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Saint Benedict and the Raven

E. M. STANDING (Florence)



A Benedictine Brother from the Monastery of Sacro Speco, Subjacio, Italy, and one of the monastery ravens. This particular bird had been a member of the community for eight years

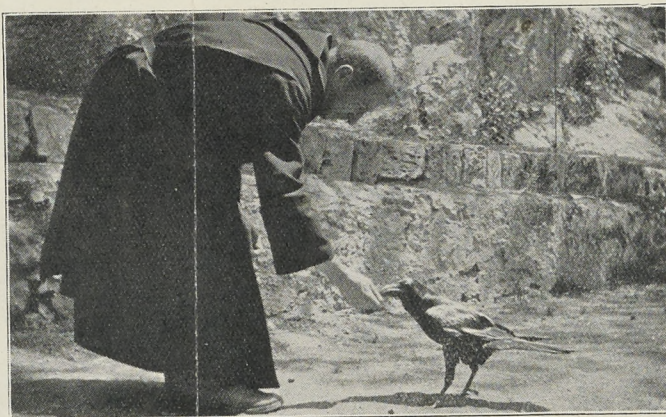
IN the Benedictine Monastery at Subjacio—which is situated in the mountains some fifty miles from Rome—the good monks always have some tame ravens. And they do this to commemorate an incident in the life of St. Benedict, their founder, who lived in the fourth century A.D.

As a young man St. Benedict had retired from the world, and went to live as a hermit

in a cave in the mountains near Subjacio. The cave is still to be seen; in fact the present monastery is built around it; and all visitors are taken to see this cave.

At the time when St. Benedict was living like a hermit in his cave there was a wicked priest in Subjacio, who endeavoured to take his life in the following way. He sent a woman to him with a loaf of bread as a present. But the bread was poisoned. By an inner admonition the Hermit was made aware of the plot upon his life. A raven happened to be passing by; and the Saint clapped his hands and ordered the bird to come and remove the dangerous food. According to the legend the bird came, seized the loaf, flew away with it, and dropped it into the rushing river, which lies at the bottom of a tremendous gorge near the monastery.

So ever afterwards, in memory of this event, his followers in this his first monastery, have kept ravens who are as it were members of the community like the monks themselves.



This raven was very suspicious of the camera—disliking publicity almost as much as the monks themselves

The Oil Menace

How Long ?

MAJOR H. H. ORMONDE, a veteran lover of birds, writes of the deplorable scenes on the Sussex coast:—

"The subject calls for immediate and strongly urgent action, for surely no dumb creatures ever suffered like these—within a few miles of one's own home and possibly even worse on unknown, out of sight coasts. Every religious body, every society, every humane person ought to join in with the R.S.P.B. in order to stop this wanton torture.

I wish I could have sent you up a big motor-truck load of starved, oiled, dying birds for London to see. The sea is covered with acres and acres of disgusting oil; and the thin streaks and patches of a few feet in extent are most dangerous, because these quietly encircle the unsuspecting feeding birds. So very little 'gammers' up their flight feathers and they are 'done'—frightened, panting, helpless and greasy lumps, which a few seconds before were strong, fearless, happy and beautiful birds. Have we no clever person who can bring the matter home to the public? Surely every person in every humane society will put aside their pet schemes to join in such a great and necessary cause as this. The horror of the oil reaches to countless thousands of birds, in an expanse of the world greater than the land—the whole wide ocean. Poor black ducks, divers, guillemots, gulls, thousands of them from Rye to Hastings, washed in on icy waves, frozen and helpless.

I have witnessed and known of much suffering from cruelty, yet I cannot tell you how much this sacrifice of the birds affects me. I feel that the prevention of it will be and must be possible. We *must* do something.

One stands on the sea-bank. There is a pool or line of oil; a single bird or a few birds get caught in it. In a moment they are helpless; they flap their useless wings, they swim round, they scream amid the oil and flotsam. Other birds of various kinds passing near, seeing or hearing them, fly down either out of curiosity or thinking there must be food. At once they, too, are 'done'. No need absolutely to settle on the surface, for if they skim the crest of a wave and there is only a little oil—perhaps hardly visible—this, getting on pinions and

tail, makes it impossible for them to ascend in the air. They usually fall down, or are beaten down, into the oily sea of death. Now and again one reaches clear water, and if not too badly oiled will get free in time, after terrible fright and distress, but probably never to recover.

'Sunny wide eyes that search the sea and wings that weary never' sang Swinburne. Is this their end?"

The Earl of Ilchester had the following motion down for the House of Lords on March 29th:—

To call the attention of His Majesty's Government to the pollution of the sea by waste oil discharged from steamers, caused not only to the waters of estuaries and tidal harbours, but also outside the three-mile limit, and to the consequent injury to bird life and to inshore fisheries and to the general amenities of the foreshore; and to ask whether, in view of the serious nature of this damage, they will summon an International Conference to discuss this question, and, if possible, to find and to carry into effect a remedy for it.

Unfortunately the motion was crowded out.

At the annual meeting of the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire, Mrs. F. E. Lemon, Hon. Secretary of the Watchers Committee, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, introduced a resolution calling for International action to stop the pollution of the high seas, territorial and inshore waters, estuaries and harbours, by the discharge of oil. This was carried unanimously.

From *Bird Notes and News*.

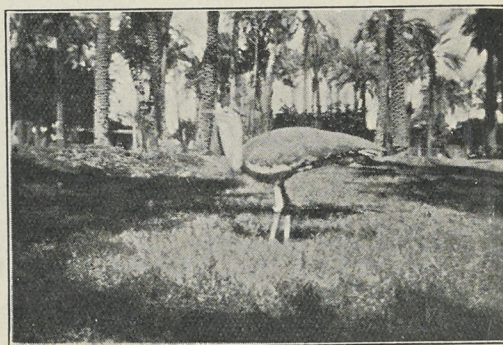
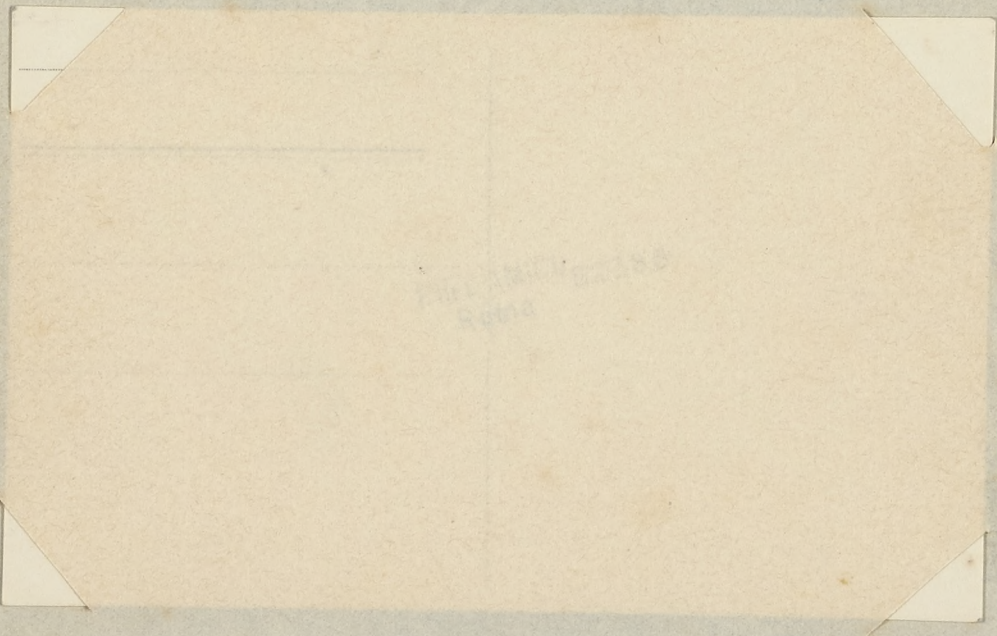
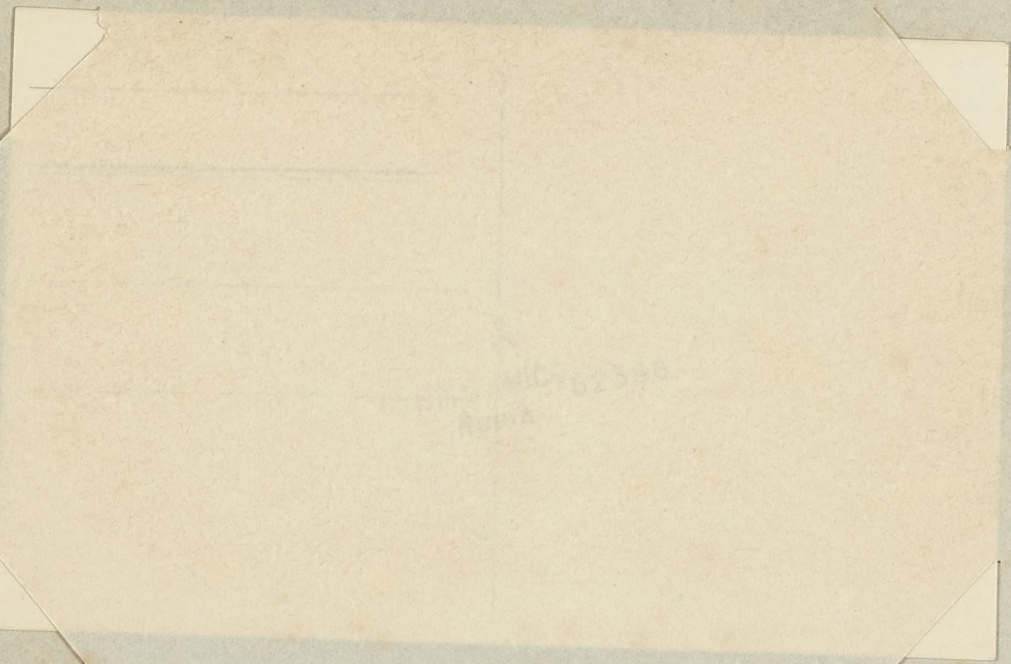


Photo by]

[Sergt. Instr. K. Mansfield

The Bustard

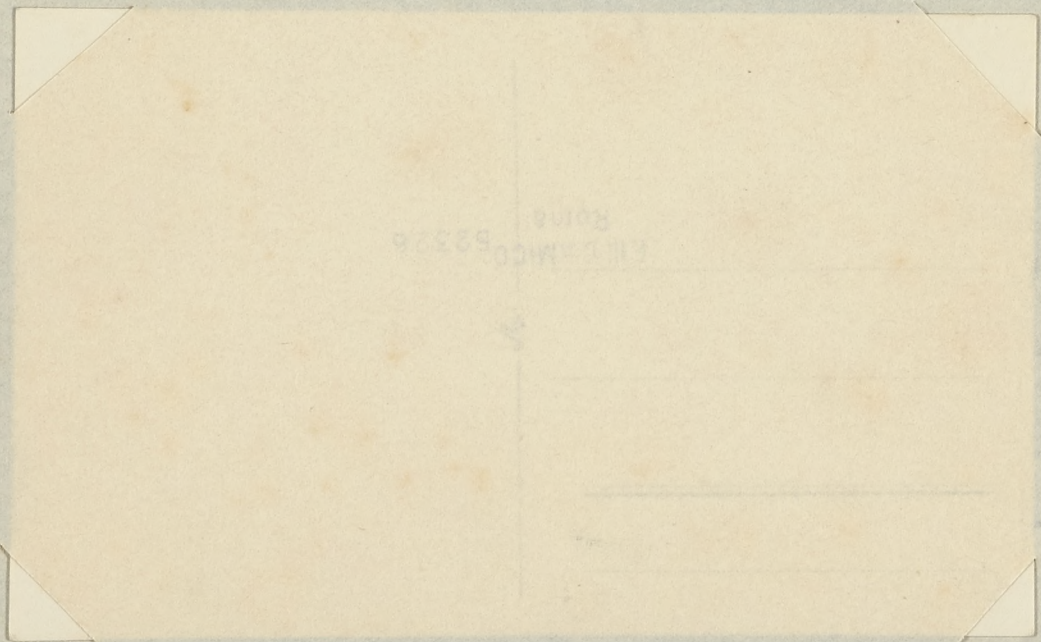






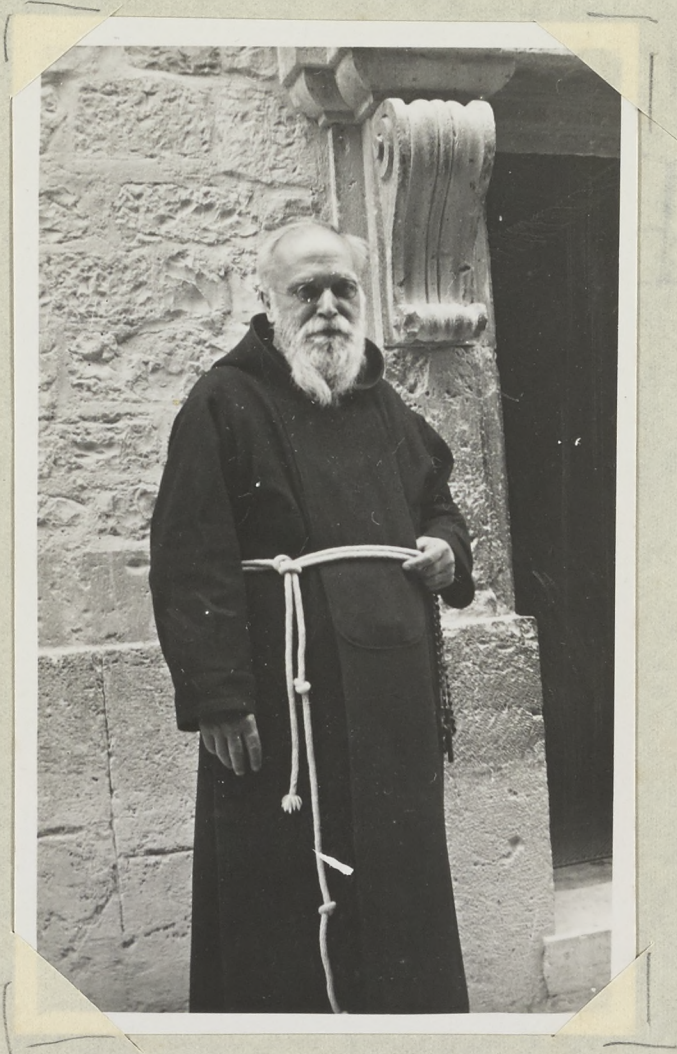


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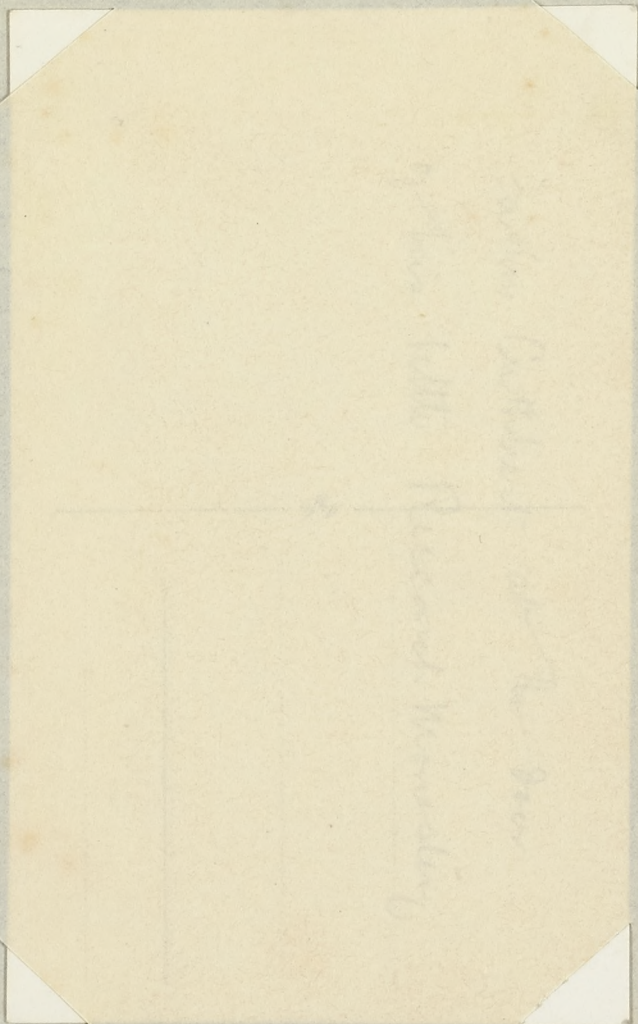




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THE RAVENS OF "SANTO SPECO "

An Ancient Usage in a Benedictine Monastery

St. Benedict , the founder of the Benedictine Order - and sometimes known as the Father of Monasticism - lived in the Sixth Century . As a boy he was sent to study in Rome ; but , at the age of fifteen , horrified by the corruption which prevailed amongst the youth of that city , he fled to a place in the country about forty miles from Rome , near the town of Subiaco .

For three years he lived as a hermit in an almost inaccessible cave , which was afterwards known as "Sacro Speco " (the sacred grotto) . For more than two of these years his humble dwelling place was unknown to anyone save St. Romanus , who used to let down a basket to him with bread in it .

When it became known in the adjoining town of Subiaco that a holy man lived nearby the inhabitants took it upon themselves to supply him with provisions . At that time there was living in Subiaco a wicked priest named Florentius , who plotted to take the young hermit's life . With this intent he despatched a woman - his maid servant - with the gift of a loaf of bread , which was however poisoned .

But the Saint , illumined by God , was made inwardly aware of the dastardly attempt on his life . Thereupon he called to a raven that was close at hand and bade it carry away the loaf , which it did in its beak to drop it in the

deep gorge which rushes by hundreds of feet below the cave .

The "Sacro Speco " became a famous and revered spot, and before long a monastery was built the place . The cave however was preserved in its natural condition , the monastery being constructed over and around it , so that visitors to-day can see the historic grotto just as it was fourteen hundred years ago . The famous Italian sculptor , Bernini , (1657) made a beautiful marble statue depicting the young St. Benedict in the attitude of prayer : it was placed in the grotto where it remains to this day .

To commemorate this incident of the poisoned loaf and the raven the monks of the Monastery of "Sacro Speco " have - for generations - kept a number of tame ravens . The accompanying photos of one of them were taken in the Inner Court of the Monastery . The wise looking old bird was profoundly suspicious of my camera ; and seemed to have a great contempt not to say distrust of new-fangled inventions , being apparently still quite medieval in his outlook . However with the help of one of the Brothers , who distracted his attention with a piece of bread , I was finally able to take the snaps .

The monastery , which is over a thousand years old , contains many precious relics and famous paintings , one of which depicts the incident described above .