

THE PRIORESS'S PROLOGUE

The Merry Words of the Host to the Sailor and to My Lady Prioress

Well said, by *corpus dominus*," said our host,
"Now long time may you sail along the coast,
Sir gentle master, gentle mariner!
God give this monk a thousand years bitter!
Aha, comrades, beware of such a jape!
The monk put into that man's hood an ape,
And in the wife's too, by Saint Augustine!
Invite no more monks to your house or inn.
"But let that pass, and let us look about
To see who shall be next, of all this rout,
To tell a tale."
And after that he said,
As courteously as it had been a maid:
"My lady prioress, and by your leave,
So that I knew I should in no way grieve,
I would opine that tell a tale you should,
The one that follows next if you but would.
Now will you please vouchsafe it, lady dear?"
"Gladly," said she, and spoke as you shall hear.

Explicit

THE PRIORESS'S TALE

Domine, dominus noster.

O Lord, Our Lord, Thy name how marvelous
Is spread through all this mighty world," said she;
"For not alone Thy praise so glorious
Is given by men of worth and dignity,
But from the mouths of children Thy bounty
Is hymned, yea, even sucklings at the breast
Do sometimes Thy laudation manifest.
"Wherefore in praise, as best I can or may,
Of Thee and of that pure white Lily-flower
Who bore Thee, and is yet a maid alway,
I tell a tale as best is in my power,
Not that I may increase Her heavenly dower,
For She Herself is honour and the one
From Whom spring wealth and goodness, next
Her Son.
"O Mother-Maid! O Maiden-Mother free!
O bush unburnt, burning in Moses' sight,
Who ravished so the Soul of Deity,
With Thy meekness, the Spirit of the Light,
That His virtue, which was Thy soul's delight,

Conceived in Thee the Father's wise Essence,
Help me to speak now with all reverence!
"Lady, Thy goodness and Thy generous grace.
Thy virtue and Thy great humility-
No tongue may say, no pen may fully trace;
For sometimes, Lady, ere men pray to Thee.
Thou goest before, of Thy benignity,
And givest us the true light, by Thy prayer,
To guide us all unto Thy Son so dear.
"I cannot bear the burden, blessed Queen,
Of fitly praising all Thy worthiness,
My wisdom and my knowledge are too mean;
But as a child of twelve months old, or less,
That scarcely any word can well express,
So fare I now, and therefore do I pray,
Guide Thou that song of Thee which I shall say!"

Explicit

In Asia, in a city rich and great
There was a Jewry set amidst the town,
Established by a rich lord of the state
For usury and gain of ill renown,
Hateful to Christ and those who are His own;
And through that street a man might ride or wend,
For it was free and open at each end.
A little school for Christian folk there stood,
Down at the farther end, in which there were
A many children born of Christian blood,
Who learned in that same school, year after year,
Such teachings as with men were current there,
Which is to say, to sing well and to read,
As children do of whatsoever creed.
Among these children was a widow's son,
A little choir boy, seven years of age,
Who went to school as days passed one by one,
And who, whenever saw he the image
Of Jesus' Mother, it was his usage,
As he'd been taught, to kneel down there and say
Ave Maria, ere he went his way.
Thus had this widow her small son well taught
Our Blessed Lady, Jesus' Mother dear,
To worship always, and he ne'er forgot,
For simple child learns easily and clear;
But ever, when I muse on matters here,
Saint Nicholas stands aye in my presence,
For he, when young, did do Christ reverence.
This little child, his little lesson learning,
Sat at his primer in the school, and there,

While boys were taught the antiphons, kept turning,
And heard the *Alma redemptoris* fair,
And drew as near as ever he did dare,
Marking the words, remembering every note,
Until the first verse he could sing by rote.
He knew not what this Latin meant to say,
Being so young and of such tender age,
But once a young school-comrade did he pray
To expound to him the song in his language,
Or tell him why the song was in usage;
Asking the boy the meaning of the song,
On his bare knees he begged him well and long.
His fellow was an older lad than he,
And answered thus: "This song, as I've heard say,
Was made to praise Our Blessed Lady free,
Her to salute and ever Her to pray
To be our help when comes our dying day.
I can expound to you only so far;
I've learned the song; I know but small grammar."
"And is this song made in all reverence
Of Jesus' Mother?" asked this innocent;
"Now truly I will work with diligence
To learn it all ere Christmas sacrament,
Though for my primer I take punishment
And though I'm beaten thrice within the hour,
Yet will I learn it by Our Lady's power!"
His fellow taught him on their homeward way
Until he learned the antiphon by rote.
Then clear and bold he sang it day by day,
Each word according with its proper note;
And twice each day it welled from out his throat,
As schoolward went he and as homeward went;
On Jesus' Mother was his fixed intent.
As I have said, as through the Jewry went
This little school-boy, out the song would ring,
And joyously the notes he upward sent;
O Alma redemptoris would he sing;
To his heart's core it did the sweetness bring
Of Christ's dear Mother, and, to Her to pray,
He could not keep from singing on his way.
Our primal foe, the serpent Sathanas,
Who has in Jewish heart his hornets' nest,
Swelled arrogantly: "O Jewish folk, alas!
Is it to you a good thing, and the best,
That such a boy walks here, without protest,
In your despite and doing such offense
Against the teachings that you reverence?"
From that time forth the Jewish folk conspired
Out of the world this innocent to chase;
A murderer they found, and thereto hired,

Who in an alley had a hiding-place;
And as the child went by at sober pace,
This cursed Jew did seize and hold him fast,
And cut his throat, and in a pit him cast.
I say, that in a cesspool him they threw,
Wherein these Jews did empty their entrails.
O cursed folk of Herod, born anew,
How can you think your ill intent avails?
Murder will out, 'tis sure, nor ever fails,
And chiefly when God's honour vengeance needs.
The blood cries out upon your cursed deeds.
"O martyr firm in thy virginity,
Now mayest thou sing, and ever follow on
The pure white Lamb Celestial"- quoth she-
"Whereof the great evangelist, Saint John,
In Patmos wrote, saying that they are gone
Before the Lamb, singing a song that's new,
And virgins all, who never woman knew."
This widow poor awaited all that night
Her child's return to her, but he came not;
For which, so soon as it was full daylight,
With pale face full of dread, and busy thought,
At school she sought and everywhere she sought,
Until, at last, from all her questioning she
Learned that he last was seen in the Jewry.
With mother's pity in her breast enclosed
She ran, as she were half out of her mind,
To every place where it might be supposed,
In likelihood, that she her son should find;
And ever on Christ's Mother meek and kind
She called until, at last, Our Lady wrought
That amongst the cursed Jews the widow sought.
She asked and she implored, all piteously,
Of every Jew who dwelt in that foul place,
To tell her where her little child could be.
They answered "Nay." But Jesus, of His grace,
Put in her mind, within a little space,
That after him in that same spot she cried
Where he'd been cast in it, or near beside.
O Thou great God, Who innocents hast called
To give Thee praise, now shown is Thy great
might!
This gem of chastity, this emerald,
Of martyrdom the ruby clear and bright,
Began, though slain and hidden there from sight,
The *Alma redemptoris* loud to sing,
So clear that all the neighbourhood did ring.
The Christian folk that through the ghetto went
Came running for the wonder of this thing,
And hastily they for the provost sent;
He also came without long tarrying,

And gave Christ thanks, Who is of Heaven King,
And, too, His Mother, honour of mankind;
And after that the Jews there did he bind.
This child, with piteous lamentation, then
Was taken up, singing his song alway;
And, honoured by a great concourse of men,
Carried within an abbey near, that day.
Swooning, his mother by the black bier lay,
Nor easily could people who were there
This second Rachel carry from the bier.
With torture and with shameful death, each one,
The provost did these cursed Hebrews serve
Who of the murder knew, and that anon;
From justice to the villains he'd not swerve.
Evil shall have what evil does deserve.
And therefore, with wild horses, did he draw,
And after hang, their bodies, all by law.
Upon the bier lay this poor innocent
Before the altar, while the mass did last,
And after that the abbot and monks went
About the coffin for to close it fast;
But when the holy water they did cast,
Then spoke the child, at touch of holy water,
And sang, "*O Alma redemptoris mater!*"
This abbot, who was a right holy man,
As all monks are, or as they ought to be,
The dead young boy to conjure then began,
Saying: "O dear child, I do beg of thee,
By virtue of the Holy Trinity,
Tell me how it can be that thou dost sing
After thy throat is cut, to all seeming?"
"My throat is cut unto the spinal bone,"
Replied the child. "By nature of my kind
I should have died, aye, many hours ago,
But Jesus Christ, as you in books shall find,
Wills that His glory last in human mind;
Thus for the honour of His Mother dear,
Still may I sing 'O Alma' loud and clear.
"This well of mercy, Jesus' Mother sweet,
I always loved, after poor knowing;
And when came time that I my death must meet,
She came to me and bade me only sing
This anthem in the pain of my dying,
As you have heard, and after I had sung,
She laid a precious pearl upon my tongue.
"Wherefore I sing, and sing I must, 'tis plain,
In honour of that blessed Maiden free,
Till from my tongue is taken away the grain;
And afterward she said thus unto me:
'My little child, soon will I come for thee,
When from thy tongue the little bead they take;

Be not afraid, thee I will not forsake."
The holy monk, this abbot, so say I,
The tongue caught out and took away the grain,
And he gave up the ghost, then, easily,
And when the abbot saw this wonder plain,
The salt tears trickled down his cheeks like rain,
And humbly he fell prone upon the ground,
Lying there still as if he had been bound.
And all the monks lay there on the pavement,
Weeping and praising Jesus' Mother dear,
And after that they rose and forth they went,
Taking away this martyr from his bier,
And in a tomb of marble, carved and clear,
Did they enclose his little body sweet;
Where he is now- grant us him to meet!
O you young Hugh of Lincoln, slain also
By cursed Jews, as is well known to all,
Since it was but a little while ago,
Pray you for us, sinful and weak, who call,
That, of His mercy, God will still let fall
Something of grace, and mercy multiply,
For reverence of His Mother dear on high. Amen.
HERE ENDS THE PRIORRESS'S TALE

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