

THE HOLY ODILE.

PATRON SAINT OF ALSACE AND OF THOSE WHO CARE FOR THE BLIND.

A few years ago, in view of an approaching holiday, we sought for an idea that would develop an adventure which would be different from one for which all details are arranged by some travel agency. No doubt the guide provided for the latter would be well versed in the history and importance of the places visited, but we sought to visualise something more original, something that would bring imagination rather than provide ready-made—and often unreal—conceptions of what we should see. The result was a decision to "follow" a saint of whom we had heard at first a mere passing remark by an artist at a dinner table. Later a little further enquiry led to recognition of the fact that none in the long Calendar of Saints is so enveloped in mystery as this one of whom the artist had spoken—St. Odile, Patron Saint of all those who care for the blind—and so we set out on a pilgrimage to follow a saint; surely never did any guide lead into such holiday experiences. Unforgettable is the magnificent splendour of the mountains of the Vosges, of ancient towns, some of which we had never heard of, with their treasures of mediæval art, and, above all, Colmar, city of ancient Charters and civic liberty, artistic treasure and giving the impression of an age-long culture. Indescribable are the experiences of an expedition when we "followed a saint," and the unforgettable feeling that, though we travelled outwardly in modern fashion, it was actually in the Middle Ages that we were making a pilgrimage—not the least of all was the manner in which we constantly chanced to meet with people who could speak, out of a knowledge of mediæval facts, of the districts visited.

What we had looked forward to as the grand climax of the adventure was the visit to the Convent of the Odilienberg. There it stands, massive and grand, on the summit of one of the highest peaks of the Vosges, overlooking majestically the lesser but still lofty mountains encircling it with their ancient, ruined fortresses dotted here and there. Alas! the Convent was something of a disappointment—so different this modern building, with its post-card booths, tea rooms, and such like modern attractions, from the picture we had built up of St. Odile's Convent of the seventh century that originally stood there. Indeed, but for one thing, we should like to possess that imaginative picture only, and the one thing that redeemed us from disappointment was—just three linden trees scenting the mountain with an incense of their own, with their blossoms spread on the path for us to tread upon; they stood there fringing a tremendous mountain precipice. But for these lindens we could have wished that we had cut short our journey a mile from the summit.

The Lindens of the Odilienberg.

And so here we will tell the story of the lindens. Thirteen hundred years ago a pilgrim—priest, scholar, or whoever he was, this Martin—brought to the monastery of Hohenburg (as it was then named) three rootlets of linden and asked that they might be planted as a remembrance of his visit. The holes had been dug for them when a nun hurried to St. Odile to protest, saying that "horrid worms" made their homes in linden trees. "Horrid worms" she called them, for to the mediæval mind worms were closely related to the serpent. But St. Odile—with kindly feeling towards the pilgrim or perhaps with a premonition that the linden trees would stand when her monastery was no more—would have the little rootlets planted and an ancient manuscript of eight hundred years later speaks of the lindens and of how "these trees make a cool shade from the sun." So do the lindens of to-day, but their fluttering

leaves and the scented air are on the side of the mysteries and will not so much as tell you whether they are grandchildren or great grandchildren of the three little rootlets. Yet do they help the eyes of the soul to touch just the fringe of that mystery which is St. Odile. She is indeed an elusive guide to follow and she has really succeeded in evading materialistic history. We have found no biography of her in English, and the best, the most vivid and comprehending that we have come across, is that (in German) by Professor Mauer, a great lover of Alsace and one who writes of the saint in the true spirit of the words of Shakespeare when he says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The Life of a Seventh-Century Saint.

But we must proceed with the story of the saint as it can be gathered up from legend and ancient chronicles. Her father was Aldarcus, one of three noblemen who governed Alsace; he was hot-tempered and regarded as a great warrior. His wife Bereswinde was a very saintly character. Odile was born blind and Aldarcus regarded this as a disgrace and considered that his neighbours would deem it to be a punishment for some sin committed. The proud nobleman could not tolerate this; he decided therefore that the baby must be killed, but her mother succeeded in getting her into the charge of an old nurse. Rumours began to spread of the whereabouts of the child, and consequently she was removed to a convent in Palma, placed under the protection of an abbess and there she received a very liberal education as most nuns did at that time. Erhard, a Bavarian Bishop, received, in a dream, the command to go to the convent of Palma, where he would find a child whom he was to baptise in the name of the Trinity. It is stated in old chronicles and in legends that she was baptised by immersion and in her baptism acquired her sight. This is the reason why we always find a pair of eyes in close proximity to any portraiture of the saint. Sometimes they are placed in the corner of the painting, sometimes in the Cup which she holds and in one beautiful picture they are on the open Bible in her hands. Many people believe that this symbol indicates that she was martyred by having her eyes put out, but this is not so. Knowing that his daughter was alive, Aldarcus determined that she would marry a husband of his choice, and there are many stories of how, for certain periods, she had to live as a beggar and sleep in caves. The flight legend is one of the most important and most esoteric parts of the story of St. Odile. We are told of how, when pursued by her father's horsemen, the rock on a mountain-side opened and sheltered her, and of how she "crossed the Rhine." To these points reference will be made later.

Later St. Odile begged her brother to intercede for her with his father; the latter refused his son's appeal. Nothing daunted, the son made arrangements for his sister's return, alas with tragic results, for, when the father saw the procession approaching and its significance was explained to him, in a fit of rage he killed his son. In remorse he retired to a monastery and sought, by mortifying his body and by constant intercession, to gain forgiveness. Convinced after some time of the fact that he could not hope to marry his daughter to the bridegroom of his choice and, according to some chronicles convinced too, of the fact that she had a mission to fulfil, he decided to build for her a convent, and so arose the original Monastery of the Hohenburg (or the Hohenmünster), in which she had some 130 nuns; later succeeding monasteries and the mountain itself were given the name of the Odilienberg. Odile built a monastery lower down the mountain near a healing well, and this was known as the Niedermünster in contradistinction to that at the top of the mountain. Here in particular the saint and her nuns nursed the sick and succoured

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