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ALICE MEYNELL

‘SOEUR MONIQUE’

A RONDEAU BY COUPERIN

Quiet form of silent nun,
What has given you to my inward eyes?
What has marked you, unknown one,
In the throngs of centuries
That mine ears do listen through?
This old master’s melody
That expresses you,
This admired simplicity,
Tender, with a serious wit,
And two words, the name of it,
‘Soeur Monique.’
And if sad the music is,
It is sad with mysteries
Of a small immortal thing
That the passing ages sing,—
Simple music making mirth
Of the dying and the birth
Of the people of the earth.
No, not sad; we are beguiled,
Sad with living as we are;
Ours the sorrow, outpouring
Sad self on a selfless thing,
As our eyes and hearts are mild
With our sympathy for Spring,
With a pity sweet and wild
For the innocent and far,
With our sadness in a star,
Or our sadness in a child.
But two words, and this sweet air.
Soeur Monique,
Had he more, who set you there?
Was his music-dream of you
Of some perfect nun he knew,
Or of some ideal, as true?
And I see you where you stand
With your life held in your hand
As a rosary of days.

And your thoughts in calm arrays,
And your innocent prayers are told
On your rosary of days.
And the young days and the old
With their quiet prayers did meet
When the chaplet was complete.
Did it vex you, the surmise
Of this wind of words, this storm of cries,
Though you kept the silence so
In the storms of long ago,
And you keep it, like a star?
—Of the evils triumphing,
Strong, for all your perfect conquering,
Silenced conqueror that you are?
And I wonder at your peace, I wonder.
Would it trouble you to know,
Tender soul, the world and sin
By your calm feet trodden under
Long ago,
Living now, mighty to win?
And your feet are vanished like the snow.
Vanished; but the poet, he
In whose dream your face appears,
He who ranges unknown years
With your music in his heart,
Speaks to you familiarly
Where you keep apart,
And invents you as you were.
And your picture, O my nun!
Is a strangely easy one,
For the holy weed you wear,
For your hidden eyes and hidden hair,
And in picturing you I may
Scarcely go astray.
O the vague reality!
The mysterious certainty!
O strange truth of these my guesses
In the wide thought-wildernesses!
—Truth of one divined of many flowers;
Of one raindrop in the showers
Of the long-ago swift rain;
Of one tear of many tears
In some world-renownéd pain;
Of one daisy ’mid the centuries of sun;

Of a little living nun
In the garden of the years.
Yes, I am not far astray;
But I guess you as might one
Pausing when young March is grey,
In a violet-peopled day;
All his thoughts go out to places that he knew,
To his child-home in the sun,
To the fields of his regret,
To one place i’ the innocent March air,
By one olive, and invent
The familiar form and scent
Safely; a white violet
Certainly is there.
Soeur Monique, remember me.
’Tis not in the past alone
I am picturing you to be;
But my little friend, my own,
In my moment, pray for me.
For another dream is mine,
And another dream is true,
Sweeter even,
Of the little ones that shine
Lost within the light divine,—
Of some meekest flower, or you,
In the fields of Heaven.