

## THE PRIORESS'S TALE

### Words of the Host to the Shipman and the Prioress

'Well said, by *Corpus Domini*!' cried our Host.\*  
'Long life to you! And may you sail the coast  
In safety, noble skipper! Don't get sunk.  
A load of lousy luck upon that monk!  
Hey, fellows, watch your step for such a japel  
He took the merchant's hood and put an ape  
Inside, by St Augustine, and what's more  
Into his wife's hood too! Well, shut your door  
Against all monks! . . . What next? . . . Well, let me see;  
Who else shall entertain the company?'  
And turning round, he checked himself, displayed  
A courtesy becoming to a maid,  
And said, 'My Lady Prioress, by your leave,  
If I felt certain not to vex or grieve,  
I'd judge it time for you to show your skill  
By telling the next story, if you will.  
Will you vouchsafe, dear lady, to comply?'  
'Gladly,' the Prioress answered, 'I will try.'

### The Prioress's Prologue

*Domine, dominus noster (Psalm viii)*

'O Lord, our Lord, how marvellous Thy name,  
Spread through the reaches of the earth!' said she,  
'Nor only are Thy precious praise and fame  
Found in the mouths of men of dignity,  
For in the mouths of children, such maybe  
As suck the breast, the bounty of Thy ways  
Can be declared in worship and in praise.'

'Wherefore in honour of Thee, as best I can,  
Of Thee and of that whitest lily-flower  
That bare Thee, all without the touch of man,  
I tell my tale and will put forth my power,  
Though all unable to increase her dower  
Of honour, who is honour itself, and root  
Of bounty, next to Thee, her body's fruit.

'O mother-maid, maid-mother, chaste and free!  
O bush unburnt, burning in Moses' sight,  
Thou that didst ravish down from Deity  
Upon thy humbleness the Spirit's flight  
That lit upon thy heart, and in whose might  
The Word took flesh, help me to tell my story  
In reverence of thee and of thy glory!

'No tongue or knowledge can have confidence,  
Lady, to tell thy great humility,  
Thy bounty, virtue and magnificence;  
For sometimes, lady, ere men pray to thee  
Thou goest before in thy benignity  
And through thy prayer thou gettest for each one  
Light that may guide them to thy blessed Son.

'Weak is my skill in speech, O blissful Queen;  
How then shall I declare thy worthiness  
Or how sustain the weight of what I mean?  
For as a child, a twelvemonth old, or less,  
That hardly has a word it can express,  
Just so am I, and therefore pity me!  
Guide thou the song that I shall sing for thee!

### The Prioress's Tale

In Asia once there was a Christian town  
In which, long since, a Ghetto used to be  
Where there were Jews, supported by the Crown  
For the foul lucre of their usury,

Hateful to Christ and all his company,  
And through this Ghetto one might walk or ride  
For it was free and open, either side.

A little school stood for the Christian flock  
Down at the further end, and it was here  
A heap of children come of Christian stock  
Received their early schooling year by year  
And the instruction suited to their ear,  
That is to say in singing and in reading  
— The simple things of childhood and good breeding.

Among these children was a widow's son,  
A little chorister of seven years old,  
And day by day to school he used to run  
And had the custom (for he had been told  
To do so) should he happen to behold  
An image of Christ's mother, to kneel and say  
*Hail Mary* as he went upon his way.

Thus had this widow taught her little boy  
To reverence the mother of Christ, our dear  
And blissful lady, and it was his joy;  
A happy child will always learn and hear.  
When I remember this, the ever-near  
Saint Nicholas stands in my presence, he  
Who did Christ reverence in infancy.

This little child, while he was studying  
His little primer, which he undertook,  
Sitting at school, heard other children sing  
O *Alma Redemptoris* from their book.  
Close as he dared he drew himself to look,  
And listened carefully to work and part  
Until he knew the opening verse by heart.

He had no notion what this Latin meant  
Being so young, so tender too, so green;  
But in the end, one morning there, he went  
And asked a comrade what the song might mean

And why it was in use. He was so keen  
To know it that he went upon his knees  
Begging the boy explain it if he please.

His schoolfellow – an older boy than he –  
Answered him thus: 'This song, I have heard say,  
Is to salute Our Blessed Lady; she  
Will hear us when we turn to her and pray  
For help and comfort on our dying day.  
I can explain no more – that's all I know;  
I can learn singing, but my grammar's slow.'

'And is this anthem made to reverence  
Christ's mother?' said this innocent. 'If I may,  
I certainly will show my diligence  
To learn it off by heart for Christmas Day.  
Though they should scold me when I cannot say  
My primer, though they beat me thrice an hour,  
I'll learn it in her honour, to my power.'

So every day his comrade secretly  
As they went homewards taught it him by rote;  
He sang it with a childlike clarity  
And boldly, word by word and note by note;  
And twice a day it filled his little throat,  
Going to school and coming back again,  
Praising Christ's mother with all his might and main.

As I have said, this child would go along  
The Jewish street and, of his own accord,  
Daily and merrily he sang his song  
*O Alma Redemptoris*, as it soared,  
The sweetness of the mother of our Lord  
Would pierce his heart, he could not choose but pray  
And sing as, to and fro, he went his way.

First of our foes, the Serpent Satan shook  
Those Jewish hearts that are his waspish nest,  
Swelled up and said, 'O Hebrew people look!  
Is this not something that should be redressed?

Is such a boy to roam as he thinks best  
Singing to spite you, canticles and saws  
Against the reverence of your holy laws?

From that time forward all these Jews conspired  
To chase this innocent child from the earth's face.  
Down a dark alley-way they found and hired  
A murderer who owned that secret place;  
And as the boy passed at his happy pace  
This cursed Jew grabbed him and held him, slit  
His little throat and cast him in a pit.

Cast him, I say, into a privy-drain,  
Where they were wont to void their excrement.  
O cursed folk of Herod come again,  
Of what avail your villainous intent?  
Murder will out, and nothing can prevent  
God's honour spreading, even from such seed;  
The blood cries out upon your cursed deed.

'O martyr wedded to virginity,  
Now mayest thou sing and follow, on and on,  
The white, celestial Lamb of Heaven,' said she,  
'Of whom the great evangelist, St John,  
In Patmos wrote, who says that there they don  
White robes before that Lamb, and sing afresh  
That never have known woman in the flesh.'

This wretched widow waited all that night,  
She waited for her child, but all for nought;  
And very early in the morning light,  
All pale with sleepless dread and busy thought,  
She searched his school, then up and down she sought  
Elsewhere, and finally she got the news  
That he was last seen in the street of Jews.

Within her breast her mother's pity closed,  
She went about as one half out of mind  
To every place in which, as she supposed,  
There was some likelihood for her to find

Her child, and to Christ's mother, meek and kind,  
She cried in heart, and in the end was brought  
Among the accursed Jews, and there she sought.

She made enquiry with a piteous cry  
Of every Jew inhabiting that place,  
Asking if they had seen her child go by,  
And they said, 'No.' But Jesus of His grace  
Put in her thought, after a little space,  
To come upon that alley as she cried,  
Where, in a pit, he had been cast aside.

Great God, that to perform Thy praise hast called  
The innocent of mouth, how great Thy might!  
This gem of chastity, this emerald,  
This jewel of martyrdom and ruby bright,  
Lying with carven throat and out of sight,  
Began to sing O *Alma* from the ground  
Till all the place was ringing with the sound.

The Christian people going through the street  
Came crowding up astonished at the thing,  
And sent to fetch the Provost to entreat  
His presence, and he came and heard him sing.  
The Provost, praising Christ our heavenly king  
And His dear mother, honour of mankind,  
Bade all the Jews be fettered and confined.

They took the child with piteous lamentation  
And he was brought, still singing out his song,  
In high solemnity and celebration  
Towards the nearest abbey by the throng.  
His mother, swooning as they went along  
Beside the bier, could not be reconciled,  
A second Rachel, weeping for her child.

The Provost then did judgement on the men  
Who did the murder, and he bid them serve  
A shameful death in torment there and then  
On all those guilty Jews, he did not swerve.

'Evils shall meet the evils they deserve.'  
And he condemned them to be drawn apart  
By horses. Then he hanged them from a cart.

Still lay this innocent child upon his bier  
At the high altar while a Mass was said.  
The abbot and his convent then drew near  
To hasten on his burial, and spread  
A rain of holy water on his head;  
And as they let the holy water spill  
He sang O *Alma Redemptoris* still.

This abbot then, who was a holy man  
As abbots are, or else they ought to be,  
In invocation of the boy began  
To say aloud, 'Dear child, I conjure thee  
By virtue of the Holy Trinity  
To say how singing is permitted thee  
Although thy throat is cut, or seems to be.'

'Through to the bone my neck is cut, I know,'  
Answered the child; 'and had I been confined  
By natural law I should, and long ago,  
Have died. But Christ, whose glory you may find  
In books, wills it be also kept in mind.  
So for the honour of his mother dear  
I still may sing O *Alma* loud and dear.

'That well of mercy, sweetest mother of Christ,  
I long have loved with all that I could bring;  
This at the hour of my death sufficed  
To draw her down to me. She bade me sing  
This anthem till my time of burying  
As you have heard; and when my song was sung  
She seemed to lay a grain upon my tongue.

'And so I sing as I must sing again  
For love of her, the blissful and the free,  
Till from my tongue you take away the grain.  
For after that, the Virgin said to me,

"My little child, behold I come for thee  
When from thy tongue this grain of seed is taken.  
And have no fear; thou shalt not be forsaken."

This holy monk, this abbot, even he,  
Touched the child's tongue and took away the grain;  
And he gave up the ghost so peacefully,  
So softly, and the marvel was so plain,  
Sate fell the abbot's tears in trickling rain,  
And down he fell, prostrate upon the ground,  
And lay as still as one who had been bound.

And all the weeping convent also bent  
To earth and praised Christ's mother with many a tear,  
And after that they rose, and forth they went  
Taking this little martyr from his bier,  
And in a sepulchre of marble clear  
Enclosed his little body, fair and sweet.  
Where he now is, God grant we all may meet!

O Hugh of Lincoln, likewise murdered so  
By cursed Jews, as is notorious  
(For it was but a little time ago),  
Pray mercy on our faltering steps, that thus  
Merciful God may multiply on us  
His mercy, though we be unstable and vary,  
In love and reverence of His mother Mary.

Amen.