

The Old Woman of Berkeley

By Robert Southey

A Ballad, Showing How an Old Woman Rode Double, and Who Rode Before Her

The Raven croaked as she sate at her meal,
And the Old Woman knew what he said;
And she grew pale at the Raven's tale,
And sickened, and went to her bed.

"Now fetch me my children, and fetch them with speed,"
The Old Woman of Berkeley said;
"The Monk my son, and my daughter the Nun,
Bid them hasten, or I shall be dead."

The Monk her son, and her daughter the Nun,
Their way to Berkeley went;
And they have brought, with pious thought,
The holy sacrament.

The Old Woman shrieked as they entered her door,
And she cried with a voice of despair,
"Now take away the sacrament,
For its presence I cannot bear!"

Her lip it trembled with agony;
The sweat ran down her brow:
"I have tortures in store for evermore;
But spare me, my children, now!"

Away they sent the sacrament:
The fit it left her weak;
She looked at her children with ghastly eyes,
And faintly struggled to speak.

"All kind of sin I have rioted in,
And the judgment now must be;
But I secured my children's souls:
Oh, pray, my children, for me!"

“I have ’nointed myself with infants’ fat;
The fiends have been my slaves;
From sleeping babes I have sucked the breath;
And breaking by charms the sleep of death,
I have called the dead from their graves,

“And the Devil will fetch me now in fire,
My witchcrafts to atone;
And I, who have troubled the dead man’s grave,
Shall never have rest in my own.

“Bless, I entreat, my winding-sheet,
My children, I beg of you;
And with holy-water sprinkle my shroud,
And sprinkle my coffin too.

“And let me be chained in my coffin of stone;
And fasten it strong, I implore,
With iron bars, and with three chains
Chain it to the church-floor.

“And bless the chains, and sprinkle them;
And let fifty Priests stand round,
Who night and day the Mass may say
Where I lie on the ground.

“And see that fifty Choristers
Beside the bier attend me,
And day and night, by the tapers’ light,
With holy hymns defend me.

“Let the church-bells all, both great and small,
Be tolled by night and day,
To drive from thence the fiends who come
To bear my body away.

“And ever have the church-door barred
After the even-song;
And I beseech you, children dear,
Let the bars and bolts be strong.

“And let this be three days and nights,
My wretched corpse to save;
Till the fourth morning keep me safe,
And then I may rest in my grave.”

The Old Woman of Berkeley laid her down,
And her eyes grew deadly dim;
Short came her breath, and the struggle of death
Did loosen every limb.

They blest the Old Woman's winding-sheet
With rites and prayers due;
With holy-water they sprinkled her shroud,
And they sprinkled her coffin too.

And they chained her in her coffin of stone,
And with iron barred it down,
And in the church with three strong chains
They chained it to the ground.

And they blest the chains, and sprinkled them;
And fifty Priests stood round,
By night and day the Mass to say
Where she lay on the ground.

And fifty sacred Choristers
Beside the bier attend her,
Who day and night, by the tapers' light,
Should with holy hymns defend her.

To see the Priests and Choristers
It was a goodly sight,
Each holding, as it were a staff,
A taper burning bright.

And the church-bells all, both great and small,
Did toll so loud and long;
And they have barred the church-door hard,
After the even-song.

And the first night the tapers' light
Burnt steadily and clear;
But they without a hideous rout
Of angry fiends could hear;—

A hideous roar at the church-door,
Like a long thunder-peal;
And the Priests they prayed, and the Choristers sung
Louder, in fearful zeal.

Loud tolled the bell; the Priests prayed well;
The tapers they burnt bright:
The Monk her son, and her daughter the Nun,
They told their beads all night.

The cock he crew; the Fiends they flew
From the voice of the morning away:
Then undisturbed the Choristers sing,
And the fifty Priests they pray;
As they had sung and prayed all night,
They prayed and sung all day.

The second night the tapers' light
Burnt dimly and blue,
And every one saw his neighbor's face
Like a dead man's face to view.

And yells and cries without arise,
That the stoutest heart might shock,
And a deafening roaring like a cataract pouring
Over a mountain rock.

The Monk and Nun they told their beads
As fast as they could tell;
And aye as louder grew the noise,
The faster went the bell.

Louder and louder the Choristers sung,
As they trembled more and more;
And the Priests, as they prayed to Heaven for aid,
They smote their breasts full sore.

The cock he crew; the Fiends they flew
From the voice of the morning away:
Then undisturbed the Choristers sing,
And the fifty Priests they pray;
As they had sung and prayed all night,
They prayed and sung all day.

The third night came, and the tapers flame
A frightful stench did make;
And they burnt as though they had been dipped
In the burning brimstone lake.

And the loud commotion, like the rushing of ocean,
Grew momentarily more and more;
And strokes as of a battering-ram
Did shake the strong church-door.

The bellmen they for very fear
Could toll the bell no longer;
And still, as louder grew the strokes,
Their fear it grew the stronger.

The Monk and Nun forgot their beads;
They fell on the ground in dismay;
There was not a single Saint in heaven
To whom they did not pray.

And the Choristers' song, which late was so strong,
Faltered with consternation;
For the church did rock as an earthquake shock
Uplifted its foundation.

And a sound was heard like the trumpet's blast
That shall one day wake the dead;—
The strong church-door could bear no more,
And the bolts and bars they fled;

And the tapers' light was extinguished quite;
And the Choristers faintly sung;
And the Priests, dismayed, panted and prayed,
And on all Saints in heaven for aid
They called with trembling tongue.

And in He came with eyes of flame,
The Devil, to fetch the dead;
And all the church with his presence glowed
Like a fiery furnace red.

He laid his hand on the iron chains,
And like flax they moldered asunder;
And the coffin lid, which was barred so firm,
He burst with his voice of thunder.

And he bade the Old Woman of Berkeley rise,
And come with her Master away:
A cold sweat started on that cold corpse,
At the voice she was forced to obey.

She rose on her feet in her winding-sheet;
Her dead flesh quivered with fear;
And a groan like that which the Old Woman gave
Never did mortal hear.

She followed her Master to the church-door
There stood a black horse there;
His breath was red like furnace smoke,
His eyes like a meteor's glare.

The Devil he flung her on the home,
And he leaped up before
And away like the lightning's speed they went,
And she was seen no more.

They saw her no more: but her cries
For four miles round they could hear;
And children at rest at their mother's breast
Started, and screamed with fear.