

LEGENDS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN

Our Lady's Tourney

Mater Intemerata—Mother undefiled

Although the last crusade of any importance took place in the reign of St. Louis, King of France, yet both political and religious necessity demanded that a stop should be put to the encroachments of the infidel hordes who were about to take Constantinople, and would have invaded Europe and crushed the steady progress of civilization, had not their progress been arrested by the battle of Lepanto, that at feat of arms, directed by the holy Roman Church, which covered the Christian arms with glory. And as, throughout our countries, the defense of the faith was urged by preachers upon the Christian knights, many were the noble youths who, during the fifteenth century, on grand solemnities, made public vows to oppose the children of Mahomet. The Order of the Golden Fleece, founded on the 10th of January, 1430, by Philip the Good, was at the outset composed of a few noblemen, nearly all engaged by oath to take the cross. Among these knights, the one most distinguished for his firm disposition and his acknowledged bravery was Sir Philip Pote, a gentleman of Burgundy, who possessed a large body of vassals. He had allowed several years to pass without taking arms for the accomplishment of his vow, when he learned, in 1438, that Albert of Austria, having ascended the imperial throne, was about to march against the Turks. He hastened to join him with his company of men, and soon distinguished himself in valiant feats of arms.

Early in 1440, report was spread that the Emperor Albert had been killed, and his bravest knights slain around him in a fierce encounter with the enemy. The rumor being confirmed, great was the mourning in many noble families. Nevertheless, his friends entertained a hope that they should see once more the valiant Philip Pote; for, before his departure, he had had his arms blessed at the shrine of our Lady of Hope, at Dijon, and had fervently invoked her powerful assistance.

Our Lady of Hope had been venerated at Dijon from time immemorial. Her image bore the marks of antiquity; it had existed, according to popular tradition, in the times of the first missionaries of the faith. It had been the channel of many graces and wonderful favors, as many illustrious persons had testified, and among others King Philip Augustus. Never had our Lady of Hope been known to desert any client, nor did she our knight of the Golden Fleece.

A Christian prisoner, who had escaped from the Turkish camp, came to Burgundy, bearing the sad intelligence—which caused many a hope to perish—that most of the knight companions of Albert of Austria had indeed perished; that several, grievously wounded, had been taken by the enemy, and that among the latter was Philip Pote. He added that all the captives who had not the means of paying their ransoms immediately, were put to death without mercy, some by the sword, others by drawing, several were hung, while many suffered the terrible death of impaling. He also stated that he had heard that Philip Pote, on account of his great bravery, had been condemned, a particular mark of their consideration of his valor, to be torn in pieces by lions. His relatives and friends now lost all hope; they could but weep and pray for the repose of his soul, though they regarded him in some sense as a martyr, having fought and suffered death in the cause of the faith.

Six months elapsed, when farther news arrived to the effect that Philip was not dead, but had escaped and returned by sea. The ship debarked at a port in Flanders, and the knight had gone to Bruges, where the Duke of Burgundy then kept his court, to get a votive picture to our Lady of Hope painted by a celebrated Flemish artist.

Yet the soldier's tale was not devoid of truth. The Christian knight had not been given up to be destroyed by wild beasts; but being unable to ransom himself, had been condemned to encounter a fierce lion in the public theater, a species of entertainment from which the Turks anticipated great sport. Being stripped of his arms and cuirass, for his enemies were bent on his destruction, Philip Pote was led forth into the arena. Yet he was not quite defenseless, for he had been allowed a short dagger, which his tormentors thought would be the means of his tormenting his savage antagonist, and thus exciting him to a state of fury. But the knight trusted in the little sword and the protection of our Lady of Hope, whom he now fervently invoked. So fortified was he by that, the first bound of the lion did not have that terrific effect it generally produced upon its victims. He stood his ground firmly, and on the first opportunity plunged the dagger into the lion's heart, who fell dead, while he himself remained perfectly unhurt. This hitherto unheard-of achievement appeared so wonderful to the Turks, that by unanimous and spontaneous exclamations they demanded the freedom of the prisoner.

Grateful for his little less than miraculous preservation, the Christian knight returned to Europe and caused his combat with the lion to be painted, in order that it might be suspended at the shrine of his Protectress.

The picture arrived at Dijon in May, 1441 and was presented, with great pomp, by the knight himself, in full costume, attended by his family, friends and servants. There was a grand fete on the occasion, and great were the rejoicings of the citizens. Another Knight of the Golden Fleece, Peter de Beaufremont, Count Of Charny, Grand Chamberlain to the Duke of Burgundy, listening to the conversations held at the church porch by a noble company, concerning the supernatural protection which been accorded to his friend, heard with impatience the cold and disdainful remarks which were made by some railers who sought to attribute human causes to superhuman effects. He suddenly rose in the midst of them, and throwing his glove, declared that he would hold a tourney in honor of our Blessed Lady, and would break a lance with anyone who offered to oppose him.

This bold defiance was met by boisterous cheering. The knights present ranged themselves on the side of Peter de Beaufremont ; they were the Baron of Seey, William Of Vienne, Andrew of Rabutin, two brothers of the house of Vaudrey, and many others who were dependents of the Great Chamberlain. But no one took up the glove, which remained in the church porch, in the very place it had fallen, for two years, until the time when the tournament took place, two years after this time.

This singular pass-of-arms had been proclaimed in the two Burgundies, in Brabant, Flanders, the Low Countries, Portugal, Spain, England, Italy, and France, and it was not until the month of May, in the year 1443, that the tournament was opened with due splendor at Dijon.

The fifteen knights of our Lady issued out of the church, where they had assisted at a votive Mass in her honor, and entered the lists, which were surrounded by a brilliant and eager assemblage. They were preceded by their esquires, all of whom bore a banner of the Blessed Virgin. Their retainers wore white blouses, with azure and gold trimmings, and bunches of roses were attached to their lances. But these bold champions had it all to themselves, say the old chronicles; no one dared to present himself to impugn the power of the Queen of Heaven. The vast assembly rent the air with their cries of joy, and went spontaneously to our Lady's Church, whither also followed the knights, whom the people called " Barons of the Blessed Virgin," who while the Magnificat was sung in triumph, held their lances to the ground before her venerable image; and at its conclusion, liberally bestowed their largess upon the people.