

THE STORY OF
ST. MARTIN OF TOURS

PATRON SAINT OF FRANCE

316-397

BY

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Chapter 1

OUR MARTIN

It is a far cry from our bustling, sceptical, scientific twentieth century back to the year of Our Lord 316, the year in which St. Martin of Tours was born.

It is a pleasant but not an easy task to bring before the mind's eye—vivid, vital in his habit as he lived—the singularly attractive personality of the gentle, serene Saint, who for many centuries has been lovingly styled by the French nation “Our Martin.” He is still so styled in many a faithful Catholic home by loyal Catholic voices; for, notwithstanding infidelity, modernism, and agnosticism in high places, the True Faith flourishes in humble homes and in old-world provincial towns and hamlets. In the countryside—the countryside that Martin loved so well—he is ever and always the friend, the champion, the kind, good Martin—“Our Martin.”

Yet this favourite patron of the French was not born in France; nor do we allow her sole claim to him and to his patronage. He is ours quite as much as he is hers; there is a spiritual kinship between him and all the Christian world. St. Gregory of Tours styled him “*Toto orbi peculiaris patronus*” (All the world's own patron). We claim him as ours; he is Our Martin; and so with deep reverence and in a spirit of loving admiration I venture to narrate the story of his life—the *story*, not the *history*; for although some people suggest that

among his other attributes he should be looked upon as the peculiar patron of historical research, yet I feel that to adhere too strictly to well authenticated facts would rob the tale of much of its charm, would prevent us from realising the vital characteristics of Martin the man, his wonderful sweetness, his marvellous charity. True, his biography was written while he still walked the earth by the learned Sulpicius Severus; but there were also innumerable delightful stories related by the rough men among whom he laboured—related by them and treasured by their descendants—an exquisite Martiniad of kind and generous deeds, of wise and homely sayings; a Martiniad fresh and charming, bringing before our mental vision the very essence of his spirit. Consequently, with all due deference to what is undeniable history, with all due respect to erudite hagiologists, I venture to mingle occasionally fact and fancy, solemnly attested records and mythical legends; and, perhaps, when all is said the legends are not so very mythical, hold, indeed, more than a grain of truth, and help to show us the reason of Our Martin's wonderful and universal power over Christendom. They throw into strong relief his serene, overflowing charity to all creatures, to the little dumb beasts as well as to mankind:

*Martin a pitie eu
De la petite beste mue.*

Yes, Our Martin has compassion on poor beasts as well as on poor men. He is the Poor Man's Knight, the dumb creatures' friend; he invariably does the right thing at the right moment.

In his universal charity and in his selfless love he closely resembles his Divine Master.

“A bruised reed He shall not break and the smoking flax He shall not quench.”

Chapter 2

THE ROMAN KNIGHT

In order thoroughly to appreciate Our Martin's character, we must endeavour to span the chasm of centuries that separates us from the days in which he lived and laboured.

We must try to breathe the air he breathed, and become saturated with the atmosphere, the ideas, the knowledge of the conditions of life, the humour, the politics, but, above all and before all, the fervour of religious enthusiasm that filled the souls of men when Constantine the Great ruled in Rome.

Rome, but a short time previously Pagan Rome, had been transformed into Christian Rome. The Faithful no longer worked out their salvation in fear and trembling; they met openly and assisted at the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries.

With the change of religion came the change of private and public customs; gradually the spiritual Empire, the Empire of the Popes, was gaining ground over the material, the Empire of the Emperors: Christian fortitude, Christian charity, Christian endurance were stronger, consequently, without apparent effort, Christianity was becoming the dominant power in the City of the Caesars.

It was at this critical period of transition that Martin was born. Far away from the Eternal City and far from the

pleasant Loire land he first saw the light; he who won renown in the army of the Caesars, and later on became the beloved friend and chosen patron of the French nation.

He was a Slav by birth, his parents were Slavs, and Sabaria, in Pannonia, Hungary, claims the honour of being his birth-place. There, among the high snow-clad mountains, among the fragrant pine forests, the years of his childhood were spent.

In the country he learned to love the birds, the beasts, and the fishes; learned the craft of the woodsman; breathed the free, transparent, invigorating air; and while his body daily gained strength and grace, his soul became imbued with the angelic serenity that seems a gift given by heaven to those whose feet climb the mountain summits; to those who, listening to the ripple of the torrents, the song of the birds, the numberless forest voices, make of Nature's playthings their friends and comrades.

Martin's parents were Pagan. His father was a soldier in the Roman army, a military tribune; and, in reward for his services, he was granted lands in Ticino.

There, in 324, his wife and family settled, and there, a couple of years later, when he was ten years old, Martin first received the gift of Faith.

It is generally believed that it was Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Pavia, who received him as a catechumen, signing him with the Sign of the Cross, and cordially praising the energy and resolution displayed by the boy of twelve, who, despite the opposition of his own people, persisted in his

determination to take the first steps towards becoming a Christian.

Sulpicius Severus tells us that the dream of Martin's life at that time was to live alone with God, far away from the allurements and distractions of the world.

However, the hour had not yet come. Martin had to pass through grievous tribulations, through thrilling adventures, hair-breadth escapes by flood and field, before he could rest from the burden and heat of the day and enjoy for a brief space the silent communion with his Redeemer, for which his soul craved.

At fifteen his father forced him to enter the army. He did so as a captive loaded with chains. He had to pass through a wearisome apprenticeship, very wearisome to him, because he passionately longed to leave the world and give himself to God; but at nineteen, when he became a regular, the spirit of the soldier was born within him, and he devoted himself with whole-hearted enthusiasm to studying the theory and mastering the science of war.

The Roman army was all-powerful. It was the most vital force in the world, making and unmaking emperors at its pleasure. For a whim it deposed one man and set up another. Emperors were crowned, played for a brief space their part upon the theatre of the world, and then were hustled and jostled out of sight; frequently banished, more frequently murdered; but through every despot's reign, through evil and good report, the army reigned supreme.

The army dominated mankind, the army conquered nations, and gave the conquered nations to whomsoever it pleased.

Martin was part and parcel of this formidable military organisation, and so it came to pass that he was ordered with his regiment into Gaul, and after many days they arrived in Picardy.

Picardy was then the very core of the land of the Franks. It was not yet a kingdom in so far as it had no reigning king; it was, indeed, still under the Roman dominion. Yet, a land very individual, very prosperous, very likely when opportunity offered, to battle for its Independence.

The capital of Picardy was Amiens—the Venice of the North she was called, and rightly, because not only was she a fair Lagoon Queen, she was also, like the Venice of the South, a queen of merchandise, sending forth her work in gold and glass, in stone and wood, in fine linen and rich stuffs—sending forth the fruit of the industry of her sons to foreign lands.

It was while stationed in this exquisitely beautiful and industrious city that one of the principal events in his life befell Our Martin. It is an oft told tale, but as it gives the key-note to Martin's character, and was, indeed, the turning point in his career, it is well worth telling once again.

The winter of AD 332, was particularly cold and severe. Snow fell heavily, covering the fair pasture lands, falling on the beautiful ice-bound streams. The east wind swept over the land, bringing devastation and death to the people—who lay dying of hunger and cold in the streets of Amiens.

In the Roman army camped within the walls there was a young *circitor* named Martin, whose duty it was to inspect the outposts, report on discipline, and go the rounds at night, visiting the sentinels at their posts, and seeing that all was well.

He was very generous and kind-hearted this gallant young *circitor*; and had given lavishly to the suffering poor—had, indeed, parted with nearly all his garments, and had certainly parted with all his money.

On one intensely cold afternoon, he rode up the rugged causeway, towards that part of the suburbs called at the present day the Hill of St. Acheul, and out through the gates of the Twins, on which were carvings of Romulus and Remus being suckled by the wolf. He rode upward, wrapped in his Knight's cloak, probably the woollen chlamys of purple and white stripes, and as he rode, a wretched, half-naked beggar, shivering with cold, emaciated with the gruesome emaciation of starvation, met him and implored an alms.

Martin took off his cloak, cut it in two with his dagger, and threw one half over the thin shoulders of the miserable beggarman.

Some people consider that it was not a generous gift, say, in their comfortable, philanthropic way, he should have given the whole garment; but to me it seems nobler to share generously than to give with, perhaps, a trifle too much self-righteous complacency.

Our Martin's gift reminds me of Lowell's beautiful lines:

*Not what we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his gift feeds three,
Himself, his hungry neighbour and Me."*

At any rate, Christ our Lord approved and accepted the gift, for He was the Mendicant, and that same night He appeared in a dream to the young man. He was clothed in the half of the cloak, and surrounded by angels, and He said to them: "Know ye who hath thus arrayed Me? It is my servant, Martin, who, though yet unbaptized, has clothed Me with his own cloak. I was naked and he clothed Me," and turning to Martin, the Lord Jesus said to the Roman Knight as He said to His Apostles: "Whoever shall give to drink to one of these my little ones a cup of cold water only, shall receive the reward of a just man."

This vision came as a revelation to Martin; it was to him the signal that the time had come to receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

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