

**SOEUR
MARIE: A POEM**

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Soeur Marie: A Poem by Mary Randall Shippey

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MARY RANDALL SHIPPEY

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Soeur Marie

A poem

BY

MARY RANDALL SHIPPEY

1845



Robert Grier Cooke

NEW YORK

MDCDIV

18

Estace Hale Ball
New York
March 1908.

Foreword

The author of *Sœur Marie* has solved the problem of the soul that she sought to explain:—Eight years ago she passed from this life. The poem is an original attempt, of a woman, to give an answer to the questions of the soul. It owes little to books, but much to conversation and experience of the heart. There will be found in the poem a minor tone of music running through its lines apart from the incident and metre—who can say? Does not the soul in Earth-life, now and then, come clearly to knowledge and expression of itself? It is always insistent, but material needs engross the intellect and rarely can the soul compel recognition. A few through the ages have kept truth, some find it, and it is given when it will be received.

Soeur Marie

I KNEW her only as a gray-garbed nun
Whose gentle mission took her wheresoe'er
A wearied body or grief-sickened heart
Had need of rest and that sure healing wrought
By her soft touch and low sweet-cadenced voice.

By what thrice-blessèd chance she came to be
The star that fixed my life's uncertain course,
Were briefly told:—The kindly, keen-eyed friend
Whose ready skill to read the cause of things
Beneath their seeming, came thro' many years
Of ceaseless work among his suffering kind,
Discerned my need and sent me Sœur Marie.

“A nurse for you.” So said the kind, keen eyes
When first they saw my languid look unfold
The restful garb and quiet, tender face.
No more it seemed a thing to question then,
To my sick heart and thought-refusing brain,
Than if he'd shut a rose, dew-kissed, within
My helpless hand and said, “a flower for you.”

How many days and nights she patient watched
Within that darkened room, I never knew ;
For memory dates from that fair morning when
Like one new-born, I woke to know and feel
The something more that marked the watcher there
From those gray shapes that peopled all my dreams.

How soft she moved with that sure poise and grace
No art can teach but only consciousness
Of having found the mission and the place
By Heaven intended. So the lily moves
On slender, swaying stem her regal head,
Each undulating motion:—saying:—“ See
How beautiful a thing it is to be !
O gracious moment that conceived it meet
That I should grow and just be fair and sweet ! ”

When from that haunted, grief-englamoured room
First ventured I into the great clean world,—
My world of arching skies and sweet new air—
’Twere hard to tell if most I joyed or grieved.

Thro’ all the long, slow, convalescing days
Conspired the gracious ministrants of health—
The tempered air, the smiling April sun,
The happy birds, the little growing things
To lure the soul back to its cage again,
And Sœur Marie’s low voice and gentle touch

Seemed but a chord the more in that full theme,
The jubilate of the waking spring.

And ah! the deep, sweet joy to feel again
That boundless heart—the mighty mother heart
That knows no change, still beating warm and true;
Within her tireless arms to lie at rest,
A child once more; to be again caressed
After long parting;—were that not joy?—and yet,
Do hearts 'neath mother-kisses straight forget
All tears and aches, or but the keener sense
By contrast with her touch the bleeding wounds
Fresh stabbed by hands less gentle?

Lethæan-sweet

The peace and rest of those long dreamful days
To my worn spirit. One by one the keys
That grief had worn to wearying dissonance,
Regained their rightful tones. My lyric soul
Awoke to feel once more its myriad strings
A nearing subtle, full, symphonious touch
With nature's music. But as daily grew
The harmony more perfect, so increased
The one o'er-strained chord's discrepant sound,
Grown thrice discordant where would else abound
Fine consonance and peace inviolate.

What taught the heart that beat so evenly
Beneath that soft gray garb, to feel the hurt

Deep hidden in another, or to trace
With such un-erring swiftness to the cause,
I could not then divine; so when my nurse
Let fall one day the volume from her hands
And clasping mine, at once began to speak
As she had read more clearly in my look
My inmost soul than from the printed book
The author's thought, in my first great surprise
I turned in half resentment from her eyes.

But not like others was my Sœur Marie,
And stooping o'er me as an angel might
She gently whispered, "Child, I know your pain;
May I not know the hidden cause as well?"

Forgive, if too abruptly thus aside
I thrust the veil so closely drawn to hide
Your aching wound; 'tis but that I may find
Some means of swifter healing, that so keen
I make the hurt.—Look in my eyes, dear soul,
And read if aught has moved me thus to speak
All uninvited, save the tender throb
Of woman's love to woman.—Do not fear
To let poor nature have her way; outpour
As freely all your pent-up pain as though
Your heart alone were listener. Dear one, know
The power to read your suffering thus doth prove
My right divine to share it,—right of love."