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RELICS IN GENERAL, AND THE IRON
CROWN OF LOMBARDY IN PARTICULAR.

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I HAD heard of relics before. Years ago I had read Mark Twain's account of the large piece of the true cross which he had seen in a church in the Azores; and of another piece which he had seen in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, besides some nails of the true cross and a part of the crown of thorns; and of the marble chest in the Cathedral of San Lorenzo at Genoa, which he was told contained the ashes of St. John, and was wound about with the chain that had confined St. John when he was in prison; and of the interesting collection shown him in the Cathedral of Milan, including two of St. Paul's fingers and one of St. Peter's, a bone of Judas Iscariot (black, not white), and also bones of all the other disciples (presumably of the normal color), a handkerchief in which the Saviour had left the impression of his face, part of the crown of thorns, a fragment of the purple robe worn by Christ, a picture of the Virgin and Child painted by St. Luke, and a nail from the cross—adding in another place that he thought he had seen in all not less than a keg of these nails.

But I had hardly taken Mark Twain seriously in these statements, not knowing at the time that his *Innocents Abroad* was one of the best guide-books to Europe that was ever written.

THE PALLADIUM OF VENICE.

I had read repeatedly the story of the bringing of St. Mark's bones from Alexandria, in Egypt, to their present resting-place in St. Mark's Cathedral at Venice—a story which is related as follows in that same lively volume:

“St. Mark died at Alexandria, in Egypt. He was martyred, I think. However, that has nothing to do with my legend. About the founding of the city of Venice—say four hundred and fifty years after Christ—(for Venice is much younger than any other Italian city), a priest dreamed that an angel told him that until the remains of St. Mark were brought to Venice, the city could never rise to high distinction among the nations; that the body must be captured, brought to the city, and a magnificent church built over it; and that if ever the Venetians allowed the Saint to be removed from his new resting-place, in that day Venice would perish from off the face of the earth. The priest proclaimed his dream, and forthwith Venice set about procuring the corpse of St. Mark. One expedition after another tried and failed, but the project was never abandoned during four hundred years. At last it was secured by stratagem, in the year eight hundred and something. The commander of the Venetian expedition disguised himself, stole the bones, separated them, and packed them in vessels filled with lard. The religion of Mahomet causes its devotees to abhor anything in the nature of pork, and so when the Christian was stopped at the gate of the city, they only glanced once into the precious baskets, then turned up their noses at the unholy lard, and let him go. The bones were buried in the vaults of the grand cathedral, which had been waiting long years to receive them, and thus the safety and the greatness of Venice were secured. And to this day there be those in Venice who believe that if those holy ashes were stolen away, the ancient city would vanish like a dream, and its foundation be buried forever in the unremembering sea.”

THE GIFT OF POPE LEO XIII. TO LONDON.

More recently I had read of what has been well called the burlesque enacted at Arundel Castle no longer ago than in July, 1902, in which the Duke of Norfolk, Cardinal Vaughan, and many lesser ornaments and dignitaries of the Romish Church took part.

“Pope Leo XIII., in order to show his ‘good-will to England,’ sent from Rome the remains of St. Edmund to garnish the new Roman Catholic cathedral at Westminster. It was an appropriate gift, for such buildings are usually garnished ‘with

dead men's bones and all uncleanness.' But as the cathedral is not yet finished, as a further token of good-will, the relics were committed to the care of no less a personage than the Earl Marshal of England. They arrived at Arundel on the evening of July 25th, and were placed for the night in Fitzalen Chapel. The next morning the whole castle was astir betimes, for the great event of the day, the transference of the bones to the castle chapel, was to take place. This was accomplished in a solemn and befitting manner. A procession was formed, and, to the measured tread of the Earl Marshal of England, Cardinal Vaughan, several archbishops and bishops, and a mixed company of priests and acolytes, and a numerous train of household servants and dependents, carrying banners, crosses, crucifixes, censers, lamps, candles, torches and other ecclesiastical stage paraphernalia, the remains of St. Edmund were borne to their resting-place. All went off well, and at last the curtain fell on the finished play, to the satisfaction of every one. Unfortunately, however, the Pope and all concerned had to reckon with English common-sense and with English love of truth, and it was not very long before it was proved to the world that the bones, like most relics of the kind, were counterfeit—whoever else's bones they were, they were not those of St. Edmund." (*The Roman Catholic Church in Italy*, Alexander Robertson, pp. 203–204.)

THE BLOOD OF ST. JANUARIUS.

I had read with cordial approval Mark Twain's animadversions upon the fraud which is regularly practiced on the people of Naples by the priests in the Cathedral:

"In this city of Naples, they believe in and support one of the wretchedest of all religious impostures one can find in Italy—the miraculous liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius. Twice a year the priests assemble all the people at the Cathedral, and get out this phial of clotted blood, and let them see it slowly dissolve and become liquid; and every day for eight days this dismal farce is repeated, while the priests go among the crowd and collect money for the exhibition. The first day the blood liquefies in forty-seven minutes—the church is full then, and time must be allowed the collectors to get around; after a while it liquefies a little quicker and a little quicker every day, as

the houses grow smaller, till on the eighth day, with only a few dozen present to see the miracle, it liquefies in four minutes.¹

“And here, also, they used to have a grand procession of priests, citizens, soldiers, sailors, and the high dignitaries of the city government, once a year, to shave the head of a made-up Madonna—a stuffed and painted image, like the milliner’s dummy—whose hair miraculously grew and restored itself every twelve months. They still kept up this shaving procession as late as four or five years ago. It was a source of great profit to the church that possessed the remarkable effigy, and the public barbering of her was always carried out with the greatest *éclat* and display—the more the better, because the more excitement there was about it the larger the crowds it drew and the heavier the revenues it produced—but at last the day came when the Pope and his servants were unpopular in Naples, and the city government stopped the Madonna’s annual show.

“There we have two specimens of these Neapolitans—two of the silliest possible frauds, which half the population religiously and faithfully believed, and the other half either believed or else said nothing about, and thus lent themselves to the support of the imposture.”

THE HOUSE OF THE VIRGIN AT LORETO.

I had read the story of the *Casa Santa*, or Holy House, the little stone building, 13½ feet high and 28 feet long, in which the Virgin Mary had lived at Nazareth. In 336 the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, made a pilgrimage to Nazareth and built a church over the Holy House. This church fell into decay when the Saracens again got the upper hand in Palestine, and when the Christians lost Ptolemais the Holy House was carried by angels through the air from Nazareth to the coast of Dalmatia. This miraculous transportation

¹ In July of this year, 1903, while the Roman Catholic world was greatly exercised over the grave illness of the late Pope, Leo XIII., the Associated Press dispatches from Naples reported that the blood of St. Januarius had miraculously liquefied at that unusual time in token that the prayers offered for the Pope’s recovery had been answered. The Archbishop of Naples has up to the present time vouchsafed no explanation of the fact that the Pope died a few days later, notwithstanding this miraculous assurance that he would recover.

took place in 1291. A few years later it was again removed by angels during the night, and set down in the Province of Ancona, near the eastern coast of Italy, on the ground of a widow named *Laureta*. Hence the name, *Loreta*, given to the town which sprang up around it for the accommodation of the thousands of pilgrims who flocked thither, and which is now a place of some six thousand inhabitants, whose principal business is begging and the sale of rosaries, medals and images. In a niche inside the Casa Santa is a small black image of the Virgin and Child, of Cedar, attributed, of course, to St. Luke. We did not visit Loreto, but at Bologna we had the satisfaction of seeing a *fac-simile* of the Casa Santa, with its little window and fireplace, and the replica of St. Luke's handiwork in the niche above, naively described by one of the children in our party as "negro dolls with beads around their necks." A large number of women, some of them handsomely dressed, were saying their prayers and counting their beads before the altar that had been erected in front of these images and the Holy House, and a few were kneeling in the narrow space behind the altar, close to the fireplace of the house. As we passed, one of these women, in plainer garb, interrupted her devotions long enough to hold out her hand to us, begging for pennies, but without rising from her knees. There was nothing unusual about this, except that this beggar made her appeal to us while actually on her knees to the image of the Virgin, for nothing is more common in Italy than for visitors to a Roman Catholic church to pass through such "an avenue of palms" when leaving it.

THE WONDER-WORKING BONES OF ST. ANNE IN CANADA.

I had even seen a few relics, not mere reproductions like that of the Casa Santa at Bologna, but the relics themselves. For instance, three summers ago, when in Quebec, I had made a special trip to the Church of St. Anne Beaupre, some twenty miles below the city, for the purpose of seeing the wonder-working relics of St. Anne, the alleged mother of the Virgin Mary—a bit of her finger bone and a bit of her wrist bone—which are devoutly kissed and adorned by thousands of pilgrims to this magnificent church from all the French and Irish portions of Canada, and which are said to have wrought miraculous cures of all manner of maladies, cures which are attested by

two immense stacks of canes, crutches, wooden legs, and the like, which rise from the floor almost to the roof on either side of the entrance. In the store in another part of the church I had got a clue to it all by seeing the poor pilgrims buying all sorts of cheap, tawdry, worthless little images and pictures, and especially little vials of oil of remarkable curative virtue because it had stood for a while before the image of St. Anne, and for which they paid five times as much as the oil had cost the priests who were selling it.

THE IRON CROWN OF LOMBARDY.

These, then, are potent bones and images and oils, but by far the most interesting relic I had seen before reaching Rome itself was the Iron Crown of Lombardy, at Monza, a little town in Northern Italy. This is the place where the good King Humbert was assassinated on the 29th of July, 1900, and it is not without interest for other reasons. For instance, it has a cathedral built of black and white marble in horizontal stripes, and containing, besides the tomb of Queen Theodolinda and other interesting objects in the nave and its chapels, a great number of costly articles of gold and silver, set with precious stones, in the treasury, as well as various relics, such as some of the baskets carried by the apostles, a piece of the Virgin Mary's veil, and one of John the Baptist's teeth. But we should never have made a special trip to Monza in such weather as we were having at the time of our visit, last November, had it not been for our intense desire to see its chief treasure, the Iron Crown, the most sacred and most celebrated diadem in the world, a relic possessing real historical interest, not because of any probability whatever in the story of its origin, but because of the extraordinary uses and associations of it within the last thousand years.

A WINTER TRIP TO MONZA.

So, regardless of the wet, cold, foggy weather that we found in Milan, and the rivers of mud and slush that were then doing duty for streets, and the splotches of snow that lay here and there in the forlorn-looking olive orchards, we took the electric tram, which was comfortably heated, and ran out to Monza, a distance of some ten miles. When we stepped into the chilly cathedral and looked about us, we could not at first see anybody

to show us around, though there were a good many poor people saying their prayers there. Evidently the custodians were not expecting tourists at such a season and in such weather. But presently, in an apartment to the left, we found a number of the priests warming their hands over a dish of twig coals covered with a light layer of white ashes, which they kindly stirred a little to make them give forth more heat as they saw us stretch our cold hands also towards the grateful warmth.

THE TREASURY OF THE CATHEDRAL.

When we asked if we could see the Iron Crown, they said we could; but instead of going at once to the chapel in which it is kept, they got a great bag of keys, large keys, thirty-seven in number, as the observant statistician of our party ascertained, and led us into the treasury and unlocked a great number of doors (one of which had seven locks), and showed us the costly objects and precious relics above mentioned. We were only mildly interested in these—even in the apostolic baskets, the Virgin's veil, and John the Baptist's tooth—partly because we were so cold and partly because of our greater interest in the more famous relic which we had come especially to see.

THE CHAPEL OF THE GREAT RELIC.

At last one of the priests, attended by an acolyte, took up a censer, placed a little incense on the coals with a teaspoon, and, swinging it in his hand by the chain, led us back into the cathedral, turned to a chapel on the left, unlocked an iron gate in a tall railing which separated this chapel from the body of the building, closed the gate again when our party had come inside, and, while a dozen or so of the people who had been at their devotions crowded up to the railing and peered curiously through, he and his attendant began to kneel repeatedly before the altar and to swing the smoking censer on every side. Above the altar was a strong, square steel box, over which, in plain view, was suspended a *fac-simile* of the Iron Crown, made of cheaper materials, while the real crown was still concealed within the steel safe.

THE GREAT RELIC ITSELF.

Handing the censer to his attendant, that it might be kept swinging without intermission, the priest produced another series

of keys and proceeded to unlock a succession of small doors in the side of the metal safe, which proved to be a "nest" of caskets, one within another, the last of which was a glass case. Drawing this out, he brought into full view the venerated crown of the Lombard kings, and told us to step up on the stool by the altar so as to see it better. It is made of six plates of gold, joined end to end, richly chased, and set with splendid jewels. But one would see at a glance that neither the material, nor the workmanship, nor the gems, could account for the unique reverence with which it has been regarded for centuries, and an indication of which we had just seen in the service conducted by the priest. Among the regalia in the Tower of London, and at several other places in Europe, we had seen crowns which far surpassed this one in costliness and beauty, but none of which, nor all of which combined, had ever excited a thousandth part of the interest attaching to this old crown in Monza.

WHY THE CROWN IS SO SACRED.

The explanation is this: within that ring of jointed plates of gold runs a thin band of iron, which priestly tradition says was made of one of the spikes that fastened the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ to the cross. It was this band of iron that we tiptoed to see, hardly noticing the bejewelled rim of gold around it. It was on account of this band of iron that the priest and his attendant swung their censers and performed their ceremony as we entered. It was this band of iron that gave to the crown its sacred place above the altar. It was for the safe keeping of this band of iron that the steel case, with its numerous locks, was made. It was from this band of iron that the diadem received its name, the Iron Crown of Lombardy.

HOW IT WAS USED BY CHARLEMAGNE AND NAPOLEON.

And what were the historical uses of it, referred to above, which made it so much more interesting to us than the many other so-called nails of the true cross elsewhere? Well, this among others: on the last Christmas day of the eighth century, while Charlemagne was kneeling with uncovered head before the high altar of St. Peter's in Rome, the Pope approached him from behind, and, placing the Iron Crown of Lombardy on his head, hailed him as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

A thousand years later, on the 26th of May, 1805, Napoleon Bonaparte, "watched by an apparently invincible army which adored him and a world which feared him," standing in the vast marble cathedral at Milan, with fifteen thousand of his soldiers around him, lifted this same Iron Crown of Lombardy into their view, and placed it upon his brow, saying, "God has given it to me, let him touch it who dares!"

HIGH REFLECTIONS AND HARD CASH.

That men who, like Charlemagne and Napoleon, had reached the highest pinnacle of human power, should seek to enhance their influence by crowning their heads with one of the nails which, as their followers believed, had pierced the Galilean's foot, is a richly suggestive fact. But we must keep our tempted thoughts to another and less edifying line at present.

When we had examined all the parts of the famous crown to our satisfaction, we stepped to the desk in the ante-room and paid our five francs (one dollar), the regular price for the exhibition of the Iron Crown, then left the cathedral, bought one or two post-card pictures of the crown, and took the tram through the dreary weather back to Milan, well pleased with the results of our first pilgrimage to the shrine of a real Roman Catholic relic in Italy.

ROME CAPS THE CLIMAX.

But on our arrival at Rome, a month later, we found that, interesting as were the relics which we had seen or read of elsewhere, they were nothing to those in the Eternal City itself. In this, as in everything else except such little matters as cleanliness and morality and truthfulness and honesty, Rome outvies all her rivals. It is only fair to add, however, that, since the overthrow of the Papal sovereignty and the establishment of an honest government, Rome has improved immensely in the matter of cleanliness, and even her immorality is not so flaunting as it was. This is attested by the Hon. Guiseppe Zanardelli, the present Premier of Italy, who says:

"The church appears better than it once was. I no longer see in Rome what I used often to see in my young days, ladies driving about its streets with their coachman and footmen in the liveries of their respective cardinals. Has this improvement

come about because the church is really growing better? Nothing of the kind. It is because the strong arm of the law checks the villainy of the priests."

DO AMERICAN ROMAN CATHOLICS BELIEVE IN THE RELICS?

A few weeks after my return from Italy, while driving one afternoon with a friend of mine, a lawyer of high intelligence and wide information, our conversation turned to the subject of the recent death of Pope Leo XIII., and from that drifted to the alleged liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius, and from that to relics in general. I mentioned some of the facts above stated concerning the numerous pieces of the true cross and the miracle-working bones and oils to be seen in Roman Catholic churches in Europe. "But," he said, "surely the Roman Catholics in America do not believe in such mediæval superstitions." I happened to have in hand a couple of copies of the *Daily Observer* (published at Charlotte, N. C.), dated August 9, 1903, and August 17, 1903, respectively, containing extracts from the letters of Bishop Haid, the highest dignitary of the Roman Catholic church in North Carolina; and, for answer to my friend's remark, I cited the following passage from Bishop Haid's letter of July 10th, written from Munich, concerning the abbey church of Scheyern:

"The chapel of the Holy Cross is specially sacred, as within is preserved a very large piece of the true cross upon which Christ was crucified, brought to Scheyern in 1156 by Count Conrad, the Crusader, who afterwards entered the monastery as lay-brother, and lies buried near the altar upon which the sacred relic is preserved."

Also the following passage from his letter of July 12th, written from Eichstadt:

"I remained the guest of Prince Ahrenberg for the night, and early in the morning, accompanied by some Benedictine students, I made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Walburg. Above the altar is the large silver receptacle into which flows that miraculous oil from her sacred relics, which is known the world over."

WHAT AMERICA NEEDS IS SOME RELICS.

Writing from Vienna, July 20, 1903, concerning the imperial palaces, he says, "They are awfully big and grand, and

cost a lot of good people's money," but adds that "the pride and glory of Vienna" is the Cathedral, and then exclaims: "How often have I wished we could have some such church in North Carolina, so that our good people who cannot visit the achievements of Catholic life in Europe could form some idea of the greatness of the religion of their fathers!"

One hesitates to differ from so good an authority on such matters as Bishop Haid, but really would he not agree, on reflection, that what this benighted and decaying country of ours needs to bring it up to a level with Italy and Austria and Spain is not a big church, but some relics? Can he not use his influence with the Pope to get us some miraculous oil or some wonder-working bones? Even a piece of the true cross or one of the nails—and they seem plentiful enough—if placed on exhibition at Charlotte, say, would attract far more attention than a big church, and enable "our good people who cannot visit the achievements of Catholic life in Europe" to form a much better "idea of the greatness of the religion of their fathers." Indeed, it seems to me strange that so many hundreds of these relics should be kept in those enlightened and happy countries like Italy, where "the achievements of Catholic life" are so well known, and where Mother Church has for centuries had full sway, and that none of them should be brought to these benighted Protestant regions, where they could effect such a salutary change in the faith of the people.