Cascia, give full and undoubted testimony, etc., for the truth, and not otherwise, etc., that at the present the blessed body of our B. Rita is entire, uncorrupted, with its flesh white, without any stain of corruption, with its eyes open, and especially the left, which is seen to be more open than the right, and with the eyelids separated, and with the mouth somewhat opened, in which are seen and very clearly distinguished the white teeth, the hands likewise white, etc.

Similarly have been observed by us, and recognised, the garments and the veils, that she has on her head, which are the same that she wore when she was alive, and with them was the blessed body placed and arranged in the same coffin, where at present she is found, as by relation and continued ancient tradition of the nuns of this convent, which garments and veils have been found to be sound, entire, and not corrupted by moths, nor by time, these garments appearing, as the veils also, as if they were worn at the present time by a living person.

Similarly we attest as above, that we have felt many times an odour and a fragrance wonderful and of Paradise, without being able to say what kind of odour it is, and this sometimes has been observed in a manner that it was felt outside the church. And by much more is this odour marvellous inasmuch as her body was not embalmed, or opened, but placed in the coffin where it is found, with all the internal portions not separated, nor divided from the body.

Similarly we fully testify as above, that we have many times observed that her blessed body had raised itself from the place where ordinarily it lies up to the top of the little grating which is above the said coffin, where reposes the same blessed body, and especially this happens on the occurrence of her feast, and when she has worked some miracle, as happened in the year 1628 for the first time, when was celebrated the feast of her beatification, of which appears authentic testimony made under date 13 June, 1660, by deed of Signor Giuseppe Benenati, native of Montefalco, with the legal form of this public office, and so much we say and attest for the truth,

etc., not only, etc., but in every other better way, etc.

- I Carlo Giudici, Vice-Governor of Cascia, was present, and affirm as above with my own hand.
- I Raffaele Cittadoni, Archpriest of the collegiate church of said place, was present and affirm, etc.
- I Dionigi Panfili, Vic. forane of Cascia, was present and affirm, etc.
- I Ortensio Martini, Canon of the collegiate church of said territory, was present and affirm, etc.
- I Antonio Frenfenelli, Canon of the collegiate church of said territory, was present and affirm, etc.
- I Cerulino Berardi, Captain of the company of the cuirassiers of said place, was present and affirm, etc.
- I Angelo Graziani, Captain of the infantry of Cascia, was present and affirm, etc.
- I Alessio Martini, notary public of Cascia, was present and affirm, etc.
- I Giovanni Graziani of Cascia was present and affirm, etc.
- I Giovanni Battista Leonetti of Cascia was present, etc.

In the Name of God. Amen.

In the year of our Lord 1682, the fifth declaration, on the 28th day of the month of May, 6th year of the Pontificate of Innocent XI., Pope by Divine Providence, I Petrus Gentilis of Tutia in

Cascia, of the diocese of Spoleto, by public Apostolic authority notary, etc.

L † S.

*The Consuls of the Renowned Territory of
Cascia.*

To all, etc. The aforesaid D. Petrus Gentilis and our other fellow-citizens are such as they describe themselves in their public and private declarations, and in this the usual and due forms were observed, and in the present matter undoubted faith is to be given them, etc., and therefore we have given these at Cascia from the Consular Palace this last day of May, 1682.

L † S.

DOMINICUS DE LANCELLOTTIS,
Canc. Secr.

CHAPTER V

IMMEMORIAL WORSHIP OF ST. RITA

IT had been provided by the sapient Pontiff Alexander III. three centuries before Rita's death that no one, however remarkable for holiness of life, and dying in the fame of sanctity, should receive public and ecclesiastical worship, unless after the approbation of the Holy Apostolic See. But it must be admitted that Rita's sanctity and miracles had more effect than any decree that interfered with the devotion of so many, and, indeed, the decree was unknown to most of them. Hardly was Rita dead than there was a great concourse of the people of Cascia gathered at the feet of the sacred body, with hands raised in veneration and entreaty, beseeching the favour of their new protectress. The constant and wonderful works which it then pleased God to perform to the advantage of those faithful people justified their confidence, and served to augment their fervour and at the same time the venera-

tion and glory of the saint. Following the example of the people of Cascia, and incited by the fame of Rita's miracles, the peoples of other places, near and far, hastened to offer her their religious homage also, in order to become participants in her favours, or to make votive offerings, or to leave memorials of graces received. As a consequence, lamps and candles were soon burning around her venerated tomb; her picture became honoured, and many votive tablets and gifts in ever-increasing numbers were offered. Hence, also, devout processions began to be celebrated on the occasions of the more extraordinary miracles, and hence her feast began to be kept on the anniversary day of her death, or, rather, of her birth to immortal life.

This singular devotion to the saint never declined; it rather acquired greater vigour and wider bounds as years went on. The processions took place only in Cascia in the beginning, but in the course of time they began to be held by the faithful of the neighbouring towns and villages, who had begun to invoke, as they still invoke, the favour of their common advocate. These pious demonstrations of public and solemn veneration are usually celebrated about the time of her feast, and are always accompanied by pious offerings. The feast itself, which at first

used to be observed in an ordinary way, came to be celebrated even magnificently when the devotion increased, and to be regarded as a holiday of obligation. The Offices of the Church, which were attended by great crowds of people, many of them from distant places, were made more impressive by the aid of the choicest music and the rich decoration of the church. But what has ever caused the greatest edification in connection with this festival was to see the number of strangers, and especially women, who came on pilgrimage in bare feet and humble attire.

From that period the convent and church, which were formerly known as St. Mary Magdalen's, came, in a beautiful way, to be called, as they are so called at present, by the title of St. Rita. For the pilgrims, as they approached the goal of their journey, had no other care than to find out where the convent of St. Rita was, and on their return were used to say that they had been in the country and in the Church of St. Rita. Hence that manner of speaking, which has prevailed from an early date, has finally succeeded in giving its fixed name to that venerated shrine.

It is also deserving of notice here that the custom of calling her the Blessed, which had been introduced even during the century after her death, in a short time became public and general.

About eight years after her most glorious death the learned Cardinal Girolamo Seripando had already placed Rita on his list of the Saints and Blesseds of the Augustinian Order ; Panfilo, Crusenio, Gelsomini, and Ferrario had in their works already confirmed these titles and honours ; the Fathers-General of the Order were already accustomed in their official documents and letters patent to style her either by the title of Blessed or that of Saint, and distinguished her convent by the same title. In a word, the general body of the faithful had already beatified her long before the Vicar of Jesus Christ had her name inserted in the Roman Martyrology or had granted an Office in her honour. Now, if the worship given to Rita was so great before it was allowed by the Church to honour her publicly, we may imagine how much it was increased when the decree of the Supreme Head of the Church, who could do no less than add his voice to the general chorus of praise, set his seal and approval on it. Religious veneration to the famous Rita then speedily spread throughout the whole earth, and together with the people, Kings, Cardinals, Prelates, and personages of the greatest distinction, bent their knees in devotion before the humble servant of God, and deemed themselves happy in her patronage. Amongst the

countries remarkable for devotion to her, the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal were pre-eminent, both in their European possessions and their vast colonies in the Western world; for throughout them all the name of Rita was glorious, and their monarchs gave the most edifying examples of piety and munificence. And it was in these Catholic dominions that, owing to the very many great miracles she wrought, she began to be known by the title of '*the Saint of the Impossible*,' and in them hard to find a church which has not an altar dedicated to her honour. So much was her veneration extended that the inhabitants of the city of St. Sebastian, in Brazil, made a supplication to Pope Benedict XIII. to obtain the extraordinary faculty of consecrating a church under the invocation of B. Rita, and when the faculty had been granted their pious intention was soon carried into effect. Seventy years before that Monsignor Giuseppe Cruciani of Cascia, chamberlain of Pope Alexander VII., had obtained possession of the Church of St. Blase in Rome, with the intention of re-dedicating it to B. Rita, and to-day we find it so dedicated, and it has become the church proper to the people of Cascia in Rome. Still earlier, and immediately after her beatification, Monsignor Fausto Poli, himself a native of Cascia, who

was then Maggiordomo to Pope Urban VIII., and afterwards became Cardinal and Bishop of Orvieto, acquired possession of the house in which the saint lived during her married life, and at his own expense had it converted into a little chapel; and so it remains to the present, and in it is preserved as a relic the mantle she wore in the world.

We must not pass over in silence a noteworthy fact recorded by some biographers of the saint, which is confirmed by a tradition in Rocca Porena, and sworn to in a deposition included in the first process. It is this: The saint's room received its light whilst she dwelt in it, and until it was changed into a chapel, from a little window, or, rather, aperture, in the roof, and there, as is piously believed, the angels used to appear who came to comfort her in her sorrows. When she entered the convent others dwelt there until the time of her beatification. Her successors in the house—and amongst them was a priest, Don Diamante di Pier Felice, who was examined as a witness in the first process—tried to close the aperture; but all their efforts were fruitless, for as often as they closed it they found it opened again, and it was, moreover, observed that through that opening neither rain nor snow ever entered.

The convent cell, too, which Rita sanctified by so many years of her presence, by her profound meditations, and by the pitiless scourging of her body, and where the two coffins in which she was first buried are at present preserved, began to be held in veneration from an early period and to be looked upon as a private oratory. In brief, it is an undoubted fact that the religious honours shown to our saint began from the very time of her death, and as time went on they increased without any interruption and became more distinguished, till veneration to Rita was spread in a singular manner throughout the whole Catholic world. Thus are the humble exalted by God, and thus are the just in the everlasting memory of the ages.

CHAPTER VI

SOLEMN BEATIFICATION OF RITA

A PERIOD of one hundred and seventy years had passed since Rita went to live crowned with glory in the kingdom of the blessed, where there is no change of years or of things, and from whence she was regarding with compassionate eyes the ever-changing vicissitudes of this valley of tears. In that interval between Rita's death and her solemn beatification the world had changed a hundred times its form and appearance. Convulsions of nature, ruling passions, kingdoms ceasing to be, new Governments, dominions extended, fires of war enkindled, extinguished, and enkindled again, heresies ever variable, now spreading themselves, now kept within bounds, councils assembled, Apostolic enterprises, and the barque of Peter always safe amid the shocks of tempests—these are the things that make up the long history of that time, and, indeed, of every epoch.

However, at the time in which the honours of beatification were being prepared for Rita, the world and the Church were enduring only minor afflictions, and the aspect of affairs would have been still more serene but that the question of the succession to the extinct House of Mantua was giving rise to some hostile movements in Italy, and that the rebellious Calvinists were causing civil discord in France. Still, compared with the past, those were times of peace, of gentleness, and of religion. In the East, in fact, the infidel Amurath IV., sunk in debauchery, had lost the taste for war and conquest. The Emperor Frederick V., in the West, was keeping the heretics in subjection and preparing the way to restore to the Church the rights and property they had usurped. Italy had no longer to tolerate those wandering troops of armed men of which we have elsewhere spoken, who, however they may have bargained to bring help, were much more accustomed to bring ruin and mourning in their train; nor was there that multiplicity of Governments, each as ambitious and tyrannical as it was insignificant. Cascia, too, although fallen from its primitive splendour, was yet at peace, as was the rest of the Pontifical dominions.

The arts were flourishing and gaining new lustre in this time of tranquillity. But what is of

most importance is good order, religious and moral, and the Council of Trent had brought back order into the bosom of Christianity, and there it continued to rule.

At that time the chair of Peter was occupied by Urban VIII., whose virtue, learning, and illustrious enterprises have made his name immortal. Before ascending the Papal throne he had governed the Church of Spoleto with great edification and splendid success, and there he had every facility for inquiring into Rita's virtues and miracles, and the antiquity and fame of the veneration paid to her. God afterwards so disposed it that he should take upon himself the government of the Universal Church, and should co-operate in the fulness of power in exalting our saint. It is true that she had already been beatified by the people from the time of her death, but in strict truth and in accordance with the sacred Canons, it did not belong, nor does it belong, to the people to declare anyone saint or blessed, for the oracle of the Apostolic See is needed. For Jesus Christ alone sanctifies in the Church triumphant, as He teaches in the Book of Leviticus, where He says, 'I am the Lord who sanctifies them,' and so in the Church militant it is the prerogative of His Vicar on earth, the Roman Pontiff, to set the seal of his

approval on sanctification and publish it to the world.

Never was there a more favourable opportunity than that which then presented itself, when the Papal throne was occupied by a Pope who had been himself a witness of the devotion with which the faithful flocked to Rita's tomb and of the ever-increasing veneration in which she was held; and therefore the Augustinian fathers, the nuns, and the Council of Cascia, determined to unite their influence with that of Monsignor Fausto Poli and other distinguished persons, amongst whom was pre-eminent the Lady Costanza Barberini, the Pope's sister-in-law, in supplicating him graciously to proceed to the anxiously desired beatification of Rita. Their petitions were sufficient for the Pope, who ordered the Sacred Congregation of Rites to set about the affair. The Congregation committed to the Bishop of Spoleto the task of investigating into the fame of the sanctity, the virtues, and miracles of the saint, and instructed him to prepare what is called the informative process.

On the 16th of October, 1626, the legal inquiry was therefore begun, and in due time brought to a happy conclusion. In the month of March of the following year the results of the Bishop of Spoleto's investigation were submitted to a rigorous

examination by the Sacred Congregation and approved of. The Cardinals of that Congregation delivered the canonical relation of the investigation and its issue to the Pope, who was rejoiced with the success of their labours. Thereupon, by a Special Brief of the 2nd of October, 1627, he granted leave to the whole Augustinian Order and the Diocese of Spoleto to recite the Office and celebrate Mass in honour of B. Rita, and this privilege was extended four months later by a Brief of the 4th of February, 1628, at the instance of the Father-General of the Order, to all priests celebrating Mass in any church of the Order, or of the Diocese of Spoleto, on the day of Rita's feast. The joy of the Augustinian Order and of Spoleto for so sovereign and gracious a concession may not be described. But the solemn beatification was not promulgated until the 16th of July, 1628, when the religious ceremony was celebrated in the Church of St. Augustine in Rome in the presence of twenty-two Cardinals and a great number of other prelates. We make no mention of the splendid festivals organized in honour of the illustrious Blessed Rita, of the panegyrics preached, of the poetical compositions with which her virtues and miracles were celebrated. The devout clients of Rita vied with one another in defraying the expenses of these pious festivities,

but the most distinguished for his liberality was Cardinal Antonio Barberini, the nephew of the reigning Pope.

The pomp of the ecclesiastical functions was renewed in all the churches of the Order, but the people of Cascia and the nuns of Rita's convent rightly determined that their celebrations more than any other should be remarkable for magnificence. The joyful pealing of the bells, which continued for several days and nights; the bonfires on the hill-tops that illuminated the whole country around; the silken hangings and rich ornaments that decorated the church within and without; the new paintings representing Rita's glorious deeds and her miracles; the solemn procession in which all the clergy, secular and regular, and all the confraternities of the town and district took part, bearing in triumph the banner of the blessed one; the band of children dressed to represent angels that accompanied it; the many wax torches and gifts; the enormous concourse of the faithful, many of them from distant places; the solemn religious functions; the sacred plays and representations; and other like pomps, all publicly testified the common applause and universal joy.

Even the body of the saint seemed as if, on so glorious a day, it wished to add to the splendour

and gladness of the extraordinary festivity; for, after the many years that had passed since Rita's death, it opened its eyes, as if to take pleasure from the solemn feast and general rejoicing, and at the same time to appease that momentary tumult of which we have already spoken. Then, too, the church was filled with that sweet odour we have described, and the sacred body raised itself to the height of the grating at the top of its resting-place. And, lest anything should be left to mar the tranquillity of that happy day, she imposed silence on the demons by then liberating from their influence two women—one from Spoleto and the other from Sinigaglia—who had been obsessed. But all that we have hitherto narrated was only accidental honour, and but a shadow of the immortal glory which Rita enjoys in heaven.

CHAPTER VII

MIRACLES WORKED BY RITA AFTER HER BEATIFICATION

IT is related in the holy Gospels that once when the Saviour was going to Jerusalem, as He entered into a certain town He saw ten lepers coming to meet Him, who began to shout from afar off, ' Jesus, have mercy on us,' and that all of them were miraculously healed by Him, but only one fulfilled the duty of gratitude by publicly giving glory to God and going back to give thanks to his Divine Benefactor.

We are forced to think that something similar must have been the case with those who have received extraordinary favours and graces through the invocation and protection of Rita. For, on the one hand, the constant appeals of the faithful for her intercession, the numerous triduums and novenas which the sick cause to be celebrated in many places in order to be cured of their diseases, and the fame which is spread throughout

the earth of the benefits she has conferred and the miracles she has worked, show with sufficient clearness the truth of them and their frequency. But, on the other hand, there are few who give full praise to God by publishing the wonderful works He has done in honour of His beloved, or, at most, they content themselves with hanging a tablet or votive offering on her altars. The present author, too, may perhaps be not altogether free from fault, for he confesses in his nothingness that he has neither sufficient zeal, nor correspondence sufficiently wide, to enable him to know all the facts. Nevertheless, we shall for the last time, for the glory of God and of Rita, relate a few of the more striking miracles we have been able to gather, and which seem best authenticated.

When we were speaking of the marvels done through such relics of the saint as the portions of the veil or by the use of the little loaves, we took occasion to mention some miracles that took place after the time of her beatification, and now, in order to avoid repetition and to pass over what is hidden in the obscurity of a period long past, we shall confine our attention to the century in which the cause of her canonization was resumed.

A youth of fifteen years, by name Francesco

Cavalieri of Cascia, was in the year 1746 confined to his bed by gangrene of the leg, which had broken out in five different places, and was so bad that the surgeons had resolved to amputate the limb. His father thereupon made a vow to the saint, who heard his prayer, and deigned to appear to the sick youth, first in the silence of the night, and again at dawn, telling him to get up and go to her church. He went as told by the saint, and was restored to perfect health.

Sister Chiara Isabella Garofili, professed nun of the convent of Cascia, was twice cured through the saint's intercession in ways that were certainly more than natural. The first case happened in 1775, when she had been suffering for eight years from a complication of diseases, of which the description would be long, and which had then become incurable. St. Rita appeared to her in a dream, telling her to get up—that she was cured. When she awoke she found that she had been restored again to health. The second case occurred in 1786, in which year Sister Chiara's right arm unexpectedly lost all power of motion, and she was also deprived of speech. She tried several medical remedies without avail, and ultimately abandoned their use, and put all her confidence in the help of Rita alone. Her trust was rewarded, for then, to the surprise of

the doctor and of the community, she found herself well once more. Yet the impediment in speech still remained to some extent; but she went to the saint's tomb accompanied by her sisters in religion, and the Superior anointed her tongue with oil from the lamp that was burning there, and in an instant her cure was perfected. This fact is confirmed by the legal testimony of the doctor, Laurenti.

During the year 1777 Giovanni Graziano of Poggiodomo, in the district of Cascia, fell from his horse, and was dragged for a considerable distance along the road, receiving a number of bruises and lacerations; but as soon as he invoked St. Rita she appeared to him, and restored him to his former health and strength.

Another miraculous recovery, which has been authenticated in legal form, was that of Sister Vittoria Teresa Bargagnati, which took place in 1781, when she was a novice in the convent of St. Teresa in Terni. Her malady was that she could retain no food in her stomach. She had in consequence been confined to bed for several months, and seemed at the last extremity. In this state, seeing that all the resources of medical science were of no avail, she resolved to have recourse to more effective aid, the intercession of St. Rita. Animated, then, by that lively faith

which is able even to move mountains, she applied to her stomach a picture of her saintly advocate, and immediately after rose from her bed, went to the refectory, and ate the same food as the others, nor did she ever after experience any trace of her malady.

There is a still more marvellous recovery, which is also proved and confirmed by legal testimony—that of Rosa Mazzi, a young lady of Cittei di Castello, who was afterwards Sister Anna Rita of the Augustinian convent of St. Maria Madalena in Spello. In the year 1780 she began to suffer from pains, difficulty of breathing, and vomitings of copious quantities of blood, and afterwards from inflammatory fevers and ischury, so that in two years she was reduced almost to the point of death. In this desperate crisis her confessor, who was attending her as a dying person, told her of the miracle we have just related, which had recently happened in Terni, and encouraged her to have equal confidence. She determined to make a devout triduum to the saint. The triduum was hardly finished when Rosa felt herself well again, rose from her bed, and continued to be even haler and stronger than she had been before her long and mortal illness. This wonderful miracle occurred on February 6, 1783.

Signora Rosalia, the daughter of Francesco

Pelagalli of St. Anatolia, but then living in Camerino, was seized in the year 1802 by constant rheumatic pains, which tormented her for two years, and brought her to a deplorable state. One evening, when she was suffering more than usual, and so much that she was forced by the pains to cry out aloud, she thought of recommending herself in her extreme anguish to the merciful intercession of Rita. She put into her mouth one of the little loaves blessed in her honour, and that instant was completely cured, and she continued to enjoy good health from that time. The documents, drawn up in legal form, which attest this remarkable recovery, are still extant in the archives of the convent.

For the sake of brevity we omit many other wonderful cures obtained by those who sought the assistance of St. Rita. But we must not altogether neglect to speak of the solemn transposition of her body. After death, as we have already said, Rita's body was placed in a coffin which was enclosed in another coffin, and there it remained for public veneration for the space of 288 years, from the year 1457 till 1745. But in that year a devout client of the saint resolved to provide a more worthy resting-place for those venerated remains, and a new urn, ample and beautiful, was sent to the convent. This the

Augustinian nuns adorned with hangings and ornamentations, so that its appearance should in some way correspond with their devotion. Monsignor Paolo Bonavisa, Bishop of Spoleto, added by his presence to the solemnity of the occasion, and on Sunday, October 24, in the presence of many notable witnesses, carried out with due formality the transposition of the sacred body into its new place of repose, where now it lies. So may God grant us, through the abundant merits and powerful intercession of Rita, to keep our minds and hearts raised above earthly things, so that we may one day be transported with her to participate in the immense and eternal joy of Paradise.

CHAPTER VIII*

MORE RECENT MIRACLES OF ST. RITA

WE must not pass over in silence the marvellous fact that, as the time of the canonization of our heroine was drawing nearer, it pleased the Lord to let men see more clearly how powerful before the throne of His infinite mercy is her patronage in favour of those who piously invoke her.

The devotion towards St. Rita, which was already of ancient date and widely spread, has, in fact, in these latter years become more universal and more fervent. Amongst every class of persons are found some who confidently have recourse to her intercession; triduums and novenas are offered in her honour, her pictures are looked for everywhere, relics of her are eagerly sought, and in the severest crises her name is invoked.

This great increase of worship is due principally, we believe, to the very many signal graces which

* Added to this edition.

have been obtained in every country through Rita's intercession.

It would be too long to narrate all those cases we have knowledge of, but we must not entirely disappoint the pious curiosity of devout readers by omitting them all. We select, therefore, a few cases from a collection of these extraordinary favours made by Monsignor Casimiro Gennari, titular Archbishop of Lepanto, who is himself a most devoted client of St. Rita and most zealous in spreading veneration towards so powerful an advocate. We have chosen those which in our opinion are most extraordinary and miraculous.

At the same time we wish to protest, out of veneration to the decrees of Urban VIII. of the 13th of March, 1625, and of the 5th of June, 1831, and of those of the Congregation of Rites, that if anything we have hitherto written or are about to write of the miracles of St. Rita be not approved by the Holy See, it ought to receive only that amount of credence to which the evidence adduced entitles it.

Sister Mary Consiglia Giona, a native of Naples, who entered the convent of St. Cosmo in Conversano in the year 1859, contracted in 1863 a very painful malady of the eyes, which gave her no rest night or day. During six years she consulted many doctors, who prescribed various

internal and external remedies, but always without result. Ultimately she had to leave the convent and go to live at Bari for six months under the care of an expert oculist, but even then she experienced no relief. The malady went on increasing, till, to her great grief, she lost the sight of her eyes, whilst the pain in them continued as great as ever. She thus returned blind to the convent, and having lost all confidence in human aid, she turned to God and asked Him to cure her through the patronage of the Blessed Virgin and the saints. She thought many times that in a dream she had seen the most Blessed Virgin, who was blaming her for having too much complained of her sufferings, and who exhorted her to offer her pains to God. One night when Sister Mary Consiglia had been suffering more than usual, worn out she fell asleep, and she seemed to see in a dream the three Babylonian youths, who wanted her to give them some bunches of grapes that were not yet ripe which were hanging from a branch near her room. She refused, and the youths then said : ‘ Why do you want a grace that is not yet ripe ? ’ They disappeared as soon as they had uttered these words, and the nun was covered with great confusion.

She continued, however, to have Masses celebrated, and to address her prayers to the most

holy Virgin and to various saints, but the grace she sought was still denied her. About this time she heard people speak of Rita of Cascia as the saint who obtains from God what is otherwise impossible, but having lost her confidence she had no desire to have recourse to that saint. Nevertheless, she was induced, and almost constrained by violence of pain, to begin a novena of prayer in her honour. Shortly after the saint appeared to her in a dream, and assured her that she should soon be cured. And so it was. Her recovery had not long to be waited for ; it was speedy and complete, without any human aid, for once more she joyfully opened her eyes to the light of heaven, and her pain ceased as if by magic. She has preserved her sight strong and perfect even to the present day, nor has she any need of spectacles even for reading, as so many of her sisters in religion have.

This nun, grateful for the great favour conferred on her, began to spread devotion to St. Rita with the utmost zeal. She had her statue placed in the convent church and exposed for veneration by permission of the Holy See, and her proper Mass is said on the feast day, which is celebrated with great solemnity and attended by a large concourse of the faithful. In this way special devotion to St. Rita began in Conversano

and the neighbouring towns, and many wonderful graces have been granted in those places by this most powerful patron.

Sister Anna Rosa Biscozzi, a nun of the same convent, was, in 1885, attacked by a violent pain in the ear, which continued for four months, and not only rendered her completely deaf, but nearly drove her mad with agony. The disease made such progress that one evening blood began to pour from her ear, and no means of stanching it could be found. The doctor's efforts were quite useless, and not being able to suggest anything better he ordered the ear to be dressed with oil of almonds. But the invalid, instead of using the oil that was prescribed, made use of oil from St. Rita's lamp, and she anointed the affected part with it for seven days, reciting three Glorias and an Ave, whilst she made the sign of the Cross with the oil, and finally saying the ejaculation, 'Blessed Rita, pray for me.' On the seventh night she had a feeling as if something inside her head had opened, and from that moment she noticed she could hear the ticking of the clock, and in a short time every trace of her malady had disappeared.

Signora Nicoletta de Bellis of Rutigliano was often complaining of an intolerable pain in her head, which came on every fifth or sixth day,

and had reduced her to a condition of the utmost emaciation. She had consulted many physicians, amongst them some of the most distinguished in Naples, and had submitted to many courses of treatment, but all to no effect. The malady was obstinate, and her health was failing day by day. Her aunt, who was a nun in the convent of St. Cosmo in Conversano, of which we have had reason to speak already, told her of St. Rita's miracles, and persuaded her to have recourse to that saint by a fervent novena. The invalid followed her advice, and we may imagine her joy and wonder on finding herself freed from her malady at the very beginning of the novena. The recovery was a perfect and lasting one, and no vestige of disease was left.

A poor man from Conversano had the misfortune to get a fistula on one of his eyes, which could be got rid of only by a difficult and costly surgical operation. He would have to go to Bari and pay 200 lire to the surgeon, which it was quite impossible for him to do. He had recourse to St. Rita in his trouble, and besought her intervention with a lively, ardent faith. His prayers were heard ; the fistula disappeared from his eye without the intervention of the surgeon's knife. He had a solemn Mass of thanksgiving sung every year in honour of his deliverer.

In 1886 a little boy of four years fell on the fire of a brazier, and besides being badly burnt, his eyes were so seriously injured that he could no longer open them. His afflicted mother called in the doctors, and applied the remedies they prescribed, but without effect. Day passed after day, and the child remained blind, nor was there any hope left that he would recover his sight. His pious mother then betook herself to prayer to God and His saints ; she addressed many appeals on her child's behalf to various heavenly patrons, but the favour she sought was not granted. One night, whilst she was sleeping, there appeared to her a nun, who said, 'You have had recourse to many saints: why have you not applied to me?' 'And who are you?' asked the woman. 'I am Blessed Rita,' was the reply, 'whose statue is in the Church of St. Cosmo. I promise you that if you come to visit me your son's eyes will be opened when you return.' The woman was in the church early next morning to pay the visit suggested to her and to beg the saint's intercession. On her return she heard her son calling, and on going to him found him with eyes open and entirely cured.

In March, 1887, Signora Maria Soria Carcaterra of Conversano received a remarkable favour from St. Rita, which she herself thus describes :

‘ I, the undersigned, testify that I have received the following favour from B. Rita of Cascia. A cyst having appeared on my right eyelid, I consulted various distinguished doctors, who told me I should have to undergo an operation. But I thought it better to recommend myself to B. Rita, and after many prayers she did me the favour of causing the cyst to disappear without any need of doctors or of medicine.

‘ MARIA SORIA CARCATERRA.’

Signor Giovanni Biscozzi had in 1887 been ill for a long time with a painful malady. The physicians thought he was suffering from disease of the heart, and therefore incurable. It is certain that he had to remain shut up in his room, for every changing of place caused him grievous torment. When his aunt, who was a nun in the convent of St. Cosmo in Conversano, came to learn this, she sent him one of St. Rita's blessed loaves, advising him to take a little piece of it every day and then drink a little water in memory of the saint's fastings, and to recite three Glorias and an Ave and the invocation, ‘ Blessed Rita, pray for me.’ The sick man followed the advice, and immediately had experience of its salutary effects, for he felt considerably better, and very soon was restored to his former health. As a

mark of gratitude he sent the convent a present of oil to be used in the lamp at the saint's statue.

Paolina Giannetti, a lay sister of the same convent of St. Cosmo, had a large pustule on her arm which was very painful, and since she could not be dispensed from working, it festered, and her whole arm became swollen, and in consequence of this she fell into a violent fever. It was thought indispensable that a doctor should be called in, and that evening a message was sent to the doctor asking him to come next day, that a lay sister had need of his services. That night a picture of St. Rita was given to the sick nun, and she placed it on her diseased arm all night. Hardly had she awakened from sleep when she found that the swelling had entirely subsided, that the fever had left her, and that every trace of the pustule had also disappeared. The doctor came later, and was told there was no need for his services.

Signora Natalizia Scattone of Conversano relates that her husband had a large tumour on one of his legs, which forced him to keep his bed for many days, and which had ultimately to be removed by an operation. His wife was very much afraid that the wound made by the surgeon would become a fistula, for even the slightest scratch on her husband took several days to

heal. She had before received many favours from St. Rita, and was therefore very devout towards her; and on this occasion, hardly had the surgeon departed after the operation, than she placed a relic of the saint over the bandages, and prayed with all her heart for her husband. On the following day the surgeon returned to dress the wound, but when the bandages were removed, it was found to be completely healed, to his great amazement and that of the family.

Signor Domenico Lopriore of Conversano had a tooth extracted in 1887, and perhaps owing to the damp to which he exposed himself by going into the country at an early hour, an abscess was formed in his mouth, which reduced him to the last extremity. A very high fever, with swellings in his throat, face, and tongue, deprived him of all repose. His tongue especially had grown so large that he had perforce to keep it full two fingers' breadth hanging out of his mouth. The doctors, seeing that he was growing worse, ordered him the last Sacraments. He had a cousin who was a boarder in the convent of St. Cosmo, and who was very devoted to St. Rita. She, with the nuns, prayed very fervently to the saint for the sick man's recovery, and his uncle, a priest, offered Mass for the same intention on the saint's altar in the church. The holy

sacrifice and the prayers soon brought about the desired effect, for the sick man suddenly became much better, and in a short time was completely cured.

Devotion to St. Rita has not only brought health to bodies, but salvation to souls, as the following shows : Sister Generosa Perrini, nun of the convent of St. Cosmo, having to live out of *clausura* for some time owing to ill-health, had occasion to go to Bari one day with her brother, Canon Francesco Perrini. In that town they heard of a young lady who was dying, and who, masquerading as a freethinker, refused to have anything to do with priests or Sacraments. Her relatives, who were in the utmost affliction at such a misfortune, begged the Canon and his sister to go and see her, in the hope that their visit might excite some good thought in her. They went to see the invalid, but as soon as she caught sight of them she began to abuse them bitterly. Said the Canon to her : 'Signora, I am only come to pay you a simple visit, and also, if you please, to bring you a cure for your disease.' 'What cure?' asked she, growing calmer. 'If, indeed, you have an efficacious one, you are welcome.' By good fortune the Canon had a little picture of the saint, and, offering it to the sick lady, he said : 'Here is the cure. If you will have recourse to this

advocate, who is called the Saint of the Impossible, you will be saved.' The sight of the picture, indeed, worked a wonder. Instead of flying into a passion and throwing it back to them, as she had done on other occasions, the invalid freely accepted it, took it with devotion, and placed it under her pillow. After this the Canon with his sister took his leave and went away, but hardly had he gone a few yards than he was called back in a great hurry, and when he went to the invalid she asked him to hear her confession. The Canon showed her that he could not hear confessions outside his own diocese, and he exhorted her to avail herself of a confessor of the place. She allowed herself to be persuaded, a confessor was called in, and she made her confession with great sorrow. She said that Rita had appeared to her as a nun, and incited her to die well. She received the Holy Viaticum and Extreme Unction with signs of sincere piety, and then delivered up her soul to God.

In March, 1888, Signora Caterina Bianchini had a little son of five years of age who was attacked by cancerous diphtheria in the throat, which soon placed him in extreme danger of death. The physicians had despaired of him, and gave him only four hours to live. His mother, who at other times had received signal favours

from St. Rita, had recourse to her, confident in her assistance, and beseeching her with tears to help her. She anointed the child's throat with the oil of the saint, and, most wonderful to tell, hardly had the oil touched his throat than he moved himself, recovered consciousness, spoke, and in a few days was well. On the following day the doctor and their relations called rather to visit the parents than the child, who they thought was dead, but imagine their astonishment on seeing him restored to health! 'My mother,' said he, 'rubbed me with St. Rita's oil, and said, "Saint Rita, give me my son," and I was well again.'

In 1890 Signorina Susanna Pallieri of Conversano had suffered from a severe pulmonary complaint, and when she recovered from it she was troubled by a gathering in one of her eyes which remained from that disease, and which resisted all the efforts of her doctors. When she found that none of the doctors of her native place could effect a cure, she put herself under the care of Dr. Vitali, a distinguished oculist of Bari, for three months. But the gathering in her eye grew worse instead of better, and finally the oculist, seeing that all his attempts produced no result, had to throw up the case. It would be impossible to tell the sorrow of the poor young lady at so unfortunate a result of her efforts. Having lost

all hope in human aid, she, with her mother, began to beseech St. Rita either to cure her of her malady or else take her out of this world to escape the intolerable anguish of the pain she had to bear. Their prayers were not in vain, for on the very next day after beginning the prayers her eye was very much improved, and that evening she was entirely cured. Dr. Vitali was immediately informed of what had happened, and at first did not believe it; but when he saw that she had really been cured, he declared openly that such a cure ought to be regarded as a real miracle. From that day Signorina Pallieri was entirely cured of the disease of her eye, and enjoyed excellent health, nor does she cease to return thanks to the Saint of the Impossible.

In the town of Turi, in February, 1893, a boy of five years of age named Filippo d'Addabbo, who had just had an attack of scarlatina, developed symptoms of violent fever accompanied by swellings of his whole body. For two days he had remained in bed unable to speak, and the doctors gave him up for dead. In this state he suddenly opened his eyes, made a sign towards a picture of St. Rita that was hanging in the room, and said to his mother: 'Take down that picture, and light some candles before it,' and they did so. Early on the following morning he said: 'Mamma,

write to Aunt Chiara Maria (she was a nun in the convent of St. Cosmo) in Conversano to have a Mass said to St. Rita.' And they immediately did as he wished. On the evening of that day the child grew worse, and they were afraid he was dying, as the doctors had assured them. At a certain time of the night, however, he became noticeably better. When the doctors came next day to visit him they found him, to their astonishment, entirely recovered, and repeating the words, 'Blessed Rita has cured me.'

Natale Esperti, a shoemaker of Conversano, had been in a deplorable state of health for a long time, for his feet and legs were swollen, and a pain in the heart deprived him of all chance of repose. The heart disease became worse, and the doctors attending him lost all hope of saving his life. On Tuesday in Holy Week, 1895, he received the last Sacraments, as he was almost on the point of death, and his end was expected every hour. His sister-in-law, who was most devoted to St. Rita, pitying his sad case, went to pray for him in the Church of St. Cosmo, and brought some candles to light before the saint's statue. Whilst all the others were weeping about the bed of the dying man she obtained a little picture of the saint, which was placed on his breast whilst they recited the invocation, 'St. Rita,

pray for him.' They also gave him a little piece of the saint's blessed bread, which he tried to swallow. A wonder was instantly seen, for the swelling decreased considerably, and the pain at the heart disappeared. In three days the man who had been dying was able to rise from his bed cured, to the incredible wonder of all who had assisted him dying.

Signora Antonia Bernardi of Cisternino also obtained a stupendous favour from our saint. In May, 1895, she had an attack of scarlatina, which was epidemic in that town, and had proved fatal in many cases. In her case it was so violent and so much resisted all the skill of the doctors that she was declared incurable, and she was preparing herself to receive the last Sacraments. Her parents were distracted with grief, but knowing the miracles that St. Rita works in every place, they had recourse to her patronage in their sorrow. The dying woman also recommended herself confidently to St. Rita, and joined her prayers to those of the others. Whilst she was in a paroxysm of fever, and hence could not say whether she was sleeping or waking, St. Rita appeared to her, and with her another saint whom the sick woman could not distinguish. The saint came close to her bed, and said to her, 'I have cured you ; now you will be well, but

mind, return me the visit at Conversano.' The saint disappeared, and the sick woman found herself instantly well. Her parents and relatives were seized with the utmost astonishment, and they took care to betake them to Conversano to return the visit of their beneficent visitor. There is no need to say that after this event the worship of St. Rita was extended to people of every rank in Cisternino.

Amongst the very many places into which the worship of St. Rita has been publicly introduced in very recent years, Noci, a large town in the diocese of Conversano, is deserving of special mention. There is an altar, richly ornamented, erected in the principal church there in honour of the saint, and never a day passes that crowds of the faithful do not go there to offer their prayers or pay their vows. And Rita, looking with pleasure on the piety of the people of Noci, repays them every day with help and favour. For brevity's sake we shall mention only three examples of this, and in the first place that obtained by the priest, Don Francesco Morea, who is remarkable for promoting devotion to St. Rita. Here are his words :

'About midnight on the 10th of April, 1895, I was awakened by violent beatings of my heart, so frequent and continuous that I could not

breathe. I remained a long time sitting up in bed with my hand tightly pressed over the region of the heart, in great trouble, without being able to utter a word. However, I turned to Blessed Rita in thought, placed her picture over my heart, and vowed a silver heart if she liberated me from this sudden illness. I recited three Glorias in her honour, adding, "O, Blessed Rita, pray for me." As soon as I had done this I was quite well. The beating of my heart became regular ; I was able to lie down and sleep. From time to time since this nervous palpitation has returned, but never in the same form as that night, nor for so long. I redeemed my vow on the 14th of May by hanging on her picture the silver heart I promised.'

The influenza, which was rife in many parts of Puglia in 1895, did not spare the town of Noci. Amongst others, Maria Luizzi, wife of Simone Sansonetti, a bleacher, was attacked by it. After struggling with the disease for several days at last it left her, and the doctor allowed her to leave her bed. Hardly, however, had she put foot on the floor than she felt entirely prostrated, and experienced such a feeling of dizziness that she fell at full length on the floor, and was with great difficulty got into bed again. On the next and three following days the same feelings of

weakness and dejection continued. On the evening of the fifth day, animated with strong confidence in St. Rita, to whom, as we have said, an altar in the parish church was dedicated, she prayed in this way: 'O Blessed Rita, I promise to present you with my *breloque* if you allow me to remain out of bed all day to-morrow.' When the time came to get up, she left her bed and dressed herself, without the least doubt that her prayer had been heard. She tried to walk about her room, and found she could do so without difficulty, for she felt herself fortified with new strength, and all the ill-effects of the influenza vanished. She redeemed her vow to the saint on the 5th of June, 1895.

The following fact that happened in Noci on the 28th of June, 1895, crowns all the wonderful works which the Saint of the Impossible performs every day. It is the case of a doctor—as pious and religious as he is skilful in the healing art—who was unexpectedly attacked by cerebral congestion and reduced to the last extremity, and even thought to be dead, who, after simply being anointed by the saint's oil moved himself, revived, and completely recovered. But let us leave it to himself to tell the story, for out of gratitude for the favour received he has written the following with his own hand :

‘On the 28th of last June, in the forenoon, whilst I was making my usual round of medical visits, I began to feel unwell; and about eleven o’clock, whilst I was standing by a sick man, I could not complete my visit, for I almost fell into a swoon. The women who were standing opposite me noticed that I was ill and gave the alarm. The priest, Don Pietro Gentile, near whose house I was, was sent for and soon arrived. He asked me how I felt, and I replied, “I mistrust myself.” “Do you wish to go home?” said he. “Yes,” I answered, “let us go.” And with the utmost difficulty I got there. I threw myself on the bed, lost all sense, was seized with epileptic convulsions of the Jacksonian type, proceeding from congestion of the brain. I had three attacks at short intervals, each more serious than the preceding one. Blood was let, leeches were applied, many mustard cataplasms were used, ice was kept constantly to my head. My colleagues who affectionately attended me already despaired of my recovery, and had the last Sacraments administered to me; the priests were reciting the prayers for the dying, and it was rumoured that I was dead. The good people poured into the church, and now had no hope except in a miracle. Ceaseless prayers were offered, especially before the altar of Blessed

Rita. The oil of the saint was requisitioned. I was conscious of waking as from a calm sleep, whilst I felt a hand anointing my cheeks ; I afterwards learned that the same thing had been done over my stomach and on my temples. From that moment I WAS COMPLETELY RESTORED TO HEALTH, and but for the concern of my friends I would have dressed myself and gone about my usual occupations. This event, really extraordinary, believed by all the people to have happened by the intercession of Blessed Rita, I consecrate in this account of it, as a proof of my gratitude, to the glory of the same Blessed Rita.

‘ PASQUALE TATEO, M.D.

‘ NOCI,

‘ *2nd of July, 1895.*’

Since this case is so singular, and the miracle so great, we subjoin the account of it given by the zealous priest of the place, Don Francesco Morea :

‘ The deaths of the three ladies, Vavalle, Mansueto, and Anguilli, had impressed the town with sadness, when a new and unexpected sorrow came to disturb all the people. In less time than it takes to relate the sad tidings had passed from mouth to mouth ; people of every condition were seen to stop in astonishment, to ask news of

one another, and turn their steps to the house where the sick man lay. It was singular to see the stairs crowded with little children of both sexes, to see the people come out tearfully on the balconies and ask news of the passers-by, and the universal sorrow would have told you the great esteem in which he that was so near the tomb was held. The news that he had already received the last Sacraments, and that the priests, who with the doctors were about his bed, had begun the prayers for a soul departing, made it clear to all that very few hours of life remained to Doctor Pasquale Tateo. In the midst of such heartfelt sorrow there were some, however, who were offering fervent prayers for him to the Most High through the intercession of the Saint of the Impossible. There were some who, whilst they slept, felt inspired by the same blessed servant of God to light a lamp before the picture of the miracle-worker, and thus obtain for certain the favour they desired ; there were some who began in secret a triduum for the sick ; and by the dying man's bed were some who, provided with the miraculous oil, anointed with it, whilst reciting the usual prayers, his head, his stomach and abdomen, that were swollen to an extraordinary extent. And such great faith in the intercession of our new protectress was

crowned by a most singular grace. As soon as the anointing was completed there came on a more violent fit of convulsions than any that had preceded it, and it was thought the doctor's last hour had come. But that fit was the last, and it seems that the powerful advocate wished to have it understood that she intervened on behalf of her faithful clients exactly when they were in direst peril, and when all hope of recovery by human means had been abandoned. Whilst the convulsive fit was in progress they began again to anoint him with the marvellous oil, and then he came to himself, and looked as if he were waking from a calm sleep of three hours.

' The transition from death to life was so sudden that those who were present could not but acknowledge that the recovery was a true miracle granted to the prayers of the entire town by its new protectress, Blessed Rita. Pleasant to relate, there was no time of convalescence, no getting better by degrees, no further remedy applied to him; but on the 30th the doctor, without any trace of weakness from the blood-letting, but full of energy, cheerful, and witty, as he usually had been, woke early in the morning, and, hearing the bell of the Capuchin church ringing, wanted to get up and go to Mass, as it was a feast day, but he was not allowed to do this. He rose later in

the day, was able to take his meals, and returned to his house without assistance, amidst the wonder and applause of the people. The next day, early, he resumed his ordinary professional duties. These circumstances were such as would make those who did not know of the miracle believe that the occurrence must have been the result of an excited imagination rather than undeniable fact. Yet such they were, and the miracle is all the more wonderful on this account, and worthy of being published for the glory of God and Blessed Rita. To this end the doctor, out of gratitude, promises to make the altar dedicated to her in this principal church even richer than it already is, by presenting a beautiful silver lamp to be hung from the arch in front of it.'

On the 20th of January, 1896, Signora Anna Gregori of Rome was seized by a violent fever, which at first, was thought to be simply rheumatic fever, but which very soon developed into that terrible malady pleuro-bronchial pneumonia, which is in most cases fatal in Rome. In spite of the prompt and skilful treatment of the well-known Professor Masciarelli, the disease continued to gain force so rapidly that the patient, who was also *enciente*, received the last comforts of religion on the 25th of the month, and also the blessing of the

Holy Father, and after having tearfully given her last messages to her friends, she was awaiting the call of the Lord with resignation.

Meanwhile her husband, Signor Augusto Gregori, who was inconsolable at the loss that threatened him after only eight years of married life, turned with confidence to Our Lady of Pompei and to St. Rita of Cascia, that well-known sketch of whose life he had read a few days before, called 'The Saint of the Impossible.' He fervently besought her aid, promising to present a silver votive offering and to spread devotion to her. Even before midnight of that day the invalid felt relief, the fever went down, her strength came back, and after two days the doctors declared her out of all danger. She was shortly after able to rise from her bed completely recovered. The favour was a complete and perfect one, for after her serious illness there was no trace of tuberculosis, which was feared, and after less than a month she gave birth to a strong and healthy little daughter. Her husband, who quickly redeemed his vow, does not cease to give glory to the Saint of the Impossible.

Simone Rotunno and his wife, Rosa Naracci, of Conversano, were overwhelmed with grief at a serious illness that threatened the life of their little daughter Maria, a child of four years. On

the 27th of January, 1896, about five in the morning, they found her writhing in convulsions and almost at the point of death. Immediately they besought the help of their great patron St. Rita, and anointed the child's members with oil from the saint's lamp whilst they were offering fervent prayers. They had not long to wait, for at eleven o'clock on the same morning the child, who had hitherto shown no signs of life, stirred in bed, opened her eyes, and began to speak, and after ten days was restored to perfect health.

A boy and girl, children of Doctor Vito Antonio Argenti of Polignano, on the sea-coast, caught the influenza, which was rife there in 1896. The disease took a very serious turn in the boy's case, and developed into pneumonia, accompanied by high fever and pain in the shoulder. The dangerous development of the disease caused consternation in the family.

They immediately began a novena to St. Rita, to whom devotion is very generally practised in that place, and in whose honour an altar is dedicated in the Church of the Sacred Heart. They had two lamps lighted before her picture, and promised many gifts if their son should be restored to health. Their prayers were answered, for the child grew markedly better during the novena, and was completely cured by the time

it was finished. The same remedy was adopted in the case of the little girl, on whom the disease had told severely. They put a picture of the saint on her breast, which she often kissed devoutly, another novena was begun for her recovery, and an improvement was soon evident, and continued till she was restored to perfect health.

A woman from Casamassima, who was married at Bari, had an only son of about seventeen years of age, who was very wild and dissolute. He was for ever running away from home, getting into trouble, and giving vent to his vicious inclinations, and staying out at night more often than not. Seeing that all good advice and even threats were thrown away upon him, his afflicted parents applied to St. Rita in prayer, for they had heard of the wonderful deeds she had done. They began a novena of certain Paters and Aves as well as they could. On the third day their son appeared at home, but shortly after went off again and returned no more. Nevertheless, they still had confidence in the saint, and began a second novena after the manner directed in a little book they got from an aunt of theirs. When the novena was nearly finished the son came back quite changed from what he had been. He threw himself at his parents' feet, and with tears asked

their pardon for the grief he had caused them, promising to lead a new life for the future. To remove all occasion of giving way to his vagrant propensities, he asked them to have him taught some business in which he could by his conduct give proof of his sincerity. His parents, beside themselves with joy, hastened to Conversano to return thanks to St. Rita, and as a proof of their gratitude they had a lamp lighted before her altar, which they made arrangements to keep burning on Friday in every week.

The brother-in-law of a certain Sister of Charity was dangerously ill of pneumonia in February, 1896. The doctor who was called to attend him did not let his friends know how critical the case was, in order not to frighten them, but he only said to the patient's wife, 'Pray to God for your husband.' Luckily for her, she had a copy of the book 'The Saint of the Impossible,' which her sister the nun had given her, and she entrusted everything to the saint, and earnestly begged her help for the sick man. One night he almost swooned from the violence of his cough, and had to sit up in bed. About midnight he saw a nun come close to him and gaze at him fixedly without speaking. She stood by his side for half an hour and then disappeared. From that time the longed-for recovery commenced, and to the

doctor's astonishment went on rapidly till he was entirely restored to health. It would be impossible to describe the joy of the family at this marvellous result. The fame of it was spread about, and devotion to the Saint of the Impossible spread to such an extent that a picture of St. Rita had to be placed in the parish church to satisfy the people's veneration.

Twelve children of the house of Ventimiglia were all suffering from the measles in March, 1896, in Vatolla, which is a town of the province of Salerno, and the youngest, a little girl of two years of age, was, in addition, attacked so badly by laryngitis that it was feared she would choke every moment. Her eldest sister, beside herself with grief, took her little picture of St. Rita, and, fastening it about the little patient's neck, earnestly prayed for the grace of her recovery. Only a few minutes passed when little Teresa—for so the sick child was called—raised herself without assistance in her cot and asked for milk. That evening the fever, which had been very high, had almost disappeared, and her cough, too, had ceased to a very great extent. A few days later the child was able to get up, fully recovered. The family, out of gratitude to their great protectress, had a Mass celebrated at her altar in Conversano.

In 1896 the marriage of Giuseppe Centrone to Maria Rotunno, two very good and pious young persons and fairly well off, was to have taken place. Through a slight quarrel, however, the marriage was broken off by the bridegroom. The bride, troubled at this sinister turn of events, together with her parents had recourse to St. Rita, and promised to present a golden votive offering if the groom should of himself reopen negotiations for the marriage that had been abandoned. On the vigil of her feast the saint appeared to the bridegroom in his sleep, and said: 'Beppino, your wife must be Maria and no one else.' This was enough to bring him back to his bride and to have the marriage take place, as it did, in fact. The vow to the saint was not only fulfilled, but they had a High Mass offered on her altar.

One night in 1896 a young woman from Castellana was sleeping on the top of a very high rick of straw, when suddenly it gave way and fell to the ground. The young woman, who would have been crushed to death under its weight, immediately invoked St. Rita, and was rescued from danger without receiving the slightest injury. The saint appeared to her the following night whilst she was asleep, and said: 'I have saved you from death, and I want in return that new dress

you have made.' The poor girl had, by dint of careful saving, made a new dress for herself, with which she wished to make an appearance on the feast days, but she made the required sacrifice to the Saint of the Impossible. She sold it and brought its price to be used in spreading the devotion to St. Rita from the church in Conversano.

In 1896 there was a family in St. Vito dei Normanni which was plunged in the greatest misery owing to its head having entirely abandoned himself to a disgraceful vice, which he still continued to practise in spite of the terrible consequences it brought upon him. For although symptoms of paralysis and rheumatism showed themselves, and he was reduced to a state of the utmost weakness and almost blindness, he still went on to follow the path that ends in ruin of body and soul. His unfortunate family, having heard of the innumerable miracles of the Saint of the Impossible, had recourse to her. They made a most fervent novena in her honour, and ended it with receiving Holy Communion, and very soon the good effect of their prayers was evident. After a couple of days the man who had been brutalized by his base pursuits began to take heed for himself; the spirit of prudence awoke in him again; he abandoned his wicked

practices, regained sight and strength, and recovered the health he had squandered. It is no wonder that the name of St. Rita is glorified in that family, or that the eldest daughter has made a vow to recite the prayers of St. Rita's novena every day as long as she lives.

A young lady named Franceschina Gabrielli, from Noci, fell dangerously ill in 1896, whilst she was on a visit to some relatives in Rutigliano. All the doctors of the town were called in successively to prescribe for her, and others were brought from distant places, but they could not stop the progress of the disease that was killing her. The grief of her family and relatives was indescribable on being informed by the doctors after three consultations that nothing but a miracle could save her. The young lady, worn out by the disease and in her last agony, had received the last consolations of religion, and the special benediction of the Holy Father, and was preparing herself for the passage to eternity. All preparations were made for her funeral, the dress for the corpse and the coffin were got ready, and the clergy and confraternities appointed to assist in the procession to the tomb.

But Franceschina had very special devotion to St. Rita, and was recommending herself to her protection with most fervent prayers. She held

a picture of her in her hand, which she was kissing every minute, and although resigned to make the sacrifice of her life to God, she promised the saint to honour her by procuring a little statue of her if she should obtain the grace of recovery. One evening she was suffering a great deal, and the doctors foresaw that she would die that night. The priests were watching by her bedside and comforting her by reciting the prayers for the dying. At midnight she thought that St. Rita with St. John appeared to her, and that St. Rita said: 'Do not be afraid; you will be well.' What is certain is that just at that time she broke silence and began to sing a hymn of St. Rita. But the really astonishing fact is that all danger was at an end from that moment, and her disease disappeared as if by magic. The next morning she was convalescent, and the doctors in their astonishment had to confess that in this wonderful recovery God had intervened.

The Salesian Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart amongst other occupations are employed in the religious and literary education of young girls, whom they watch over with a care that is truly maternal. Their mother-house is in Rome, and there is attached to it what is styled a providential boarding-school for young women who attend the normal schools, and at the end

of their course get a Government certificate that entitles them to teach. Providential this college really is, for its pupils attend the Government schools and yet are carefully preserved from every danger. In 1896 the annual examinations at the end of the scholastic year were approaching. The students were in a state of trepidation, for with all their diligence and labour in study very little was needed to have girls make mistakes in the presence of examiners who were perhaps not too favourable to them. Having heard of the miracles of St. Rita of Cascia, they confidently turned to her, and confided to her care the result of the examinations. They had recourse to her patronage, they offered prayers in her honour, and other works of piety. Nor were their hopes frustrated. The examinations resulted most brilliantly, and to the entire satisfaction of all who took part in them. To thank her for so remarkable a favour the grateful girl students elected St. Rita their special protectress.

On the 29th of May, 1897, a Calabrian gentleman arrived in Conversano on a pilgrimage, and, going into the Church of St. Cosmo, he went to the altar of St. Rita, and, prostrate before it, offered his thanks to the Saint of the Impossible. He afterwards told the nun who was promoter of the devotion that his name was Luigi Naccarato,

of the province of Cosenza, and that he had come to redeem a vow made to the saint for a remarkable favour granted to him. He had been suffering for many years from a disorder of the brain that rendered him incapable of doing anything. His brother, a doctor, had used every means to eradicate his disease; he had consulted the most eminent medical men in Naples and elsewhere, but without any good effect. Having lost all hope in human means, he had recourse to the aid of Heaven by prayers to several holy patrons, but it seemed that Heaven, too, was deaf to his appeals. At last a lady in Cosenza had advised him to trust himself to the Saint of the Impossible, who had granted many extraordinary graces to those devoted to her. The young man, who was truly religious, willingly followed her advice. He began to invoke the saint, and made a vow to visit Conversano if his prayers were heard. His petition was granted; the disease that had hitherto baffled every remedy disappeared, and he felt himself free in mind and vigorous in health, as if he had never suffered from any malady.

Not dissimilar from the preceding case was the disease from which the Princess Telesio Antonacci of Naples suffered, and by which she was brought to a deplorable state. Her brain was so weakened

that she could not fix her mind on anything or do anything. When all the efforts of medical science had proved vain, her sorrowful sister, who had the book we have so often mentioned, wrote to Conversano to have a novena offered to the saint. The novena was made, and some of the blessed oil was also sent to have the invalid's forehead anointed with it. Instantly a wonderful change was wrought. As they anointed her forehead the disease grew less, her mind became clear, and her strength came back. The application of the oil was persevered in and so did the improvement continue, and the oil of St. Rita was recognised as the only remedy against that terrible disease. The Princess, in gratitude for so signal a favour, sent a present of a barrel of oil to Conversano, and money also to be employed in worship in honour of the saint.

A little girl, the daughter of Sebastiano Gianuli, a merchant of Bari, had suffered from her earliest years from a tumour in the knee. The doctors of the town held different opinions as to the nature of her disease, and the well-known Doctor Giuseppe Luciana was consulted, who diagnosed the case as caries of the bone, and declared a surgical operation indispensable for a cure. This operation would be painful, difficult, and full of danger. The family by this opinion

was reduced to a state of consternation, and had recourse to prayer, and by the suggestion of a nun made a novena to St. Rita, but the favour they prayed for was then denied them. The operation had to take place on the 22nd of July, 1897, and the tibia was almost entirely separated from the thigh-bone; the knee-pan was almost entirely removed, nearly four fingers' length of the tibia was removed, and as much of the thigh-bone, and both were united so as to form one bone only, whence all power of bending the joints was lost. Owing to the difficulty of the operation the doctors could not promise that she would surely recover; they only said the child would have to suffer a great deal. And, indeed, the poor child did suffer a great deal from high fever, excruciating pains, and a weakness so extreme that she could not even cry out.

On the next day the child, who up to that time, owing to the pain she was suffering, had not even opened her mouth, asked for a picture of the saint that was hanging in the room, and began to say, 'O, Blessed Rita! oh, grant me the favour, because I am suffering very much! It is true that I have been ungrateful towards you, because when the others were saying the novena I was distracted, and I took very little care to pray to you; but now I know how wrong I was, and I ask

your pardon. Oh, grant me the favour, for I think I cannot suffer any more.' And whilst the attendants were drawing close to her bed, she added: 'Make way; she is coming now.' 'Who?' they asked. 'A nun,' answered the child. 'Where is she coming from?' 'From there—from that door.' 'What is she doing?' 'She is moving about my bed—coming to sit near me.' The child then remained motionless, as if she were listening to something being said to her, and soon after said: 'With the help of the saint, doctors, how well she has settled my leg! She has put her beautiful hands on me and cured me!' and, turning to those near her who were weeping, 'Do not cry any more,' she said; 'be all very glad. Do you not see how glad I am at getting so beautiful a favour? I have no more pain. Blessed Rita has told me that all my pains will end in three days; with my injured leg I shall be able to dance, to jump, to run about without trouble.'

And so it turned out. The child was able to get up after three days free entirely from all trace of disease. But the most stupendous part was that her right leg, from which half a palm's length of bone had been cut off, and which would be shortened, even supposing her cured, and quite incapable of bending, was found after the inter-

vention of Blessed Rita to be of the same length as the left, and equally flexible and sound.

Most grateful for so great a miracle, the family did not put off going to Conversano to return thanks and redeem their vow to the Saint of the Impossible, and many people took notice of the child that had been cured, how she walked without difficulty and without a halt, both her legs being precisely of the same length.

The following stupendous fact that happened in the case of a person who had never even heard the name of St. Rita of Cascia shows how much God wishes glory to be given to His famous servant.

To Vito Palazzi and his wife Rosina Surico of Gioia del Colle, near Bari, a child was born in 1897, who was christened Filippo. From birth the infant had one of its feet turned, so that the sole of the foot was twisted to a right angle from the place it ought to occupy. Doctors were consulted, but to no effect. They declared no care could remedy the defect, and that an operation would be dangerous and useless. The poor mother could only weep distractedly. One night, after crying excessively, she was sleeping, when a nun appeared to her in her sleep. 'Rosina,' said she, 'why do you weep? Can you not have recourse to me in your affliction?' 'And who

are you, O, blessed sister?’ said she. ‘I am Blessed Rita of Cascia,’ said the nun. ‘O, Blessed Rita,’ said the afflicted woman, ‘cure my little Filippo for me;’ and she showed the saint her infant’s twisted foot. ‘Have faith, Rosina,’ said the saint to her; ‘the defect in the child is a serious one, but God can do all things;’ and so saying she made the sign of the Cross three times on the foot and disappeared. When the woman awoke on the following morning she remembered the vision, and, hurrying from her bed, she ran to the infant’s cradle; she undid the bandages and looked at its feet, and found them both as they ought to be, for the deformity of the left foot had disappeared. She knelt on the floor and thanked the saint most earnestly. She then called her husband, showed him the infant’s foot, and told him of the vision and miracle. She remembered St. Rita, and wrote to Conversano for a large picture of her, which she had framed, and before which she keeps a lamp burning night and day; and she likewise had a High Mass sung before the saint’s altar, nor is she ever wearied in telling the miracle and giving glory to the saint to whom she owes it.

CHAPTER IX

HER CANONIZATION

IN reading the wonderful and miraculous facts of the life of St. Rita and the very many prodigious works done by God through her intercession, the reader must have asked himself more than once how it is that so grand a soul, whose heroic virtues shine so brightly, and who was, like the greatest saints of the Church, favoured by God with most singular graces and sublime privileges, should be adorned with the aureole of a saint and raised to highest honours of the altars only after more than four centuries had passed since she had gone to immortal glory in heaven. .

The only reasonable answer to this question, the only explanation of a delay not by any means unique in the history of the canonization of the great heroes of the Church, is that the judgments of God are incomprehensible and His ways unsearchable, and the Divine wisdom which in His own time makes each cause produce its effect, and

all things regulates in number, weight, and measure, so disposes it that the exaltation of His servants on earth then takes place when it is for the greater glorification of His Church and the greater spiritual advantage of Christians. This just reflection ought to console us in the sorrow we naturally feel at the long delay that has occurred in bringing to a happy termination the process of the canonization of our heroine.

After the privilege of reciting the office and celebrating Mass in honour of the saint had been granted to the Augustinian Order and the Diocese of Spoleto in 1627, as soon as the solemn festivals we have described were brought to an end, devotion to St. Rita increased to such an extent, and the desire of the faithful became so fervent to have their great advocate enrolled by the Church's supreme authority in the catalogue of the Blessed and afterwards of the Saints, that in August, 1737, her cause was resumed in the state and terms in which it was found. On the 3rd of August in that year an ordinary session of the Congregation was held to debate the point whether the case excepted in the decrees of Pope Urban VIII. was fully established, and in the result the Congregation found the answer to be in the affirmative, and Pope Clement XII., on the 13th of the same month, confirmed the

finding of the Congregation. On the 25th of July in the following year remissorial letters were therefore sent to the Ecclesiastical Courts of Spoleto, in whose jurisdiction Cascia then was, authorizing them to institute an Apostolic process of inquiry regarding the virtues and miracles of Blessed Rita, it being the unbroken practice of the Holy See not to grant the supreme honours of the altars unless it be shown that the theological and moral virtues were practised in a heroic degree. But the process then begun was interrupted by various events, and was not resumed until 1851. Without further interruption it was finally perfected in 1855, and its validity was approved in 1856 in Rome by Pius IX., of happy memory. Meanwhile the fame of the extraordinary graces and miracles granted by God through the saint's intercession was everywhere increasing, but it is hard to collect the proofs and institute a process that will satisfy the rigorous requirements which the Church exacts in those matters.

Nevertheless, juridical proofs of some of these miraculous occurrences were not wanting. In fact, in the years 1851 and 1852 there was held by Apostolic permission in the Ecclesiastical Courts of Nursia, under the jurisdiction of which Cascia had passed, a process of inquiry into the reported case of instantaneous curing of a girl—

Elisabetta Bergamini, who had been suffering from conjunctivitis complicated with ulcerous keratitis. Owing to the efforts of the Most Rev. Mons. Casimiro Gennari, then Bishop of Conversano, and at present titular Archbishop of Lepanto and Assessor of the Inquisition, who is most zealous, as we have said, in spreading devotion to St. Rita, the authorization of the Holy See was asked for and obtained in 1887 to institute a formal Apostolic process of inquiry into the case of Cosimo Pelligrini, of the town of Conversano, who was reported to have been miraculously cured. As soon as the inquiry was perfected, it was scrutinized in an ordinary Congregation of the Rota on the 28th of June, 1892, and its validity recognised. On the 17th of the following month the Holy Father deigned to confirm the sentence of the Sacred Congregation.

Almost at the same time there was held, by virtue of remissorial letters of the 18th of February, 1892, in the Ecclesiastical Courts of Nursia, a special inquiry, in which the Promoter of the Faith, Mons. Agostino Caprara, intervened, into the most sweet and miraculous odour which from time immemorial is at intervals experienced about the blessed body of St. Rita. By other remissorial letters of the 22nd of August following, the Promoter of the Faith was empowered to examine

the venerable body itself, in order to make certain that it had never been embalmed, nor any odoriferous substances placed in it.

When this process of inquiry into the marvellous odour was brought to an end, it was decided to join it to the process that had been executed in the courts of Spoleto by ordinary authority in 1626. On the 25th of February, 1896, the Sacred Congregation of Rites delivered its judgment that the validity of the two processes of 1626 and 1892 had been established, the reporter of the cause being his Eminence Cardinal Gaetano Aloisi-Masella, Prefect of that Congregation. As regards another process of inquiry executed in 1775, with only ordinary authority, into the instantaneous and miraculous curing of an Augustinian nun of the convent of Cascia, it was decided to supplicate the reigning Pontiff, Leo XIII., that he would deign to make good the defect of jurisdiction, and make the acts of that process valid. But the Holy Father, rather than grant the convalidation, was pleased to dispense, by most special favour, with the fourth miracle, for from time immemorial the proof of four miracles has been required for the canonization of the servants of God.

Owing to the sovereign concession of the Holy Father, the promoters of the cause of canonization had high hopes of bringing it to a happy

conclusion before much more time should pass. They obtained leave to introduce the Ordinary Process of 1626 as having equal value as proof with the Apostolic Process that closed in 1855; and the presence of the consulters and their voting being dispensed with, on the 6th of April, 1897, in an ordinary meeting of the Congregation, the writings of St. Rita were inquired into, and it was further debated and discussed 'Whether the virtues of Blessed Rita had been so clearly established that the discussion of her miracles might be proceeded with?' The session gave an affirmative decision, which was confirmed by the Sovereign Pontiff on the 9th of the month.

The way was thus prepared for the discussion of the miracles. Information regarding them and summaries were prepared, and the opinions of two distinguished experts were added. On the 27th of June, 1899, the Congregation met under the presidency of the Most Eminent Cardinal Aloisi-Masella, reporter of the cause, to discuss the miracles, and on the 9th of January, 1900, the preparatory Congregation held its meeting in the Vatican palace, and on the following 27th of March, in the general Congregation, assembled, as is customary, in the presence of the Holy Father, the following subject was discussed: 'Whether any, and what, miracles have been

conclusively proved, after veneration had been allowed to the Blessed, in case and to the effect of the present discussion ?' And by a very special favour of the Holy See the following was also discussed : 'And granted the approval of the miracles, whether her canonization may safely be proceeded with ?'

The Most Eminent Cardinals and Most Rev. Consulters delivered their opinions on both matters, and were heard most attentively by the Sovereign Pontiff ; and although he described the cause as *most rare* and *most noble*, he nevertheless, according to the usual custom, deferred giving his definitive decision, but *redoubled his prayers to implore the help of Heaven*.

On Palm Sunday, the 8th of April following, the Holy Father, after having most fervently offered to God the Eucharistic Sacrifice, had the decree of approval of the three miracles, of which we shall speak afterwards, read and published with the accustomed solemnity by Monsignor the Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of Rites. He next published the decrees, called the 'Tuto,' for the beatification of seventy-three Venerable Martyrs of China, Tonquin, and Cochin China, members of the Dominican and Franciscan Orders, the Congregations of Missionary Priests, and of Foreign Missions ; and the decree of beatification of the

Venerable Martyrs of the West Indies, members of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, and that of the beatification of the Venerable Servant of God, Maria Cresenzia Hoss, professed nun of the Third Order of St. Francis. His Holiness then deigned to address to the assembly a Latin allocution, in which he manifested the joy that he felt, especially for the decrees regarding Blessed Rita of Cascia, the glory and ornament of the Augustinian Order, and the jewel of the Umbrian province, which gave birth also to St. Benedict and St. Francis, and where for many years the Sovereign Pontiff himself had exercised as Bishop his pastoral ministry. All the more did he rejoice since it was a question of this most humble and most holy woman's canonization, a solemn religious ceremony, and supreme act of the Pontifical authority and of the infallible teaching of the Vicar of Jesus Christ. He added that it was desirable that the marvellous odour which is diffused and given forth from time to time near the sacred remains of the Blessed Rita, and called prodigious from the time of Urban VIII., should soon be renewed, as a happy augury of a better future in this Holy Year and in this century that is about to commence.

CHAPTER X

THE THREE MIRACLES APPROVED FOR HER CANONIZATION

FIRST MIRACLE.—The odour which is felt near St. Rita's body, especially when miracles are worked through her intercession, and which is diffused in a wonderful manner.

As regards this miracle, we told in full everything about it in the fourth chapter of the present part. We have only to add our joy that the oracle of the Holy See has solemnly confirmed what historians have written regarding this sweet odour, and what has been alleged in the processes and confirmed by experience.

Second Miracle.—Complete and instantaneous recovery of Elisabetta Bergamini from conjunctivitis complicated by ulcerous keratitis of the small-pox form.

Elisabetta Bergamini of Terni, about seven years before the time of which we wrote, had been attacked by the small-pox in so virulent a form that it left her whole face pitted, and destroyed

the sight of her eyes, so that she could hardly distinguish light from darkness. Several physicians consulted by her parents had submitted her to different forms of treatment for the recovery of her sight, but to no purpose. She was then sent as a boarder to the Augustinian convent of Cascia, where her father's sister was a nun, known as Sister Maria Maddalena, in order to pray the Lord through St. Rita's intercession either to restore her sight or else take her to Himself. She was there principally because her father's stepmother had been miraculously cured by St. Rita some years before.

The girl was brought to the convent and confided to the nuns' care in 1833. Pitying the sad case of the afflicted child, they took most loving care of her. The doctor who attended the convent was called in to visit her, and he confirmed the opinions of the doctors of Terni that her disease was incurable, and that only a miracle could restore her sight. The poor child suffered great pain, and even the light caused her so much inconvenience that two patches of green silk had to be hung over her eyes. Besides, there was a constant flow of humour mixed with tears, which was so corrosive that it ate away channels on her nose and cheeks, and gave forth a nauseating and insufferable stench. To give some relief

to the little patient, her aunt and the mistress of the boarders used to wash her eyes, by the doctor's directions, with a decoction of marshmallows; but even from this treatment she suffered a good deal, for in the course of it her eyelids had to be raised as much as possible, and this caused her acute pain.

Elisabetta continued in this deplorable state till September of that year, when the nuns thought of getting her to wear a black votive dress in honour of St. Rita. This dress was first blessed by the confessor and touched to the receptacle in which the saint's body lies. She was dressed in that habit and her eyes touched with a little silver rod, which tradition says once touched St. Rita's forehead. The mistress noted that afterwards the flow of humour from her eyes had decreased, and this fact gave Elisabetta courage to have greater confidence in the saint's protection. That morning the nuns, according to custom, were sorting in the courtyard the corn to be employed in making the little loaves of St. Rita. The mistress brought Elisabetta to them, and she sat down near one of the nuns, and, owing to her blindness, began, instead of selecting the best, to mix what had already been sorted with the inferior corn. The nun told her to keep quiet, and the mistress then gave her a cup with some

corn in it to play with. As soon as Elisabetta got the cup she began to stir the corn with her little hand, and suddenly called out that she could see, and as she did not know what corn should be rejected, she held out a grain in her hand and asked whether that should be put aside or not. At the same time she threw off the green patches, and the nuns ran in astonishment to look at the child's eyes, and saw that they were most beautiful and entirely cured. To make sure that she had recovered her sight they made her sort all the corn that she had in the cup, and she did it perfectly. Then they all went together to where the saint's body was to thank her for so great a miracle. The child then saw for the first time the body of her benefactress, and she wept with love, and with her arms crossed returned her thanks in a loud voice. When the doctor of the convent saw Elisabetta he declared that the saint had worked a great miracle, and that otherwise she never would have been able to see.

The child remained in the convent for nearly three years after, and her eyes were always strong. She learned so well to read that she used to recite the office in choir with the nuns, and read instruction for the lay sisters. She also learned to write and sew, and do other feminine work that needs very acute sight.

As a complement of the narration of this miracle, we judge it right to quote the words of a famous Roman physician, who was called on to give his judgment on this prodigious event. His learned opinion, delivered in writing, ends thus :

‘ It is a matter of conscience and of necessity to reiterate my opinion that this cure has been instantaneous, perfect, and lasting, in no way caused by art or by natural forces, impossible to take place except by miracle, which by science and by conscience must be classified with the great inexplicable portents which the Omnipotent God allows to be performed by His faithful servants, and in our case by Blessed Rita of Cascia ; and this I again repeat in my deposition under my oath.’

Third Miracle.—Instantaneous and perfect curing of Cosimo Pelligrini from chronic catarrhal gastro - enteritis, hemorrhoidal affection, and serious and permanent chronic anæmia.

Cosimo Pelligrini, of the town of Conversano, in the province of Bari, a tailor by trade, and fifty years of age, broken in health by long years of labour and by troubles of mind, began to lose strength, and his eyesight became so weak that although he used very strong glasses he could distinguish only with difficulty objects a short distance away. He had, besides, grown so deaf in both ears that it was necessary to speak in a

very loud voice to make him hear, and so great was his deafness that he did not even hear the strokes of a hammer with which on one occasion his cloak was nailed for a joke to a bench on which he was sitting.

Besides his great loss of strength and the weakening of his organs, he also suffered from serious disorders of the stomach, pains in the abdominal region, frequent vomitings and hæmorrhoids. He, moreover, experienced frequent sudden attacks of dizziness, which were so serious as to make him fall to the ground unless he speedily retired to bed, and stupefied him for hours, during which time his sight was altogether obscured. At night he often suffered from muscular contractions, and if he spoke for long or listened to others for any length of time he was seized with shakings in all his members. His ways of curing himself made his already sufficiently deplorable state of health still worse. For, instead of consulting a doctor, following his own caprices he took frequent purgatives, and bled himself so often and to such an extent that he developed chronic anæmia, which showed its presence in his pallid, emaciated countenance. He was thus often forced to keep his bed, and his bodily weakness and mental agony made life a burden.

Such for many years was Pelligrini's miserable condition. About the year 1877, on the 22nd of May, the feast of St. Rita, to whom he had great devotion, when he was entering his house after hearing Mass at the saint's altar in the church of the nuns of St. Cosmo, he fell to the ground, deprived almost entirely of sense. He was put to bed, and the doctor immediately sent for. On his arrival the doctor instantly saw the very grave state of the man, prescribed some remedies, of which, however, almost no use could be made, and ordered the last Sacraments to be administered. After being anointed, Pelligrini became so ill that he lost all strength and the use of his senses, and was hardly able to breathe; his face became corpse-like in its pallor as he lay motionless in bed. In this state he passed two days, and on the third day the doctor was of opinion that he would not live till evening.

Meanwhile a lay sister of the convent, who was sister of the sick man's wife, sent to ask how he was, and in sending an answer his wife requested the nuns to light the lamp at the saint's altar and offer prayers for her husband, who was in his last agony. The request was immediately attended to by all the community. Little over an hour passed when Pelligrini, as if waking from a profound lethargy, opened his eyes, began to

move his arms, and, calling his wife, said to her, 'I am cured. Blessed Rita has made me well.' He then began to tell how the saint had appeared to him, had touched him on the forehead, shoulder, and breast, and assured him that he would be cured, and that after only a day or two of weakness he would be entirely well. He also gave the same account of the vision to others who came to see him, and the fact proved that the saint had miraculously saved him from imminent death.

The next day he left his bed completely cured, as Rita had told him he would be. He was able to eat and digest his food as well as any person of strong robust health, and all those chronic ills that afflicted him for so many years were instantaneously and entirely eradicated, and his deafness and lack of vision also were entirely gone. He could see as well as if he had never been short-sighted, and could detect the least noise, and although he was seventy years of age he had regained full vigour and strength.

Many people went to see Pelligrini, who seemed as one raised from the dead to a new life, and who was filled with a new strength. All who saw him gave glory to God and to Rita for so wonderful and surprising a fact. After ten years, when he was eighty years old, he was examined by doctors, and found perfectly healthy and full of vigour.

CONCLUSION

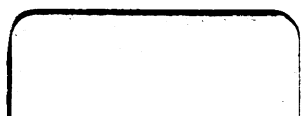
WE have now come, oh, reader, to the end of our journey, and however short it has been, you, the faithful follower of our steps, cannot fail to look back, as travellers do after a difficult passage, and consider with us the difficulty and roughness of the way that Rita traversed in order to reach her sublime goal. We are convinced that it is not simply curiosity that has moved you to follow our plain narration of facts, but the proposal to follow on the path that Rita has travelled by, and walk in her footsteps, for the lives of the saints are written and read for no other object than with the Divine assistance to cause their virtues to be imitated. And you must have remarked that Rita's virtues have this peculiar characteristic—that persons of both sexes, of all ages and conditions, may put themselves in the way of practising them and turning them to account. The young, married persons, parents, widows, persons in religious life, the troubled and afflicted of both

sexes, have each in the life of this saint a bright and shining mirror wherein to behold their stains, their weakness, their imperfection, and see also how to remove these blots under Rita's care and protection.

The incident of the wondrous bees flitting about her cradle, described in the first part, seems to us to symbolize the great multitude of Christian souls, each of which in its proper place may extract, like industrious bees, the honey and fragrance of virtue from this mystic, odoriferous, and precious garden. She is indeed the jewel of the Umbrian province, as the inspired Pontiff, Leo XIII., styled her in most happy phrase on April 8, 1900, whose beauty can never fade, about which thousands of souls may gather and be excited to thoughts of ineffable sweetness that will produce good fruits in time and in eternity.

You young people, you parents, you religious, you troubled and afflicted, never lose sight of your model! Have recourse to her in all your trials, and even when your troubles seem irreparable, do not lose courage, for she who is commonly called the *Saint of the Impossible and of desperate cases* will then especially guard you and bring you consolation.

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