

THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

A widow poor, somewhat advanced in age,
Lived, on a time, within a small cottage
Beside a grove and standing down a dale.
This widow, now, of whom I tell my tale,
Since that same day when she'd been last a wife
Had led, with patience, her strait simple life,
For she'd small goods and little income-rent;
By husbanding of such as God had sent
She kept herself and her young daughters twain.
Three large sows had she, and no more, 'tis plain,
Three cows and a lone sheep that she called Moll.
Right sooty was her bedroom and her hall,
Wherein she'd eaten many a slender meal.
Of sharp sauce, why she needed no great deal,
For dainty morsel never passed her throat;
Her diet well accorded with her coat.
Repletion never made this woman sick;
A temperate diet was her whole physic,
And exercise, and her heart's sustenance.
The gout, it hindered her nowise to dance,
Nor apoplexy spun within her head;
And no wine drank she, either white or red;
Her board was mostly garnished, white and black,
With milk and brown bread, whereof she'd no lack,
Broiled bacon and sometimes an egg or two,
For a small dairy business did she do.
A yard she had, enclosed all roundabout
With pales, and there was a dry ditch without,
And in the yard a cock called Chanticleer.
In all the land, for crowing, he'd no peer.
His voice was merrier than the organ gay
On Mass days, which in church begins to play;
More regular was his crowing in his lodge
Than is a clock or abbey horologe.
By instinct he'd marked each ascension down
Of equinoctial value in that town;
For when fifteen degrees had been ascended,
Then crew he so it might not be amended.
His comb was redder than a fine coral,
And battlemented like a castle wall.
His bill was black and just like jet it shone;
Like azure were his legs and toes, each one;
His spurs were whiter than the lily flower;
And plumage of the burnished gold his dower.
This noble cock had in his governance
Seven hens to give him pride and all pleasure,
Which were his sisters and his paramours
And wondrously like him as to colours,
Whereof the fairest hued upon her throat

Was called the winsome Mistress Pertelote.
Courteous she was, discreet and debonnaire,
Companionable, and she had been so fair
Since that same day when she was seven nights old,
That truly she had taken the heart to hold
Of Chanticleer, locked in her every limb;
He loved her so that all was well with him.
But such a joy it was to hear them sing,
Whenever the bright sun began to spring,
In sweet accord, "My love walks through the land."
For at that time, and as I understand,
The beasts and all the birds could speak and sing.
So it befell that, in a bright dawning,
As Chanticleer 'midst wives and sisters all
Sat on his perch, the which was in the hall,
And next him sat the winsome Pertelote,
This Chanticleer he groaned within his throat
Like man that in his dreams is troubled sore.
And when fair Pertelote thus heard him roar,
She was aghast and said: "O sweetheart dear,
What ails you that you groan so? Do you hear?
You are a sleepy herald. Fie, for shame!"
And he replied to her thus: "Ah, madame,
I pray you that you take it not in grief:
By God, I dreamed I'd come to such mischief,
Just now, my heart yet jumps with sore affright.
Now God," cried he, "my vision read aright
And keep my body out of foul prison!
I dreamed, that while I wandered up and down
Within our yard, I saw there a strange beast
Was like a dog, and he'd have made a feast
Upon my body, and have had me dead.
His colour yellow was and somewhat red;
And tipped his tail was, as were both his ears,
With black, unlike the rest, as it appears;
His snout was small and gleaming was each eye.
Remembering how he looked, almost I die;
And all this caused my groaning, I confess."
"Aha," said she, "fie on you, spiritless!
Alas!" cried she, "for by that God above,
Now have you lost my heart and all my love;
I cannot love a coward, by my faith.
For truly, whatsoever woman saith,
We all desire, if only it may be,
To have a husband hardy, wise, and free,
And trustworthy, no niggard, and no fool,
Nor one that is afraid of every tool,
Nor yet a braggart, by that God above!
How dare you say, for shame, unto your love

That there is anything that you have feared?
 Have you not man's heart, and yet have a beard?
 Alas! And are you frightened by a vision?
 Dreams are, God knows, a matter for derision.
 Visions are generated by repletions
 And vapours and the body's bad secretions
 Of humours overabundant in a wight.
 Surely this dream, which you have had tonight,
 Comes only of the superfluity
 Of your bilious irascibility,
 Which causes folk to shiver in their dreams
 For arrows and for flames with long red gleams,
 For great beasts in the fear that they will bite,
 For quarrels and for wolf whelps great and slight;
 Just as the humour of melancholy
 Causes full many a man, in sleep, to cry,
 For fear of black bears or of bulls all black,
 Or lest black devils put them in a sack.
 Of other humours could I tell also,
 That bring, to many a sleeping man, great woe;
 But I'll pass on as lightly as I can.
 "Lo, Cato, and he was a full wise man,
 Said he not, we should trouble not for dreams?
 Now, sir," said she, "when we fly from the beams,
 For God's love go and take some laxative;
 On peril of my soul, and as I live,
 I counsel you the best, I will not lie,
 That both for cholera and for melancholy
 You purge yourself; and since you shouldn't tarry,
 And on this farm there's no apothecary,
 I will myself go find some herbs for you
 That will be good for health and pecker too;
 And in our own yard all these herbs I'll find,
 The which have properties of proper kind
 To purge you underneath and up above.
 Forget this not, now, for God's very love!
 You are so very choleric of complexion.
 Beware the mounting sun and all dejection,
 Nor get yourself with sudden humours hot;
 For if you do, I dare well lay a groat
 That you shall have the tertian fever's pain,
 Or some ague that may well be your bane.
 A day or two you shall have digestives
 Of worms before you take your laxatives
 Of laurel, centaury, and fumitory,
 Or else of hellebore purificatory,
 Or caper spurge, or else of dogwood berry,
 Or herb ivy, all in our yard so merry;
 Peck them just as they grow and gulp them in.
 Be merry, husband, for your father's kin!
 Dread no more dreams. And I can say no more."
 "Madam," said he, "gramercy for your lore.
 Nevertheless, not running Cato down,

Who had for wisdom such a high renown,
 And though he says to hold no dreams in dread,
 By God, men have, in many old books, read
 Of many a man more an authority
 That ever Cato was, pray pardon me,
 Who say just the reverse of his sentence,
 And have found out by long experience
 That dreams, indeed, are good significations,
 As much of joys as of all tribulations
 That folk endure here in this life present.
 There is no need to make an argument;
 The very proof of this is shown indeed.
 "One of the greatest authors that men read
 Says thus: That on a time two comrades went
 On pilgrimage, and all in good intent;
 And it so chanced they came into a town
 Where there was such a crowding, up and down,
 Of people, and so little harbourage,
 That they found not so much as one cottage
 Wherein the two of them might sheltered be.
 Wherefore they must, as of necessity,
 For that one night at least, part company;
 And each went to a different hostelry
 And took such lodgment as to him did fall.
 Now one of them was lodged within a stall,
 Far in a yard, with oxen of the plow;
 That other man found shelter fair enow,
 As was his luck, or was his good fortune,
 Whatever 'tis that governs us, each one.
 "So it befell that, long ere it was day,
 This last man dreamed in bed, as there he lay,
 That his poor fellow did unto him call,
 Saying: 'Alas! For in an ox's stall
 This night shall I be murdered where I lie.
 Now help me, brother dear, before I die.
 Come in all haste to me.' 'Twas thus he said.
 This man woke out of sleep, then, all afraid;
 But when he'd wakened fully from his sleep,
 He turned upon his pillow, yawning deep,
 Thinking his dream was but a fantasy.
 And then again, while sleeping, thus dreamed he.
 And then a third time came a voice that said
 (Or so he thought): 'Now, comrade, I am dead;
 Behold my bloody wounds, so wide and deep!
 Early arise tomorrow from your sleep,
 And at the west gate of the town,' said he,
 A wagon full of dung there shall you see,
 Wherein is hid my body craftily;
 Do you arrest this wagon right boldly.
 They killed me for what money they could gain.
 And told in every point how he'd been slain,
 With a most pitiful face and pale of hue.
 And trust me well, this dream did all come true;

For on the morrow, soon as it was day,
 Unto his comrade's inn he took the way;
 And when he'd come into that ox's stall,
 Upon his fellow he began to call.
 "The keeper of the place replied anon,
 And said he: 'Sir, your friend is up and gone;
 As soon as day broke he went out of town.'
 This man, then, felt suspicion in him grown,
 Remembering the dream that he had had,
 And forth he went, no longer tarrying, sad,
 Unto the west gate of the town, and found
 A dung-cart on its way to dumping-ground,
 And it was just the same in every wise
 As you have heard the dead man advertise;
 And with a hardy heart he then did cry
 Vengeance and justice on this felony:
 'My comrade has been murdered in the night,
 And in this very cart lies, face upright.
 I cry to all the officers,' said he
 'That ought to keep the peace in this city.
 Alas, alas, here lies my comrade slain!'
 "Why should I longer with this tale detain?
 The people rose and turned the cart to ground,
 And in the center of the dung they found
 The dead man, lately murdered in his sleep.
 "O Blessed God, Who art so true and deep!
 Lo, how Thou dost turn murder out alway!
 Murder will out, we see it every day.
 Murder's so hateful and abominable
 To God, Who is so just and reasonable,
 That He'll not suffer that it hidden be;
 Though it may skulk a year, or two, or three,
 Murder will out, and I conclude thereon.
 Immediately the rulers of that town,
 They took the carter and so sore they racked
 Him and the host, until their bones were cracked,
 That they confessed their wickedness anon,
 And hanged they both were by the neck, and soon.
 "Here may men see that dreams are things to dread.
 And certainly, in that same book I read,
 Right in the very chapter after this
 (I spoof not, as I may have joy and bliss),
 Of two men who would voyage oversea,
 For some cause, and unto a far country,
 If but the winds had not been all contrary,
 Causing them both within a town to tarry,
 Which town was builded near the haven-side.
 But then, one day, along toward eventide,
 The wind did change and blow as suited best.
 Jolly and glad they went unto their rest.
 And were prepared right early for to sail;
 But unto one was told a marvelous tale.
 For one of them, a-sleeping as he lay,

Did dream a wondrous dream ere it was day.
 He thought a strange man stood by his bedside
 And did command him, he should there abide,
 And said to him: 'If you tomorrow wend,
 You shall be drowned; my tale is at an end.'
 He woke and told his fellow what he'd met
 And prayed him quit the voyage and forget;
 For just one day he prayed him there to bide.
 His comrade, who was lying there beside,
 Began to laugh and scorned him long and fast.
 'No dream,' said he, 'may make my heart aghast,
 So that I'll quit my business for such things.
 I do not care a straw for your dreamings,
 For visions are but fantasies and japes.
 Men dream, why, every day, of owls and apes,
 And many a wild phantasm therewithal;
 Men dream of what has never been, nor shall.
 But since I see that you will here abide,
 And thus forgo this fair wind and this tide,
 God knows I'm sorry; nevertheless, good day!'
 "And thus he took his leave and went his way.
 But long before the half his course he'd sailed,
 I know not why, nor what it was that failed,
 But casually the vessel's bottom rent,
 And ship and men under the water went,
 In sight of other ships were there beside,
 The which had sailed with that same wind and tide
 "And therefore, pretty Pertelote, my dear,
 By such old-time examples may you hear
 And learn that no man should be too reckless
 Of dreams, for I can tell you, fair mistress,
 That many a dream is something well to dread
 "Why in the 'Life' of Saint Kenelm I read
 (Who was Kenelphus' son, the noble king
 Of Mercia), how Kenelm dreamed a thing;
 A while ere he was murdered, so they say,
 His own death in a vision saw, one day.
 His nurse interpreted, as records tell,
 That vision, bidding him to guard him well
 From treason; but he was but seven years old,
 And therefore 'twas but little he'd been told
 Of any dream, so holy was his heart.
 By God! I'd rather than retain my shirt
 That you had read this legend, as have I.
 Dame Pertelote, I tell you verily,
 Macrobius, who wrote of Scipio
 The African a vision long ago,
 He holds by dreams, saying that they have been
 Warnings of things that men have later seen.
 "And furthermore, I pray you to look well
 In the Old Testament at Daniel,
 Whether he held dreams for mere vanity.
 Read, too, of Joseph, and you there shall see

Where dreams have sometimes been (I say not all)
 Warnings of things that, after did befall.
 Consider Egypt's king, Dan Pharaoh,
 His baker and his butler, these also,
 Whether they knew of no effect from dreams.
 Whoso will read of sundry realms the themes
 May learn of dreams full many a wondrous thing.
 Lo, Croesus, who was once of Lydia king,
 Dreamed he not that he sat upon a tree,
 Which signified that hanged high he should be?
 Lo, how Andromache, great Hector's wife,
 On that same day when Hector lost his life,
 She dreamed upon the very night before
 That Hector's life should be lost evermore,
 If on that day he battled, without fail.
 She warned him, but no warning could avail;
 He went to fight, despite all auspices,
 And so was shortly slain by Achilles.
 But that same tale is all too long to tell,
 And, too, it's nearly day, I must not dwell
 Upon this; I but say, concluding here,
 That from this vision I have cause to fear
 Adversity; and I say, furthermore,
 That I do set by laxatives no store,
 For they are poisonous, I know it well.
 Them I defy and love not, truth to tell.
 "But let us speak of mirth and stop all this;
 My lady Pertelote, on hope of bliss,
 In one respect God's given me much grace;
 For when I see the beauty of your face,
 You are so rosy-red beneath each eye,
 It makes my dreadful terror wholly die.
 For there is truth in *In principio*
Mulier est hominis confusio
 (Madam, the meaning of this latin is,
 Woman is man's delight and all his bliss).
 For when I feel at night your tender side,
 Although I cannot then upon you ride,
 Because our perch so narrow is, alas!
 I am so full of joy and all solace
 That I defy, then, vision, aye and dream."
 And with that word he flew down from the beam,
 For it was day, and down went his hens all;
 And with a cluck he them began to call,
 For he had found some corn within the yard.
 Regal he was, and fears he did discard.
 He feathered Pertelote full many a time
 And twenty times he trod her ere 'twas prime.
 He looked as if he were a grim lion
 As on his toes he strutted up and down;
 He deigned not set his foot upon the ground.
 He clucked when any grain of corn he found,
 And all his wives came running at his call.

Thus regal, as a prince is in his hall,
 I'll now leave busy Chanticleer to feed,
 And with events that followed I'll proceed.
 When that same month wherein the world began,
 Which is called March, wherein God first made man,
 Was ended, and were passed of days also,
 Since March began, full thirty days and two,
 It fell that Chanticleer, in all his pride,
 His seven wives a-walking by his side,
 Cast up his two eyes toward the great bright sun
 (Which through die sign of Taurus now had run
 Twenty degrees and one, and somewhat more),
 And knew by instinct and no other lore
 That it was prime, and joyfully he crew,
 "The sun, my love," he said, "has climbed anew
 Forty degrees and one, and somewhat more.
 My lady Pertelote, whom I adore,
 Mark now these happy birds, hear how they sing,
 And see all these fresh flowers, how they spring;
 Full is my heart of revelry and grace."
 But suddenly he fell in grievous case;
 For ever the latter end of joy is woe.
 God knows that worldly joys do swiftly go;
 And if a rhetorician could but write,
 He in some chronicle might well indite
 And mark it down as sovereign in degree.
 Now every wise man, let him hark to me:
 This tale is just as true, I undertake,
 As is the book of Launcelot of the Lake,
 Which women always hold in such esteem.
 But now I must take up my proper theme.
 A brant-fox, full of sly iniquity,
 That in the grove had lived two years, or three,
 Now by a fine premeditated plot
 That same night, breaking through the hedge, had got
 Into the yard where Chanticleer the fair
 Was wont, and all his wives too, to repair;
 And in a bed of greenery still he lay
 Till it was past the quarter of the day,
 Waiting his chance on Chanticleer to fall,
 As gladly do these killers one and all
 Who lie in ambush for to murder men.
 O murderer false, there lurking in your den!
 O new Iscariot, O new Ganelon!
 O false dissimulator, Greek Sinon
 That brought down Troy all utterly to sorrow!
 O Chanticleer, accused be that morrow
 When you into that yard flew from the beams!
 You were well warned, and fully, by your dreams
 That this day should hold peril damnably.
 But that which God foreknows, it needs must be,
 So says the best opinion of the clerks.
 Witness some cleric perfect for his works,

That in the schools there's a great altercation
 In this regard, and much high disputation
 That has involved a hundred thousand men.
 But I can't sift it to the bran with pen,
 As can the holy Doctor Augustine,
 Or Boethius, or Bishop Bradwardine,
 Whether the fact of God's great foreknowing
 Makes it right needful that I do a thing
 (By needful, I mean, of necessity);
 Or else, if a free choice he granted me,
 To do that same thing, or to do it not,
 Though God foreknew before the thing was wrought;
 Or if His knowing constrains never at all,
 Save by necessity conditional.
 I have no part in matters so austere;
 My tale is of a cock, as you shall hear,
 That took the counsel of his wife, with sorrow,
 To walk within the yard upon that morrow
 After he'd had the dream whereof I told.
 Now women's counsels oft are ill to hold;
 A woman's counsel brought us first to woe,
 And Adam caused from Paradise to go,
 Wherein he was right merry and at ease.
 But since I know not whom it may displease
 If woman's counsel I hold up to blame,
 Pass over, I but said it in my game.
 Read authors where such matters do appear,
 And what they say of women, you may hear.
 These are the cock's words, they are none of mine;
 No harm in women can I e'er divine.
 All in the sand, a-bathing merrily,
 Lay Pertelote, with all her sisters by,
 There in the sun; and Chanticleer so free
 Sang merrier than a mermaid in the sea
 (For Physiologus says certainly
 That they do sing, both well and merrily).
 And so befell that, as he cast his eye
 Among the herbs and on a butterfly,
 He saw this fox that lay there, crouching low.
 Nothing of urge was in him, then, to crow;
 But he cried "Cock-cock-cock" and did so start
 As man who has a sudden fear at heart.
 For naturally a beast desires to flee
 From any enemy that he may see,
 Though never yet he's clapped on such his eye.
 When Chanticleer the fox did then espy,
 He would have fled but that the fox anon
 Said: "Gentle sir, alas! Why be thus gone?
 Are you afraid of me, who am your friend?
 Now, surely, I were worse than any fiend
 If I should do you harm or villainy.
 I came not here upon your deeds to spy;
 But, certainly, the cause of my coming

Was only just to listen to you sing.
 For truly, you have quite as fine a voice
 As angels have that Heaven's choirs rejoice;
 Boethius to music could not bring
 Such feeling, nor do others who can sing.
 My lord your father (God his soul pray bless!)
 And too your mother, of her gentleness,
 Have been in my abode, to my great ease;
 And truly, sir, right fain am I to please.
 But since men speak of singing, I will say
 (As I still have my eyesight day by day),
 Save you, I never heard a man so sing
 As did your father in the grey dawning;
 Truly 'twas from the heart, his every song.
 And that his voice might ever be more strong,
 He took such pains that, with his either eye,
 He had to blink, so loudly would he cry,
 A-standing on his tiptoes therewithal,
 Stretching his neck till it grew long and small.
 And such discretion, too, by him was shown,
 There was no man in any region known
 That him in song or wisdom could surpass.
 I have well read, in Dan Burnell the Ass,
 Among his verses, how there was a cock,
 Because a priest's son gave to him a knock
 Upon the leg, while young and not yet wise,
 He caused the boy to lose his benefice.
 But, truly, there is no comparison
 With the great wisdom and the discretion
 Your father had, or with his subtlety.
 Now sing, dear sir, for holy charity,
 See if you can your father counterfeit."
 This Chanticleer his wings began to beat,
 As one that could no treason there espy,
 So was he ravished by this flattery
 Alas, you lords! Full many a flatterer
 Is in your courts, and many a cozener,
 That please your honours much more, by my fay,
 Than he that truth and justice dares to say.
 Go read the Ecclesiast on flattery;
 Beware, my lords, of all their treachery!
 This Chanticleer stood high upon his toes,
 Stretching his neck, and both his eyes did close,
 And so did crow right loudly, for the nonce;
 And Russel Fox, he started up at once,
 And by the gorget grabbed our Chanticleer,
 Flung him on back, and toward the wood did steer,
 For there was no man who as yet pursued.
 O destiny, you cannot be eschewed!
 Alas, that Chanticleer flew from the beams!
 Alas, his wife recked nothing of his dreams!
 And on a Friday fell all this mischance.
 O Venus, who art goddess of pleasance,

Since he did serve thee well, this Chanticleer,
 And to the utmost of his power here,
 More for delight than cocks to multiply,
 Why would'st thou suffer him that day to die?
 O Gaufred, my dear master sovereign,
 Who, when King Richard Lionheart was slain
 By arrow, sang his death with sorrow sore,
 Why have I not your faculty and lore
 To chide Friday, as you did worthily?
 (For truly, on a Friday slain was he).
 Then would I prove how well I could complain
 For Chanticleer's great fear and all his pain.
 Certainly no such cry and lamentation
 Were made by ladies at Troy's debolation,
 When Pyrrhus with his terrible bared sword
 Had taken old King Priam by the beard
 And slain him (as the Aeneid tells to us),
 As made then all those hens in one chorus
 When they had caught a sight of Chanticleer.
 But fair Dame Pertelote assailed the ear
 Far louder than did Hasdrubal's good wife
 When that her husband bold had lost his life,
 And Roman legionaries burned Carthage;
 For she so full of torment was, and rage,
 She voluntarily to the fire did start
 And burned herself there with a steadfast heart.
 And you, O woeful hens, just so you cried
 As when base Nero burned the city wide
 Of Rome, and wept the senators' stern wives
 Because their husbands all had lost their lives,
 For though not guilty, Nero had them slain.
 Now will I turn back to my tale again.
 This simple widow and her daughters two
 Heard these hens cry and make so great ado,
 And out of doors they started on the run
 And saw the fox into the grove just gone,
 Bearing upon his back the cock away.
 And then they cried, "Alas, and weladay!
 Oh, oh, the fox!" and after him they ran,
 And after them, with staves, went many a man;
 Ran Coll, our dog, ran Talbot and Garland,
 And Malkin with a distaff in her hand;
 Ran cow and calf and even the very hogs,
 So were they scared by barking of the dogs
 And shouting men and women all did make,
 They all ran so they thought their hearts would break.
 They yelled as very fiends do down in Hell;
 The ducks they cried as at the butcher fell;
 The frightened geese flew up above the trees;
 Out of the hive there came the swarm of bees;
 So terrible was the noise, ah ben'cite!
 Certainly old Jack Straw and his army
 Never raised shouting half so loud and shrill

When they were chasing Flemings for to kill,
 As on that day was raised upon the fox.
 They brought forth trumpets made of brass, of box,
 Of horn, of bone, wherein they blew and pooped,
 And therewithal they screamed and shrieked and
 whooped;
 It seemed as if the heaven itself should fall!
 And now, good men, I pray you hearken all.
 Behold how Fortune turns all suddenly
 The hope and pride of even her enemy!
 This cock, which lay across the fox's back,
 In all his fear unto the fox did clack
 And say: "Sir, were I you, as I should be,
 Then would I say (as God may now help me!),
 'Turn back again, presumptuous peasants all!
 A very pestilence upon you fall!
 Now that I've gained here to this dark wood's side,
 In spite of you this cock shall here abide.
 I'll eat him, by my faith, and that anon!'"
 The fox replied: "In faith, it shall be done!"
 And as he spoke that word, all suddenly
 This cock broke from his mouth, full cleverly,
 And high upon a tree he flew anon.
 And when the fox saw well that he was gone,
 "Alas," quoth he, "O Chanticleer, alas!
 I have against you done a base trespass
 In that I frightened you, my dear old pard,
 When you I seized and brought from out that yard;
 But, sir, I did it with no foul intent;
 Come down, and I will tell you what I meant.
 I'll tell the truth to you, God help me so!"
 "Nay then," said he, "beshrew us both, you know,
 But first, beshrew myself, both blood and bones,
 If you beguile me, having done so once,
 You shall no more, with any flattery,
 Cause me to sing and close up either eye.
 For he who shuts his eyes when he should see,
 And wilfully, God let him ne'er be free!"
 "Nay," said the fox, "but, God give him mischance
 Who is so indiscreet in governance
 He chatters when he ought to hold his peace."
 Lo, such it is when watch and ward do cease,
 And one grows negligent with flattery.
 But you that hold this tale a foolery,
 As but about a fox, a cock, a hen,
 Yet do not miss the moral, my good men.
 For Saint Paul says that all that's written well
 Is written down some useful truth to tell.
 Then take the wheat and let the chaff lie still.
 And now, good God, and if it be Thy will,
 As says Lord Christ, so make us all good men
 And bring us into His high bliss. Amen.

HERE ENDS THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE