

The Second Nun's Tale

from The Canterbury Tales

By Chaucer

The Second Nun's Prologue

That servant and that nurse unto the vices
Which men do call in English Idleness,
Portress at Pleasure's gate, by all advices
We should avoid, and by her foe express,
That is to say, by lawful busyness,
We ought to live with resolute intent,
Lest by the devil through sloth we should be rent.

For he, that with his thousand cords and sly
Continually awaits us all to trap,
When he a man in idleness may spy
He easily the hidden snare will snap,
And till the man has met the foul mishap,
He's not aware the devil has him in hand;
We ought to work and idleness withstand.

And though men never dreaded they must die,
Yet men see well, by reason, idleness
Is nothing more than rotten sluggardry,
Whereof comes never good one may possess;
And see sloth hold her in a leash, no less,
Only to sleep and eat and always drink
And to absorb all gain of others' swink.

And so, to save us from such idleness
Through which great trouble and distress have grown,
I have here done my faithful busyness,
Translating the old legend, to make known
All of that glorious life which was thine own,
Thou ever with the rose and lily crowned,
Cecilia, for virtues high renowned.

And thou that art the flower of virgins all
Of whom Saint Bernard loved so well to write,
To thee at my beginning do I call;
Thou comfort of us wretches, help me indite
Thy virgin's death, who won through her merit
The eternal life, and from the devil such glory
As men may read hereafter in her story.

Thou maid and mother, daughter of thy son,
Thou well of ruth, of sinful souls the cure,
In whom, for goodness, God was embryon,
Thou humble one, high over each creature,
Thou did'st ennoble so far our nature
That no disdain God had of humankind
His son in blood and flesh to clothe and wind.

Within the blessed cloister of thy sides
Took human shape eternal love and peace
Who all the threefold world as sovereign guides,
Whom earth and sea and heaven, without cease,
Do praise; and thou, O stainless maid, increase
Bore of thy body - and wert kept a maid -
The mighty God who every creature made.

Assembled is in thee magnificence,
With mercy, goodness, and with such pity
That thou, who art the sun of excellence,
Not only keepest those that pay to thee,
But oftentimes, of thy benignity,
Freely, or ever men thy help beseech,
Thou goest before and art their spirits' leech.

Now help, thou meek and blessed, thou fair maid,
Me, banished wretch, in wilderness of gall;
Think how the Canaanitish woman said
That even dogs may eat of the crumbs all
Which from the master's laden table fall;
And though I, now, unworthy son of Eve,
Am sinful, yet accept me, who believe.

And since all faith is dead divorced from works,
That I may do the right, O give me space
To free me from that darkness of deep murks!
O thou, who art so fair and full of grace,
Be thou my advocate in that high place
Where without ever end is sung 'Hosanna,'
Thou, mother of Christ and daughter of Saint Anna!

And of thy light my soul illuminate,
That troubled is by the contagion sown
Here in my body, also by the weight
Of earthly lust and false loves I have known;
O haven of refuge, O salvation shown
To those that are in sorrow and distress,
Now help, for to my work I'll me address.

Yet pray I all who read what I do write,
Forgive me that I do no diligence
This same story carefully to write;
For I have taken both the words and sense
From him who wrote the tale in reverence
Of this one saint; I follow her legend
And pray you that you will my work amend.

First would I you the name of Saint Cecilia
Expound, as men may in her story see.
It is to say, in English, 'heaven's lily,'
Symbol of pure and virgin chastity;
Or, since she had the white of modesty,
And green of good conscience, and of good fame
The savour sweet, so lily was her name.

Or else Cecilia means 'path for the blind,'
For she example was, by good teaching;
Or else Cecilia, as I written find,
Is made, after a manner of joining,
Of 'heaven' and 'Lia'; and, in figuring,
The 'heaven' is put for 'thought of holiness'
And 'Lia' for enduring busyness.

Cecilia may mean, too, in this wise,
'Lacking in blindness,' for her shining light
Of sapience, and for good qualities;
Or else, behold! this maiden's name so bright
From 'heaven' and 'leos' comes, for which, by right,
Men well might her the 'heaven of people' call,
Example of good and wise works unto all.

Leos is folk in English, so to say,
And just as men may in the heavens see
The sun and moon and stars strewn every way,
Just so men ghostly, in this maiden free,
See of her faith the magnanimity,
And the whole glory of her sapience,
And many actions, bright of excellence.

The Second Nun's Tale

And just as these philosophers do write
That heaven is round and moving and burning,
Just so was fair Cecilia the white
Eager and busy ever in good working,
Large and whole-hearted, steadfast in each thing,

And shining ever in charity full bright;
Now have I told you of her name aright.

This virgin bright, Cecilia, her life saith,
Was Roman born and of a noble kind,
And from the cradle tutored in the faith
Of Christ, and bore his gospel in her mind;
She never ceased, as written do I find,
To pray to God, and love him, and to fear,
Beseeching him to keep her virginity clear.

And when this maiden must unto a man
Be married, who was a young man in age,
And who had to his name Valerian,
And when the day was come for her marriage,
She, meek of heart, devout, and ever sage,
Under her robe of gold, well-made and fair,
Had next her body placed a shirt of hair.

And while the organ made its melody,
To God alone within her heart sang she:
"O Lord, my soul and body guide to the
Unsoiled, lest I in spirit ruined be."
And for his love who died upon a tree,
Each second or third day she used to fast,
And ever prayed she till the day was past.

The night came, and to bed she must be gone
With her young husband, but she had no fear,
And privately to him she said anon:
"O sweet and well-beloved spouse so dear,
There is a secret, if you will to hear,
Which I am fain enough to you to say,
So that you swear that me you'll not betray."

Valerian to her his oath did swear
That evermore, whatever thing might be,
He never would betray what she said there
And so beginning straightway thus said she:
"I have an angel lover that loves me,
And with a great love, whether I wake or sleep,
He will my body ever guard and keep.

"And if it happens that he feels" she said
"That you will touch or love me vulgarly,
At once he'll slay and leave you with the dead,
And in your days of youth thus shall you die;
And if you love me cleanly, so say I,

He'll love you as now me, for your cleanness,
And show you all his joy and his brightness."

Valerian, checked thus as God would mould,
Replied: "If I'm to trust you, let me see
That angel with my eyes and him behold;
And if that it a very angel be,
Then will I do as you have asked of me;
And if you love another man, forsooth
Right with this sword then will I slay you both."

Cecilia replied right in this wise:
"If you so wish, that angel shall you see,
So you believe in Christ and you baptize.
Go forth to Via Appia," said she,
"That from this town is distant but miles three,
And to the poor folk who in that place dwell
Say to them what I'll now proceed to tell.

Tell them that I, Cecilia, have sent
You to the good man Urban, who is old,
For secret need, and with a good intent.
And when this holy Urban you behold,
Tell him the thing that I to you have told;
And when he shall have purged you of your sin,
That angel shall you see before thence you win."

Valerian to that place got him gone,
And just as he'd been told about the thing,
He found this ancient saint, Urban, anon,
Among the holy catacombs lurking.
And he straightway, with never tarrying,
Told him his errand; and when it was told,
Urban for joy his two hands did uphold.

Some teardrops from his two eyes he let fall.
"Almighty Lord, O Jesus Christ," said he,
"Sower of counsel chaste, shepherd of us all,
The fruit of that same seed of chastity
Which thou sowed'st in Cecilia, take to thee!
Lo, like a busy bee, and without guile,
Thy thrall Cecilia serves you all the while!

For that same spouse that lately wedded she,
Who was like lion fierce, she sends him here,
As meek as ever was a lamb, to Thee!"
And with that word anon there did appear
An old, old man, clothed all in white clothes clear,

Who had a golden-lettered book in hand,
And who before Valerian did stand.

Valerian for fear fell down as dead
When him he saw, who raised him from the floor,
And from his book, of which I told, he read,
"One Lord, one faith, one God with never more,
One Christian Church, one father of all to adore,
Above all, over all, and everywhere."
These words in very gold were written there.

When this was read, then said the ancient man:
"Do you believe or not? Say 'Yea' or 'Nay'."
"I do believe this," said Valerian,
"For truer thing than this, I dare well say,
Under the heavens none can think, nor may."
Then vanished the old man, he knew not where,
And Pope Urban baptized him even there.

Valerian, going home, Cecilia found
In chamber, wherein did an angel stand;
This angel had two coronals, woven round
Of roses and of lilies, in his hand;
And to Cecilia, as I understand,
He gave the one, and gave the other straight
Unto this said Valerian, her mate.

"With body clean and with unsullied thought
Keep well these crowns for ever," then said he;
"To you from Paradise have I them brought,
Nor ever shall they fade or withered be,
Nor lose their perfume sweet, so you trust me;
And never man shall see them with his eye,
Save he be chaste and hate depravity.

"And you, Valerian, since you so soon
Consented to accept the Faith also,
Say what you will and you shall have your boon."
"I have a brother," said Valerian, "Oh,
And in the wide world I love no man so.
I pray you that my brother may have grace
To know the truth, as I do in this place."

The angel answered: "God likes your request,
And both of you, with palm of martyrdom,
Shall come at last unto His blessed rest."
Whereon his brother Tibertius was come.
And when he smelled the sweet perfume that from

The roses and the lilies filled the air,
In heart he wondered much how came it there,

And said: "I wonder much, this time of year,
Whence comes the sweetness that arises so,
Of rose and lily, to my senses here?
For though I held them in my two hands- no
The savour could in me no deeper go.
The gentle scent that in my heart I find
Has changed me to a man of other kind."

Valerian replied: "Two crowns have we,
Snow white and rose red, and they're bright and fair,
The which your two eyes have no power to see;
And as you smell them, brother, through my prayer,
So shall you see them also, brother dear,
If you but will, without delay forsooth,
Rightly believe and know the very truth."

Tibertius answered: "Say you this to me
In truth? Or do I dream I hear all this?"
"In dreams," replied Valerian, then, "have we
Lived to this time, O brother mine, ywis.
In truth now for the first time our life is."
"How know you?" asked Tibertius: "In what wise?"
Valerian said: "You will I now apprise.

God's angel unto me the truth has taught,
Which you shall see, if only you'll put by
All idols and be clean, else you'll learn naught."
And of these crowns miraculous, say I,
Saint Ambrose of the two does testify
In his Preface; this noble doctor dear
Commends the story, making it all clear:

The palm of martyrdom, thus to receive,
This Saint Cecilia, filled with God's gift,
The world and even her chamber did she leave;
Witness Tibertius' and Valerian's shrift,
To whom the good God sent by angel swift
Two crowns of flowers fair and sweet smelling,
And bade the angel take them as fitting.

The virgin brought these men to bliss above;
The world has learned what it is worth, 'tis plain,
Devotion to fair chastity to love."
Then did Cecilia show him and explain
That every idol is a thing all vain;

For they are dumb, and they are deaf also,
And charged him that his idols he forgo.

"Whoso believes not this, a beast he is,"
Said then Tibertius, "if I shall not lie."
And then she kissed his breast, when she heard this,
And was full glad that truth he could espy.
"This day I take you for my own ally,"
So said this blessed, lovely maiden dear;
And after that said on as you shall hear:

"Lo, even as the love of Christ," said she,
"Made me your brother's wife, just in that wise
I take you now my close ally to be,
Since you'll forgo your idols and despise.
Go with your brother, let them you baptize
And make you clean; so that you may behold
The angel's face whereof your brother told."

Tibertius answered, saying: "Brother dear,
First tell me where to go and to what man."
"To whom?" said he, "Come forth, and with good cheer,
For I will lead you unto Pope Urban."
"To Urban? Brother mine, Valerian,
Tibertius said, "and thither will you lead?
I think this were a wondrous thing indeed.

"Surely you mean not Urban!" he cried out,
"Who's been so often ordered to be dead,
And lives in corners, dodging ever about,
And dares not once by day to show his head?
Why, men would burn him in a fire right red
If he were found, or any him could spy;
And us, if we should bear him company.

And while we seek for that Divinity
Who is in Heaven where we may not see,
Burned in this world to ashes shall we be!"
To whom Cecilia answered, and boldly:
"Men might well dread, and very reasonably,
This life on earth to lose, my own dear brother,
If this alone were living, and no other.

But there's a better life in other place,
That never shall be lost, nay, fear you naught,
Whereof God's Son has told us, through his grace;
That Father's Son all things that He has wrought,
And all that is has made with reasoned thought,

The Spirit which from Father did proceed
Has given a soul to each, fear not indeed.

By word and miracle God's only Son,
When He was in this world, declared us here
There was another life that could be won."
To whom replied Tibertius: "Sister dear,
Did you not say, just now, in manner clear,
There's but one God, the Lord in truth, no less;
And now to three, how can you bear witness?"

"That will I tell," said she, "before I go.
Just as a man has kinds of wisdom three,
Memory, genius, intellect also,
So in one Being of Divinity
Three Persons, truly may there right well be."
Then she to him full earnestly did preach
Of Jesus' coming, and of his pain did teach,

And many points his agony had shown:
How God's Son in this world a time did hold
To man a full remission to make known,
Who had been bound in sin and care of old:
All these things to Tibertius first she told.
And then Tibertius, with a good intent,
He with Valerian to Pope Urban went;

Who thanked God; and with a glad heart and light
He christened him, and made him in that place
Perfect in knowledge, and God's very knight.
And after this Tibertius got such grace
That every day he saw, in time and space,
God's angel; aye, and every kind of boon
He asked of God, the same was granted soon.

'Twere hard in proper order to explain
How many wonders Jesus for them wrought;
But at the last, to tell it short and plain,
They by the sergeants of Rome town were sought,
And to Almachius the prefect brought,
Who questioned them and learned their whole intent,
And unto Jupiter's image had them sent,

Saying: "Who will not go and sacrifice,
Strike off his head, that is my command here."
These martyrs, then, of whom I do apprise,
One Maximus, who was an officer
Of the prefect's, and his corniculer,

Took them; and when the saints forth he had led,
Himself he wept, for pity that he had.

When Maximus had learned their creed and lore,
Of executioners obtained he leave,
And to his house he led them, without more;
And by their preaching, before it came to eve,
They from the executioners did reave,
And Maximus and from his folk, each one,
The false faith, to believe in God alone.

Cecilia came, when it was fully night,
With priests, who christened them together there;
And afterward, when day came with its light,
Cecilia them bade, with steadfast cheer:
"Now Christ's own knights together, lief and dear,
The works of darkness cast you all away,
And arm you in the armour of the day.

You have indeed fought the good fight- all hail!
Your course is done, your faith you have preserved,
Go to the crown of life that shall not fail;
The Righteous judge, Whom you have so well served,
Will give it to you, since you've it deserved."
And when, as I have told this thing was said,
To make the sacrifice they forth were led.

But when before the image they were brought,
Briefly to tell the end as it is known,
They'd not incense, and sacrificed they naught,
But on their knees they reverently knelt down,
With humble heart and firm devotion shown,
And so they lost their heads there in that place.
Their spirits went unto the King of Grace.

This Maximus, who saw this thing betide,
With pitying tears he told folk then, forthright.
That he their souls had seen to Heaven glide
With angels full of glory and of light,
And by his words converted many a wight;
For which Almachius had him beaten so,
With whips of lead, he did his life forgo.

Cecilia him buried with the others,
Valerian and Tibertius, quietly.
Thus in the tomb he rested with the brothers;
And after this Almachius speedily
Ordered his servants fetch him openly

Cecilia, that she might in his presence
Make sacrifice to Jove and burn incense.

But since they were converted by her lore,
They wept, and to a full belief they came
In what she said, and cried out more and more,
"O Christ, God's Son, whose substance is the same,
Thou'rt very God, and blessed be thy name,
Who hast so good a servant thee to serve;
This with one voice we say, nor will we swerve."

Almachius, who heard of this same thing,
Commanded that they bring her him to see,
And when she came, this was his questioning:
"What manner of woman are you?" then asked he.
"I am a noblewoman born," said she.
"I ask," said he, "though to your harm and grief,
Of your religion and of your belief."

"You have begun your questions foolishly,"
Said she, "who would two answers so include
In one demand; you asked me ignorantly."
Almachius answered that exactitude:
"Whence comes your answering so rough and rude?"
"Whence?" asked she, when that she was thus constrained,
"From conscience and from simple faith unfeigned."

Almachius said: "And do you take no heed
Of power I wield?" And she replied like this:
"Your might," said she, "is scarce a thing to dread;
For power of every mortal man but is
Like to a bladder full of wind, ywis.
For with a needle's point, when it is blown,
Prick it, and all the pride of it comes down."

"Erroneously have you begun," said he,
"And deep in error do you still remain;
Know you not how our mighty princes free
Have ordered us such error to restrain,
That every Christian man shall suffer pain,
Unless his Christianity he deny?
He shall be free if he'll do that, say I."

"Your princes err, and your nobility,"
Cecilia said, "and with a mad sentence
Condemn our guilt all guiltless though we be;
And you, who know full well our innocence,
Merely because we do our reverence

To Christ and bear ourselves the Christian name,
You thus impute to us a crime and blame.

But we, who know far better than can you
Its virtue, will not once the name gainsay."
Almachius said: "Choose one of these things two:
Deny that faith, or sacrifice today,
That you may now escape from death that way."
Whereat the holy, blessed, lovely maid
Began to laugh, and to the judge she said:

"O judge, convicted by your own folly,
Will you that I deny my innocence
And make myself a criminal?" asked she.
"Lo, he dissimulates in audience,
He glares and rages in his violence!"
To whom Almachius: "O unhappy wretch,
Do you not know how far my might may stretch?"

"Did not our mighty princes to me give,
Aye, both the power and authority
To give to people death or make them live?
Why do you speak so proudly then to me?"
"I speak to you but steadfastly," said she,
"Not proudly, for I say, upon my side,
We've deadly hatred for the vice of pride.

And if to hear a truth you do not fear,
Then will I show, all openly, by right,
That you have said a full great falsehood here.
You say, your princes have you given the might
Both to condemn and give life to a wight;
But you can merely him of life bereave,
You have no other power or other leave!

"You may but say, your princes did declare
You were death's officer; if more you claim,
You lie, for of more power you are bare."
"This bold speech drop!" Almachius did exclaim,
"And do your sacrifice in our gods' name.
I care not what you wrongfully impute;
Like a philosopher I'll bear it, mute.

But those same wrongs which I cannot endure
Are those you speak against our gods," said he.
Cecilia replied: "O vain creature,
You've nothing said, since speaking first to me,
That I've not learned thereby your great folly,

And that you were and are, in every wise,
An ignorant officer and vain justice.

There is no proving, by your outward eye,
That you're not blind; what can be seen by all,
That it is stone -that men see well, say I-
Yet that same stone a god you think and call.
I charge you, let your hand upon it fall,
And test it well, and 'twill be stone, you'll find,
Since you can see it not with your eyes blind.

It is a shame that all the people shall
So scorn you, judge, and laugh at your folly;
For commonly men know it above all
That mighty God is in His heaven high,
And idols such as these, they testify,
May bring no profit to themselves or you -
They have no power, nothing can they do."

These words and many other such said she,
And he grew wroth and bade she should be led
Home to her house. "And in her house," said he,
"Boil her in bath heated by great flames red."
And as he bade, so was it done, 'tis said;
For in a bath they locked her and began
All night and day a great fire there to fan.

The long night through, and a long day also,
For all the fire and all the bath's great heat,
She sat there cool and calm and felt no woe,
Nor did it make her any drop to sweat.
But in that bath her life should she lose yet;
For he, Almachius, with bad intent,
To slay her in the bath his headsman sent.

The executioner three times her smote
Upon the neck, and could not strike again,
Although he failed to cut in two her throat,
For at that time the ordinance was plain
That no man might another give the pain
Of striking four blows, whether soft or sore;
This executioner dared do no more.

But half dead, with her neck cut three times there,
He let her lie, and on his way he went.
The Christian folk that all about her were,
With sheets caught up the precious blood she spent;
And three days lived she in this same torment,

But never ceased at all the faith to teach,
That she had fostered; dying did she preach;

To them she gave her goods and everything,
And of Pope Urban put them in the care,
And said: "This much I asked of Heaven's King,
A respite of three days, that you might share
With me these souls; and too I would prepare
Before I go my house a church to make,
That it be kept forever for my sake."

Saint Urban, with his deacons, privately,
The body took and buried it by night
Among his other saints, right honourably.
Her house is Church of Saint Cecilia hight;
Saint Urban hallowed it, as well he might;
Wherein in noble wise unto this day
To Christ and to his saint men service pay.