

## Was Juniper a Woodentop?

On a time as Friar Juniper was journeying to Rome, where the fame of his holiness was already noised abroad, many Romans, of their great devotion, went out to meet him; and Friar Juniper, beholding so many people coming, imagined how he might turn their devotion into sport and mockery. Now there were two children playing at see-saw, to wit, they had placed one log of wood across another, and each of them sat at his end of the log and see-sawed up and down. Away goes Friar Juniper and takes off one of these children from the log, and mounting thereon begins to play see-saw. Meanwhile the people came up and marvelled to see Friar Juniper see-sawing, yet, with great devotion, they greeted him and waited for him to end the game of see-saw, in order to accompany him honourably as far as the friary. And Friar Juniper heeded little their greetings, their reverence, and their waiting, but held very diligently to his see-sawing. And waiting thus a long space, certain of them began to weary thereof, and said, "What a blockhead"! Others, knowing his ways, waxed in greater devotion. Nevertheless all departed and left Friar Juniper on his see-saw. And when they were all gone, Friar Juniper was left wholly comforted, because he saw that certain of them had mocked at him. He then set forth and entered Rome, and with all meekness and humility came to the house of the friars minor.

Thus with childlike acceptance an unknown annalist continues the hagiography of his great, dead friends: They whom the Spanish would remember as San Bernardino, Santa Clara, San Francisco and San Antonio. With droll charm, his adze of atrament builds yet another window into the minds of men who would found a country called California, and yet spurn the fortunes along the river of their Queen of the Angels of the Small Portion.

As with the tale of Anthony and his fishes it is delightful to imagine the glee of little children as this simply hilarious and deeply disturbing story was read to them at bedtime.

Of course, the holy friar was not the first, and neither would he be the last, to enter Rome with all meekness and humility. How many torn and naked captives were dragged through the dust in triumph, or how many starved and goaded creatures *ad ludum*, we will not know this side of the grave. When challenged before the Appian Gate by an aging slave, Our

Savior Himself replied that he entered to be re-crucified, and such has been the fate, physical or spiritual, of many who presented there.

And yet there is something engaging, homely and irrepressibly plebeian about these heirs of grandeur who would as indifferently mock or venerate a learned superior and as uncritically dismiss as accept his inexplicable message.

We are not told the sex of the child displaced, but he was of course a boy, and we wonder, in common with a million and one small girls, whether he ran blurting and sniveling to his mother at being so peremptorily frustrated; or whether he stood aside with manful gravitas, watching with knowing eyes the farce unfold, and judging the real as well as the ostensible follies around him.

But is it humility to seek how to turn devotion into sport and mockery or is it a vain delight in power masquerading as humility? For to abase himself is to act upon the Self with self-solicitude whilst true humbleness waits upon The Will of Christ and accepts whatever He confers whether that be empires or oubliettes. What of the faith and devotion of those who would have celebrated Juniper's entry into the City of Peter? Was Juniper justified in thinking their acclamation idolatrous, and scrupulous to be no Franciscan Naylor, to thus rudely defuse their zeal? And why, in that arena of all others, was to play see-saw so grave a degradation, so childish a sport so sullyng?

Where is the humility and where the manly grace, native or Conferred, in removing a child from his delight to abase oneself or even to deliver an eternal homily?

"What a blockhead", we might well agree.

And yet the diverse acceptance and common desertion of the holy brother in his tiny passion postfigures a larger story and a greater remembrance, and if the antics of this weird friar minor have brought just one more child to the feet of his Savior then his childish guile gave wisest gain.

## Reference

"The Little Flowers of St Francis"  
( published with "The Mirror of Perfection"  
by Leo of Assisi and "The Life of St Francis" by  
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translator to English, Thomas Okey )  
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( From the *Fioretti*, Italian-language translations  
of the original Latin  
"Actus B. Francisci et sociorum ejus" )

p144  
Section IX of The Life of Friar Juniper  
"How Friar Juniper, to abase himself,  
played at see-saw."