**The Nun’s Priest’s Tale**

***Here begins the Nun’s Priest’s Tale of the cock and hen, Chanticleer and Pertelote***

A poor widow, somewhat bent with age,

Lived, long ago, in a little cottage,

Beside a grove, standing in a dale.

The widow of whom I tell this tale,

Since the day when she was last a wife,

Led, patiently, a very simple life,

For little was her property or rent.

By husbandry, such as God her sent,

She kept herself, and two daughters poor.

Three large sows had she, of swine no more,

Three cows, and a sheep, as well, called Molly.

Full sooty was her bower, all melancholy,

In which she ate full many a scanty meal.

No pungent sauce was needed for her veal;

No dainty morsel ever passed her throat.

Her diet, her cottage struck a single note.

Repletion thus had never made her sick;

And a moderate diet was all her physic,

And exercise, and the heart’s abundance.

The gout no reason gave her not to dance,

No apoplexy smote her in the head.

No wine drank she, neither white nor red.

Her board was mostly of the white and black –

Milk and brown bread, of which she had no lack,

Grilled bacon, and an egg or two, I say,

For she was, as it were, a dairy maid.

A yard she had, enclosed all about

With palings, and a dry ditch without,

In which there roamed a cock called Chanticleer.

In all the land, at crowing he’d no peer;

His voice was merrier than the merry organ

On Mass days in the chapel there, piping on.

Truer was his crowing in the lodge

Than is a clock or abbey horologe.

By nature he knew the right ascension

Of the celestial equator, I’ll mention:

For each fifteen degrees of its ascending,

He would crow, as needed no amending.

His comb redder than the finest coral,

Was crenellated like the castle wall.

His bill was black, and as the jet it shone;

Like azure were his legs and toes, as one;

His claws were whiter than the lily flower,

And like the burnished gold all his colour.

This noble cock had in his governance

Seven hens, his pleasure to advance,

Who were his sisters and his paramours,

And wonderfully like him, as to colours;

Of which the fairest, tinted round her throat,

Was called the lovely lady Pertelote.

Courteous she was, discreet and debonair,

Companionable, and bore herself so fair

From the day that she was seven nights old,

That truly the heart she held in her hold

Of Chanticleer, locked in her every limb.

He loved her so that all was well with him.

And such a joy was it to hear them sing

When that the bright sun began to spring,

In sweet accord, ‘My love’s in foreign land’.

– For at that time, I’m given to understand,

Beasts and birds as well could speak and sing.

And it so befell, that in the early dawning,

As Chanticleer among his wives all

Sat on his perch, lodged within the hall,

And next to him sat the fair Pertelote,

Chanticleer began moaning in his throat,

Like a man who in a dream is troubled sore.

And when Pertelote thus heard him roar,

She was aghast, and said, ‘My heart, dear,

What ails you, to moan as you do here?

Fie, what a sleeper! What a noise, for shame!’

And he answered her, saying thus: ‘Dear dame,

I pray you not to take my noise amiss.

By God, I thought I was in such mischief

Just now, my heart is pounding yet with fright!

Now God’, quoth he, ‘read my dream aright,

And keep my body from foul prison now!

I dreamed that I wandered up and down

Within our yard, and saw a kind of beast

Shaped like a hound, that would have seized

My body, and I seemed as good as dead.

His colour was betwixt yellow and red,

And tipped was his tail, and both his ears,

With black, unlike the rest of all his hairs.

His snout was small, and he was fiery eyed.

– Of his mere looks alone I almost died!

And this caused all my moaning, doubtless.’

‘For shame!’ quoth she, ‘fie on timorousness!

Alas!’ quoth she, ‘for, by the Lord above,

Now have you lost my heart and all my love!

I cannot love a coward, by my faith!

For certainly, whatever women say,

They all desire, if it might truly be,

A husband who is brave, and wise and free,

Discreet as well, no miser, and no fool,

Nor one aghast at every warlike tool,

Nor yet a boaster, by our Lord above!

How dare you say for shame, to your love,

That anything at all makes you a-feared?

Where is your man’s heart to match your beard?

Alas, and are you aghast at dreaming?

God knows, dreams are vanity or nothing.

Dreams are engendered by indigestion,

And bodily exhalations and their action,

And excessive humours dreams excite.

For sure, this dream that you met with tonight

Comes from the greater superfluity

Of your red choler, as it seems to me,

Which causes folks to be in dread, in dreams.

Of arrows, and the fire’s reddening gleams,

Of red beasts also, lest they seek to bite,

Of warfare, and whelps both fierce and slight

– Just as the humour of melancholy

Causes full many a man to cry in sleep

For fear of black bears, or bulls black,

Or else black devils clinging to his back.

Of other humours I could tell also,

That work a man in sleep many a woe,

But I’ll pass on as lightly as I can.

Lo, Cato was ever so wise a man,

Did he not say: “Take no account of dreams”?

Now sire,’ quoth she, ‘when we flee our beam,

For God’s love, go take a laxative!

On peril of my soul, long days to live,

That’s the best counsel, and no deceit,

To purge both choler and melancholy;

And lest you find an excuse to tarry,

Because the town has no apothecary,

I myself the right herbs will show you

That bring both health to us and profit too.

And in our own yard these herbs I’ll find,

Which in their properties are of the kind

To purge below, and do the same above.

Don’t neglect them now, for God’s own love!

You are quite choleric in complexion;

Beware lest the sun in his ascension

Find you all replete with humours hot!

And if he does, I’ll bet a groat it’s not

Long before you’ve a fever, a tertian,

Or an ague that may prove your bane.

A day or two you’ll need digestives

Of worms, before you take your laxatives,

Of laurel, centaury, and fumitory,

Or else hellebore that grows so freely,

Of caper-spurge or the blackthorn berry,

Or plantain, growing in our yard, so merry.

Peck them as they grow, and take them in!

Be merry, husband, by your father’s kin!

Fear you no dream – What I can say more?’

‘Madame’ quoth he, ‘*graunt merci* for your lore!

But nonetheless, regarding Cato now,

Who for his wisdom won such great renown,

Though he bade us hold no dream in dread,

By God! Men have in old books often read

In many a text of more authority

Than ever Cato’s had, God prosper me,

The very reverse of all Cato’s sense

And have found in their experience

That dreams to us are significations

Both of the joys and the tribulations

That folk suffer in this life at present.

There is no need for any argument;

The proof itself is shown by the deed.

One of the greatest authors that men read,

Cicero, says thus: two friends once went

On pilgrimage, with serious intent;

And it so chanced, they came to a town

Where they such a congregation found

Of people, and so many folk in passage,

That there was not so much as a cottage

In which they might both lodge for a fee.

So that they had, out of necessity

For that one night, to part company;

And each of them went to a hostelry,

And found a lodging as it might befall,

So one of them was lodged in a stall,

Far off, in a yard, with oxen used to plough;

The other man was lodged well, I vow,

As chance favoured him, or else Fortune,

She that governs all of us in common.

And it befell that, long ere it was day,

The latter dreamed, in bed there as he lay,

That his friend began for him to call,

Crying: “Alas! Here in an ox’s stall,

This night, I shall be murdered where I lie!

Now help me, dearest brother, or I die!

Come to me, and in all haste,” he cried.

The man from his sleep in fear did rise;

But once he’d woken, and banished sleep,

He took a turn, and thought the thing would keep,

And that his dream was merely fantasy.

So twice in his sleep thus dreamed he,

And yet a third time came his friend again

As he thought, and said, “Now I am slain.

Behold my blood-stained wounds deep and wide!

Rise early and in the morning-tide

At the west gate of the town”, quoth he,

“A cart full of dung there you shall see,

In which my corpse was hidden secretly.

Have the carter then arrested boldly.

My gold caused my murder: truth I say.”

– And every detail of his death he gave,

With a full piteous face, pale of hue.

And trust me, next day the dream proved true;

For on the morrow, soon as it was day,

The man to his friend’s inn made his way.

And when he came to the ox’s stall,

For his friend he began to call.

The innkeeper answered him anon,

Saying: “Sire, your friend is long gone.

As soon as daylight came, he went from town.”

This the man’s suspicion did arouse,

Remembering the dreams he encountered;

And forth he went – he would wait no longer –

To the west gate of the town, where he found

A dung cart, off to fertilise the ground,

That was in all particulars that arise

The same he heard the murdered man advise.

And he began to cry, courageously,

On vengeance, justice for the felony:

“My friend indeed was murdered this same night,

And in this cart he lies gaping upright!

I call upon the officers”, quoth he,

“Charged to protect and keep this city!

Murder! Alas, here lies my friend, I’ll state!”

What more of this tale should I relate?

Folk ran to tip the load out on the ground,

And in the middle of the dung they found

The dead man, his murder shown anew.

O blissful God, who are so just and true,

Lo, how always murder you betray!

Murder will out, we say day after day.

Murder is so foul and abominable

To God, who is so just and reasonable,

That he will not allow it long concealed,

Though hidden for a year, or two, or three.

Murder will out: that is my conclusion.

And right anon, the officers of that town

Seized the carter, and they racked him so,

And then the innkeeper they racked also,

That they confessed their wickedness anon,

And were hanged high by the neck bone.

Thus dreams may prove serious indeed.

And certainly in the same book I read,

Right in the next chapter after this

– I tell no lie, and so may I find bliss –

Of two men who wished to pass the sea,

For certain reasons, into a far country,

If the wind had not proved contrary,

And made them tarry there in the city,

That stood full merry on the haven side.

But at last, towards the evening-tide,

The wind began to blow from the west.

Jolly and glad they went to their rest,

And vowed that in the dawn they’d set sail.

But hearken to my marvellous tale.

One of them, as deep in sleep he lay,

Had a wondrous dream, towards day

He thought a man stood by his bed-side,

And commanded that he should abide,

Saying; “If you should sail, as you intend,

You will be drowned; my tale is at an end.”

He woke, and told his friend straight away,

And begged him the voyage to delay;

And for that day, he begged him to abide.

His friend, indeed, who lay by his bed-side,

Began to laugh, and jeer at him full fast.

“No dream,” quoth he, “may make my heart aghast.

I’ll not delay my plans for anything!

I give never a straw for all your dreaming,

For dreams are but vain things, and mere japes.

Men dream every day of owls or apes

And of many a fantasy withal.

Men dream of things that never are at all.

But since I see you’re settled to abide,

And thus wilfully forsake the tide,

God knows, I’m sorry; yet, enjoy your day!”

– And thus he took his leave, and went his way.

But ere that he had half the voyage sailed,

I know not why, or what mischance assailed,

By some chance the ship’s planks were rent,

And ship and man beneath the water went,

In sight of other ships close alongside,

That had sailed with them on that same tide.

And therefore, fair Pertelote, my dear,

From these old examples, it does appear

That no man should show himself careless

Regarding dreams, for I say, doubtless,

Many a dream proves serious indeed.

Lo, in the life of Saint Kenelm I read,

Son of Kenulphus, once the noble king

Of Mercia, how Kenelm dreamed a thing,

Shortly ere he was murdered, on a day,

His murder in a vision saw, I say.

His nurse, she expounded, so they tell,

His dream, and bade him guard him well

From treason; yet he, but seven years old,

Took little notice of the dream he told,

So innocent and holy was his heart.

By God, I’d give my shirt, for a start,

If you’d read of his legend, like to me!

Dame Pertelote, I tell you truly,

Macrobius, who writes of a vision

Of Scipio’s in Africa, his opinion,

As he affirms, is that dreams may be

Warnings of things that later men may see.

And furthermore, I pray you, look you well

In the Old Testament, at Daniel,

And whether he thought dreams mere fantasy.

Read of Joseph too, and there you shall see

That dreams are sometimes – though not all –

Warnings of things that later do befall.

Look, too, at Egypt’s King, at Pharaoh,

At his baker and his butler also,

As to the consequences of their dreams!

Whoever meditates on ancient themes

May find of dreams many a wondrous thing.

Lo, Croesus, who was of Lydia king,

Did he not dream he sat upon a tree,

Which signified that hanged he should be?

Lo, there is Andromache, Hector’s wife,

The day that Hector would lose his life,

She dreamed the very same night before

How Hector should die and be no more

If he went that day into the battle.

She warned him, but it was of no avail;

He went off to fight nevertheless,

And was slain by Achilles, no less.

But the tale is all too long to tell,

And now it is nigh day; I may not dwell

On all of this, so say in conclusion,

That I shall have from this prevision

Adversity; and I say furthermore

By your laxatives I set no store,

For they are poison, I know full well.

I defy them; I love not their spell!

Now let us speak of mirth, forget all this.

Madame Pertelote, thus have I bliss,

In one thing God has sent me large grace,

For when I see the beauty of your face,

You are so scarlet-red about your eye,

It quenches my fears and makes them die.

For certain it is: *In principio,*

*Mulier est hominis confusio.*

– Madame, the meaning of the Latin is:

“Woman is man’s joy and all his bliss.” –

For when I feel a-nights your soft side,

– Even though I may not take a ride,

Because our perch so narrow is, alas! –

I am so full of joy and of solace,

That I defy both vision now and dream.’

And with that word, he flew down from the beam,

Since it was day, and also his hens all,

And with a ‘chuck’ began his hens to call,

For he had found seed lying in the yard.

Regal he was, no longer filled with dread;

He covered Pertelote some twenty times,

Trod her as often, ere that it was prime.

Like a grim lion he gazes all around,

And on his toes he saunters up and down;

He deigns not to set foot upon the ground.

He ‘chucks’ again each time a seed is found,

And to him then run his dear wives all.

Thus regal, as a prince is in his hall,

I’ll leave this Chanticleer in his pasture,

And next will I tell of his adventure.

When the month with which the world began,

Namely March, in which God first made man,

Was complete, and past again also

When March was done, thirty days and two,

Befell it, Chanticleer in all his pride,

His seven wives walking by his side,

Cast up his eyes towards the bright sun,

That into the sign of Taurus now had run

Twenty degrees and one, and somewhat more,

And knew by nature, and no other lore,

That it was prime, and crowed with blissful voice.

‘The sun,’ he said, ‘is climbed in heavenly course,

Forty degrees and one, and more, it is.

Madame Pertelote, my world’s bliss,

Hearken, these blissful brides, how they sing,

And see the fresh flowers how they spring!

Full is my heart with revel and with solace!’

But suddenly he fell in sorrowful case;

For ever the latter end of joy is woe.

God knows that worldly joy is swift to go;

And any rhetorician who fair can write

He in a chronicle can safely that indite,

As a sovereign thing to note, indeed.

Now ever wise man, let him list to me;

This story is as true, I’ll undertake,

As the book of Launcelot of the Lake,

That women hold in such great reverence.

Now will I turn again to my utterance.

A black-tipped fox of sly iniquity,

Who in the grove had lived years three,

With premeditated scheming, at a stroke,

That same night through hedge and fences broke,

Into the yard, where Chanticleer the fair

Was wont and his wives too, to repair;

And in a bed of green-stuff still he lay

Till it was near the middle of the day,

Waiting the time for Chanticleer to fall,

As are wont to do these homicides all

That lie in wait to slay innocent men.

O false murderer, lurking in your den!

O new Escariot, new Ganelon!

False dissimulator, O Greek Sinon,

Who brought Troy all utterly to sorrow!

O Chanticleer, accursed be the morrow

When you flew to the yard from the beam!

You were warned indeed by your dream

That this day would be perilous to thee.

– But what God foreknows must surely be,

In the opinion of certain clerics.

Ask witness of one who a true cleric is,

That in the schools has been great altercation

About this matter, and great disputation,

Wrought by a hundred thousand, every man.

But I cannot sift the flour from the bran,

As can the holy doctor Saint Augustine,

Boethius, or Bishop Bradwardine,

As to whether God’s noble foreknowing

Means that I must then do a certain thing

– By ‘must’ I denote *simple* necessity –

Or whether free choice may be granted me

To do that same thing, or to do it not,

Though God foreknew it ere that I was wrought,

Or if his knowing constrains me not at all,

Except by necessity *conditional*.

Well, I’ll have naught to do with the matter;

My tale’s of a cockerel, as you may hear,

Who took his wife’s counsel, but in sorrow,

To walk in the yard upon the morrow

After he’d had the dream of which I told.

Woman’s counsel oft leaves us dead and cold;

Woman’s counsel brought us first to woe,

And made Adam out of Paradise to go,

Where he had been merry and full of ease.

But as I know not whom it might displease

If I the counsel of women dare to blame,

Let us pass on, I speak as if in game.

Read the authors, treating of such matter,

And of women you may hear their chatter.

These are the cockerel’s words and not mine;

I wish no harm to any woman divine.

Fair in the dust, to bathe her doth lie,

Pertelote, with all her sisters by,

Out in the sun, and Chanticleer so free

Sings merrier than a mermaid in the sea

(For *Physiologus* says for a certainty

That they sing right well and merrily).

And it so befell, that as he cast his eye,

Among the green-stuff, at a butterfly,

He suddenly saw the fox lying low,

No longer had a reason then to crow,

But he cried anon, ‘Cock, cock!’ and up did start,

As a man does who is a-feared at heart;

For by nature a beast desires to flee

From its enemy, if one it chance to see,

Though it has never seen such with its eye.

Now Chanticleer, when he chanced to spy

The fox, he would have fled, but fox anon

Said: ‘Noble sir, alas, will you be gone?

Are you afraid of me who am your friend?

Now, surely, I’d be worse than any fiend

If I should do you harm or villainy!

I have not come to steal your privacy;

But truly, the reason for my coming

Is only to hear how well you sing.

For truly, you have as merry a voice,

As the angels who in Heaven do rejoice.

And then you have in music more feeling

Than Boethius, or any who can sing.

My lord your father – God his soul now bless! –

And also your mother, of her great kindness,

Once visited my house, to my great ease.

And you sir, certainly, I seek to please.

For if men speak of singing, I must say

– As own the use of my two eyes I may –

Save for you, I never heard man sing

As your father did of a sweet morning.

Sure it was heart-felt, everything he sang!

And to be sure his voice full loudly rang,

He would take great pains that both his eyes

Were tight shut, so louder were his cries,

While standing on tiptoes therewithal,

And stretching out his neck long and small;

And also he was of such discretion

That there was no one in any region

Who in song or wisdom might him surpass.

I have read, in *Burnellus the Ass*,

Among its verses, how there was a cock,

Who, when a priest’s son gave him a knock

On his leg when young, served him amiss,

And made him lose his sovereign benefice.

But certainly, there’s no comparison

Between the wisdom and discretion

Of your good father, and such subtlety!

Now sing on, sire, for holy charity;

Let’s hear: can you your father emulate?’

Then Chanticleer his wings began to beat,

As one who could not foul treason see,

He was ravished so by such flattery.

Alas, you lords, many a false flatterer

Lives at your court, and many a cozener,

Who pleases you better, by my faith,

Than he who truthfulness does display!

Read *Ecclesiastes* on flattery;

Beware, you lords, of all their treachery.

Chanticleer stood up high on his toes,

Stretched out his neck, and kept his eyes closed,

And began to crow out loud for nones.

Sir Russell the fox started up at once,

And by the throat seized Chanticleer,

And on his back toward the wood, I fear,

Carried him off, and nobody pursued.

O Destiny that may not be eschewed!

Alas, that Chanticleer flew from the beam!

Alas, that his wife ignored his dream!

– And on a Friday fell all this mischance.

O Venus, sweet goddess of love’s chance,

Since it was your servant, Chanticleer,

And in your service he spent his life dear,

More for delight than race to multiply,

Why suffer him on your own day to die?

O Geoffrey of Vinsauf, my master sovereign,

Who, when your great King Richard was slain

By a bolt, lamented his death so sore,

Why have I not your wisdom and your lore,

To chide the day, a Friday, as did you?

– For he was slain upon a Friday too.

Then my lament I would show you plain,

For Chanticleer’s fear, and for his pain.

For sure, such cries and such lamentation

Were never made by ladies when Ilium

Was won, and Pyrrhus with his drawn sword,

Having grasped King Priam by the beard,

Slew him, as Virgil’s *Aeneid* tells us,

As all those hens made in the close

When of Chanticleer they caught sight.

But above all Dame Pertelote outright

Cried louder than did Hasdrubal’s wife,

When her dear husband lost his life,

And the Romans set fire to Carthage;

She was so filled with torment and rage

That willingly into the flames she leapt,

Steadfast of heart, her tryst with death she kept.

O woeful hens, you cried as loudly

As, when Nero set fire to the city

Of Rome, cried all the senator’s wives,

Because their husbands had lost their lives;

In their innocence Nero had them slain.

Now will I turn to my tale again.

The poor widow, her daughters also,

Heard the hens cry and all their woe,

And out of the house they ran anon,

And saw the fox towards the grove had gone,

And on his back carried the cock away,

And shouted out: ‘Thief!’ and ‘Well-away!

It is the fox!’ – And after him they ran,

And with staves many another man.

Ran Coll our dog, and Talbot and Gerland,

And Malkin with a distaff in her hand;

Ran cow and calf, and the very hogs,

Frightened by the barking of the dogs,

And the shouting of men and women, worst,

They ran so I thought their hearts would burst.

They yelled as the fiends do down in Hell;

The ducks quacked as though death loomed as well;

The geese for fear flew high above the trees;

Out of the hive came a swarm of bees.

So hideous was the noise – ah, *benedictitee*! –

I’m sure Jack Straw and all his company

Never uttered shouts one half so shrill,

When they wished the Flemings all to kill,

As this day rose up behind the fox.

Trumpets of brass they brought, flutes of box,

Of horn, of bone, to blow out loud and hoot,

And therewithal they shrieked and whooped;

It seemed as if the heavens themselves would fall!

Now, good men, I pray you, hearken all:

Lo, how Fortune alters suddenly

The hope and pride of their enemy!

The cock that lay upon the fox’s back,

Despite his fear, spoke to the fox: ‘Alack,

Sire, if I were you, as it seems to me,

I’d turn my head, and shout, God help me,

“Turn back again, you proud peasants all!

And a foul pestilence upon you fall!

Now I have reached the woodland-side,

Despite your chase, the cock shall here abide.

I’ll eat him, by my faith, and that anon!”’

The fox said, ‘By my faith, it shall be done!’

– And as he spoke the words, all suddenly,

The cock broke from his mouth full swiftly,

And high into a tree he flew anon.

And when the fox saw that the cock was gone,

‘Alas!’ quoth he, ‘O Chanticleer, alas!

I have done you,’ quoth he, ‘a foul trespass,

Inasmuch as I rendered you a-feared,

When I seized you and then brought you here.

But sire, I did it with no harsh intent;

Come down, and I’ll explain what I meant.

God help me, I’ll tell you all the truth!’

‘Nay, then’ quoth he, ‘and curses on us two!

And first I’ll curse myself, both blood and bones,

If you deceive me oftener than once!

You shall no more, with your foul flattery,

Make me sing, close my eyes so foolishly;

For he that shuts his eyes when he should see,

Willingly, let him not thrive, for me!’

‘Nay,’ quoth the fox, ‘may God give him mischance

Who is so careless of his governance,

And chatters when he should hold his peace!’

Lo, such it is to be reckless indeed,

And negligent, and trust in flattery!

But you that think this tale but a folly,

And all about a fox, and cock, and hen,

Take note of the moral, my good men.

For Saint Paul says all that written is,

For our understanding’s written, as is this,

Take the grain, and leave the chaff there still.

Now, gracious God, if it should be thy will

(As said my Lord), so make us all good men,

And bring us to the heights of bliss! Amen.

***Here is ended the Nun’s Priest’s Tale***