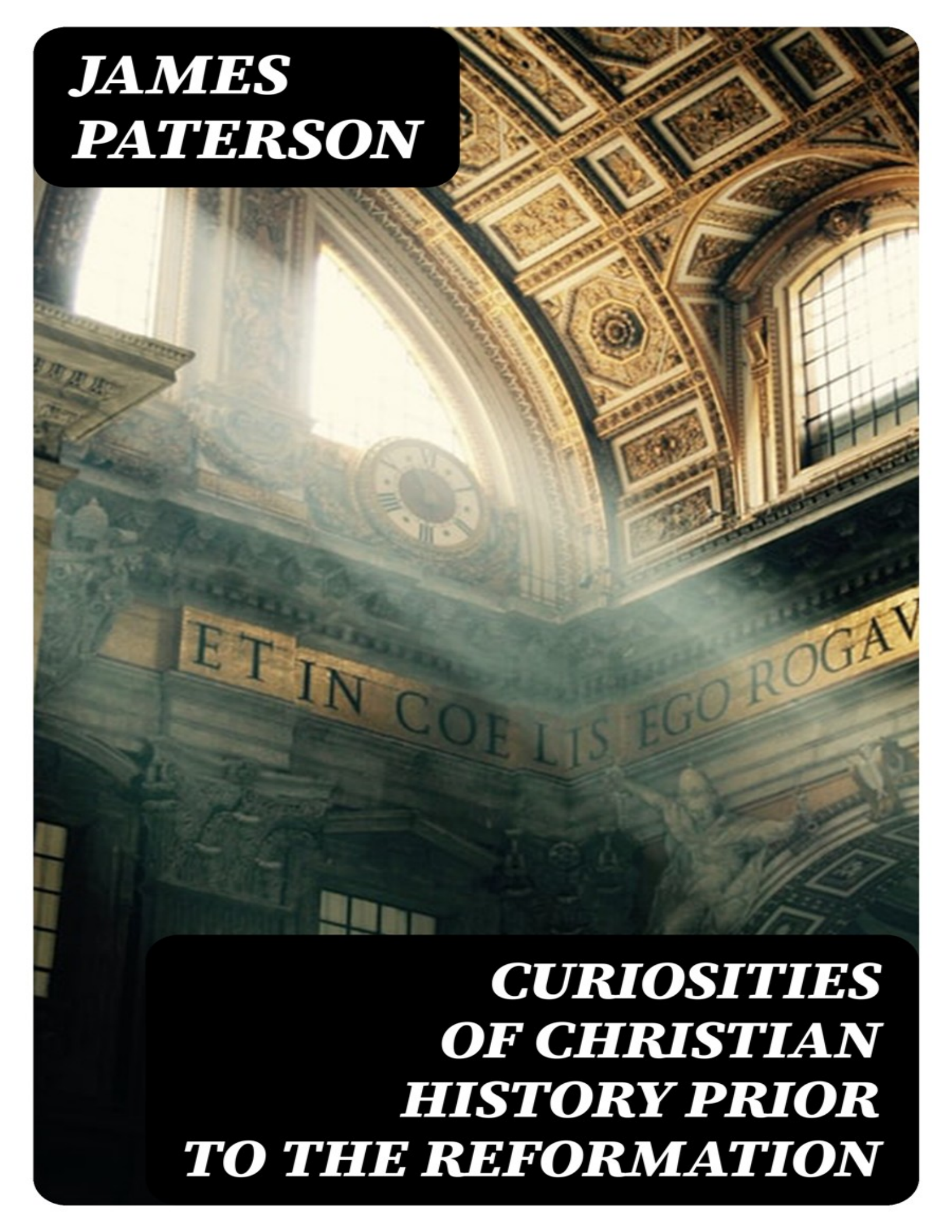


***JAMES
PATERSON***



***CURIOSITIES
OF CHRISTIAN
HISTORY PRIOR
TO THE REFORMATION***

James Paterson

Curiosities of Christian History Prior to the Reformation

EAN 8596547242611

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PREFACE.

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History is often a dreary study except to a few experts; and yet the Christians of to-day naturally wish to know more about their predecessors in the old time before them. There is always much difficulty in separating what to them must be interesting from masses of detail which do not touch their sympathies.

From the time of Christ to the epoch of the Reformation there were no Dissenters—only traitors and heretics, who were deemed unworthy to live in the same world and to breathe the same air as Emperors, Popes, and Bishops. But the Christian temperament can be traced through all the centuries—whether the devout people of the period were martyrs or hermits, monks, nuns, or friars, pilgrims or crusaders, priests or warriors. The same aspirations, misgivings, trials, and difficulties existed then as now, though the trials and difficulties may now be less. The best people of to-day may be trusted to recognise a touch of their own kindred amid all the varieties of time and place and circumstance which make up the past.

I have here collected from many histories, annals, chronicles, and biographies, far and wide, some particulars of the interesting persons, episodes, and events from the Christian's point of view during the first fourteen centuries. The literature of so many ages is vast, and the things now deemed of most interest are overlaid with heavy material. But I have left out all the miracles—most of the wordy war of doctrines—most of the atrocities of persecutors and

inquisitors. I have only culled a few flowers; I have only tried to snatch from oblivion a few brief memorials which may suggest wholesome thoughts and inquiries to modern Christians of every denomination.

C. J.

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FLOWERS OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

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HEATHEN KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE VIRGIN MARY.

According to an ancient legend, the Emperor Augustus Cæsar repaired to the sibyl Tiburtina to inquire whether he should consent to allow himself to be worshipped with Divine honours, which the Senate had decreed to him. The sibyl, after some days of meditation, took the Emperor apart, and showed him an altar; and above the altar, in the opening heavens, and in a glory of light, he beheld a beautiful Virgin, holding an Infant in her arms; and at the same time a voice was heard saying, "This is the altar of the Son of the Living God." Whereupon Augustus caused an altar to be erected on the Capitoline Hill, with this inscription—"Ara primogeniti Dei"; and on the same spot in later times was built the church called the *Ara-Cœli*, well known, with its flight of one hundred and twenty-four marble steps, to all who have visited Rome.

This particular prophecy of the Tibertine sibyl to Augustus rests on some very antique traditions, Pagan as well as Christian. It is supposed to have suggested the "Pollio" of Virgil, which suggested the "Messiah" of Pope. It is mentioned by writers of the third and fourth centuries, and our own divines have not wholly rejected it; for Bishop

Taylor mentions the sibyl's prophecy among "the great and glorious accidents" happening about the birth of Jesus.

LEGEND ABOUT SIMEON'S GREAT AGE.

It is related that when Ptolemy Philadelphus, about two hundred and sixty years before Christ, resolved to have the Hebrew Scriptures translated into Greek, for the purpose of placing them in his far-famed library, he despatched messengers to Eleazar, the high priest of the Jews, requiring him to send scribes and interpreters learned in the Jewish law to his court at Alexandria.

Thereupon Eleazar selected six of the most learned rabbis from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, seventy-two persons in all, and sent them to Egypt, in obedience to the commands of King Ptolemy; and among these was Simeon, a priest and a man full of learning. And it fell to the lot of Simeon to translate the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. And when he came to that verse where it is written, "Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son," he began to misdoubt in his own mind how this could be possible; and after long meditation, fearing to give scandal and offence to the Greeks, he rendered the Hebrew word *Virgin* by a Greek word which signifies merely a *young woman*. But when he had written it down, behold, an angel effaced it, and substituted the right word. Thereupon he wrote it again and again; and the same thing happened three times; and he remained astonished and confounded. And while he wondered what this could mean, a ray of Divine light penetrated his soul. It was revealed to him that the miracle which in his human wisdom he had presumed to doubt was

not only possible, but that he, Simeon, “should not see death till he had seen the Lord’s Christ.”

Therefore he tarried on earth by the Divine will for nearly three centuries, till that which he had disbelieved had come to pass. He was led by the Spirit to the Temple on the very day when Mary came there to present her Son and to make her offering; and immediately taking the Child in his arms, he exclaimed, “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word.”

PORTRAITS OF THE VIRGIN MARY.

Nicephorus Callixtus says that the person of the Virgin Mary was described by Epiphanius, who lived in the fourth century, and who derived the particulars from his predecessors. He said: “She was of middle stature; her face oval; her eyes brilliant and of an olive tint; her eyebrows arched and black; her hair was of a pale brown; her complexion fair as wheat. She spoke little, but she spoke freely and affably; she was not troubled in her speech, but grave, courteous, tranquil. Her dress was without ornament, and in her deportment was nothing lax or feeble.”

Mrs. Jameson says that Raphael’s “Madonna di San Sista,” in the Dresden Gallery, comes nearest to her notion of the Virgin.

AN EXACT PORTRAIT OF THE VIRGIN MARY.

In the College of Jesuits at Valencia a picture of the Virgin by Juanes is looked upon with immense admiration. The tradition runs that Father Alberto was on the eve of the Assumption waited on by the Blessed Virgin herself, who

required him to cause her portrait to be taken in the dress she then wore, which was a white frock or tunic, with a blue cloak; and Christ was to be represented also in the design as placing a crown on her head, while the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove hovered over the group. Alberto therefore gave the commission to Juanes, who, appreciating the honour, devoutly set himself to work, and put forth all his skill on the composition. The first sketch did not please Alberto; but the Father assisted the artist so effectually with his prayers, that at last the artist's pencil seemed to succeed at every stroke; and in the end the Father, taking credit himself for much of the work, was highly pleased with the happy result. During the work Juanes was one day seated on his scaffold finishing the upper parts of the picture, when the structure gave way, and he was in the act of falling, when the Holy Virgin stepped suddenly out of the canvas, and, seizing his hand, preserved him from instant death. This being done, the Blessed Virgin returned to her canvas, and has continued there ever since, all the supplicants and worshippers who look on it devoutly believing in this being an exact counterpart of the original. This great artist died in 1579; and Valencia contains many of his masterpieces, for he ranks high in the school of Raphael.

THE MARRIAGE OF JOSEPH AND THE VIRGIN MARY.

The legend of the marriage of the Virgin Mary is thus given in the "Protevangelion" and the "History of Joseph the Carpenter": "When Mary was fourteen years old, the priest Zacharias inquired of the Lord concerning her what was right to be done; and an angel came to him and said, 'Go

forth and call together all the widowers among the people, and let each bring his rod (or wand) in his hand; and he to whom the Lord shall show a sign, let him be the husband of Mary.' And Zacharias did as the angel commanded, and made proclamation accordingly. And Joseph the carpenter, a righteous man, throwing down his axe and taking his staff in his hand, ran out with the rest. When he appeared before the priest and presented his rod, lo! a dove issued out of it—a dove dazzling white as the snow—and after settling on his head, flew towards heaven. Then the high priest said to him, 'Thou art the person chosen to take the Virgin of the Lord and to keep her for Him.' And Joseph was at first afraid, and drew back; but afterwards he took her home to his house, and said to her, 'Behold, I have taken thee from the temple of the Lord, and now I will leave thee in my house, for I must go and follow my trade of building. I will return to thee, and meanwhile the Lord be with thee and watch over thee.' So Joseph left her, and Mary remained in her house."

THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS.

Milman says that the murder of the innocents by Herod's orders is a curious instance of the reaction of legendary extravagance on the plain truth of the evangelic history. The Greek Church canonised the fourteen thousand innocents; and another notion, founded on a misinterpretation of Rev. xiv. 3, swelled the number to one hundred and forty-four thousand. The former, at least, was the common belief of the Church, though even in the English Liturgy the latter has in some degree been sanctioned by retaining the chapter of Revelation in the "epistle for the day." Even Jeremy Taylor

admits without scruple or thought the fourteen thousand. The error did not escape the notice of the acute adversaries of Christianity. Vossius was the first divine who pointed out the monstrous absurdity of supposing such a number of infant children under two years in so small a village.

THE ANGEL GUIDING THE VIRGIN TO EGYPT.

The journey of the Holy Family to Egypt, being about four hundred miles, must have occupied five or six weeks. It is related in the legend as follows: "We are told that, on descending from the mountains, they came upon a beautiful plain, enamelled with flowers, watered by murmuring streams, and shaded by fruit trees. In such a lovely landscape have painters delighted to place some of the scenes of the flight into Egypt. On another occasion, they entered a thick forest, a wilderness of trees, in which they must have lost their way had they not been guided by an angel. As the Holy Family entered this forest, all the trees bowed themselves down in reverence to the Infant God; only the aspen, in her exceeding pride and arrogance, refused to acknowledge Him, and stood upright. Then the Infant Saviour pronounced a curse against her, as He afterwards cursed the barren fig tree; and at the sound of His words the aspen began to tremble through all her leaves, and has not ceased to tremble even to this day."

HEROD HEARING OF THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT.

Another legend about the journey of the Holy Family to Egypt is this: "When it was discovered that the Holy Family had fled from Bethlehem, Herod sent his officers in pursuit

of them. And it happened that when the Holy Family had travelled some distance, they came to a field where a man was sowing wheat. And the Virgin said to the husbandman, 'If any shall ask you whether we have passed this way, ye shall answer, "Such persons passed this way when I was sowing this corn."' For the Holy Virgin was too wise and too good to save her Son by instructing the man to tell a falsehood. But, behold, a miracle! For, by the power of the Infant Saviour, in the space of a single night the seed sprang up into stalk, blade, and ear, fit for the sickle. And next morning the officers of Herod came up, and inquired of the husbandman, saying, 'Have you seen an old man with a woman and a Child travelling this way?' And the man who was reaping the wheat replied, 'Yes.' And they asked him again, 'How long is it since?' And he answered, 'When I was sowing this wheat.' Then the officers of Herod turned back and left off pursuing the Holy Family."

THE PALM TREE AND THE HOLY FAMILY.

One of the most popular legends concerning the flight into Egypt is that of the palm or date tree which at the command of Jesus bowed down its branches to shade and refresh His mother; hence, in the scene of the flight, a palm tree became a usual accessory. In a picture by Antonello Mellone, the Child stretches out His little hand and lays hold of the branch; sometimes the branch is bent down by angel hands.

Sozomen, the historian, relates that, when the Holy Family reached the term of their journey and approached the city of Heliopolis, in Egypt, a tree which grew before the

gates of the city, and was regarded with great veneration as the seat of a god, bowed down its branches at the approach of the Infant Christ. Likewise it is related (not in legends merely, but by grave ecclesiastical authorities) that all the idols of the Egyptians fell with their faces to the earth.

THE HOLY FAMILY AND THE WILD BEASTS OF THE DESERT.

The “Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew” contains the following (chapter xix.): “In like manner lions and leopards adored the Child Jesus, and kept company with the Holy Family in the desert. Whithersoever Joseph and Blessed Mary went, they went before them, showing the way and bowing their heads; and showing subjection by wagging their tails, they adored Him with great reverence. Now, when Mary saw lions and leopards and various kinds of wild beasts coming round them, she was at first exceedingly afraid; and Jesus, with a glad countenance, looking into her face, said, ‘Fear not, mother, because they come not to thy hurt, but they hasten to come to thy service and Mine.’ By these sayings He removed fear from her heart. Now, the lions walked along with them, and with the oxen and asses and the beasts of burden which carried necessaries for them, and hurt no one, although they remained with them; but they were tame among the sheep and rams, which they had brought with them from Judæa, and had with them. They walked among wolves, and feared nothing, and no one was hurt by another. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by the prophet, ‘Wolves shall feed with lambs; lion and ox shall eat chaff together’ (Isa. xi. 6-9; lxxv. 25). There were two oxen

also with them, and a cart, wherein they carried necessaries; and the lions directed them in their way.”

THE HOLY FAMILY LEAVING EGYPT.

Jeremy Taylor says, as to the pagan idols, as follows: “The Holy Family, on their departure for Egypt, made, it is said, their first abode in Hermopolis, in the country of Thebais; whither, when they first arrived, the Child Jesus, being by design or providence carried into a temple, all the statues of the idol-gods fell down, like Dagon at the presence of the ark, and suffered their timely and just dissolution and dishonour, according to the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘Behold, the Lord shall come into Egypt, and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at His presence.’ And in the life of the prophet Jeremy, written by Epiphanius, it is reported that ‘he told the Egyptian priests that then their idols should be broken in pieces when a Holy Virgin with her Child should enter into their country.’ Which prophecy possibly might be the cause that the Egyptians did, besides their vanities, worship also an infant in a manger and a virgin. From Hermopolis to Maturia went these pilgrims in pursuance of their safety and provisions, where it is reported they dwelt in a garden of balsam till Joseph ascertained by an angel the death of Herod.”

THE BOY CHRIST ON LEAVING EGYPT.

St. Bonaventure, a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, who died 1274, wrote a Life of Christ, which is or was much read by all good Catholics, and which contains the following: “The next morning, when the Holy Family are

ready to set out on their journey from Egypt, imagine you see some of the most respectable matrons of the city and the wiser part of the men come to accompany them out of the gates. When they were out of the gates, the Holy Joseph dismissed the company, not suffering them to go on any farther, when one of the wealthiest of them called the Child Jesus, and in compassion to the poverty of His parents bestowed a few pence upon Him; and the rest of the company, after the example of the first, did the same. Compassionate here the confusion of the Divine Child, who, blushing, holds His little hands out to receive what the love of poverty has reduced Him to want. Pity likewise His holy parents, who share with Him His confusion; and think on the great lesson here set you when you see Him who made the earth and all that is in it make choice of so rigorous a poverty and so penurious a life for His blessed parents and Himself. What lustre does not the virtue of poverty receive from their practice! And how can we behold it in them without being charmed to the love and imitation of the like perfection! After returning thanks to their company and taking their leave, they proceeded on their journey.”

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN MARY.

It was usually believed that the Virgin Mary lived to a great age, and her death is unknown. It was a tradition that she was assumed to glory without dying. The practice of praying to her has been traced as far back as the second century. In the fourth century a sect called the adversaries of Mary rose up and affirmed that she had, after the birth of