

The Tale of Beatrice

Vertaald door: P. Geyl

bron

P. Geyl (vert.), *The Tale of Beatrice*. Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1927

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Introduction

The Tale of Beatrice, like nearly all Dutch literature of the Middle Ages, is the work of a Fleming. It is preserved in one manuscript, now in the Royal Library at The Hague, and was most probably written in the first half of the fourteenth century.

*The veneration of Mary, characteristic of the religion of the period, gave rise to hundreds of miracle stories in which she appears as the benefactress of mankind. Few of these have achieved so great a popularity as the one that forms the subject of our poem. It is a story of surprising depths, which many modern poets have been tempted to plumb. Maeterlinck's *Soeur Béatrice* has perhaps done most to make it known to the European public; Reinhardt's 'wordless spectacle' *The Miracle* was*

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based on this French version. In Dutch there is the Dutchman Boutens' poem Beatrijs and the Fleming Teirlinck's play Ik dien.

The mediaeval poet himself, as he explains on his first page, only retold what he had heard from 'brother Ghisbert', who for his part, had found the story 'in the books he read'. Modern erudition has identified these monkish works, The dry bones of the legend are to be found in the Dialogus Miraculorum of Caesarius of Heisterbach, which was completed towards the year 1225, and in a still older work by Alanus de Rupe. But no more than the dry bones. All the warmth and tenderness, all the life and truth, which make the Tale of Beatrice, unpretentious as it is, one of the great works of Dutch literature, are due to the unknown Fleming, who 'won little gain' by his poetry, but who, in spite of

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his friends' worldly-wise advice, could not help 'labouring' over rhythm and rhyme to the greater glory of our Lady.

For those who can read mediaeval Dutch, neither Maeterlinck's lyrical and high-flown romanticism, nor Boutens' chastened and attenuated gracefulness, or Teirlinck's vehement and palpitating realism, can stand a comparison with the simplicity and directness of the mediaeval poet. It is his utter absence of pose and his unqualified belief in the facts as well as in the deep significance of the legend which make the little work so refreshing and which touch the imagination even of the modern reader so much more intimately than all the art and ingeniousness of our too self-conscious and sophisticated contemporaries.

As in my translation of Lancelot of Denmark, I

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have done my best to follow the original as closely as my knowledge of the English language and the exigencies of rhyme and metre would permit, I may perhaps observe that in the original there are great differences of style between the 'able plays' of Lancelot of Denmark and of Esinoreit, and the Tale of Beatrice. The knights and damsels of the able plays move in a conventional world on softly flowing rhythm and amid sweet poetic imagery, Beatrice lives in the poet's own workaday world, and the language in which her story is told occasionally assumes the sober plainness of her surroundings. If the verse of my translation is of a somewhat drier or harsher quality than that of Lancelot of Denmark, I can only assure the English or American reader that, to the best of my belief, it truthfully reflects a difference in the original.

Such as it is, this little book, like its predecessor, owes a very great deal to the suggestions of my friend R.C. Trevelyan, whom I cannot sufficiently thank for his inexhaustible patience and resourcefulness.

P. Geyl.

London, May, 1927.

[The Tale of Beatrice]

FROM poetry I win little gain,
My friends advise me to refrain
From labouring poems for to make,
But for her glorious virtue's sake
Who was mother and still virgin,
Will I a fair miracle begin,
Which God allowed for no idle whim,
But to honour Mary who suckled him,
'Tis of a nun that I will now
This poem tell. May God allow
That I my object may achieve
And relate all things, so believe,
After the truth full honestly,
As brother Ghisbert told it me,
A pious Williamite now dead,
Who found it in the books he read,
He was an ancient, grey-haired man,
The nun of whom this tale began

Was of courteous manner and subtle mind.
Methinks that never would you find
The like of her in all your days
For beauty and for courteous ways.
Yet for me her limbs to praise
Were a thing that would become me ill;
But what task she did fulfil
In the convent where the habit she wore,
That will I tell you and no more.
She was the vergeress, you must know.
She was neither lazy nor slow.
At her work she was quick and snell.
In church she was wont to ring the bell.
The lights and the ornament she tended,
And roused the convent when night was ended,
Not without love ran this lady's life,
Love, who with man, maid or wife,
Will often work strange happenings.
Ugly disgrace at times she brings.
And sorrow and despair no less;
At times high joy and happiness,
A fool she doth of the wise man make,

That his own fortunes he doth break,
Whether he likes or likes it not,
Some she so stresses that they wot
Neither how to be silent nor speak the word
They hope will win them their reward.
Many a one doth Love o'erthrow
Who riseth but when she wills it so.
Some are by love made generous,
Who ne'er would use their riches thus
Were it not that Love did ask her toll.
Next, such there are of constant soul
Who what they have, be it more or less,
Sorrow, joy and happiness,
For Love's sake make it common all.
Such love faithful love I call.
I could not tell you if I would
How much bad fortune and how much good
From the deep wells of Love doth run.
Therefore we must not blame this nun
That she could not escape nor slip
From Love, who held her in firm grip.
For always doth the Devil desire

To tempt us; nor of his tricks will tire,
Neither by day nor yet by night.
Late and early he tries his might.

With wicked wiles, as he well knew how,
He tempted the nun to break her vow.
He pressed her so, she could bear no more.
She prayed to God and did implore
He would comfort her for mercy's sake.
She said: 'My heart with love doth ache.
'Tis wounded with strong Love's fierce woe.
He knows it who all things doth know,
He from whom nought can be hidden away,
He knows weakness will make me stray.
Alas, this life I must resign
And here lay down this habit of mine.'

Now hear what afterwards befell.
She sent to the youth she loved so well
That he come to her as soon as he may,
And tarry not upon the way,
If his own good he would pursue.
A letter it was both sweet and true.
The messenger to the young man sped.

He took the letter and he read
What she had writtten, his sweet friend.
Ahl there his joy might have no end!
He made haste to go to her.
Since they were but in their twelfth year
Had Love bent to her will these two
And made them suffer grievous woe.
He rode as fast as he could spur
To the convent and there looked for her.
He sat him down at the little window
And would fain, if it might be so,
See his love - that was his aim.
She tarried not long before she came.
At the little window that was barred
With iron cross-bars, strong and hard,
Did these two lovers converse hold.
They sighed full many times untold,
Where he sat without and she within,
Their hearts caught fast in Love's strong gin.
So there they sat a long long time,
Nor could I tell you in my rhyme
How oft their cheeks did change their blee.

'Ah woe is me', she said 'ay me!
O chosen love, I suffer so,
Do speak to me a word or two,
Which comfort to my heart may give,
For you are my comfort while I live.
Here in my heart I feel Love's arrow
So that I suffer grievous sorrow.
No joy is left for me on earth,
Unless you thence may wrench it forth!

With feeling did he answer thus:
'For many years hath Love ruled us,
You know it well, my dearest heart:
Love has been all our life's chief part.
Yet had we never so much relief
As to steal one kiss, however brief.
Lady Venus, the goddess famed,
By God our Lord may she be damned,
Because she made this folly ours
And has caused two such lovely flowers
Sadly to wither away and fade.
Dear love, could I but you persuade
The habit you now wear to doff,

Would you but let me carry you off,
And appoint an hour for us to fly,
Then would I ride in haste to buy
Goodly clothes all made of wool,
And have them lined with beautiful
And costly fur, both coat and dress.
I will forsake you in no distress.
Sweet hours and bitter, far and near,
Will I adventure with you, dear.
To pledge this word, love, take my faith.
'Chosen friend', the maiden saith,
'I will fain accept it, and I will
Go with you far away until
Within this convent none shall know
Whither we two away did go.
From this night you must count nights eight,
Then come here and without await
My coming in the orchard there.
Therein are trees full many and fair.
Under an eglantine abide
Until I come. I'll be your bride
And I will go wherever you crave.

Unless it be for sickness grave
Or other matter too strong for me,
I shall come thither, most certainly,
And of you I earnestly desire
That you come thither, dear esquire.⁷

This to each other promised they.
He said goodbye and went his way,
To where his horse for him abode.
Into the saddle he sprang and rode
Joyfully toward the town,
Over a field, up hill and down.
His promise he did not forget.
Next day fine blue cloth and scarlet
From a rich merchant of the town
He bought, and out of it a gown
He bade them cut, for her to wear,
Likewise a hood and mantle fair.
These were lined as they should be:
No better and costlier fur could you see
Inside women's dress in all your days,
All those who saw it gave it praise,
Jewels and finery untold,

Knives and belts and rings of gold,
Bags and caps, all that brides desire
Were bought for his love by this young esquire.
Then taking with him five hundred mark,
One evening secretly after dark
Toward her out of the town he rode,
On his horse the precious load
Of all the gifts which you have heard.
Towards the convent the young man spurred,
To the orchard as she had said.
Under an eglantine broad spread,
Down in the flowering grass he lay,
Until his love should come that way.

Of him now will I leave the tale
And tell you of the maiden frail.
Ere midnight matins did she ring;
Love caused her heavy suffering;
And when matins had been sung,
Both by the old and by the young
Who in that convent then did stay,
And when to the dormitory they

Together had all gone back again,
Alone in the choir did she remain
And there to Mary her prayers bid,
As oftentimes before she did.
In front of the altar did she kneel,
And like one who doth great anguish feel:
'Mary mother', she said, 'sweet name,
No longer can I in this same
Nun's habit let my body dwell.
At all moments you know full well
Man's heart in all its Joys and cares.
I have fasted and said prayers,
And I have practised discipline:
It is all in vain that I do pine.
Love has caught me fast and downward hurled,
So that I now must serve the world.
As truly as my heart believes
That you, dear Lord, between two thieves
Were tortured once upon the cross,
And that you wakened Lazarus
From death, as in his grave he lay,
So may you know my need, I pray,

And my misdeed forgive, I must
In grievous sins, alas, be lost,'

After this she went from the choir
Toward a statue (in rich attire
Mary, mother of God, stood there);
She knelt before it and said her prayer.
'Mary', she said in a voice not faint,
'Day and night have I made complaint
Before you of my grievous lot.
I am none the better, not one jot.
My wits would tumble all astray,
Did I in this habit longer stay.'

There and then she took off hood and gown.
On our lady's altar she laid them down.
Then she did take off her shoes.
Now listen what she further does.
She hangs the keys of the sacristy
In front of the image of Mary.
Truthfully now my story tells
Why there she left them and nowhere else.
If they looked for them at prime,
There would they find them In shortest time.

It is right, and always will. be so,
That who past our lady's image go
Up unto her their eyes should raise
Saying 'ave' ere they go their ways:
'Ave Maria', of that she thought,
And that is why there the keys she put.

And now of hard necessity
All bare but for a shift went she
To where a little door she knew,
Which she opened and glanced through,
And anxiously peered all around.
Then she slipped through without a sound.
Into the orchard she came with fear.
The young man saw her, and when she was near
He said: 'Love, be not afraid,
I am your friend, come to your aid.'
When they were together in such wise,
She blushed to stand before his eyes
With nothing but her shift to wear
And with head and feet all bare.
Quoth he: 'None's fairer, dear, than you.
The finest garments are your due.'

But be not wroth with me, I pray:
I will give you some without delay.'
Then under the eglantine she went
And he gave her fine raiment,
Two pairs of dresses he gave her there,
Blue was the one she chose to wear.
Well cut it was, and fitted well.
Smiling did his glance now dwell
Upon her, and he said: 'This blue
Far better than the grey suits you.'
Two stockings then did she put on
And two shoes of leather cordovan,
Which also far better suited her
Than did the shoes that nuns do wear.
Next he gave to his sweetheart
A veil of white silk made with art,
Down from her head she let it flow.
The young man, when he saw her so,
Full lovingly kissed her on the mouth,
As if the sun broke through the clouds,
So felt he as on her he gazed.
On his horse then did he mount in haste,

And onto the saddle lifted her,
So off they rode until afar
The dawn began to light the sky,
And looking round with anxious eye,
They saw that no one was behind.
'May God, who comforts all mankind,'
Said she, 'now keep us from harm's way.
There I see break the light of day:
Had I not run off with you,
I would have rung prime as I used to do.
I fear I shall someday rue this ride.
To the world my all I now confide.
Yet little faith the world doth hold.
Merchants are there who for gold
To yokels rings of copper sell.
The world's like them, I know full well,'
'Ah sweet, say not that you will rue:
If ever I break faith with you,
May God's fell anger punish me.
Whate'er our need, where'er we be.
You shall find comfort in my true heart,
Till bitter death shall us depart.

How can you doubt me, how can you so?
You have never found me, dear, I know,
Either cruel or treacherous.
Since love first united us
I would not have let my mind dwell on
An empress in her dominion;
Had down to me her favour strayed,
Not therefore by me had you been betrayed.
Believe me when I tell you thus.
Even now I am taking, love, with us
A thousand marks of silver clear:
Thereof shall you be lady, dear,
Though into foreign lands we speed,
To pledge our goods we shall not need,
Until these first seven years have past,
That morning through a forest vast
Their horse did lead them amblingly.
Therein the birds held revelry.
They heard on all sides, far and near,
Their merry throats ring high and clear.
Each one sang after its own kind.
No spot more lovely could you find.

Full many flowers, smelling sweet,
Opened their faces to the sun's heat.
The air was clean and fine and good,
And many tall, straight trees there stood,
Whose foliage spread a rich shade.
The youth then gazed upon the maid,
Whom he loved well and constantly.
Quoth he: 'My love, if you agree,
Let us alight and some flowers cull.
I think this spot is beautiful.
Let's play love's game as lovers do.'
'What say you', said she, 'villein you!
Would you have me alight upon the field,
Like a woman who doth her body yield,
Villelnously, for a little gain?
For certain, I should have little shame!
Such a base thing you would never say,
Were you not made of villein's clay.
Well may I look back with bitterness.
God's curse on you for seeking this.
But make an end now of such words,
And listen to the joyous birds,

Singing their songs with merry cheer.
Less tedious so will the time appear.
When I am with you abed
In a well-closed chamber, all naked,
Then you may do all that you please
And that will set your heart at ease.
I am sore at heart, I do avow,
That you proposed this to me now.'
He said: 'Love, be not angry with me.
It was nought but Venus' devilry.
God give me shame and sickness sore
If I should speak of this any more.'
She said: 'I will forgive you then.
You are my comfort before all men
Now living under heaven's, high dome.
Even though the fair knight Absalom
Were still alive and I were sure
My life with him might still endure
For a thousand years in luxury,
That were no happiness to me.
My choice from all men, alive or dead,
I would not ever have It said

That I had failed you in any test.
Were I in heaven among the blessed
And you on earth apart from me,
I would come to you most certainly.
Ah God, by whom none speaks unheard,
Leave unrevengeed this foolish word.
Beside the least of heaven's joys
I know all earthly pleasure cloys.
There the least soul so perfect is,
It can conceive no happiness
But to love God unendingly.
All earthly matters are misery;
They are not worth a single hair
Beside the least joy that is there.
Who pine for heaven, they are wise.
Yet must I stray from what I prize
And turn to grievous sins and dire,
For your sake, my dear fair esquire'.

Thus did they speak, and speak again,
They rode over hill and plain.
I cannot tell you everything
Their travels did to those lovers bring.

They travelled many days until,
At the bottom of a sloping hill,
They reached a town which pleased them well,
So there they resolved awhile to dwell.
And they did stay there for years seven.
Their life was like an earthly heaven:
All joys of the body and of wealth they knew,
Also they begot there children two.

The seven years they came and went,
And when the money was all spent,
They sold for no more than half its worth
All they brought with them when they rode forth:
They had to live as best they might.
Garments, horses and jewels bright,
All was gone in a month or two.
Then they knew not what to do.
No coat or surcoat could she spin
Wherewith anything to win.
There was a dearth in the land that year
Of corn for bread, of wine and beer,
And of all else men need for food.

Thence melancholy grew their mood.
They would much rather have been dead
Than go and beg for their daily bread.
Poverty made between these twain
A severance, tho' it caused them pain.
The man it was whose faith proved light.
He left her there in sorry plight
And went back to the land of his birth.
She saw him never again on earth.
With her were left abandoned there
Two childern marvellously fair.

Quoth she: 'Befalleth me now the fate
That I have feared early and late.
I must remain in suffering,
He to whose faith I fain would cling,
My lover, has forsaken me.
Virgin Mother of God, Mary,
Pray for me the elder and these the younger,
That we die not now of hunger.
Woe, woe is me, what shall I do?
I must stain my body and my soul too
With sinful deeds, though I will it not.

Mary, lady, regard my lot.
Though I could a garment spin,
Yet thereby should I never win
Even in two weeks a loaf of bread.
If I would have my children fed,
I must go without the town to the field
And there for money my body yield,
That therewith I may buy them food.
Whatever I would or whatever I should,
My children I can not forsake.'

To a sinful life thus did she take.
For seven years, so have I heard,
And know it for a truthful word.
As a common woman the world she plied
And in many sins her body tried,
Yet she hated this full heartily,
Although she did it bodily,
Little pleasure she took therein.
'Twas but that she thereby might win
Some money lest her children starve,
No good purpose would it serve,
Were I all the shameful sins to tell

Wherein she fourteen years did dwell.
But in all that time she forgot not once
Daily to pay her devotions
To our Lady Mary faithfully.
Whatever might be her misery,
She read the seven Hours all her days,
To honour Mary and to praise,
And that she might convert her yet
From the sins that did her life beset.

When the fourteen years were past,
God sent into her heart at last
Repentance that o'erpowered her so
That the thought of suffering the fell blow
Of a naked sword to cut off her head
Would not have caused her so much dread
As to sin again as in those years.
Night and day then she shed tears,
Her eyes with weeping became red.
'Mary, who suckled God,' she said,
'Fountain that cleanseest from all stain,
Let me not in my need remain.
As a witness, lady, I take you

That my loathsome sins I rue.
So many they are that I know not
With whom I did them or in what spot.
But I repent them heartily,
Alas, what shall my fate soon be?
Well may I fear the judgment day
When no sins can be hidden away.
Both poor and rich will that day quail,
For God's eyes pierce through every veil;
Then due revenge awaits each crime
Unless it be confessed in time,
And penitence have been done therefor.
That I know well, it is true lore,
Thence am I now in mortal fear.
Though a hair cloth I should wear,
And crept in it through all Christian lands
Walking on my feet and hands,
Clad in wool and without shoes,
Yet know I that I could not lose
The sins by which my soul is weighed,
Unless you, Mary, grant me aid.
Fountain over all virtue,

Many a man has been cheered by you;
This well appeared by Theophilus,
As evil a sinner as ever was,
Who had surrendered and ceded whole
To the Devil his life and soul,
And had sworn to be his thrall
You saved him, lady, in spite of all.
A sinner am I, as little worth
Salvation as any soul on earth.
But whatever the life that I have led,
Remember, lady, that I have read
A prayer to honour you every day.
Be merciful, again I pray.
Sorrows have been my only meed.
Of your help I stand in such sore need,
I dare not cease imploring thee.
Never without reward went he
Who every day, oh maiden sweet,
Did you with an "Ave Maria" greet.
Who read your prayer with a will.
They will be gainers by it still,
Lady, it pleaseth you so well.

That's true, as often I've heard tell.
Dear bride of God, blest without end,
Your son a greeting to you did send
At Nazareth, where you were sought
By one who to you a message brought
Which ne'er from messenger was heard:
Tis therefore this self-same blessed word
Doth please you so: 'tis from your son,
And you are grateful to each one
Who with it likes to honour you.
You would work for his salvation too,
Though stained with sins in every limb,
And before your son would plead for him.'

Thus did this sinner every day
To God's mother lament and pray.
She took a child in either hand
And with them travelled through the land,
From town to town, in poverty,
And lived with them on charity.
So long about the land she went
Until she came near that same convent

Wherein she once had been a nun.
It was evening, after set of sun.
She knocked upon a widow's door,
And begged for mercy's sake of her
That there the night she would let them stay.
'It would be hard to drive you away
With your little children,' answered she.
'They look tired, it seems to me.
Rest you, woman, sit down there,
And I with you again will share
What God grants me for my earthly days,
For his mother's sake, and for her praise.'
So with her children did she remain,
And now she would have heard full fain
How in the convent things might be.
'Good woman, tell me, I pray', said she,
'Is this a ladies' convent here?'
'It is,' said she, 'nor yet its peer
Searching the world through would you find:
So rich it is, and so refined.
There is no man but speaks well
Of the nuns that in this convent dwell.

No story yet have I ever heard
To their disgrace, no not one word.'
She who there with her children sat
Made answer: 'Wherefore say you that?
So much within this very week
Have I heard men of one sister speak:
If I remember right, I was told
She was the vergeress here of old.
He was no liar who spoke that word.
'Tis fourteen years, so he averred,
Since from the cloister she fled away.
Whither she went no man might say,
Or in what land she died, or when.'
The widow grew very angry then
And said, 'Methinks you've lost your sense!
You shall cease such medisance
Against the vergeress to say,
Or in my house you shall not stay.
She has here been vergeress
For full sixteen years, no less.
Nor ever in all that time one hour
Hath she neglected her devoir.

He that said aught but good of her,
Were worse far than an evil cur.
Her soul is so pure, I tell you true,
Were one to search all convents through
Between the rivers Elbe and Rhone,
He would not find beneath God's throne
One who lives more as beseems a nun.
She whom her sins had so undone
She marvelled greatly at what she heard,
And said: 'Lady, give me word,
What were her father and mother hight?'
Then she named them both aright,
Then she knew well that it was she.

Ah God, how she wept secretly,
All that night, before her bed!
'I have nought else to give,' she said,
'Save great repentance inwardly.
Sweet Mary, do not abandon me.
So do I hate my sins, God wot,
That did I behold an oven hot,
Standing so fearfully aglow
That flames from out its mouth did blow,

Willingly would I creep therein,
If so it might heal me of my sin.
Thou hast forbidden despair, oh Lord.
I put my trust in that great word.
I am one who hopes for mercy still,
Yea for mercy I hope and ever will,
Though fear drives me with cruel goad.
No soul of sins ever bore such load;
But since to earth, Lord, for our sake
You came down, human form to take,
And chose to die upon the cross,
You will save it from eternal loss,
He who seeks mercy, though he came late,
By true repentance will find it straight;
Even as It once appeared full plain
By the one sinner of the twain,
Who was hanged at thy right side.
Thou didst receive him, nor didst chide -
A tale 'tis comfort to recall.
A good repentance o'ercomes all;
That by this thief's lot we may see.
Thou saidst: "To-day, friend, thou shalt be

In my heavenly realm with me in bliss.
Doubt not, I tell thee truth in this.”
Again, Lord, even Gisemast
Implored your mercy at the last,
The murderer, so I have been told.
He gave you neither treasure nor gold,
But his sins caused him distress.
Your goodness, Lord, is bottomless.
Even as we all know that none may
Bale out the sea in a single day
And of ail water drain it dry.
Never was sin so huge and high
Which your forgiveness did not o'ertop.
How at me should your pity stop?
How should I be alone denied,
Who loathe the sins wherein I am tied?’

A drowsiness came while she prayed
That all her body did pervade,
Into a slumber she did fall.
A mighty voice she then heard call,
Spell-bound by a vision she was kept,

And thus the voice spoke while she slept:
‘Woman, so long hast thou made moan,
Thou hast touched a heart to pity prone,
Mary has raised her voice for thee.
Go to the convent hastily.
Wide open shalt thou find the door,
Through which thou fledst to thy paramour,
The youth who left thee in thy need.
That which I tell thee is truth indeed.
Thou'lt find thy habit in the same stead
Upon the altar where 'twas shed:
As readily as thou dost choose
Mayest don thy veil and cap and shoes.
Give Mary ever thanks therefor.
The keys of the sacristy, which before
Her image thou didst hang that night
When from the convent thou tookst flight,
She has so guarded ever since
That no one ever missed them thence,
Or knew thereof from first to last,
In all the fourteen years that passed.
Thou hast in Mary so firm a friend.

From the beginning to the end
She In thy likeness hath for thee served
Nor ever from thy duties swerved.
That hath the Queen of Heaven done
For thy sake, oh thou sinful one.
To thy cell she bids thee go without dread:
Empty wilt thou find thy bed.
Be ready, woman, obey my call:
I speak from God who ruleth all.'

The voice was heard no more, and soon
She wakened from her dreaming swoon.
'God', said she, 'thou almighty King,
Suffer not now the Devil to bring
Me to worse sorrows than heretofore
I have suffered: I can bear no more.
If to this voice I gave belief,
And the nuns should catch me for a thief,
Then were I yet more cruelly cursed
Than when I fled from the convent first.
I appeal to you, oh merciful God,
By the ever precious blood
That from your wounded side did fall,

That If the voice which I heard call
Is hither come for mine avail,
In that case it may not fail
A second time to come to me,
And a third time manifestly,
That so without doubt I may go
To the convent if it tells me so.
Always will I therefor love and bless
The name of Mary, my patroness.'

The next night, now give attentive ear,
Again she seemed a voice to hear,
That called on her, 't was loud and strong.
'Woman, thou dost abide too long.
Go to thy convent back again.
God will give strength to bear thy strain.
Mary's behest do thou carry out.
I am her messenger, have no doubt.'

A second time thus hath she heard
The voice utter that awful word
Bidding her go to the convent.
Such was her fear that ere she went,
Wait for the third night she still would.

She said: 'If he be of elfish brood,
This messenger that appears to me,
Then I pray God that graciously
He break the devil's wicked might;
And if again he come this night,
Confound him, Lord, in such alarm
That, without doing me any harm,
From the house he straightway fly.
And now Mary, to you I cry.
Meseemed that a voice to me you sent
Which bade me go to the convent.
I implore you, by your son's sorrow,
For the third time let it come to-morrow.'

She waked through the third night, hour by hour,
A voice came to her from God's power,
With a clear and shining light,
And it said; 'Woman, it is not right
That thou heedest not my decree,
For it is Mary speaks through me.
See that thou tarriest not too long.
Go to the convent, fear no wrong,
The doors will open: to and fro,

Where'er thou wilt, there thou mayest go.
Thine habit thou'lt find in the same stead,
Upon the altar where 'twas shed.'

Now that unearthly voice did cease,
And she whose sins left her no peace
Could see the brightness with her eyes.
She said: 'Now in no wise
May I doubt it any more,
'Tis the Virgin Mary's messenger;
That do I know now without fail.
You come from God, oh voice, all hail
You come with light so bright and fair.
Now to the convent I'll repair.
I will now do it, since I must,
And in our Lady will put my trust.
And both my children - though 'tis hard -
Will I leave in God our Father's guard.
He'll see they come to no more ill.'

She stripped her clothes off with a will.
And therewith covered them in their cot,
Quietly, so as to wake them not.
On the mouth she kissed them tenderly.

‘Children, fare yon well’ quoth she.
‘Hence am I summoned and I must
Here leave you in our Lady’s trust.
Had she not bidden me so to do,
I would not have abandoned you
For all the Pope’s wealth and dominion.’

Pray listen how our tale goes on.
Now she goes with sorrowful moan
To the convent all alone.
When to the orchard she was come,
She found the gate at once undone.
She went through it without fear.
‘I thank you, Mary, Lady dear,
I am now come within the wall.
Pray God that nought but good befall!’
Each door, as she went from place to place,
Opened wide before her face.
Into the church she then did go
And in secret wise she did speak so:
‘Lord, let my prayer not be in vain
Help me into my habit again,

Which I, it is now fourteen year,
Left on our Lady's altar here,
The night that I from hence did fly.'

Now listen, and you will hear no lie,
I tell you the story without guile,
Her two shoes and her cap and veil
Did she find in the same stead
Where long ago she had them shed.
She put them on, remembering.
She said: 'Oh God, oh heavenly King,
And Mary, maiden pure and fair,
May you be blest, that is my prayer.
You are a chosen treasure good.
In your spotless maidenhood
Without pain a child you bore
Which will be our Lord for evermore,
Your child created heaven and earth.
You may command whom you gave birth.
You are his mother, and yet he
Dear daughter may call you lovingly.
Of all virtues you are the flower.
God lets you share his divine power.

It waits your pleasure day and night.
Hence is my dreary life now bright.
Whoever for mercy on you shall wait,
Will gain his suit, though he be late.
Your help is wonderful indeed.
Although I live in woe and need,
You have wrought a transformation
And my tears are jubilation.
'Tis right that I bless you evermore.'

The key then of the sacristy door
She saw hanging, I tell you true,
Where she left it, on Mary's statue.
On her belt she hanged the key
And went to the choir, where she did see
Lamps on all sides that brightly burned.
To the prayer-books then she turned
And put each in its proper place,
As oft she did in former days.
And to the Virgin she did pray
That she would keep all evil away
From her and the children she left behind
At the widow's house with heavy mind.

By then the night was so far run
That the clock to strike began,
And one might know it was midnight.
She took the bell-rope and pulled it tight,
And matins so well began to sound
That they heard it all around.
Out of the dormitory the nuns
Came altogether down at once.
Of what I have been telling you
Not one of them the least bit knew.
So in the convent she remained
Without reproach, by no one shamed.
Mary had served there in her stead
And in her likeness, so I have read.
Thus was the sinner led to repent.
Mary, maiden heaven-sent,
Mary be praised eternally.
She will always faithfully
Come to the rescue in her friends' aid
When they by dangers are dismayed.

This lady of whom my tale doth run

Is again, as she was before, a nun.
Now it behoves me to relate
Of her children whom in sorry state
She left at the widow's house in bed.
They had neither money nor bread.
I cannot find any words to say,
When they found their mother had gone away,
How loudly they wept and woefully cried.
The widow came and sat by their side.
She took pity on their distress.
She said: 'I will go to the abbess
With these two children, and I know,
God will soften her heart so
That she will do them charity.'
She dressed and shod them properly
And to the convent took the twain.
She said: 'Lady, let me make plain
How these two orphans came to this plight,
Their mother stayed with them the night
Within my house and has left them behind.
I know not what was in her mind,
Nor wither she went, wether east or west.

Thus are these children sore distressed.
Fain would I help them did I know how.'
Then said the abbess to this widow:
'Keep them, I'll give thee such reward
- For the love of our dear Lord -
That thou shalt not regret the day
When they were left with thee to stay.
Every day, for charity,
Send a messenger to me,
Who food and drink will carry back,
And let me know when aught they lack.'

The widow she was very glad
That things had befallen the way they had,
She took the children home with her
And looked after them with kindly care,
She who had suffered to give them birth
And had nought dearer left on earth,
Her mother's heart for joy it leapt
When she knew the children were well kept.
Henceforth for them she was free from fear,
Though still as ever they were dear.
A saintly life henceforth she led,

Many times she sighed, many tears she shed,
Every night and every day.
For in her heart repentance lay
Of all the evil sins she had done,
But never dared she to any one
Either to speak them or to write.
Yet she prayed and bemoaned them day and night.

Then to the convent one day came
An abbot who used to visit them
Once every year. It was his cure
To be informed and to make sure
That no scandal had taken place
Which might the nuns' good name deface.
So when this abbot had entered there,
This sinner, alone, was reading her prayer
Within the choir down on her knees,
Torn by great doubts and anxieties.
The Devil tempted her with shame
To make her keep her sinful blame
From the abbot and not confess.
While thus she prayed, the vergeress,

She saw a fair, unearthly lad
Pass by her, all in whiteness clad.
In his arm he carrièd
A child that seemed to her like dead.
The youth threw up into the air
And caught again an apple fair,
And for the child's delight made play.
While she there in her prayers lay,
The nun wondered at what she saw.
She said: 'Friend, by God's law,
If it be so that from his part
Thou art come (as I do think thou art)
I prithee, hide it not, but say,
Before that child why dost thou play
With a fair apple, bright and red,
While he within thine arms lies dead?
It helps him nought whate'er thou do.'
'Verily sister, you say true.
He knows nought of what I play,
Though I continue day after day.
He's dead, his ears hear not, nor his eyes see.
Even so God knows not, nun, that ye

Read prayers and fast for penitence:
It helps you nought, not in any sense.
The pains your discipline may cost,
They are nought else than labour lost.
Your sins so cover you and o'erwhelm
That God, high in his heavenly realm,
Hears not your prayer: it goes to waste.
Now I do counsel you: make haste,
Go to the abbot, your good father,
And relate to him altogether
All your sins and get you shrieved.
Hearken not to the Devil, nor be deceived.
The abbot will absolve and pardon you
For all the sins that burden you,
But if of your sins you will not speak
Stern vengeance upon you God will wreak.'

The youth went away out of her sight
Nor came he back in all that night,
But what he said she had understood.
In the morning she went in sober mood
To the abbot and begged that he would hear
Her full confession from mouth to ear.

The abbot was a wise man and old.
'Sweet daughter, that will soon be told,'
He said. 'I am ready. Tell me all.
Think well, and let no sin, how small
So ever, in your confession be forgot.'
So she sat down with the good abbot
And discovered the whole course
Of her life with great remorse:
How she had been so possessed
By a mad love (this she confessed)
That one night her habit she had shed
On our Lady's altar and had fled
From the convent with a youth,
And that he (she told all the truth)
On her two children had begot.
Whatever sins had been her lot,
At this hour she concealed them not.
Whatever in her heart's depths she knew,
To the abbot now she told it true.
When she had confessed altogether,
The abbot said, that holy father:
'Daughter, I will absolve you now

From all the sins which you avow.
Praised be and blessed for evermore
God's Mother, who your habit wore.'
With awe and reverence thus he said,
Then laid his hand upon her head
And gave her pardon in God's name.
'In a sermon,' he said, 'will I proclaim
To all the world this your confession,
Cleverly using such suppression
That you will never in any place
Be met with scandal or disgrace,
You or your children. But it were wrong
- You have kept silent all too long -
To allow the fair miracle to stay hid
Which God to honour his Mother did.
I will bruit it here and in distant parts,
And I hope that many sinful hearts
May yet be converted by its appeal
And honour our Lady with burning zeal.'

He explained to the convent
Ere again he homeward went,
What had befallen a certain nun,

But they never knew which one.
The sinner's name he told them not.
In God's good guard went the abbot.
With him for Mary's sake he took
The children whom the nun forsook.
He made them don grey habit and hood,
And they grew to be pious men and good.
Beatrice was their mother's name.
Praise God and sing aloud her fame
Who fed him once at her maiden breast
And showed this miracle for our best.
She raised this sinner from her fall.
Now pray we all, both great and small,
Who have heard this faithful miracle read
That when the graves shall yield their dead
And God judge our souls for eternity,
Mary may then our advocate be.