

Alfred Austin (1835-1913)

2 *Ave Maria*

I

In the ages of Faith, before the day  
When men were too proud to weep or pray,  
There stood in a red-roofed Breton town  
Snugly nestled 'twixt sea and down,  
A chapel for simple souls to meet, 5  
Nightly, and sing with voices sweet,  
*Ave Maria!*

II

There was an idiot, palsied, bleared,  
With unkempt locks and a matted beard,  
Hunched from the cradle, vacant-eyed, 10  
And whose head kept rolling from side to side;  
Yet who, when the sunset-glow grew dim,  
Joined with the rest in the twilight hymn,  
*Ave Maria!*

III

But when they up-got and wended home, 15  
Those up the hillside, these to the foam,  
He hobbled along in the narrowing dusk,  
Like a thing that is only hull and husk;  
On as he hobbled, chanting still,  
Now to himself, now loud and shrill, 20  
*Ave Maria!*

IV

When morning smiled on the smiling deep,  
And the fisherman woke from dreamless sleep,  
And ran up his sail, and trimmed his craft,  
While his little ones leaped on the sand and laughed, 25  
The senseless cripple would stand and stare,  
Then suddenly holloa his wonted prayer,  
*Ave Maria!*

## V

Others might plough, and reap, and sow,  
 Delve in the sunshine, spin in snow, 30  
 Make sweet love in a shelter sweet,  
 Or trundle their dead in a winding-sheet;  
 But he, through rapture, and pain, and wrong,  
 Kept singing his one monotonous song,  
Ave Maria! 35

## VI

When thunder growled from the ravelled wrack,  
 And ocean to welkin bellowed back,  
 And the lightning sprang from its cloudy sheath,  
 And tore through the forest with jagged teeth,  
 Then leaped and laughed o'er the havoc wreaked, 40  
 The idiot clapped with his hands, and shrieked,  
Ave Maria!

## VII

Children mocked, and mimicked his feet,  
 As he slouched or sidled along the street;  
 Maidens shrank as he passed them by, 45  
 And mothers with child eschewed his eye;  
 And half in pity, half scorn, the folk  
 Christened him, from the words he spoke,  
Ave Maria.

## VIII

One year when the harvest feasts were done, 50  
 And the mending of tattered nets begun,  
 And the kittiwake's scream took a weirder key  
 From the wailing wind and the moaning sea,  
 He was found, at morn, on the fresh-strewn snow,  
 Frozen, and faint, and crooning low, 55  
Ave Maria!

## IX

They stirred up the ashes between the dogs,  
 And warmed his limbs by the blazing logs,  
 Chafed his puckered and bloodless skin,

And strove to quiet his chattering chin; 60  
But, ebbing with unreturning tide,  
He kept on murmuring till he died,  
Ave Maria!

X

Idiot, soulless, brute from birth,  
He could not be buried in sacred earth; 65  
So they laid him afar, apart, alone,  
Without or a cross, or turf, or stone,  
Senseless clay unto senseless clay,  
To which none ever came nigh to say,  
Ave Maria! 70

XI

When the meads grew saffron, the hawthorn white,  
And the lark bore his music out of sight,  
And the swallow outraced the racing wave,  
Up from the lonely, outcast grave  
Sprouted a lily, straight and high, 75  
Such as She bears to whom men cry,  
Ave Maria!

XII

None had planted it, no one knew  
How it had come there, why it grew;  
Grew up strong, till its stately stem 80  
Was crowned with a snow-white diadem, —  
One pure lily, round which, behold!  
Was written by God in veins of gold,  
“Ave Maria!”

XIII

Over the lily they built a shrine, 85  
Where are mingled the mystic bread and wine;  
Shrine you may see in the little town  
That is snugly nestled 'twixt deep and down.  
Through the Breton land it hath wondrous fame,  
And it bears the unshriven idiot's name, 90  
Ave Maria.

XIV

Hunchbacked, gibbering, blear-eyed, halt,  
From forehead to footstep one foul fault,  
Crazy, contorted, mindless-born,  
The gentle's pity, the cruel's scorn,  
Who shall bar you the gates of Day,  
So you have simple faith to say,

95

Ave Maria?

*1882*

(From *Narrative Poems*. London, 1891)