

The Nun's Priest's Tale

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,(5)
Had led, with patience, her straight 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 pain,(10)
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;(15)
Her diet well accorded with her cote.
Repletion never made this woman sick;
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,(20)
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.(25)
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.(30)
And 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;(35)
This noble cock had in his governance
Seven hens to give him pride and all pleasance,
Which were his sisters and his paramours
And wondrously like him as to colours,
Whereof the fairest hued upon her throat(40)
Was called the winsome Mistress Pertelote.
Courteous she was, discreet and debonnaire,
Companionable, and she had been so fair
That truly she had taken the heart to hold
Of Chanticleer, locked in every limb;(45)

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."
So it befell that, in a bright dawning,(50)
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.(55)
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,(60)
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.
I dreamed, that while I wandered up and down
Within our yard, I saw there a strange beast(65)
Was like a dog, and he'd have made a feast
Upon my body, and have had me dead.
His snout was small and gleaming was each eye.

Remembering how he looked, almost I die;
And all this caused my groaning, I confess.”(70)
“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,(75)
We all desire, if only it may be,
To have a husband hardy, wise, and free.
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?(80)
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.”
“Lo, Cato, and he was a full wise man,(85)
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.(90)
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,(95)

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

Who say just the reverse of his sentence,

And have found out by long experience(100)

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.”(105)

“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(110)

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;(115)
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,(120)
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,(125)
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 that he said.
This man woke out of sleep, then, all afraid;(130)
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(135)
(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,(140)
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.(145)
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."(150)
"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,(155)
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;(160)

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(165)
'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(170)
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(175)
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,(180)
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.

And therefore, pretty Pertelote, my dear,(185)

By such an old example 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.

Upon this point I say, concluding here,(190)

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.”(195)

“But let us speak of mirth and stop all this;

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 when I feel at night your tender side,(200)

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,(205)

For he had found some corn within the yard.

Regal he was, and fears he did discard.

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.(210)

He clucked when any grain of corn he found,

And all his wives came running at his call.

Thus regal, as prince is in his hall,

I'll now leave busy Chanticleer to feed,

And with events that followed I'll proceed.(215)

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.

“The sun, my love,” he said, “has climbed anew.(220)

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;(225)

For ever the latter end of joy is woe.

God knows that wordly joys do swiftly go.

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,(230)
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(235)
Till it was past the quarter of the day,
Waiting his chance on Chanticleer to fall.
O Chanticleer, accursed be that morrow
When you into that yard flew from the beams!
You were well warned, and fully, by your dreams(240)
That this day should hold peril damnably.
But that which God foreknows, it needs must be.
Whether the fact of God's great foreknowing
Makes it right needful that I do a thing
(By needful, I mean, of necessity);(245)
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.(250)
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,
Now women's counsels oft are ill to hold;
A woman's counsel brought us first to woe,(255)
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.(260)
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,(265)
Lay Pertelote, with all her sisters by,
There in the sun; and Chanticleer so free
Sang merrier than mermaid in the sea
(For Physiologus says certainly
That they do sing, both well and merrily).(270)
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(275)

As man who has a sudden fear at heart.
For naturally a beast desires to flee
From any enemy that he may see.
He would have fled but that the fox anon
Said: "Gentle sir, alas! Why be thus gone?(280)
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(285)
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.
Save you, I never heard a man so sing
As did your father in the grey dawning;(290)
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,(295)
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,(300)
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(305)
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,(310)
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,(315)
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,(320)
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.(325)
O destiny, you cannot be eschewed!
Alas, that Chanticleer flew from the beams!
Alas, his wife recked nothing of his dreams!
This simple widow and her daughters two
Heard these hens cry and make so great ado,(330)
And out of doors they started on the run
And saw the fox into the grove just gone,
Bearing in his mouth the cock away.
And then they cried, "Alas, and weladay!
Oh, the fox!" and after him they ran,(335)
And after them, with staves, went many a man;
Ran Coll, our dog, and Talbot and Garland,
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,(340)
They all ran so they thought their hearts would break.
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 now lay in the fox's mouth,(345)

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!(350)

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(355)

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(360)

Inasmuch as I made you afear'd

When I seized you and brought you from the 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!(365)

"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 closeup either eye;(370)
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."(375)
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.(380)
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.