

THE TALE. <1>

O Lord our Lord! thy name how marvellous Is in this large world y-spread!
<2> (quoth she) For not only thy laude* precious
*praise Performed is by men of high degree, But by the mouth of children
thy bounte* *goodness Performed is, for on the breast sucking
Sometimes showe they thy herying.* <3> *glory

Wherefore in laud, as I best can or may Of thee, and of the white lily flow'r
Which that thee bare, and is a maid alway, To tell a story I will do my
labour; Not that I may increase her honour, For she herselven is honour and
root Of bounte, next her son, and soules' boot.* *help

O mother maid, O maid and mother free!* *bounteous O bush
unburnt, burning in Moses' sight, That ravished'st down from the deity,
Through thy humbless, the ghost that in thee light; <4> Of whose virtue,
when he thine hearte light,* *lightened, gladdened Conceived was the
Father's sapience; Help me to tell it to thy reverence.

Lady! thy bounty, thy magnificence, Thy virtue, and thy great humility,
There may no tongue express in no science: For sometimes, Lady! ere men
pray to thee, Thou go'st before, of thy benignity, And gettest us the light,
through thy prayere, To guiden us unto thy son so dear.

My conning* is so weak, O blissful queen, *skill, ability For to
declare thy great worthiness, That I not may the weight of it sustene; But as
a child of twelvemonth old, or less, That can unnethes* any word express,
*scarcely Right so fare I; and therefore, I you pray, Guide my song that I
shall of you say.

There was in Asia, in a great city, Amonges Christian folk, a Jewery, <5>
Sustained by a lord of that country, For foul usure, and lucre of villainy,
Hateful to Christ, and to his company; And through the street men mighte
ride and wend,* *go, walk For it was free, and open at each end.

A little school of Christian folk there stood Down at the farther end, in which
there were Children an heap y-come of Christian blood, That learned in that
schoole year by year Such manner doctrine as men used there; This is to
say, to singen and to read, As smalle children do in their childhead.

Among these children was a widow's son, A little clergion,* seven year of age,

young clerk or scholar That day by day to scholay was his won,**
*study **wont And eke also, whereso he saw th' image Of Christe's mother,
had he in usage, As him was taught, to kneel adown, and say Ave Maria as
he went by the way.

Thus had this widow her little son y-taught Our blissful Lady, Christe's
mother dear, To worship aye, and he forgot it not; For sely* child will always
soone lear.** *innocent **learn But aye when I remember on this
mattere, Saint Nicholas <6> stands ever in my presence; For he so young to
Christ did reverence.

This little child his little book learning, As he sat in the school at his
primere, He Alma redemptoris <7> hearde sing, As children learned their
antiphonere; <8> And as he durst, he drew him nere and nere,*
*nearer And hearken'd aye the wordes and the note, Till he the firste verse
knew all by rote.

Nought wist he what this Latin was tosay,* *meant For he so
young and tender was of age; But on a day his fellow gan he pray To
expound him this song in his language, Or tell him why this song was in
usage: This pray'd he him to construe and declare, Full oftentime upon his
knees bare.

His fellow, which that elder was than he, Answer'd him thus: "This song, I
have heard say, Was maked of our blissful Lady free, Her to salute, and eke
her to pray To be our help and succour when we dey.* *die
I can no more expound in this mattere: I learne song, I know but small
grammere."

"And is this song y-made in reverence Of Christe's mother?" said this
innocent; Now certes I will do my diligence To conne* it all, ere Christmas
be went; *learn; con Though that I for my primer shall be
shent,* *disgraced And shall be beaten thries in an hour, I will it
conne, our Lady to honour."

His fellow taught him homeward* privily *on the wayhome From
day to day, till he coud* it by rote, *knew And then he sang it
well and boldly From word to word according with the note; Twice in a day
it passed through his throat; To schoole-ward, and homeward when he
went; On Christ's mother was set all his intent.

As I have said, throughout the Jewery, This little child, as he came to and
fro, Full merrily then would he sing and cry, O Alma redemptoris, evermo';

The sweetness hath his hearte pierced so Of Christe's mother, that to her to
pray He cannot stint* of singing by the way. *cease

Our firste foe, the serpent Satanas, That hath in Jewes' heart his waspe's
nest, Upwell'd and said, "O Hebrew people, alas! Is this to you a thing that
is honest,* *creditable, becoming That such a boy shall walken as
him lest In your despite, and sing of such sentence, Which is against your
lawe's reverence?"

From thenceforth the Jewes have conspired This innocent out of the world
to chase; A homicide thereto have they hired, That in an alley had a privy
place, And, as the child gan forth by for to pace, This cursed Jew him hent,*
and held him fast *seized And cut his throat, and in a pit him
cast.

I say that in a wardrobe* he him threw, *privy Where as the
Jewes purged their entrail. O cursed folk! O Herodes all new! What may your
evil intente you avail? Murder will out, certain it will not fail, And namely*
where th' honour of God shall spread; *especially The blood out
crieth on your cursed deed.

O martyr souted* to virginity, *confirmed <9> Now may'st
thou sing, and follow ever-in-one* *continually The white Lamb
celestial (quoth she), Of which the great Evangelist Saint John In Patmos
wrote, which saith that they that gon Before this Lamb, and sing a song all
new, That never fleshly woman they ne knew.<10>

This poore widow waited all that night After her little child, but he came not;
For which, as soon as it was daye's light, With face pale, in dread and busy
thought, She hath at school and elleswhere him sought, Till finally she gan
so far espy, That he was last seen in the Jewery.

With mother's pity in her breast enclosed, She went, as she were half out of
her mind, To every place, where she hath supposed By likelihood her little
child to find: And ever on Christ's mother meek and kind She cried, and at
the laste thus she wrought, Among the cursed Jewes she him sought.

She freined,* and she prayed piteously *asked* <11> To every
Jew that dwelled in that place, To tell her, if her childe went thereby; They
saide, "Nay;" but Jesus of his grace Gave in her thought, within a little
space, That in that place after her son she cried, Where he was cast into a
pit beside.

O greate God, that preformest thy laud By mouth of innocents, lo here thy
might! This gem of chastity, this emeraud,* *emerald And
eke of martyrdom the ruby bright, Where he with throat y-carven* lay
upright, *cut He Alma Redemptoris gan to sing So loud, that
all the place began to ring.

The Christian folk, that through the streete went, In came, for to wonder on
this thing: And hastily they for the provost sent. He came anon withoute
tarrying, And heried* Christ, that is of heaven king, *praised
And eke his mother, honour of mankind; And after that the Jewes let* he
bind. *caused

With torment, and with shameful death each one The provost did* these
Jewes for to sterve** *caused **die That of this murder wist, and
that anon; He woulde no such cursedness observe*
*overlook Evil shall have that evil will deserve; Therefore with horses wild he
did them draw, And after that he hung them by the law.

The child, with piteous lamentation, Was taken up, singing his song alway:
And with honour and great procession, They crry him unto the next abbay.
His mother swooning by the biere lay; Unnethes* might the people that were
there *scarcely This newe Rachel bringe from his bier.

Upon his biere lay this innocent Before the altar while the masses last!;*
*lasted And, after that, th' abbot with his convent Have sped them for to
bury him full fast; And when they holy water on him cast, Yet spake this
child, when sprinkled was the water, And sang, O Alma redemptoris mater!

This abbot, which that was a holy man, As monkes be, or elles ought to be,
This younger child to conjure he began, And said; "O deare child! I halse*
thee, *implore <12> In virtue of the holy Trinity; Tell me what is
thy cause for to sing, Since that thy throat is cut, to my seeming."

"My throat is cut unto my necke-bone," Saide this child, "and, as *by way of
kind,* *in course of nature* I should have died, yea long time agone; But
Jesus Christ, as ye in bookes find, Will that his glory last and be in mind;
And, for the worship* of his mother dear, *glory Yet may I
sing O Alma loud and clear.

"This well* of mercy, Christe's mother sweet, *fountain I loved
alway, after my conning:* *knowledge And when that I my
life should forlete,* *leave To me she came, and bade me for
to sing This anthem verily in my dying, As ye have heard; and, when that I

had sung, Me thought she laid a grain upon my tongue.

"Wherefore I sing, and sing I must certain, In honour of that blissful maiden free, Till from my tongue off taken is the grain. And after that thus saide she to me; 'My little child, then will I fetch thee, When that the grain is from thy tongue take: Be not aghast,* I will thee not forsake.'" *afraid

This holy monk, this abbot him mean I, His tongue out caught, and took away the grain; And he gave up the ghost full softly. And when this abbot had this wonder seen, His salte teares trickled down as rain: And groff* he fell all flat upon the ground, *prostrate, grovelling And still he lay, as he had beeny-bound.

The convent* lay eke on the pavement *all the monks Weeping, and heryng* Christ's mother dear. *praising And after that they rose, and forth they went, And took away this martyr from his bier, And in a tomb of marble stones clear Enclosed they his little body sweet; Where he is now, God lene* us for to meet. *grant

O younge Hugh of Lincoln!<13> slain also With cursed Jewes, -- as it is notable, For it is but a little while ago, -- Pray eke for us, we sinful folk unstable, That, of his mercy, God so merciable* *merciful
On us his greate mercy multiply, For reverence of his mother Mary.