

The First Creche

More than seven hundred years ago in the village of Greccio in Italy there lived a man who was at war with God. His name was Luigi, and he had his reasons.

He was a strong man, black-eyed, hot-tempered, with wonderful sensitive hands. From childhood, he had had the gift of shaping wood into marvelous imitations of life. And for a long time, he accepted this talent with gratitude, as a sign of God's favor. But the day came when Luigi cursed heaven. It was the day he learned that his daughter—his only child—was blind.

She had seemed perfect when she was born: blonde and blue-eyed like her mother. But when it became apparent that the child would never see, the wood-carver of Greccio seemed to go mad.

He went no more to the little church on the hill. He refused to allow prayers in his house. His child had been called Maria, after the mother of Jesus. He changed her name to Rosa.

His wife pleaded in vain; nothing could move him. "I will have nothing to do," he said, "with a God who condemns innocent children to darkness." To an artist, blindness is like a sentence of death.

Then in mid-December, in the year 1207, a mule train came through Greccio. Among the treasures for sale was a magnificent piece of ivory. As soon as he saw it, Luigi had the thought that he would carve it into a doll—a *bambino*—for his little girl.

In three days it was finished. Life-sized, smiling, with tiny arms outstretched, the ivory *bambino* seemed almost to breathe. Luigi told no one about it except his wife, and he told her only because he wanted her to make some clothes for the doll.

Meantime, in the village, everyone was talking about the young friar who had come to Greccio from a neighboring town to preach in the little church. No one could say exactly what it was about his preaching, but people who heard him came

away with an extraordinary sense of peace, as if all the anger and pain of living had been lifted from their hearts.

Luigi's wife heard the young friar preach, and she begged her husband to come to the church with her. But Luigi shook his head. "When this God of yours shows me that he can cure blindness, then I will believe in him."

He would not let his wife take Rosa, either. But she wanted desperately to bring her child into some sort of contact with the love and warmth that seemed to flow from the young friar. And on Christmas Eve, suddenly, she thought of a way.

When by chance Luigi went into his workshop, his shout of fury brought the servants running. The ivory *bambino* was gone. From a terrified maid, Luigi learned that his wife had taken it to the church to have it blessed.

Out into the street stalked Luigi, black anger in his heart. Up the hill he went through the pale December sunlight toward the little church. But before he could reach the door, a cavalcade swept up the hill, three young nobles, richly dressed, then half a dozen mounted servants, and finally two carts loaded with farm animals: sheep, goats, oxen, a donkey.

The riders pulled up at the church door with a chorus of shouts. A young man in a purple cloak sprang down.

"Francesco!" he shouted. "Francesco Bernardone! We got your message and we are here!"

Luigi spoke roughly to one of the servants. "Who is this Francesco Bernardone that you seek here in Greccio?"

The servant pointed. "That is he—the friar."

The church door had opened, and a slender, brown-clad figure had come out. "Welcome my friends," he said, smiling, "and God's peace be upon you all."

The young man in the purple cloak swept his arm in a wide gesture. "We've brought the animals, just as you said. But really, Francesco, how much longer are you going to play this farce?"

Luigi tightened his hold on the servant's shoulder. "Who is this man?"

The servant shrugged despairingly. "In Assisi, until not long ago, he was my master's friend and drinking companion.

Now, they say, he preaches the word of God. It is very strange."

Other servants were unloading the carts, where the frightened animals reared and plunged. "A moment, please," the friar said. He walked over to the nearest cart and laid his hand on the donkey's back. "Be calm, there, Brother Ass. And you, Sister Sheep, do not baa so pitifully." And even as he spoke, the animals grew calm and still.

A hush seemed to fall upon the people who had gathered. In this sudden quiet, the friar said to the young man in the purple cloak. "Come into the church, Lorenzo. I want to show you my manger scene."

The young man said in a low voice, "I am not a true believer, Francesco. You know that."

"All the more reason for coming," the little friar said. He turned and went back into the church, and all the animals followed him, and the people, too. Even Luigi.

Inside the church, candles burned dimly. Near the altar was a rude shelter, made of green boughs, and in the shelter was a manger. Luigi could not see into the manger, but he knew what it contained, for a woman was kneeling near it, her face beautiful in the candlelight. The woman was his wife.

Without being led, without being driven, the animals grouped themselves around the manger. Then the little friar stood up on the steps of the altar.

"I was going to read you the Christmas story from the gospel," he said. "But my nativity scene makes me so happy that I am going to sing it to you."

No one who heard it ever forgot the sweetness of his song. He told the ageless story of the angels and the shepherds, of the coming of the Wise Men. Even the animals seemed to be listening, as if they too could understand the words. And Luigi was prepared to believe that they could, because an even greater miracle was taking place within himself. The bitterness and the anger were fading from his heart.

Nor was his the only heart that was being changed, for when at last the music ended, the young man in the purple cloak moved forward. From around his neck he took a chain

of gold and put it beside the manger. And after him his companions came and put down gifts, one a ring, the other a jeweled dagger.

Luigi felt a touch on his arm. Looking around, he saw the little friar smiling at him.

"You wondered if God could cure blindness," the friar said. "Well, we are watching him do it, are we not?"

Luigi did not answer, for there was a tightness in his throat. He could see the villagers crowding forward to look into the manger and the awe and wonder in their faces as they gazed upon his handiwork. Afterward, there were those who swore that the ivory *bambino* stirred and smiled and lifted his arms to them. But this, no doubt, was the flickering candlelight.

Then the friar said, "Please thank your daughter for the loan of her Christmas present. And now you may take it back."

Luigi shook his head. "It is where it belongs. Let it stay."

The friar said, "Tomorrow is Christmas. Your little girl would be disappointed."

"No," said Luigi, "I will make her another *bambino*. I will work all night. I will carve her a whole nativity scene, just like yours, so that Ro—I mean Maria—will have Christmas at her fingertips whenever she wants it."

So Luigi went home, leaving the ivory *bambino* with Saint Francis of Assisi in what, according to legend, was the first actual creche. Hand in hand with his wife, he walked back down the hill. And he worked all night with gratitude in his heart because he knew that in his house blindness had indeed been cured—not his daughter's, but his own.