

The Small Miracle by Paul Gallico

In the town of Assisi there lived a boy called Pepino with his donkey Violetta.

Pepino was ten years old and an orphan. All his relatives had been killed in the war. The donkey, Violetta was the only thing he owned in the whole wide world. The boy and the donkey loved each other very much. To earn their living they did all sorts of things. They would carry shopping for the old people, help pull carts that got stuck in the mud and sometimes even act as a taxi service. In this way they earned enough to buy food for them both and rent a small stable.

At night the boy Pepino slept in the stable curled up close to the donkey, his head pillowed on her neck. When the boy was upset the donkey would gently nuzzle him. The boy for his part groomed and fed and watered the little donkey, and gave her all the affection he would have given his parents if they had been alive.

One day in the early Spring Violetta the donkey fell ill. First it seemed that she was just tired but then she started to get very thin as well. Pepino had saved a little money and so he took Violetta to the vet. The vet didn't know what was the matter with the donkey but he was worried about her, and told the boy that this might be the end of the little donkeys life.

Pepino was very upset but after a while he knew what he must do . He must take his donkey into the crypt beneath the Basilica of Saint Francis, where the remains of the saint who loved all the birds and the beasts lay. Pepino was sure that the Saint would cure Violetta. So he took the donkey to the Basilica, and explained to the Superintendent of the Basilica what he wanted.

Unfortunately the Superintendent was at that time very worried. Fewer and fewer people were coming to the Basilica of St Francis, which meant less and less money for the repairs to the crypt which were urgently needed. If only they could find a relic of the Saint. This would attract the crowds. and the money back to Assisi. Because the Superintendent was so worried Pepino's request did not go down well. The Superintendent told the boy that he was a fool. Apart from anything else how on earth did he think he could get a donkey down the narrow winding stairway into the crypt? It was difficult enough for two legged humans never mind a four legged donkey.

But Pepino had foreseen this problem. A friend of his had told him that there was another way into the crypt...a tunnel that had been bricked up for hundreds of years. He told the Superintendent about the tunnel, but the man only got even more irritated . "Yes ,Yes he knew all about the tunnel but it could only be opened with permission from the highest Church authority". That was the Pope and he was hardly likely to give permission allowing a peasant boy to take a donkey into a holy place.

Pepino didn't believe him. He was sure the Pope would understand. So he left Violetta with a friend of his and set off for Rome. It was a long and hard journey but finally he got to Rome. Outside the entrance to the Vatican was a flower seller. Pepino spent his last 50 lire on a bunch of flowers for the Pope.

Opposite the Vatican was a stall which sold postcards and souvenirs. They gave

Pepino a pencil and paper and he wrote a note to go with his flowers to the Pope.

It said: Dear and most sacred Holy Father
These flowers are for you. Please will you let me come and tell you about my donkey Violetta, who is dying. They won't let me take her to see Saint Francis so that he may cure her. Love from Pepino.

Pepino then gave the flowers and the note to the guard who stood outside the Vatican gates and begged him to take them to the Pope.

The guard pretended that he would, but lots of people asked him to do this kind of thing and, because the Pope could not possible deal with all these kind of requests what he would do instead was, take the flowers into the Vatican, throw them in a bin and then return to the gate and pretend that the Pope had said "thank you, I'm sorry but I can't see you."

This was what the guard intended to do but when he got to throwing the flowers into the bin he found to his amazement that somehow he could not bring himself to do it. The flowers seemed to be glued to his fingers.

The guard left the Guard Room and wandered through the corridors not knowing what to do. A busy little secretary saw him and was astonished at the sight of this great burly man wandering along clutching a bunch of flowers.

He took the flowers from the Guard who was very pleased to get rid of them. But the same thing happened to the secretary! The flowers made him remember good times, happy moments, and he just somehow hadn't the heart to throw them away.

In this way the little bunch of flowers passed onwards and upwards until finally they arrived in front of the Pope himself. He read the note and looked at the flowers and then said to his secretary "Let the child be bought here. I will see him."

Pepino came to the Pope's office and told him all about his donkey Violetta, and how he needed permission to open the second entrance to the tomb of Saint Francis.

After half an hour a very happy little boy came out of the Vatican. In his pocket Pepino had a letter which authorised the opening of the second entrance.

Before nightfall Pepino had arrived back in Assisi. He took the Pope's letter straight to the Supervisor of the Basilica. When the man had read the letter he promised that first thing in the morning work would start to open the second entrance.

The next morning the clink of the stonemason's pick rang again and again as the walled up door of the passageway leading to the crypt was being removed. The Supervisor and the boy, Pepino watched. The boy was supporting the donkey who was now so ill she was very shaky on her legs and could hardly stand.

The mason had trouble knocking down a certain bit of the wall. The donkey suddenly moved forward. Her feet slipped on the rubble...a brick fell out.....a crack appeared.

The Supervisor leapt forward and pulled the boy and donkey out of the way as, with a roar, the wall collapsed and everything vanished in a cloud of dust.

When the dust settled they saw a small grey leaden box. Engraved on it was the year 1226...the year Saint Francis died...and the large initial "F".

It was what they had all hoped for the long lost relic of Saint Francis himself. Now the Basilica would become popular again and the repairs could be done.

Pepino quietly asked if he could take the donkey into the crypt now.

"Yes, Yes." Said the Supervisor.

They all watched as the boy and the donkey went into the crypt.

They were amazed to see that Pepino was no longer supporting the donkey . Far from it the donkey was trotting along, ears forward, head up and looked as healthy and as happy as if she had never had a days illness in her life.