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READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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3. The Poetaster Raymond de Borrelli

On three separate occasions, the Frenchman Raymond de Borrelli, born in 1837 and died in 1906, won the [prize for poetry](#) that the Académie française or “French Academy” awards.



Fig. 25: Raymond de Borrelli. Engraving, before 1890. Artist unknown. Published in Raymond de Borrelli, *Arma* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1890), frontispiece.

Beyond being a heavily decorated war hero and an aristocrat holding the rank of viscount, he owed much of his fame to patriotic poetizing that drew on his [experience in combat abroad](#): he spent years as a cavalryman in Europe, Africa, and Asia—from the Second Italian War of Independence of 1859 through the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 to the Tonkin Campaign of 1883–1886. Despite popular plaudits, he was anything but a darling among Parisian literati. Such luminaries as the novelist Marcel Proust and French Symbolist writer Remy de Gourmont, barely bothering to keep their opprobrium private, passed scathing judgment on the literary caliber of Borrelli’s verse.

The former military man read aloud his second prize-winner, *Le Jongleur* or “The Juggler,” in the public session of the French Academy on November 19, 1891. The poem was [printed three times](#): in a journal ten days later, by itself in a slim book in 1892, and in a collection of Borrelli’s verse in 1893. The narrative comprises thirty-four cinquains,

to use the technical term for its five-line stanzas. The lines are rhymed variously, most often ababb. The form, which was known to have originated in the Middle Ages, lent itself well to Borrelli's chosen topic. It also accorded nicely with the values of the Parnassians, French poets of his day who stressed technical perfection in versification.

The medieval manuscripts entitle the thirteenth-century poem with the French for "Our Lady's Tumbler," to acknowledge its leading character. He is identified equally as [tumbler, minstrel, and jongleur](#). Borrelli spotlighted the last-mentioned French noun as the title of his own work, which omits the further element of *Notre Dame* or Our Lady. Even in English today the word *jongleur* denotes "an itinerant medieval entertainer proficient in juggling, acrobatics, music, and recitation." Among these activities, the main figure in *Le Jongleur* or, in English, "The Juggler" most nearly resembles a professional acrobat. His stunts include walking on his hands, standing on his head, and tumbling, but his foremost skill turns out to be juggling. That detail explains why, if push comes to shove, the translation "The Juggler" must be preferred to "The Jongleur." After a fever necessitates the hospitalization of the story's star, he prays to the Virgin and pledges to light a taper in her honor. This motif, though not in the thirteenth-century text, squares neatly with other medieval miracles related to "Our Lady's Tumbler": candles were salient in the miraculous events involving jongleurs at both Rocamadour and Arras. By the same token, the same kind of object remained even in the late nineteenth century the most common sort of votive that a worshipper praying to Mary would have offered.

What does the tradition of "The Juggler of Notre Dame" owe to Borrelli? He deserves credit from the very word *juggler* on. The poet's decision to make an all-round showman into a specialist of this kind speaks to the vogue that juggling enjoyed at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Partly thanks to circuses, traveling performers specialized more than had been the case in the Middle Ages. Juggling became a bonafide profession in its own right. Paradoxically, the activity became closely [identified with the medieval period](#), as continues to be the case even today.

At the same time, Borrelli was very much a creature of his times. Whereas the original of the thirteenth century presented its hero as having been successful in his career and the possessor of material objects that proved his prosperity, the versifier of the nineteenth century could not resist the romantic impulses to cast him as a struggling artist and afflict him with the added pathos of illness. He restrained himself from making the juggler consumptive, coughing away in a windowless garret, but he hints at a similar picture.

The Viscount introduced two further motifs that resurfaced in many later versions of the story. The first of the poet's enhancements is the specific flourish that the protagonist strews the steps of the altar with roses. The flowers are unsurprising, in view of the frequency with which floral offerings have long been rendered to the Virgin, but no one before Borrelli brought them into the tale. Though not in the short

story by Anatole France, they show up often subsequently, from the opera by Jules Massenet and even in the poster contemporary with it down to the extraordinary protographic novel by R. O. Blechman. In the last-mentioned the tables are turned when Mary presents the juggler with the bloom rather than vice versa. Borrelli's other innovations were two details about the juggling. The performer, we are told twice, carries a carpet that he spread before putting on his show. The poet spells out further that the entertainer uses copper balls in his act.

Thanks in part to paraphrases by the local historian Félix Brun but much more to praise by the renowned literary historian and public intellectual Gaston Paris, the thirteenth-century "Our Lady's Tumbler" made a leap from being the province solely of the medieval French philologists who had known it since 1873. Borrelli's composition left no lasting mark, but it helped to boost the medieval miracle into a higher orbit. Its most enduring effect may have come from its contribution to Anatole France's almost simultaneous reimagining of "Our Lady's Tumbler." Therein lies a story.

Borrelli punctuates heavily, with semicolons, colons, and dashes that for greater readability have been reduced in many cases to commas in the translation.

"The Juggler"

Have you read Baruch?

5 **H**ave you ever read [Jacobus de Voragine](#)?
 It's Latin, not at all good, but easy to grasp,
 if you've got, by chance, a moment free,
 if you have Faith (as I suppose you do),
 read that book: you will take pleasure from it.

10 **T**he title is among the most beautiful: [The Golden Legend](#)!
 As for the text, the author, simple and scrupulous, made
 a place of honor in it for the most minor saints.
 This work has only one thing wrong: it is too little known,
 as full as it is of miraculous events.

15 **A**nd these events are certain! Better than certain, well known!
 And, if the marvelous blooms there openly,
 it would be necessary, to complain of it, to be truly mean.
[I transcribe, at random, one of these stories:](#)
 you will tell me, afterward, if it is touching or not.

Being a street acrobat is a [poor profession](#);
 seldom are evenings [golden](#) and triumphant in it!
 You fear dark days and stifling days.

15 Bread is lacking in fall and spring, as soon as it rains:
and it is hard, for your wife and little children.

Since come what may, it is essential to eat,
you work all the same, in snow and shower, sun, and wind.
Then, you feel sick: so it is. Often people die.
Or, if they come out of it, recovered, somehow,
20 they are a little weaker and poorer than before.

So then, it happened, long ago—the story is of a different era—
it happened that a juggler suffered fatal destiny.
An agile hand, a ready body, and a good heart for the work,
he had it all; but at the end of the road and of stamina,
25 fever landed him on a hospital bed.

When I say "hospital," I have it wrong. In our France,
hospitals back then were called convents;
people would talk there, in low voices, of love and hope,
and, at least in this regard, the centuries of ignorance
30 were perhaps worth more than others—more learned.

After treatment, bandaging, and pampering, the juggler got well
quickly.
His soul had also found great support:
having entered there not much of a believer, he came out a Christian.
All long suffering is an invitation to prayer;
35 one fine day, you take the risk—and you find yourself happy for it.

Our man had prayed to the good Blessed Virgin,
as the simple spirit he was, humbly.
At the height of his torment, he had even promised,
if he ever escaped, to burn a candle for her:
40 he proceeded to keep his oath.

But first he wanted to be left in peace,
alone in the chapel, for at least an hour.
The request was disquieting and unprecedented.
Consequently, without racking their brains very long,
45 they did what was needed so that he would have witnesses—

Secret witnesses, so as to content a guest,
but above all observant ones: keeping watch seemed urgent,
the chalice being of gold and the candlesticks of silver.
Some monks, hidden in the high gallery,
50 stayed to watch everything with a diligent look.

The nave was deserted. A prism of light
 fell there, in full bloom from the transept to the altar,
 where a Virgin of stone, with a halo on her brow,
 lowered her white eyelid toward the forecourt of the choir,
 55 in the reflection of the colored glass.

The man entered, believed himself to be alone, and closed the door
 again.

He still wore the loose-fitting garment
 that at the hospital covers those suffering from every type of illness,
 but because of being tighter where his waist is stouter,
 60 this sort of gown pinches him noticeably.

The man came with an entire strange kit.
 There was, beyond the candle, a bundle comprising
 a folding table and its crossed feet;
 then, a rolled-up carpet that was wearing through at the fringe,
 65 then one knew not what, in a worn handkerchief.

Once he was in the choir, they saw him, without saying anything,
 take his old carpet and spread it out nicely,
 assemble the table, open the handkerchief, set up
 some small objects; then, lighting the taper,
 70 he knelt and began to speak:

“Madam, I know well that people call you Queen,
 I know that they name you Morning Star,
 but I also know well that neither a heavenly body nor a sovereign
 would have helped me in my pain as you did,
 75 and I would like to be able to say it to you in Latin.

Pardon me; what is more, having not a cent,
 my candle, too little, gives me grief.
 I don’t feel clear of my debt, and I am leaving today.
 It is absolutely necessary that I do work for you.
 80 You have a child: let’s say it is for him.

I will do my best. Unfortunately, unemployment,
 cruel for the whole world, is more detrimental for us:
 I can bungle my stunts, and that would be too bad.
 You will not want the less to accept my homage,
 85 and I request this of you, Madam, on my two knees.”

The man stood up. With a single rapid movement,
 he cast aside the gown that was open in its roominess:
 and, like a butterfly out of its chrysalis,
 he looked spruce, light, supple, and solid,
 90 under his old and faded juggler's outfit.

"I begin," he said. And alive and elusive,
 the ball went in subtle bends.
 There, *under this cup*, it was on the table.
 Someone would go to find it there, there was no doubt—
 95 and would have wagered that he would always be mistaken!

Mixing up in a box a mass of things,
 the juggler then pronounces a *sacramental word*,
 and this word was capable of everything—even transformations!
 For the box, once open, was full of nothing but *roses*,
 100 with which he went to strew the steps of the altar.

To conclude, he took some copper balls,
 and one saw him, by way of his scarcely moving hands,
 toss the spheres back and forth, in a perfect and enchanting orbit
 in which the eye, marveling, got lost in following them,
 105 tirelessly;

And the weightless globes, enflamed by a spark,
 in this quickly alternating torrent,
 produced for her a splendor, much like the one above
 which strung into an immortal crown,
 110 nimbed another brow with *nine stars of gold*.

"Another thing!" he said. "Perhaps you are weary,
 and, if I was doing too much of this, I would be in the wrong.
 So then, I will put away the table and all the sleight of hand:
 for what comes next there needs to be a lot of space,
 115 and we are going to work harder and harder!"

Harder and harder! Without any presumption
 he was speaking truly, for "what came next" was
 a work of high style and exquisite elegance,
 and of an originality and an extravagance
 120 to make the monks be on the lookout:

He walked on his hands, he held himself steady
 on his head, and with marvelous balance
 he does a cartwheel and, forming a perfect arch,
 he comes to land standing, in full view, in celebration,
 125 after one jackknife and three dangerous flips!

A while passes. – Then, in silence, and with an air of mystery,
 the man, with the slowness of a slinking reptile,
 lay down on the ground, this time, full length,
 and the performance then changed in character:
 130 cheery as it was, it became alarming!

Everything that a person can get out of a head and a torso,
 a neck, an arm, feet, legs, and hands,
 in truth everything that they can produce, in feats of strength,
 by wrenching, fracturing, and spraining,
 135 took on superhuman aspects in this poor body,

So much that a person might have thought these *odd figures*
 from ogival porches and from old capitals,
 where, beneath holy patrons in stiff mantles,
 the sculptor put misshapen monsters and demons
 140 to enliven a little chapels and castles!

So too, when he concluded a final stunt
 by his most beautiful bow, all pale from heat,
 staggering and looking for the wall, his lead lowered,
 with short breaths in his weary chest,
 145 the juggler spoke again as follows:

“Madam,” he was saying, “this exercise is tough,
 tougher than it seems and than you would believe!
 For work of the kind, much study is needed:
 a person gets rusty very fast and, for want of practice,
 150 struggles a little, as you see.”

Then—and we enter fully into the wonder—
 this truly unheard of thing happened:
 there is not only a poor, dazzled man,
 but there are people, all of them having sound vision and hearing
 155 who confirm it: the Virgin, smiling, said “Yes.”

All of them saw her, leaving the heights of the **tabernacle**,
 descend to the ground in a gentle glide,
 then, having reached the forecourt, walk there like us.
 And he, the humble man, for whom a miracle happens,
 160 kneeling, watched her come;

And as he stayed there, shaken to the marrow,
 the beautiful lady with her brow haloed in stars,
 white in the reflection of the colored glass windows,
 wiped, with the noble hem of her veil,
 165 the sweat that beaded at the juggler's temples.



Fig. 26: Mary kissing the juggler. Watercolor by A. Teisseire, original art to illustrate story as recounted by Maurice Vloberg, tipped into a bound copy of Raymond de Borrelli, *Le jongleur* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1892), after title page.