

ADIEU, MY WEDGEWOOD LADY

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BEYOND the blue of the sea in revered Italy the pensive city of Bologna sequestered the maid of whom I would sing. Born in an age of pungent paradox, of a great feudal family that endowed her with prominence socially, artistically, intellectually, she contacted every vital force of the glamorous thirteenth century. Francis of Assisi and Dominic of Guzman were her contemporaries! While little is known of her early childhood, her life reveals no want of that intelligence, courage and largesse of soul possessed by distinguished men of her time. A wistful tradition graces her with the loveliness of an early spring bloom. Her spirit was lively; her imagination, fresh; deep were the emotions surging from a plain, sympathetic heart; her will steady, while sensitive to whatever good, truth and beauty she knew. Her first move on this chequer-board of nights and days, like that of Saint Francis, was the gesture of "the darling of a rich family," fond of fine dress and rich jewels that enhanced her personal beauty and charm, enamored of life and the world about her, good but not particularly pious, certain to be a great force for good or for evil. But seventeen, in love with life! Even in an exotic age, hers was the charm of fragrant spices from afar. She was waiting, breathless, poised like a jewelled javelin. Then Saint Dominic came and at his gentle touch, released, she pierced the hearts of many.

Who is this daughter of Bologna? With tantalizing brevity, the ancient chronicler of her life made this substance for the frugal inscription found on her tomb:

*Here lies Sister Diana of Andalo
Who made the vows of religion in the hands of
Blessed Dominic
And built the Monastery of Saint Agnes in which
She lived most holily for thirteen years
And migrated to the Lord in the year 1236.*

When the homing youngster trips on the new Persian rug rather than praises its beauty, and the new gate-leg is altogether in the way, mothers sigh. Their care to make house lovelier with works of art, to refine with something dainty placed "right there"—that old Paisley shawl, a bowl of nasturtiums, a spray of the wild crab-apple in the tall silver vase, Japanese rose-jars—is it just their dream of a world wrought in the delicate concern and joy of solicitous thought? Are their sighs synonymous with failure? Never! The exposure to beauty is fatal; in maturer years the child awakens and is grateful.

I remember well a delicate piece of clay; but six inches high it resembled a slender triangle that just grew up. Its color was the heaven's own blue, while a dainty garland of dazzling whiteness, flowing up and down, made mountain-peaks and valleys of its top. In the center was a white cameo-relief looking for all the world like my Mother's ancient brooch. The lovely lady was a huntress, her quiver of arrows and her hounds were there; her bow was raised above a stately head; in her hair she wore a crescent. When I grew up they told me she was Wedgewood, that I might touch the fragile beauty; but she remained in her niche secure and aloof even when I learned she was a pagan.

Like the sands of an hour-glass the years have waned; gone are the old familiar faces and my sylvan lady too. Your melodies were sweet, goddess, but memory is not enough. Now, I understand the Mother's sigh in the unheard piping of Blessed Diana of Andalo. O Attic Maid, you taught me as best you knew, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—I will not forget. And thou shalt remain, though now it is, "Adieu, My Wedgewood Lady!" In the light of your memory shall I sing of the maiden to whose shrine you lighted me; in her life shall I discover all you wished to be—that blessed Christian virgin who, in knowing, loving Christ, has found for me that Beauty ever Ancient, ever New.

Diana of Andalo was of the eminent family of the Carbonesi. People called her father "little Andrew" and Andreola or Andalo became the family surname. Mayor of the mountain-fastnesses about Bologna, he was a power. His office demanded not alone prudence and impartiality, but kindness, firmness, courage; the young girl knew her father both as warrior and statesman. Her brothers were six (she had a favorite, Brancaleon); they walked after their father and are not unknown to history. Of the mother and only sister we but know their common name, Otha. We may conjecture Diana's mode of life among so many broth-

ers. She was brave. Truly her "relief" was white. Saint Dominic came when she was eighteen.

In 1218 the Dominican Friars came to Bologna. Hospitably received by some Canons Regular, they began at once their apostolate by combining the work of preaching with the practice of the monastic life. Their hospice was near Diana's home. It is said both leisure and an intellectual penchant led her often to hear the new Preachers, while surely their habit, designed by Heaven's Queen, thrilled her. And the very Friar to whom Mary had displayed Her art, Blessed Reginald, was there teaching at the hospice. His eloquence seared like a flame. One day while he was preaching on the vanity, pride and extravagance of women, Diana, now a frequent visitor, was smitten by Love Himself and filled with the feeling of compunction. She saw to whatever her strong inclinations if unchecked would lead her. Like a true huntress she changed to simple garb and sought out Blessed Reginald. Together they studied the interior life Saint Dominic avowed, and "as she studied she felt more and more drawn to imitate it." The quest was before her. Like an arrow sprung from its bow, she winged straight to the target that is Love. In company with those Hounds of the Lord, the Friars of Saint Dominic, she passed through torturous woods of fear and darkness, but fearless, alight with Truth. Here is her adventure.

Diana would be a Dominican nun not according to her ideas but according to Saint Dominic's, "a helper like unto himself," maintaining the full observance, nurturing for it ever a stronger, sweeter taste in order to be an inspiration to the Friars whose apostolic work proved an hindrance, however blessed, to the practice of monasticism. With the spring, Diana, "now by tears, now by winning smiles, now by persuasive arguments"—in a word, by blandishments—overcame the stubborn opposition of her family and gave to the Mendicants some sorely needed property. It was her first public act toward the Friars, an act of that free, beautiful generosity which so characterized her life. Things were progressing pleasantly when suddenly her brilliant teacher was moved to Paris. Diana was worried with tears. Then there came to her the greatest of all Dominicans, the gentle Patriarch himself.

Saint Dominic received her as his own. With an affection peculiarly his he taught her the secret of his prayer. To him the maiden made the vow of virginity planning to enter a convent of his sisters without delay. The Saint's words, full of

sweetness, light and vigor were as seeds to germinate, to burgeon into this first flower of Dominican Sisters. In these serene days, Diana, to the world appeared its charming lady, to God, a consecrated religious. "In a spirit of self-denial and penance she wore an iron chain around her body, rose early, and prayed or worked in silence in her room until nine o'clock. The rest of the day she spent with her family and friends especially with those ladies who had assisted at her profession and were becoming her disciples."

After Saint Dominic's forced departure Diana in desperation sought admittance at the Benedictine convent of Saint Gregory. She was refused because the Sisters feared either the instability of the seeker or the wrath of her family. Thwarted again yet optimistic and undaunted she turned to Friar Alberto, an intimate friend of Saint Dominic. At his request the Canonesses of Saint Augustine at Ronzano, who looked to him as their founder, consented to receive her, if she could find a way to them while hiding her real intention. Pretending to join a pilgrimage in honor of Saint Mary Magdalen, Diana fled to her convent-retreat at the foot of the Appenines and received the habit. When her family heard of this "outrage" we read, "they rode wildly in full armour across the plain," actually stormed the cloister, seized Diana whose pleadings they loftily disdained and in their rough abduction broke one of her ribs.

Her father's house became her prison. "Bedridden for almost a year, she suffered physical pain though that was little in comparison with the mental anguish. Her plans were ruined; her people cold and harsh; she was not permitted to see any of the Dominican Friars." Once again Saint Dominic came to her, but admittance was denied him. There were, however, his secret letters full of the old light, love and fire. For her courage he promised her eventual peace. "He exhorted her to place all her confidence in God, quite assured that He would enable her to realize her wishes." Ancient writings ironically relate that even when writing consolatory notes to Diana, the Saint was prey to the fever sapping his life. His death was the dregs of the chalice for the stricken maiden. In her bewildering pain she prayed, "My God what pleasure canst Thou find in rejecting a heart that seeks Thee so sincerely?" 'Twas then Mary's blue mantle enfolded her and the Triune God infused His mysterious Hope. Diana of Andalo was growing up.

One tranquil All Saints Eve in 1221, Diana again escaped to

Ronzano. This time her parents left her in peace. Had her imprisonment robbed her of all physical beauty? At last she was in the Sisterhood; yet awaiting the Dominican foundation at Bologna. Like the ivy Diana had entwined two mighty oaks but God had transplanted them in Paradise. The vine was trailing the dust whence sprung another to lift her up, even to the Heavens. Blessed Jordan of Saxony, the new Master General of the Friars, lost no time in opening the long-looked for convent for the Sisters of Saint Dominic. "On May 29, 1223, Diana with four other ladies took possession of Saint Agnes'. A month later she and her companions received the habit, the white tunic and scapular, and the black veil from the hands of Blessed Jordan." After five years weary with beginnings, the promise of Saint Dominic was realized and his spirit of joy and liberality now flowered in her to be diffused at last in a fixed abode.

Thirteen years were left—Sister Diana lived them well. Though foundress of her convent, ever its soul and mainstay, she was never superior, yet always the safe channel through which the growing Dominican spirit flowed to Saint Agnes' Convent. Ancient biographers simplify those years with, "She was remarkable for the regularity of her life. All the little observances of conventual life, especially those established by Saint Dominic, she kept and induced others to keep with zeal. Profoundly humble she thought herself the least of all and saw to it that she wore the poorest habit; she loved to keep in the background—she was possessed by the spirit of poverty, completely detached from the goods of this world, and took her joy in privations of any sort." By 1236 the triangle of her life was built—austere penance had shattered any lingering earthly link; exact obedience had whirled her heavenwards; abundant charity had made her love of one and all unique. At thirty-five she had actually worn herself out seeking the welfare of her sisters and striving ardently for sanctity.

While her virtues were many, Blessed Diana's most fragrant was her rare gift for Friendship. She understood its beauty. Her eagerness for it was electrifying; because of it her prayers were charged. With a holy introspection she discovered her need of it. She loved her "treasures." Some pass through life almost alone, others need the support, the encouragement, the affection of companions. "To some God gives such graces, of freedom from trial and worry, or of light, sound judgment, and strength of will, that they seem to have little need even of a

spiritual director—let them thank God.” Others are otherwise favored; they are hard pressed by trials, timorous, distrustful of self; they have need of almost constant direction and encouragement to develop and to do the work of God. To deny them the help of a true friend is to hinder the work of God.—Theirs is the greater gratitude due God. Among the Saints there have been friendships, that of Blessed Diana and Blessed Jordan is one of the sweetest. “It was not an icy Platonic love but really human, a union of hearts that beat as one. What worried the one worried the other, what gladdened the one rejoiced the other. Their thoughts were full of each other; the hope of seeing each other made them happy, and parting was always painful to them. Not for them that wrong-headed austerity, an anti-social repression of affectionate impulses developing a dry-as-dust, unreal, emotionless spirituality to freeze their beings in a state of chronic semi-starvation.” In the Letters of Blessed Jordan their perfect friendship is found. If the world today would but take time to read them ’twould understand far better Christ’s precept, “Love one another.”

At her death on June 11, 1236, Diana was venerated by the Friars and Nuns, and by the people of the district. Her miraculous intercession immediately after death is authenticated by her contemporaries. In 1891 Diana of Andalo was declared Blessed by Pope Leo XIII; her feast is observed on June the ninth.

The light of your halo has not dimmed, gentle maiden, nor have the arrows of your kindness ceased their winging. But like the loveliness of my Wedgewood Lady, yours’ has been known to few. For seven hundred years your Brothers and Sisters have admired you secure, aloof, in your niche. ’Tis time they gave you to a world hungry for Truth that is Beauty, for Beauty that is Truth. The world cannot soil you. You can cleanse it. Come forth, cloistered Huntress, and with the Hounds of the Lord search for souls. You were “an helper like unto himself”—your work so exquisitely done reflects the living image of him you knew and loved, Saint Dominic. If the world would observe you, hear you, but see you pass, it could not help but mend; for, Blessed Diana, you are the finger of Saint Dominic, you are his heart, his work, his child.¹

¹ All quotations are from *Blessed Diana and Blessed Jordan*, by Norbert Georges, O.P. (The Rosary Press, Somerset, Ohio: 1933).