

PILGRIM WALKS IN FRANCISCAN ITALY

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Pilgrim Walks in Franciscan Italy by Johannes Jørgensen

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JOHANNES JØRGENSEN

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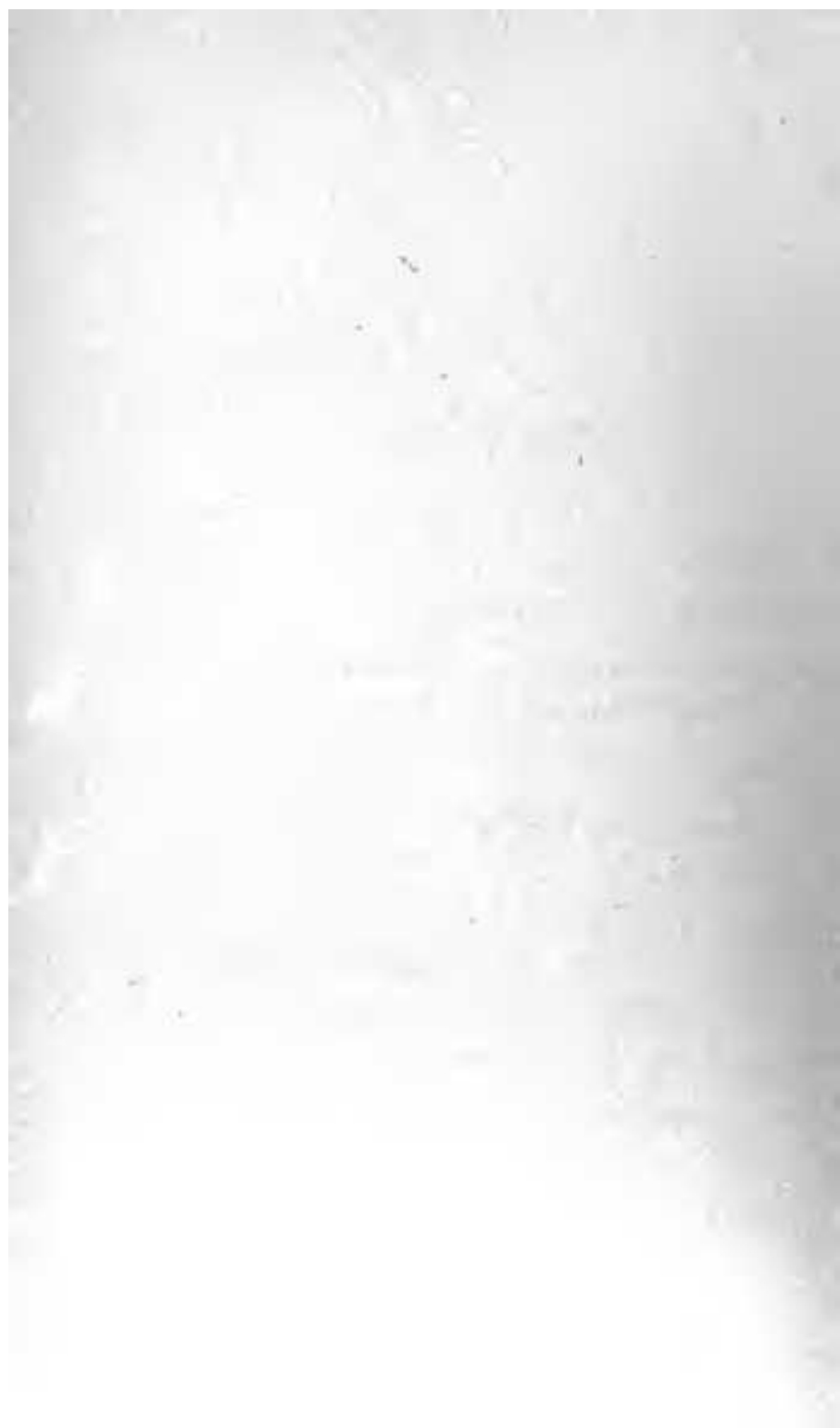
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PILGRIM WALKS IN FRANCISCAN ITALY

I

GRECCIO

DURING the winter of 1904 I had frequently looked northward with a pilgrim's yearning to the Galilee of St Francis—Umbria, Tuscany, the March of Ancona, the fairest region of fair Italy, hallowed by the footsteps of the saint, rich in historical and legendary lore. In imagination I entered the ravines of the Apennines, the solitudes of the mountain forests, where are the ancient hermitages, the secluded monasteries dating from the earliest years of

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the Franciscan Order. I longed to visit these and other monasteries of great antiquity beyond the hills, where all is just the same at the present day as in the days of yore—to find myself actually within the precincts of the venerable cloisters about which such wondrous stories are related.

At length, one fine day in April, I was able to fulfil my wish, to start on my travels, my primary destination being the vale of Rieti. In the same compartment with me was a priest, with whom I entered into conversation. We naturally spoke of St Francis, and of the great interest now generally taken in him and all that is closely associated with him. As the train wound its slow way up through the wild, mountainous region, my fellow-traveller directed my attention to the principal points of interest: the picturesque old towns on

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the hillsides, whose towers and belfries stood out dark against the clear sky ; the grey feudal fortresses crowning the loftier heights.

Presently we emerged into the wide plain between the vineyards, where the verdant branches of the vines hang like festoons from tree to tree. In the far distance, above the purple hills, the crests of the snow-clad mountains were discernible, glistening in the sunshine. The train stopped ; we were in Greccio. The cool air from the mountains met us as we passed out of the small station to the highroad.

Greccio consists of three distinct parts : the new part close to the railway station ; the old town high up on the hillside ; and the ancient Franciscan monastery, San Francesco di Greccio. The town, whose windows show dark on the grey walls of the houses, amid which rises a single