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BOOKS BY MARY FABYAN WINDEATT

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SAINT FRANCIS SOLANO

WONDER-WORKER OF THE NEW WORLD
AND APOSTLE OF ARGENTINA AND PERU

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For
Jane Vollmuth

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SOUTH AMERICA AND CENTRAL AMERICA

SAINT
FRANCIS SOLANO

CHAPTER 1

THE MAYOR'S SON

SCHOOL WAS over in the little Spanish town of Montilla on a sunny day in the year 1566. As the doors of the Jesuit college opened, a crowd of eager students poured down the steps and into the spacious grounds.

“Anybody want to go fishing?” cried one boy, tossing a battered textbook into the air and catching it with one hand.

A companion stared in mock dismay. “*Fishing?* After sitting down all day? Don’t be silly, Peter. Let’s have a ball game.”

At once the would-be angler began to argue his case. Fishing was a restful pastime after six hours in a classroom. There was a little boat he knew, moored in a secret place down the river. It could hold five boys, maybe six. As for tackle and bait . . .

“No, no!” cried the others. “We want action!” And as someone threw a ball high over a tree, there was a mad scramble to catch it. Shouting and laughing rang from all sides, and soon even Peter had forgotten his previous interest in fishing.

“Ball game!” he called, as a fellow student came slowly down the front steps of the college. “Hurry up, Francis Solano. We’re going over to the far field.”

A smile lit up the newcomer’s face, but he shook his head. “Thank you, Peter, not today. I have to look after some very important business.”

Peter shrugged his shoulders and trotted off to join his companions, who had almost reached the main gate. Soon the carefree group had disappeared, and comparative quiet descended upon the deserted school grounds.

For a moment the newcomer stood looking after his friends, his dark eyes thoughtful. He had told the truth about his important business. Today, this very afternoon, he was going to tell his parents of the decision he had reached after weeks of prayerful thought: that God was calling him to be a priest.

“A *Franciscan* priest,” he told himself happily, and here in the friary in Montilla.”

As he made his way toward the gate, the boy’s mind was busy with the wonderful thought. Then another consideration presented itself, and some of the eagerness faded from his face. For instance, what would his father say when he learned the news? Matthew Sanchez Solano was mayor of Montilla, a good Christian man, one whose home was always open to the sick and needy—and yet it was very possible that he might be disappointed because his son had no wish to pursue a worldly career. After all, Francis had done well with his school work. He had the makings of a good lawyer,

possibly even of a doctor or a professor.

"Oh, but he *must* understand!" thought the boy. "I'm just not called to have a career in the world. God wants me for His own service."

Concern for his father's opinion gave way, however, as Francis realized that at least his mother would be pleased about his vocation. For years she had been devoted to the Franciscan Order. Before his birth she had recommended him to the care and protection of the Poor Man of Assisi. Indeed, the very fact that he now bore the name of Francis was due to his mother's love of the saint.

"She'll help me," the boy told himself. "She'll make Father understand. I know it!"

Absorbed in his thoughts, the young student walked slowly homeward, scarcely noticing the fresh beauty of the country landscape. God willing, in a few weeks' time he would ask for the Franciscan habit. He was seventeen years old, in good health, and since childhood he had longed to be a priest—facts which spoke well for his being accepted as a novice. Of course it was true that he had also thought of entering the Society of Jesus. His teachers at school were Jesuits, and many of them were his close friends. One or two had even suggested that he teach a while at the college, then enter the Society. But in the end the thought had always persisted that he was not meant to serve God as a Jesuit teacher. He was meant to work out his salvation as a Franciscan friar.

There were two reasons for this. First, the poverty of the Franciscan Order appealed to him espe-

cially. How fine it was to have nothing of one's own, to rely upon God's Providence for the very necessities of life! Then again there was the possibility of going to Africa as a missionary. For a long time now the Franciscans had been connected with this work. Almost every year a little group of friars left home and family to labor among the bloodthirsty Moors.

"That's what I'd like best," Francis told himself as he walked along, "to be a missionary priest in Africa." Then he smiled at his own words. What was he saying? If he became a Franciscan, no one would be concerned with what he *liked*. The superiors would give him the work *they* thought he was fitted to do. That was all he had to remember. And after all, wasn't that the best way of fulfilling God's Will?

As he was considering this, the clamor of voices raised in anger suddenly struck his ears from a field close by.

"Oh! So I'm a coward, am I?" There was a curse, followed by a groan.

The boy stopped short and looked quickly in the direction from which the sounds had come. There he saw two men, armed with swords, about to rush at each other. One of them was staggering, while blood streamed down his cheek. Instantly Francis broke into a run.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! In God's Name, stop!"

As he bounded over a low stone wall and into the field, the wounded man, startled, let his sword slip from his grasp.

“Curse you, boy!” he gasped hoarsely.

His opponent mocked him. “Coward! The boy came just in time!”

Rage gave the wounded man a renewal of strength, but as he lunged to retrieve his sword, Francis put his foot on it.

“Gentlemen,” he said calmly, “fighting is all right if there’s good reason for it, but duelling is nothing but murder. What can either of you hope to gain, whichever wins?”

The two enemies glared in astonishment. Then the younger found his voice.

“Be off with you, boy!” he cried, choking with anger. “This is no concern of yours!”

“But I think it is, sir.” There was a flicker of laughter in his eyes.

“Why, you, you—who the deuce are you?”

Francis smiled broadly. “I am Francis Solano, and my father is the mayor of Montilla.”

For a long moment the would-be combatants stared at the mayor’s son, puzzled by the effect which the understanding smile of this mere boy was having upon them. He was unusual. Although his clothes were of fine material and he spoke as the educated son of a good family, there was nothing soft or weak about him. Unquestionably he was quite fearless.

Suddenly the younger man rattled his sword impatiently. “Well, do we fight or don’t we? It’s getting late.”

Francis hesitated. The older man had a deep gash on his head which was bleeding badly. There

was no doubt that in a little while, unless something was done, he would die from loss of blood.

“I think this friend of ours needs help,” Francis said quickly. “He should go to bed at once.”

At these words the wounded man uttered a harsh laugh. “What are you saying, boy? Bed! I’m a stranger in these parts and well-nigh penniless.”

“You mean you haven’t a place to stay tonight?”

“That’s right. But what does it matter? I’m sick of the company of men . . . of wretches like this one here . . . and if you’d only give me back my sword . . .”

“And you?” asked Francis, pretending not to understand and turning quickly to the younger man, “you’re a stranger, too?”

“I am. But I could have been at the inn long ago if this blackguard hadn’t insulted my honor. Why, he told me right to my face . . .”

Francis interrupted with a laugh and clapped a hand on the speaker’s shoulder. “Let’s talk about all this after a good meal at my father’s house.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then the younger man spoke:

“But you said your father was the mayor!”

“That’s right.”

“Who can go to a mayor’s house looking like us?”

Francis laughed again as he bent to pick up the older man’s sword. “I have a mother, sirs, who will find great pleasure in looking after all your needs before my father comes. Now, shall we go?”

So it was that the boy and his two companions presently started down the highway leading toward

Montilla. A white handkerchief, pressed into service as a bandage, had stopped the flow of blood from the older man's wound, and he was able to stumble forward weakly under Francis' direction. The little group had gone only a short distance, however, when the sound of a violin fell upon their ears—a gay little melody that told of happy hearts and dancing feet.

Francis looked up eagerly. "That's John the fiddler coming from the fair, friends. Keep your eyes on that bend in the road ahead and I promise you a wonderful sight."

Even as he spoke, the lilting strains grew louder and an elderly vagabond came into view—in tattered green suit and scarlet cloak, his ruffled white hair tumbling to his shoulders. There was an air of such happy abandon about the fiddler that it set Francis' eyes dancing with affectionate merriment.

"He'll pass us by if we're not careful, friends, for his heart is in his song." Then, as the newcomer drew apace: "Oh, John! Haven't you a word for us?"

At once the gay music stopped. "Why, Master Francis! Master Francis Solano! What makes you so late from school?"

"Unexpected business, John. I met two friends a while ago, and now I'm taking them home to dinner. Wouldn't you like to join us?"

The old man drew near and peered curiously at the two strangers. His eyes narrowed as he noted the swords, the white bandage with its ominous red stain, the suspicious scowls that still lingered on

both faces. But he smiled and nodded vigorously.

“A good dinner should never be despised, Master Francis. Or new friends. As I’ve said before, I believe friendship is a foretaste of Heaven, so God bless you for this new chance to enjoy it.”

“And you’ll play something as we walk?”

“Why not? The time will pass more quickly then.”

But even as he lifted his violin to his shoulder, the old man had an idea. “It’s been a long time since you played for me, Master Francis. Suppose I help this poor soul with the wound in his head and you make the music?”

Francis smiled. “All right,” he said. “Just take his arm, John, and I’ll try my luck.”

The two enemies exchanged furtive glances as the old fiddler stepped between them. How was it that they had fallen into such unusual company? That the anger which had burned so fiercely within them a short while ago was beginning to subside? But soon came an even greater surprise, for Francis, now a short distance ahead of the little group, had begun to play a melody such as the strangers had never known before. It was a plaintive song, yet one could smile for joy at hearing it.

Puzzled, the wounded man looked at the old fiddler. “What tune is this?” he asked. “And how does a mere boy play so well?”

The latter smiled. “The song, sir, is a hymn to Our Lady. As for the skill of the player . . .”

“*Skill?* But it’s more than that!” broke in the younger man. “Why, I’ll wager the lad has forgotten



FRANCIS HAD BEGUN TO PLAY
A STRANGE MELODY.

all about us, now that he holds a fiddle in his hands!”

Three pairs of eyes looked down the road to where Francis walked alone. The rays of the setting sun were full upon him as he played and sang, and suddenly tears started in the eyes of the old fiddler.

“I taught the lad to play,” he whispered.

“*You?*”

“Yes, through God’s mercy. And don’t worry that the boy has forgotten you, sirs. This song he sings to Our Lady is offered in both your names.”

The recent enemies looked at each other in astonishment. “*What?*”

“That’s right, sirs. Master Francis knows many songs, but his favorite is this one—to the Queen of Peace.”