

The illustration is a medieval-style painting. In the center, the Virgin Mary is depicted in a long, flowing white gown with a blue mantle. She holds a white lily in her right hand and has her left hand resting on the head of a man kneeling before her. The man is wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern and is looking up at Mary with an expression of awe or devotion. In the background, to the right, a group of men in white robes are watching the scene. To the left, there is a large, ornate golden altar or shrine. The overall style is characterized by soft, blended colors and a sense of sacredness.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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Cover image: Leon Guipon, 'Lightly down from the dark descends the Lady of Beauty' (1907), published in Edwin Markham, 'The Juggler of Touraine', *Century Magazine* (December 1907), p. 231.

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

9. The Children's Book Writer Violet Moore Higgins

[Violet Moore Higgins](#), an American who was born in 1886 and died in 1967, studied art in Chicago in the early 1900s. Afterward, she worked mainly as a cartoonist for newspapers. In addition, by 1916 she distinguished herself outside journalism by both writing and illustrating more than a dozen children's books. As an illustrator alone, she produced artwork for even more. Today this artist remains known, if only modestly, for her contributions to editions in the United States of such classics as *Pinocchio*, *Hans Brinker*, and *Heidi*, as well as of [child-friendly features](#) published in dailies.

When the prose of her "The Little Juggler" appeared in 1917, she scored a few important firsts in reconceiving the story. For a start, she begins with the stock opening "Once upon a time" and compounds its fairy-tale effect by emphasizing "long, long ago." We have already seen how the Frenchman Félix Brun, who first recast the medieval poem for a popular audience, commenced his prose with the corresponding cliché in his native language. Not a decade before Higgins's "The Little Juggler," the US poet Wallace Stevens started his own version of the tale with [the same formula](#): "Once upon a time there was a beggar who scraped together a living by juggling; and that was all he could do." But let us turn to versions after Higgins's that were composed by authors who would not have known her form of the story and that open with "Once upon a time" or the equivalent phrase in other modern languages. In English, we find one in a collection entitled *Once-upon-a-Time Saints: Faith-Tales for Children* from 1977; in German, one by [Max Bolliger](#) from 1991; and in French, two more, one by [Michel Zink](#) and the other by [Cecilia Pieri](#), both from 2004.

Higgins leaves not a shadow of a doubt about genre: she claims to be writing a fairy tale. True, one edition that makes our story its headliner contains in its title the vague and evasive *French Tales Retold*. Compensatorily, another volume containing the little juggler is entitled explicitly *French Fairy Tales*. This low-budget product was reprinted more than a decade and a half later, coupled with Higgins's *English Fairy Tales*, as a two-volume set in a pictorial cardboard halfbox labeled "[2 Books in a Box](#)."

Five years later, with no awareness of Higgins, the European side of the Atlantic too provides evidence that the story was being billed as a fairy tale. Ernst Tegethoff, a German folklorist and philologist, incorporated a careful summary of the medieval original into an [anthology of folktales and fairy tales](#) from France that he published in

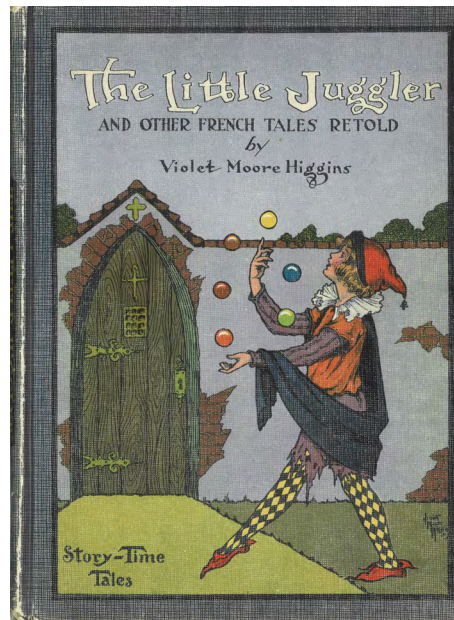


Fig. 43: Front cover of Violet Moore Higgins, *The Little Juggler and Other French Tales Retold* (Racine, WI: Whitman, 1917).

1923. By so doing, he certified that the piece belonged legitimately within the category of folktale. More than a half century later, it still made sense for publishers in Germany to feature the story within a popular [collection of French folktales](#).

In 1917 Higgins's text was offered for purchase in [two distinct forms](#). In what must have been the more economical one, the opening page of her story faces an illustration by another artist. The simple artwork conjures up a remote, perhaps late medieval, past. It depicts a scene in which young people clutch gifts such as kites and dolls. Whatever the era, a caption below it points to a set season of the year: "To Give Is the Spirit of Christmas." The more elegant edition that Higgins both wrote and illustrated in the same year wraps up with a story called "The Noel Candle."

The American children's book author was prescient in highlighting gift-giving as the guiding theme of the tale, as well as in connecting it with Christmas. Two decades or so later, the radio personality John Nesbitt recorded his wildly successful narration of the miracle under the title "A Christmas Gift." In 1942, a film short called "The Greatest Gift of All" was released.

To turn to the geographical setting of her story, Higgins specifies Tourlaine, supposedly "a quaint old French village" but in fact an imaginary place listed in no atlas: she generated the name by ringing a single-consonant change on Edwin Markham's Touraine. The writer made a further major innovation of long-enduring influence: she turned the male lead from an adult into a boy "not more than twelve." This youthful hero is "The Little Juggler" of the title. He is called Rene, corresponding

to the French René, from the Latin *renatus* meaning “reborn.” The etymology of the name may not be beside the point.

Beyond his littleness, the principal character in her version is hurt. He sprains his ankle while dancing and is forced to convalesce in a monastery, where he can hobble around only with the help of a crutch.



Fig. 44: Brother Ambrose supports the injured young juggler. Illustration by Violet Moore Higgins, 1917. Published in Violet Moore Higgins, *The Little Juggler, and Other French Tales Retold* (Racine, WI: Whitman Publishing Co., 1917), between pp. 16 and 17.

Though we may be tempted to see the injury as reflecting the many servicemen wounded from combat in World War I, the US did not enter the war officially until April 6, 1917, well into the year in which Higgins's book came out. Maimed soldiers would have been returning stateside already, but not in the numbers that 1918 would see. Then again, she could have easily known from newspapers and other sources about the thousands upon thousands of injured soldiers even before America's belated entrance into the fray.

The author does not reveal what prompted her to make the star of her adaptation a juvenile or to pitch it to young readers or listeners, but her book leaves no uncertainty about being intended an audience of children. The ground for the repurposing of the story's genre was laid from the start of the late-nineteenth-century reception, when Wendelin Foerster described the hero's "childlike innocence" and Gaston Paris praised the poem for "its delightful and childlike simplicity." The writer Anatole France did not direct his short story at children, but he did reveal elsewhere his acceptance that the Middle Ages and the religious faith of medieval people seemed inherently childish.

The philologists who discovered the medieval poem saw it and its hero as being childlike. This perspective was consonant with a somewhat condescending conception of the Middle Ages that many people commonly held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They saw the period as embodying childhood in a maturing process that presumably led to the civilizational adulthood of their own times.

Violet Moore Higgins's prose, for all its emphasis on guilelessness, is not itself irreproachable in the attitudes it discloses. For example, while writing about the distant past in which she sets her story, she layers upon her imaginary world prejudices about Africans that reflect the racism of the Jim Crow era in the United States. In this regard, late medieval or early modern France takes on a distressing resemblance to the nation in which she lived her whole life.

When the little juggler debuts, he brings up the rear in a procession of performers that includes "a hideous little dwarf, shaking a tambourine, and jabbering in some strange tongue to a wizened little monkey that perched on his shoulder." Two pages later one of the entertainers, touting the skills of his companions, singles out "a little monkey from Africa; and his master, who seems himself to be naught but a grinning ape, who can play the tambourine passing well." The grudging compliment at the end cannot unsay two preceding circumstances, first that the monkey takes precedence over the man and second that the human being is compared to a grinning ape. A page later, Higgins, in reporting the performance the troupe gives, again stresses the simian qualities of the monkey's trainer, describing him as "[grimacing like an ape](#)." In her own time these passages may not have caused many readers so much as to bat an eye, but they now clash in ugly ways with the pathos and compassion that "The Little Juggler" seems designed to awaken.

After Violet Moore Higgins, the tale was pressed into service again and again by grown-ups who believed or wanted it to hold a special appeal to the young. Children's books proliferated, even as a pop-up, that retold the story with illustrations. Maryline Poole Adams released a handcrafted miniature book in a limited edition. Though her target audience was adults, half of the book consisted in a first-person narration by the protagonist as a youth. Female authors have been active in rewriting the story for children. The two most reprinted adaptations have been by the late Barbara Cooney and Tomie dePaola, but many others exist. In a class of its own is R. O. Blechman's photographic novel: though not pitched at juveniles, its heavy illustration has caused it to be mistaken for children's literature. That trend was only encouraged once it was made into an animated short.

As the narrative was presented in children's literature, it was also used in schools for didactic purposes. Anatole France's prose was widely used in French-language instruction in the English-speaking world, and more than one instructor based skits, musicals, or other dramatic enactments on it. As French, religion, and medieval Europe have all lost ground in American schools and perhaps even become undesirable presences, the juggler has lost all but the tiniest toehold there. But thanks to affection

for the story within the worldwide market for children's books, some of its best forms in such literature live on.

"The Little Juggler"

Once upon a time, long, long ago, on the first warm morning of spring, the quiet streets of Turlaine, a quaint old French village, rang with strange and unusual sounds. The clear shrill notes of a flute vibrated in the air, and woke a thousand echoes, though the player was as yet unseen. So gay and merry was the tune that all the villagers were drawn to their doors and presently were hurrying along the pavements to seek the cause of it all. Even the thick gray walls of the monastery nearby were penetrated by the music and Father [Justinian](#), the prior, unlocked the gate and led his band of twenty monks into the street.

Suddenly there appeared around a bend in the road the oddest procession that ever had entered Turlaine. A flute player was at its head, and he was a big burly man, with muscles like a blacksmith's. He was dressed in motley, as the bright-colored garments of the court jesters were called, and on his shock of coarse black hair was a pointed fool's cap, all a-tinkle with little bells. Thrust through his girdle was a stout cudgel.

Just behind him came a thin and haggard lad of fifteen, leading a shaggy black bear. The clumsy animal shuffled along patiently, with funny waddling steps that threw his great bulk from side to side, and made the spectators laugh, even as they shrank away from him, for all saw that his keeper carried a sharp pointed goad.

Next followed a hideous little dwarf, shaking a tambourine, and jabbering in some strange tongue to a wizened little monkey that perched on his shoulder. The fourth member of the band was an attractive youth with a lute strung over his shoulder and a roll of parchment, covered with music, in his hand.

Close at his heels came a boy, not more than twelve, with a thin delicate face framed in soft clustering locks of fair hair. There was a soiled white muslin ruff about his neck, and his clothes were a patchwork of bright colors. A gaudy satin cloak hung from his shoulders and in one hand he carried a bag, loosely knotted of cords, and containing six balls about the size of oranges, all painted in different hues—red, blue, yellow, orange, green and violet.

The procession advanced to the music of the flute until they reached the center of the village square. There they halted and the villagers quickly formed a ring about them. When all had assembled, the flute player pulled off his cap, grinned broadly, and began to speak.

"Good people of Turlaine," he cried in a deep rough voice, "ye shall see wonders come to pass. Here be a great singer; a dancing bear from the far cold countries; a little monkey from Africa; and his master, who seems himself to be naught but a grinning ape, who can play the tambourine passing well. And here's a wondrous juggler and dancer, with a foot like [thistledown](#). Drop first a penny in my cap in token of good faith, and ye shall see all these wonders. Then if we please ye not, give us no more, but if ye like our tricks, reward us according to our deserts."

At that he pulled off his cap and passed among the crowd. There was a rattle of pennies into the cap and the people pressed and jostled closer and closer about the performers, each one trying to obtain a better view than his neighbor. Only the monks remained at some little distance, watching from the elevation of the chapel steps, half

in curiosity, half in disapproval. Nor did the stranger approach them for money. With a laugh, he called over his shoulder: "Holy men have no pennies, but ye may watch and welcome. [Mayhap](#) your blessing will fall upon us."

Then he returned to the circle, and raised the flute to his lips. The dwarf and his monkey came forward. Shaking his tambourine, and grimacing like an ape, the little man began to put his pet through its tricks. He held out one hand, and the monkey swung by its tail from his wrist. It climbed up and down on him as though the dwarf had been a tree; it danced a comical jig, and ended by snatching off its little cap and making a profound bow.

The next performer was the dancing bear. Urged on by his trainer's goad he went through some sort of a clumsy dance, snorting with pain whenever the sharp point was thrust into him. The villagers had been too much interested in the monkey's antics to notice that the flute player had been tweaking the dwarf's ear cruelly, whenever his efforts on the tambourine slackened, and now as his fingers were busy on the flute, he gave the bear an occasional kick, and sometimes followed it with one for the boy. There was a murmur in the crowd at that, but just then there stepped forward the lad with the lute, and began to pick at its strings. Then he sang in a high sweet voice a song of adventure, of knights and ladies, and held the crowd in perfect quiet by the beauty of his song. When he had finished they called for another. Flushed and smiling, he gave it to them, and when they clamored for it, would have sung a third, but the flute player, with a scowl and a muttered word, elbowed him aside and roughly thrust into his place the little juggler.

The boy drew his balls from their bag, and began to juggle them, tossing them up and catching them in his thin deft fingers until all the six were in the air at once. Many tricks he did that seemed no less than magic to the simple villagers. At last he began to dance. His nimble feet, moving in time to the lively music of the flute, were here and there, like thistledown indeed, and at intervals he would give a leap high in the air. The tune grew faster and faster, and at the shrill notes the dance grew wilder, and ended at last in a great leap, higher than the ones that had gone before.

But the little dancer did not regain his feet as he had done previously. His ankle gave a sudden twist, and with a scream of pain the boy fell to the ground and lay there, white faced and sobbing, holding his ankle with both hands. The crowd pressed in closer, and a dozen hands were stretched out to raise the boy. He tried to stand, but it was torture to rest his weight on the injured foot, and with a moan he sank down again.

There was a black frown on the face of the leader. He did not address a word to the little juggler, did not extend a hand to him, but stood apart, grimly silent, as if he were trying to decide what to do. At last he pulled off his cap and passed among the crowd.

There was a generous outpouring of coins. Everyone seemed to have the same idea. With the necessity of leaving the boy at the inn, and paying for his care, or providing a little cart for him to ride in, the troupe would need more money, and every villager who could spare even a copper, dropped it in until the hat was nearly full. The man emptied the coins into a leather bag, put on his cap, and gave a sharp word of command. The dwarf and his monkey were first to go, then followed the boy with the dancing bear. The lute player spoke to the master in a low voice, but the big man gave him a glance so ugly that the lad trembled, and hurried after the others. And then almost before the villagers realized what he meant to do, the flute player strode off down the road after him.

The little juggler made a frantic effort to rise. But the effort was too much for him and he fell forward on the grass in a faint.

Several of the men made a rush toward the leader, but he turned and faced the crowd, one hand on the bear's collar, the other gripping his thick cudgel.

"Advance another step," he cried, "and I set free this savage animal upon you all, and beat you with this thick stick. Think you I mean to bother with that useless child? He will never dance again, nor juggle either till he be able to stand on his two feet. I leave him to your gentle care. We thank you all," he ended with an evil grin, and swinging about on his heel he strode away down the road after his miserable troupe who were hurrying on with bent heads, as if they were too frightened to give even a backward glance at their deserted comrade.

The villagers returned to the circle about the boy. Father Justinian and another friar were kneeling beside him, **rubbing his hands and slapping the palms**. He opened his eyes at last and gave a wild look about.

"Is he gone?" he asked in a weak voice.

"Aye, lad," answered a dozen voices. The little juggler began to tremble. "I don't know what to do or where to go," he said in a quavering voice, "I have no home—no friends—no one but him—and now he has left me." There was infinite misery in his tone.

"You have friends," said the gentle voice of Father Justinian. "We are all your friends, and here is Brother **Ambrose**, who is even now longing to try his bone-setting skill on you. There—put one arm around my neck—so—now the other around Brother Ambrose's—there—easy," and gently and by degrees they raised the boy, made a chair of their crossed hands, and lifted him onto it.

What happened after that was very vague in the mind of Rene, the little juggler. All his life he could remember little else but hard work, tramping about from town to town, dancing and juggling, receiving in payment a small portion of food and many blows from his master. At night he usually slept in some stable, or on a heap of sacks in a tavern, but now he was carried within the monastery walls, and on into a small bare room, furnished only with a narrow bed. Gently they laid him upon it, and Brother Ambrose ran his fingers over the injured ankle.

It was a hard fifteen minutes that followed. The monk's fingers were strong and firm, and they pushed and pulled at the bones until the lad screamed with pain, though he tried hard to be brave, and smiled through his tears at the kind face bending over him. But at last it was over, and he lay back pale and weak, while the foot and ankle were swathed round and round with many rolls of clean white bandages, whose very snugness seemed to ease the pain somewhat.

Then followed the brightest days Rene had ever known. As the ankle began to mend, Brother Ambrose would help him out into the monastery garden, and place him where he might watch the monks at work among the flowers. Sometimes, however, he took him into the schoolroom instead, a great vaulted room where the boys of the village were learning their lessons. Some of the older ones were studying to enter the order, and wore plain **brown garments** very much like those of the monks. Rene himself had been given such a suit. His own clothes had been deemed unsuited for wear in the monastery, and now, neatly cleaned and mended by Brother Ambrose, lay in a small bundle at the foot of his bed, together with his red cap and the six bright balls. Rest and kindness, and simple nourishing food in abundance had made a different boy of Rene. His eyes had grown brighter, and his hollow cheeks were round and rosy.

There were two clouds, however, on the sunshine of Rene's joy. He was almost cured—soon he would have to go away—away from the beautiful garden—away from Brother Ambrose and Father Justinian and the others.

That was one cloud. The other was that Brother Melchior hated him. It was quite true. The tall thin gray man who was *second in authority* to Father Justinian had never a word or a smile for the lad, naught but frowns and every sign of open disapproval. Several times he had spoken to the prior, in Rene's hearing, of the welcome time when they should at last be rid of the nuisance. And so, on the day when Rene could bear his full weight on his left foot and feel no pain there, only a certain weakness, he knew that the happy hours were over for him. It remained only to learn what was to become of him.

A summons from Father Justinian, as he was walking in the garden with Brother Ambrose, brought him no comfort. It meant only his dismissal, he felt, and he walked slowly along the path, with lagging feet and hanging head. He had a wild desire to hurt himself in some way, so that his stay within the friendly walls might be lengthened, but he put that idea behind him, and went to Father Justinian.

"Rene," said the old man gently, as the boy stood before him, "if you might choose your life what would you do with it?"

Without hesitation came the answer. "I would study and learn, so that I might become a good man like you and Brother Ambrose, and serve our dear Lord, and the Blessed Lady all my days," said Rene earnestly.

The answer seemed to please the prior. "That is what I would have you do," he said. "You may stay here and learn. Then, when you are a man, you shall become one of the brethren if you will it so—there—there—lad—take it not so much to heart," for Rene had fallen to his knees and was sobbing over Father Justinian's hand.

And so the little juggler stayed on at the monastery, though much against the wishes of Brother Melchior. The boy had several duties to perform each day now, in addition to his studies. He did them all with a will, but best of all he liked to clean the chapel floor. It was hard work to kneel on the bare stones and scrub them, but there was a reward. In a niche in the wall between two high stained glass windows, through the panes of which the sunlight filtered in all the gay colors of the rainbow, stood a figure of the Virgin. Her face and hands were of wax, so delicately modelled and painted that they seemed flesh and blood. Her smile was so sweet and tender that the boy grew to feel that she looked for him, and welcomed him each day as he came in to do his work. He would polish away at the stones with all the strength in his slender hands until the floor fairly shone, and then would look up at the figure in the rich robes of red, blue and gold, as if for her smile of approval. He felt proud to serve the Queen of Heaven, even if in so humble a way.

But others were *serving her in other ways*. One of the boys of Rene's own age had a beautiful voice, as sweet as that of the lute player who had been Rene's companion in his juggling days. Morning and evening he would enter the chapel, kneel before the statue and sing to it. But the songs were not about knights and ladies, nor of adventure, but all were in praise of God. Another boy played sweetly on the viola, and it was his custom to play before the altar each day. A third had learned to paint in colors and gold, on parchment, and often when he had made something especially beautiful he would enter the chapel and reverently lay it at the feet of the image.

A secret pain began to burn in Rene's heart. Added to the constant disapproval of Brother Melchior was the knowledge that he had no talent with which to serve the Virgin. He could neither play, nor sing, nor paint—he read badly, halting and stumbling over every long word. He was making but slow progress in his other studies, too. Never before in all his life had he been taught anything—even the dancing and juggling he had picked up for himself, with blows and hard words as his only encouragement. There was only that one thing he could do and do well.

One day as he scrubbed the chapel floor it seemed to him that the smile on the sculptured face was even sweeter and kinder than usual, and he made a sudden resolve. When the work was done he hurried to his cell and hastily dressed himself in his old garments of a juggler, took up the colored balls and returned to the chapel.

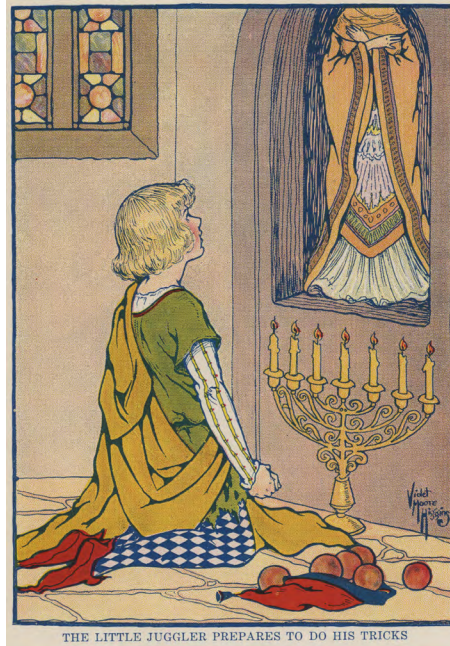


Fig. 45: "The Little Juggler Prepares to Do His Tricks." Illustration by Violet Moore Higgins, 1917. Published in Violet Moore Higgins, *The Little Juggler and Other French Tales Retold* (Racine, WI: Whitman, 1917), frontispiece.

Rene did not see the thin figure that followed him, and stood at the doorway, watching him as he prepared to juggle the balls before the altar.

Only a moment did Brother Melchior linger, then he was on his way to Father Justinian. He had come so often with tales of the lad's misdoings, all very trifling ones except to himself, that the old man was inclined to doubt this latest story.

"Then come with me," the other replied sourly, "and see if I be wrong."

With a sense of misgiving the old man followed Brother Melchior, and the two hid in a recess of the deep stone doorway leading to the chapel. From their hiding place they could see Rene quite plainly, though he was so intent on his affairs that he did not see them, or hear, their stealthy footfalls. He was juggling the balls as he had done in the streets, and even the weeks without practice had not spoiled the cunning of his hand. It was harder work for him now, that was all. He had to strain every nerve and muscle to catch them, but not a ball fell to the floor. When he had done all his tricks of juggling, he put the balls on the floor in his red cap, and straightened up to his full height. It was here that Brother Melchior wished to rush forward and seize the wicked lad who dared to juggle before the very altar, but Father Justinian held him back. "I will see it through," he whispered in the other's ear, "I must know all."

The next instant the watchers received a second shock. Rene was dancing!

He did not trip as lightly as once he had done through the village streets. His ankle was not strong enough to bear this unaccustomed strain, and it began to ache painfully, but he gritted his teeth and kept on. Sweat poured down his face and mingled with the tears that would force themselves out; little involuntary moans came now and then from his lips. At last, utterly exhausted, he fell on his knees before the altar.

"Now," whispered Brother Melchior eagerly, but again Father Justinian held him back as the boy began to speak.

"Oh, Gracious Lady," he began, almost gasping the words, so out of breath was he, "I have served thee with the only talent that I have. I cannot sing, nor play the sweet toned viola, nor paint in glowing colors on the smooth white parchment. I can only dance and juggle for thee. Thou who knowest all the sorrows of the world, Thou knowest that it hurts me full sore to dance upon the foot that was hurt, yet have I done my best. All that I have is Thine. My life is given to Your service. Oh, bless me. Gracious Lady."

The earnest young voice ceased, and he knelt with bowed head. It was very still in the chapel. Then, as the hidden watchers would have slipped away unseen, there was a movement at the altar.

The figure in the niche was bending forward, a white hand rested for an instant on Rene's head, and with her scarlet mantle the Virgin was wiping away the moisture from his brow.

And at that sign, Father Justinian, happy in a faith justified, and Brother Melchior, his heart strangely softened, fell on their knees and prayed.