

alloyed with brass, that though the coin be fair to the eye, it would break in two rather than bend. And so for love of the Wife of Bath, — whom and all her kind may God maintain in high mastery, it were pity else, — with heart fresh and lusty I will say you a song to gladden you, I trust ; and let us cease from earnestful matters. Listen to my song, which runs thus : —

## L'ENVOY DE CHAUCER

Griselde is dead, and all her sufferance,  
 And buried in a green Italian vale ;  
 Wherefore I cry in open audience,  
 No wedded man so hardy be to assail  
 His own wife's patience, in the hope to find  
 Griselda's, or for certain he shall fail.

O noble wives, full of high sapience,  
 Let no humility your clappers nail,  
 And let no clerk have cause or diligence  
 To write of you so wonderful a tale  
 As of Griselda, patient, meek and kind,  
 Lest Chichevache gulf you in her entrail.

Follow Echo, goddess of impudence,  
 That answers up the hill and down the dale ;  
 Be never cozened for your innocence,  
 But sharply take on you the governaille.  
 Print in your mind this lesson on mankind  
 For common profit, and it will avail.

Ye archwives, ever stand on your defence,  
 Since ye are strong as elephant or whale ;  
 Suffer not puny man to do offence.  
 Ye alim wives, frail and splenetic and pale,  
 Bite as a snake in Afric or in Ind,  
 And rattle as a windmill in a gale.

Dread ye not men, do them no reverence,  
 For though your husbands armèd be in mail,  
 The arrows of your crabbed eloquence  
 Shall pierce their breast and make their top to vail,  
 And eke with jealousy your husbands bind,  
 And ye shall make them couch as doth a quail.

If thou be fair, go where is dalliance,  
 And show thy stomacher and farthingale ;  
 If thou be foul, be free of thy dispense,  
 To win thee friends let not thine ardor stale.  
 As leaf in tree-top be thou light of mind,  
 And let him chafe and weep and wring and wail.

*Here endeth the Clerk of Oxford's Tale.*

*The Prologue of the Merchant's Tale.*

'Weeping and wailing, care and sorrow, I know enough,'  
 quoth the Merchant, 'at morn and at eve, and so do others that  
 be wedded, I trow ; well I wot it is so with me. I have a wife,  
 the worst possible ; for though the Fiend were coupled to her, I  
 dare well swear she would overmatch him. Why should I re-  
 hearse to you all points of her great malice ? She is an evil creature  
 in all things. There is a long and large difference betwixt  
 Griselda's meekness and the surpassing cruelty of my wife.  
 Were I unbound, never again would I come into the snare, by  
 mine head ! We wedded men live in care and sorrow ; try it  
 who will, he shall find, by Saint Thomas of India, that I say  
 sooth, — as to the greater part, I speak not of all ; God shield  
 it should be so ! Ah, good sir Host ! I have been wedded  
 these two months, and not more, perdy ! And yet I trow that  
 he who has all his life been wifeless could in no wise, though  
 men would rend him to the heart, tell so much sorrow as I could  
 tell now here of my wife's cursedness !'

Quoth our Host, 'Now, Merchant, so may God save your  
 soul, since you know so much of that gear, I pray you full  
 heartily, tell us a part thereof.'

'Gladly,' he replied, 'but of mine own hurt, for sorry heart  
 I can tell no more.'

*Here beginneth the Merchant's Tale.*

Whilom there dwelt in Lombardy a worthy knight, born in  
 Pavia, in which town he lived in great prosperity ; and for sixty

years he was wifeless and ever pursued his carnal pleasure on women where his appetite was fixed, just as these fools do that be laymen. And when he was past sixty years, this knight had such a mind to be a wedded man — were it from holiness or dotage, I cannot say — that he did all he could, day and night, to espy where he might wed him ; praying our Lord to grant him once to know that same blissful existence that is betwixt husband and wife, and to live under that holy bond with which God first bound man and woman.

‘No other way of life,’ said he, ‘is worth a bean. For wedlock is so easy and pure that it is paradise on earth.’ Thus spake this old knight, who was so wise.

And of a certainty, as true as God is King, it is glorious to take a wife, especially when a man is old and hoar ; then a wife is the jewel of all his treasures. Then he ought to take a young wife and a beautiful, on whom to beget him an heir ; and lead his life in joy and bliss, whilst these bachelors sing ‘alas!’ , when they find any reverse in their affairs of love, which are but childish vanity. And in sooth it is fitting that bachelors have pain and woe oft ; they build on brittle ground, and find brittleness when they look for certainty. They live but as a bird or a beast, in freedom, under no restraint, whilst a wedded man in his degree lives a life blessed and ordered, secured under the yoke of marriage ; well may his heart abound in all gladness and bliss. For who obeys as a wife ? Who is so faithful as his mate, and eke so attentive to care for him, sick and well ? For weal or for woe, she will not forsake him. She is not weary to love and serve him, though he lie bedridden till he die. And yet some clerks deny it, of whom Theophrastus is one. But what matter though Theophrastus is pleased to lie ? He says, ‘Take no wife, for the sake of thy thrift, to spare expense in thine household ; a faithful servant is more diligent than thine own wife to keep thy goods. For all her days she will claim a half part. And if thou be sick, God is my witness, thy true friends or a faithful lad will care for thee better than she that ever waits, and has waited many a day, after thy goods.’ This evil saying, and an hundred more evil, writes this man, — may God curse his bones ! But heed no such vain opinions ; reject Theophrastus and hearken to me.

Verily, a wife is God's gift. All other manner of gifts, such as lands, rents, pasture, commonage, or movable property, all are gifts of Fortune, I declare boldly, which pass away as a shadow upon the wall. But without doubt, and to speak plainly, a wife will last and abide in your house (longer than you would wish, peradventure). Marriage is a full great sacrament; he who has no wife, I hold him a lost man, who lives helpless and desolate, — I speak of lay folk. And hearken why — (I say not this lightly); it is because woman was wrought to be man's help. The high God, when he had made Adam, and saw him all alone, and belly-naked, — God of his great goodness said, 'Let us now make an helper for this man, like to himself.' And then he made Eve for him. Here you may see and prove hereby that a wife is man's help and comfort, his terrestrial paradise and his diversion. So obedient and excellent she is that they cannot but live in unity. They be one flesh; and one flesh, I apprehend, has but one heart in weal and woe.

A wife! ah, Saint Mary! *benedicite!* How could a man feel any mischance who has a wife? Certes, I cannot say. The bliss that is betwixt them two no tongue can tell or heart think. If he be poor, she helps him labor; she keeps his goods and wastes never a bit. All that her husband desires, well pleases her. She says not once 'nay' when he says 'yea.' Says he, 'do this'; she answers, 'all ready, sir.' O, blessed order, precious wedlock, thou art so pleasant and virtuous and so highly commended and approved, that every man who holds himself to be worth a leek ought all his days upon his bare knee to thank his God that has sent him a wife, or else pray God to send him a wife to last until he dies. For then is his life set in security. He cannot be deceived, I trow, so he work after his wife's counsel; wives are so faithful and discreet that he may hold his head up boldly. Therefore, if you will be as the wise, do ever as women counsel you.

Lo, how Jacob by the good counsel of Rebecca his mother, as these clerks read, bound the kid's skin about his neck, and thus won his father's benison. Lo, Judith, as the history tells; she by wise counsel guarded God's people and slew Holofernes whilst he slept. Lo, Abigail, how she by good counsel saved her husband, Nabal, when he was to have been slain. And

look also how Esther by good counsel delivered the people of God from woe, and made Mardocheus to be advanced by Ahasuerus.

There is nothing superlative in degree, as Seneca says, above an humble wife. Suffer your wife's tongue, as Cato bids. She shall command, and you shall permit it, and yet of her courtesy sometimes she will obey. A wife will guard your household-thrift. Well may the sick man lament who has no wife to keep his house. I warn you, if you will act wisely love your wife well, as Christ loves His church. If you love yourself, you will love your wife; no man hates his own flesh, but all his days he fosters it, and therefore I bid you cherish your wife, or you shall never prosper. However men mock and jest, of all mortal folk husband and wife hold the safest road. They are so knit no harm can happen, — and especially from the wife's side.

Wherefore in the days of his age, this January of whom I speak meditated on the lusty life, the virtuous quiet, in honey-sweet marriage. And on a day he sent for his friends, to tell them all his mind.

With grave countenance he told his tale, and said, ' Friends, I am hoar and old, and, God wot, almost on the brink of the grave; now must I consider my soul somewhat. I have wasted my body on folly, but blessed be God! that shall be amended; for I will be a wedded man, and that forthwith, of a surety, in all possible haste. I pray you, help me to plan for my speedy marriage unto some fair maiden tender of years, for I will not tarry; and on my side, I will try to seek out to whom I may be quickly wedded. But inasmuch as you are more numerous than I, you rather than I should be able to study out such a thing, and where it were best for me to mate.

' But of one thing, my dear friends, I warn you: by no manner of means will I have any old wife. In sooth, she shall not be over twenty years of age; I full fain would have old fish and young flesh. Better is a pike than a pickerel, and better the tender veal than old beef,' quoth he. ' I will have no woman thirty years of age; such are but bean-straw and coarse fodder. And eke, God wot, these old widows, — they know so much of Wade's boat, so many arts and troublous tricks when they would use them, that I

should never live in peace with a widow. For a change of divers schools makes subtle clerks; and woman is half a clerk of many schools. But of a certainty men can guide a young thing, just as men can mold warm wax with the hands. Wherefore I tell you in short and plain, I will have no old wife, for this very reason. For if it fell out so ill that I could have no joy in her, then should I lead a life of adultery and go straight to the Devil when I die. And I should get no children of her; yet I tell you all, I had rather hounds should eat me than that my heritage should fall into strange hands. I dote not, I know the reason why men should wed, and furthermore I know that many a man speaks of wedlock who knows no more than my page for what reasons man should take a wife. If he cannot live chaste all his days, let him take a wife in piety, for the sake of procreating children, to the honor of God in heaven and not only for love and passion; and because they should shun lechery and yield their debt when it is due; or that each of them should help the other in misfortune, as a brother shall a sister, and live holily in continence. But, sirs, by your leave, I am not such; for, God be thanked, I feel my limbs strong and sufficient to play all a man's part. I know best what I can do. Though I be white on my head, I fare like a tree that blossoms ere it yield fruit; a blossoming tree is not dry or dead. I feel myself hoar only on my hair; my heart and limbs are as green as the laurel is throughout the year. And since you have heard all my mind, I pray you assent to my will.'

Divers men told him diversely many old ensamples about marriage. In sooth, some blamed it, some praised it; but in the end, to speak briefly, as altercation every day befalls betwixt friends in dispute, there fell a strife betwixt his two brethren, of whom the first was called Placebo, the second Justinus.

Placebo said, 'Brother January, right small need had you, my lord so dear, to ask counsel of any one present, save that you are so sapient that of your high prudence you list not turn aside from the word of Solomon. This word he said to us, "Do all things by counsel and then thou shalt not repent thee." But though Solomon spake such words, mine own dear lord and brother, I hold your own counsel the best, so may God save my soul! For, brother mine, take this from me: I have been a

courtier all my life now, and God wot, though I be unworthy, I have stood in high place about lords of full great estate; yet I never had strife with any of them. Verily, I never withstood them. I wot well my lord knows more than I; what he says I hold to be sound, and say the same, or things similar. Any counsellor who serves a lord of high degree is a full great fool, if he dare take upon himself, or even think, that his counsel should surpass his lord's wisdom. Nay, by my faith, lords be no fools; you yourself have showed here to-day so holily and well such lofty wisdom, so devoutly and well, that I approve and confirm all your words and your opinion every whit. By the Lord, there is no man in all this town nor in all Italy who could have spoken better; Christ is well pleased with this counsel. And in truth it shows a high spirit in any man who is advanced in age, to take a young wife; by my father's soul, your heart hangs on a jolly pin! Do in this even as you will, for in conclusion I hold it best.'

Justinus, who sat ever quiet and hearkened, answered Placebo in this wise: 'Now, brother mine, be patient, I prithee; since you have spoken, hearken to me. Seneca, amongst his other wise words, says that a man ought right well to consider to whom he gives his land or his goods. And since I ought to bethink me well to whom I give my goods away, much more ought I to bethink me to whom I give my body; for right well I warn you it is no child's play to take a wife without due thought. A man must inquire, I hold, whether she be rich or poor, wise and sober, or bibulous and proud, or otherwise a bad lot,— a chider, a waster of goods and a termagant. Albeit no man shall find or imagine any in this world that trots perfectly in all, neither man nor beast, nevertheless it should suffice that any wife have more good traits than ill vices. And all this demands leisure to inquire into. For, God wot, I have wept full many a privy tear since I have had a wife. Let whoso will praise the life of a wedded man, in sooth I find in it only cost and trouble, and observances bare of all bliss. And yet,— God wot, my neighbors around me, and especially many a troop of women, say I have the most steadfast and meekest wife living. But I know best where my shoe wrings me. But for all of me, you may do even right as you will; you are a man of years, consider how

you enter upon marriage, and especially with a young wife and a fair. By Him that made water, air, earth, and fire, the youngest man in all this company has enough to do to have his wife to himself, trust me. Not for three years can you wholly content her; a wife demands right much respectful ministracion. But I pray you be not ill-pleased with me.'

'Well; have you done your speech?' quoth this January. 'A straw for your Seneca and your proverbs; I care not two blades of grass for your school-terms. Wiser men than you have assented to my plan, as you have heard even now. Placebo, what say you?'

'I say,' quoth he, 'that it is verily a cursed man who hinders matrimony.' And at these words they straightway arose and fully agreed that he should wed when he list and whom he would.

High imagining and careful thought about his marriage began to occupy January's soul from day to day, and night by night many a fair shape and many a fair visage passed through his heart. Whoso should take a well-polished mirror and should set it in the general market-place, then should he see many a form pass across his mirror; and in the same wise January began to consider in his thoughts the maidens who dwelt nigh him. He wist not where his thoughts should settle. For if one had beauty of countenance, another stood so highly in the people's grace for her steadiness and kindness that she most had the general approval. And some were rich, and had a bad reputation. But nevertheless, betwixt sport and earnest, at last he fixed on one, and let all the others pass out of his heart, and of his own motion chose her; for love is ever blind. And when he was laid in his bed, in his heart and mind he portrayed her fresh beauty and tender age, her small middle, her long and slim arms, her wise demeanor, her steadiness, her good breeding and her womanly bearing. And when his choice was fixed upon her, it seemed to him that it could not have been bettered; for when he was resolved, he thought every other man's wit so poor that none could reply against his choice; this was his fancy.

He sent to his friends with urgent request and prayed them to do him that pleasure to come to him speedily. He would relieve them, one and all, of their labor (he said), and there



was no more need for him to walk or ride about, for he had appointed where his choice should rest.

Placebo came straightway, and eke all his friends. And first of all January begged of them the grace that none of them should offer argument against the purpose which he had taken; which course was pleasing to God, and a sure foundation for his well-being. He said there was in the town a maiden who had a great name for beauty, though she were of low degree; but her youth and her beauty sufficed him. Which maiden, he said, he would have, to lead all his life with her in ease and holiness; and he thanked God that he might have her entirely, that no wight should share his bliss, and prayed them to do their diligence that he failed not of success; would they do this, his spirit were at rest. 'Then,' quoth he, 'there is nothing to mar my bliss, save that one thing pricks in my conscience, the which I will rehearse to you here. Full long I have heard it said,' quoth he, 'that no man can have two perfect joys, that is, on earth and eke in paradise. For though he avoid the seven sins and eke every branch of that tree, yet is there such perfect felicity and ease and joy in marriage, that now in mine old age I am ever aghast that I shall now lead so merry a life, so delicious, without woe and contention, that I shall have my heaven now on earth. For since the true heaven is bought so dearly with tribulation and great penance, how should I, then, who shall live in such happiness as all wedded men have, come to the bliss where Christ lives eternally? This is my dread, and do you, my two brethren, resolve me this question, I pray.'

Justinus, who despised his folly, answered forthwith in his mockery; and to abridge his long tale he would cite no authority, but said, 'Sir, so there be none obstacle other than this, God may work so high mercy and marvel for you that, ere you have the due offices of Holy Church, you may repent of a wedded man's life, in which you say there is no woe or contention. And God forbid else, that he send not a wedded man grace to repent well oftener than to a single man! And therefore the best counsel I know is, despair not, sir, but have in your memory that peradventure she may be your purgatory. She may be God's instrument and God's scourge; then shall your soul skip up to heaven swifter than an arrow out of a bow. I hope to God that

hereafter you shall learn that there is no such felicity in marriage, and never shall be, as to hinder your salvation, so you solace yourself with your wife temperately, as is just and reasonable, and please her not too amorously, and keep you from other sin eke. My tale is done, for my wit is thin, but be not aghast at this, my brother. But let us wade out of this matter. The Wife of Bath has declared full well in little space, if you have understood, upon marriage, which you have in hand. And now fare you well, and God have you in His grace !'

And after these words Justinus and Placebo each took leave of him and each other. And when they saw it must needs be, by discreet and wise negotiation they wrought so that this maiden, who was named May, should be wedded to this January as soon as ever she could. I trow it would delay you too long if I told you of every bond and document whereby she was enfeoffed in his estates, or of all her rich preparation. But finally the day was come when they both betook them to the church to receive the holy sacrament. Forth came the priest with stole over his shoulders, and bade her be like Rebecca and Sara in faithfulness to marriage vows and in discretion; and said his orisons as is wonted, and signed them with the cross and prayed God bless them, and made all secure enough with holy rites.

Thus were they wedded with all ceremony, and at the feast he and she sat upon the dais with other honorable folk. All full of joy and happiness was the palace, and full of instruments of music and of viands the most dainty in all Italy. Before them stood such instruments of music that Orpheus nor Amphion of Thebes made never such melody. With every course came such bursts of minstrelsy that Joab never trumpeted half so clear to men's hearing, nor Thiodamas at Thebes, when the city was in dread. Bacchus poured out the wine for them on every side, and Venus laughed upon every one of them, for January was now her knight and would make trial of his spirit as well in marriage as in freedom; and with her torch in her hand she danced about before the bride and all the company. I dare right well say this, of a sooth, that Hymen, who is god of marriage, saw never in his life so merry a wedded man. Thou poet Martian, who describest to us that merry wedding of Philology and Mercury, and the songs that the Muses sang, hold thou thy

peace; too small are both thy pen and thy tongue to describe this wedding. When tender youth weds stooping age, there is such mirth that it cannot be written; try it yourselves, and then shall you know whether or not I lie in this.

May, who sat with so benign a countenance, to look upon her seemed enchantment; so meek was her look, Queen Esther never looked with such eyes upon Ahasuerus. I cannot describe to you all her beauty, but thus much I may tell, that she was like the bright morn of May filled to the full with all beauty and joy.

This January was ravished into a trance every time he beheld her face. 'Now would God it were become night,' he thought, 'and that the night would last forever! Would that all these people were gone!' And finally he did all he could, saving his honor, to hasten them in crafty wise from the feast. And time came when it was in reason to rise. And after that, folk danced and drank deep, and cast spices all about the house, and every man was full of joy and happiness. All but a squire, called Damian, who full many a day had carved before the knight. He was so ravished with his lady May that for the very pain he was wellnigh mad; he almost fainted and swooned where he stood, so sore had Venus wounded him with her brand as she bore it in her dancing. And quickly he got him to his bed, — and I speak no more of him as at this time, but there let him weep and lament his fill, until fresh May will have pity on his pain.

*Auctor.* O perilous fire, that breeds in the bedstraw! O household foe that proffers his service! O traitor servant, false appearance of domestic faithfulness, like to the sly faithless serpent in the bosom, — God shield us all from knowing you! O, January, drunken in joy of marriage, see how thy Damian, thine own squire and thy man born, has in mind to do thee dishonor. God grant thee to spy out thine household foe. For there is no worse pestilence in this world than an household foe ever before thee. —

The sun had run his diurnal arc; his body could no longer sojourn on the horizon in that latitude; night with his dark rough mantle began to overspread the hemisphere. Wherefore all this lusty throng parted from January, with thanks on every side. Home to their houses they rode in all lustihood, where

they did their things even as pleased them, and went to rest when they saw their time. Soon after, this impatient January would go to bed, would tarry no longer. He drank punches, cordials and sweet wine of Italy with stinging spices, and many a full choice syrop, such as the cursed monk Constantine has written of in his book *De Coitu*; he was no whit backward to partake of all of them. And to his close friend he said, 'For God's love, in courteous wise let the house be emptied as soon as may be.' And they did even as he desired. Men drank, and anon drew the curtain. The bride was brought to bed as still as a stone; and when the bed had been blessed by the priest, every wight betook him out of the chamber.

When the day began to dawn January took a sop of bread in fine cleared wine and sat upright in his bed and sang full loud and high, and kissed his wife and made wanton cheer. He was all coltish, and as full of sportiveness and jargoning as a flecked magpie. The slack skin about his neck shook whilst he sang, so chanted and croaked he. But God knows what May thought in her heart, when she saw him sitting up in his shirt and night-cap, with his lean neck; he valued him not a bean. Then he said, 'I will take my rest; now the day has come, I can watch no longer.' And down he laid his head and slept until prime. And afterwards in due season up rose January, but fresh May, as the good custom is for wives, kept her chamber up to the fourth morning. For all must have repose sometime, or else they cannot long endure, — no living creature can, be it man or beast, or fish or bird.

*Auctor.* Now will I speak of the wretched Damian, who, as you shall hear, is languishing for love, and therefore I speak to him thus, and say, 'O hapless Damian, alas! Answer my demand now, how shalt thou tell thy woe to thy lady, the fresh May? She will say "no," and eke if thou speak, she will reveal thy sorrow. May God be thy help! I can say no better.' —

This sick Damian so burned in the flames of Venus that he was dying of desire, wherefore he could endure no longer in this state, but put his life in hazard, and secretly he borrowed a pen-case, and wrote all his pain in a letter, in the style of a complaint or a lay, unto his fair fresh lady. And he put it into a purse of silk which hung over his shirt, and laid it next his breast.

The moon, which on that noon when January wedded fresh May was in the second degree of Taurus, was now glided into Cancer; thus long had May abode in her chamber, as is the custom amongst these nobles; a bride shall not eat in the hall till four days, or three at the least, be gone; then let her go to the banquet. The fourth day being completed from noon to noon, when the high mass was ended, this January sat in the hall, with May as fresh as a bright summer's morning. And so befell, this good man bethought him of his squire and said, 'Saint Mary! how is it that Damian attends not upon me? Is he still sick, or how is it?'

His squires, who stood beside him, made excuse for their fellow because his sickness hindered him from his duties; none other cause could keep him away.

'That grieves me; he is a gentle squire, by my faith!' quoth this January. 'Were he to die, it were harm and pity; he is as wise, discreet and secret as any man of his degree that I know, and eke manly and ready to serve, and likely to prosper in his life. After meat, as soon as I can, I myself and eke May will visit him, to do him all the comfort I know how.'

And for these words every man blessed him, that of his noble kindness he would thus comfort his squire in sickness; for it was a gentle deed.

'Dame,' quoth this January, 'after meat when you are come to your chamber out of this hall with your women, mind that you all go see this Damian; make him some entertainment, he is a man of gentle blood, and tell him that I will visit him when I have but rested me a little. And haste you, for I will abide till you are come to me again.' And after these words he called to him a squire, who was marshal of his hall, and told him certain things, what he would.

This fresh May with all her women held her way straight to Damian. Down by his bed-side she sat, comforting him in as goodly way as she could. This Damian, when he saw his time, put into her hand secretly his purse and eke his missive in which he had written his desires, without more ado than that he sighed wondrous deep, and softly said to her, 'Your grace to me, and I pray that you expose me not. I am dead if this thing be known.'

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 This purse she hid in her bosom and went her way; ye get no more of me on this meeting. And now she came to January, and sat full softly upon his bed-side. He took her and kissed her full often, and laid him down to sleep. She made excuse to leave the room, and when she had read through this billet, at last she rent it all to bits and privily cast them away in a safe place.

Who thinks hard now but fair fresh May? She came back to the side of old January, who slept till the cough awaked him. But lest over-nice folk be wroth with me, I dare not let you know whether it seemed to her paradise or hell; and here I leave them till evensong rang and they must arise.

Were it by destiny or chance, were it by some mystic influence or by nature or through the constellations,—that the heavens stood in such array that the time was fortunate (for as these clerks say, everything has its time) to give a billet in the service of Venus to any woman, to get her love,—as to all this I cannot say; but great God in heaven, who knows no act is without cause, let Him judge of all, for I will hold my peace. But the truth is that this fresh May received that day such an impression of pity for this sick Damian that she could not drive from her heart the thought of bringing him ease. 'In truth,' she thought, 'I care not whom this thing may annoy, for here I warrant him to love him best of any creature, had he no more than his kirtle.'

Lo, pity runs quickly into a gentle heart! Here you may see how excellent a generosity there is in women, when they take counsel well. There may be some tyrant, indeed there be many, with hearts as hard as any stone, who would have let him die in the place rather than have granted him favor; and would rejoice in their cruel pride, and care not though they did murder.

This gentle May, full of pity, made a letter with her own hand, in which letter she granted him her full favor; nought lacked but only day and place where she might meet him, for it should be even as he would have it. And upon a day, when she saw her time, May went to visit this Damian, and craftily thrust this letter down under his pillow; let him read it if he will! She took him by the hand and wrung it hard, but so secretly that

there wist no wight of it, and bade him be all well soon, and went forth to January, when he sent after her.

Up rose Damian next morning; all his sickness and sorrow were gone. He combed his hair, he preened and pranked him, he did all that his lady could wish; and eke he was as docile toward January as ever was hunting-dog. He was so pleasant to every one (for cunning is all, whoever knows how to use it), that every wight was fain to speak well of him; and fully he stood in his lady's favor. And thus I leave Damian going about his business, and I will proceed with my tale.

Some clerks hold that highest felicity consists in pleasure; and if this be so, in sooth this noble January shaped his course by all his power to live in the highest happiness, in honorable wise as beseems a knight. His house and all his manner of life were made as honorable and befitting his degree as a king's. Amongst others of his seemly appurtenances, he made a garden, all walled with stone; so fair a garden I wot of nowhere. For out of doubt, I trow verily, he who wrote the Romance of the Rose could not well describe the beauty of it; nor would Priapus, though he be god of gardens, be sufficient to tell the beauty of the garden and of the spring under an ever-green laurel. Full oftentimes Pluto and his spouse Proserpina, and all elfdom, disported them and made melody about that pool, and danced, as men told. This aged knight, noble January, took such pleasure in walking and diverting him there that he would suffer no wight save himself to bear the key; for he carried ever a little silver key to the small wicket, with which, when he list, he opened it. And in the summer season, when he would solace him with his wife, he would go thither with May his wife and none but they two. And in this wise this January and his blooming spouse lived many a merry day. But earthly joy lasts not ever, for January or any creature.

*Auctor.* O sudden chance, O thou fickle Fortune, so deceitful like the scorpion, that with thine head flatterest when thou wilt sting; thy tail with its venom is death. O brittle joy! O sweet, strange venom! O monster, that canst paint thy gifts so craftily, under guise of steadfastness, that thou deceivest both great and small! Why hast thou thus deceived January, who hadst taken him as thy full friend? And now thou hast robbed

him of both his eyes, for sorrow of which he would fain die. —

Alas! this noble, lordly January, amidst all his prosperity and lustiness, is waxed blind, and that suddenly. He wept and wailed sore, and therewith, lest his wife should fall into some folly, the fire of jealousy so burned his heart that he would fain some man had killed both him and her. For he desired not that either in his lifedays or after his death she should be loved or wedded, but ever live as a widow in black clothes, solitary as the turtle-dove that has lost her mate. But at the last, sooth to say, his sorrow began to assuage after a month or two; for when he wist that it could be no otherwise, he took his adversity in patience, save that he could not forego to be evermore jealous. Which jealousy was so inordinate that neither in the hall nor in any house else, nor in any other place, would he suffer her to walk or ride, unless he had evermore his hand on her. Wherefore this fresh May wept full often, who loved Damian so warmly that either she must soon die or else she must have him. She looked ever for the day when her heart should break.

Upon the other side Damian was become the most sorrowful wight that ever was, for neither by day nor by night could he speak a word to fresh May upon his subject, or upon any such matter, unless January were to hear it, who had hand upon her evermore. But notwithstanding this, by writing to and fro and by privy signals, he knew her mind; and she knew eke whither his purpose tended.

*Auctor.* O January, what boots it though thou couldst see as far as ships sail? As well be deceived when blind as be deceived when a man can see. Lo Argus with an hundred eyes, much as he could pry or pore, yet was he hoodwinked; and, God wot, so be others that ween verily that it be not so. But to pass over all that is a pleasure, and I say no more. —

This fresh May, that I have been speaking of, pressed into warm wax the little key, which January carried, of the small wicket through which he often went into his garden. And Damian, who knew all her plan, privily counterfeited the key. There is no more to say, but there shall soon betide some marvel through this key, which you shall hear, if you will tarry.

*Auctor.* O noble Ovid, God wot thou sayest full truly!



What sleight is so long and painful that a lover will not find out in some way? Men may learn from Pyramus and Thisbe; though they were watched everywhere full long and strictly, they had an understanding, whispering through a wall; none could have descried such a trick. —

But now to my tale. Ere eight days were passed, ere the month of July, it befell that through the urging of his wife January caught so great an appetite to divert him in his garden, with none but they two, that upon a morning he said to this May, 'Rise up, my wife, my noble lady, my sweeting; the turtle's voice is heard, my sweet dove; the winter is gone, with his drenching rains. Come forth, now, with thy dovelike eyes! How fairer be thy breasts than wine! The garden is enclosed all around; come forth, my white spouse; of a surety thou hast wounded me in mine heart, O wife! I have known no blemish in thee. Come forth, and let us take our disport. I chose thee for my wife and my solace.'

Such old words of folly he used. To Damian she made a sign that he should go before with his key. This Damian then opened the wicket and in he darted, and that in such wise that none could see or hear it, and anon he was sitting quietly under a bush. This January, as blind as a stone, holding May by his hand and with no wight else, went into his fresh garden, and quickly clapped the wicket to.

'Now wife,' quoth he, 'here is none but you and I, — you, who are the creature I love best. For by that Lord That sits in high heaven, I had liefer die on a sword than harm you, dear faithful wife! For God's sake, think how I chose you, not for any covetousness, in verity, but only for the love I bore you. And though I be old and see not, be true to me, and I shall tell you wherefore. Three things you shall win thereby, certes: first, Christ's love; and honor for yourself; and all my heritage, town and tower. I give it you, make out the charters as you list; this shall be done to-morrow ere the sun go down, so surely may God bring my soul to heaven. First I pray kiss me in sign of covenant, and though I be jealous, blame me not. You are so deeply imprinted in my thought, that when I consider your beauty and therewith my old unpropitious age, certes, though I die for it, I cannot suffer to be out of your company,

for very love; and this is very truth. Now wife, kiss me, and let us roam about the garden.'

This fresh May, when she heard these words, answered January mildly; but first of all she began to weep. Quoth she, 'I have a soul to guard as well as you, and also mine honor, and that tender flower of my wifhood, which I secured to your hand when the priest bound my body to you. Wherefore I will answer thus, by your leave, my dear lord: I pray to God, never dawn the day that I die not, as foully as woman can, if I ever do that shame to my kindred, or so smirch mine honor, as to be false. And if I do that fault, let me be stripped and put in a sack, and drowned in the nearest river. I am a gentlewoman, and not a wench. Why speak you thus? But men ever be faithless and women ever have fresh reproach from you; you have no other pretext, I trow, than to speak of distrust and reproach to us.'

And at that word she saw where Damian sat in the bush, and she began to cough and made signs with her finger that Damian should climb up a tree which was laden with fruit; and up he went. For verily he knew all her purpose, and every sign that she could make, far better than January, her own husband. For she had told him all of this matter in a letter, how he was to act. And thus I leave him sitting up in the pear-tree, and January and May roaming pleasantly.

Bright was the day and the firmament blue; Phœbus sent down his beams of gold, to gladden every flower with his warmth. At that time he was in Gemini, I trow, but little removed from his depression in Cancer, which is the exaltation of Jupiter. And so befell, this bright morning-time, that in the further side of that garden was Pluto, who is the king of fairyland, and many a lady with him, following his wife, Queen Proserpina, one after another, straight as a line. (Ye may read the story in Claudian, how he fetched her away in his grisly chariot, whilst she was gathering flowers in the meadow.) This king of fairyland then sat him down upon a bank of turves green and fresh, and forthwith he said thus to his spouse: 'My wife,' quoth he, 'no wight can say nay, experience proves ever the treason which women do to men. I can tell ten hundred thousand notable stories about your

infidelity and frailty. O Solomon, wise, richest in wealth, filled with sapience and earthly glory, thy words be full worthy to be remembered of every wight that knows wit and reason. Thus he praises the goodness of man: "Amongst a thousand men still I found one good, but of all women I found none." These be the words of the king who knows your wickedness. And Jesus the son of Sirach, I trow he but seldom speaks respectfully of you. A wild-fire and corrupt pestilence fall upon your bodies to-night! See you this honorable lord? Alas, because he is old and blind, his own man shall make him a cuckold. Lo here in the tree he sits, the profligate! Now of my royal power I will grant to this old, blind, worthy knight that he shall recover his vision, when his wife would do him wrong. Then he shall know all her looseness, both to her dishonor and of others besides.'

Quoth Proserpina, 'You shall, if you so wish; but by the soul of my mother's sire I swear that I shall grant to her to return a sufficient answer, and for her sake to all women after; that, though they be overtaken in any guilt, they shall excuse themselves with bold face, and bear down those who would call them to account. None of them shall die for lack of an answer. Although a man had seen somewhat with both of his eyes, nevertheless we women shall face it boldly out, and weep, and swear, and craftily chide, so that you men shall be as ignorant as geese. What care I for your authorities? I wot well this Jew, this Solomon, found many a fool amongst us women. But though he found no good woman, yet many another man has found women full faithful, good and virtuous. Witness them that dwell in Christ's house; they proved their steadfastness by their martyrdom. Also the Roman histories make mention of many a true faithful wife. But, sir (and be not wroth), albeit he said he found no good woman, I pray you take the man's meaning; he meant thus, that in sovereign goodness there is none but God, That sitteth in Trinity. Eh, for the love of the one true God! Why make you so much of Solomon? What though he builded a temple, God's house? What though he were glorious and rich? So likewise he made a temple to false gods; how could he do a thing more forbidden? Perdy! fairly as you plaster his name, he was a lecher and an idolater, and in

his old age he forsook the true God. As the Bible says, if God had not spared him for his father's sake, He would have rent the kingdom away earlier than He did. I care not a butterfly for all the dishonor that you men write of women. I am a woman, I must needs speak or else swell till my heart burst. For since he said we be praters, so surely may I keep all my tresses whole, as I spare not out of any courtesy to speak harm of him who would wrong us.'

'Dame,' quoth this Pluto, 'be wroth no longer, — I give it up. But since I swore mine oath that I would grant him his sight again, I warn you that of a truth my word shall stand. I am a king, it is not fitting that I should be false.'

'And I,' quoth she, 'a queen of the fairies. She shall have her answer, I undertake. Let us have no more words hereof. In sooth I will oppose you no longer.'

Now return we to January, who was in the garden with his fair wife, and sang more merrily than a popinjay, 'Thee I love best, and ever shall, and none other.' So long he wandered amongst the alleys until he was come by the pear-tree where this Damian sat on high, right merry amongst the fresh green leaves. This fresh May, so bright and fair, began to sigh, and said, 'Alas my side! Now sir, for aught that may hap, I must have some of the pears that I see, or I must die, so sorely I long to eat of the small green pears. Help, for the love of our Lady in heaven! I tell you of a truth, a woman in my situation may have so great an appetite for a fruit that she may die unless she have it.'

'Alas!' quoth he, 'that I have not here a boy that could climb! Alas, alas, that I am blind!'

'Yea, sir,' quoth she, 'no matter; but if you would vouchsafe, for love of heaven, to clasp that pear-tree within your arms (for I well know you distrust me); then, so I might set my foot on your back, I could climb up well enough.'

'Certes,' quoth he, 'there should be nothing wanting here, if I could help you even with my heart's blood.'

He stooped down, and she stood on his back and caught hold by a branch and went up. Ladies, I pray you be not wroth; I cannot gloss, I am a rough man. And forthwith this Damian received her.



JANUARY HELPING MAY INTO THE TREE

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And when Pluto saw this great wrong, he restored his sight to January and made him see as well as he ever could. And when he had his sight again, never was there man so fain of anything. But his thought was evermore on his wife, and he cast his two eyes up into the tree, and saw Damian with his wife. And he set up such a roar and a cry as the mother does when the child is dying: 'Out! help! alas!' he began to cry. 'O rude, bold lady, what do you?'

And she answered, 'Sir, what ails you? Have patience and reason in your mind. I have helped you in both your eyes. On peril of my soul, I lie not; it was taught me that to heal your eyes there was nothing better than to stand with a man up in a tree. God knows, I did it with a full good intent.'

'With a man up in a tree!' he said. 'God grant that you both die a shameful death! It was worse than that; I saw it with mine eyes, else let me be hanged by the neck!'

'Then,' quoth she, 'my medicine is all false; for certainly, if you were able to see well, you would not say these words to me; you have some glimmerings, but you have not perfect sight.'

Quoth he, 'I see with both of mine eyes as well as I ever could, God be thanked! And by my troth, methought it was as I said.'

'You are bewildered, good sir, bewildered,' quoth she. 'This thanks I have because I have given you your sight! Alas that ever I was so kind!'

'Now, dame,' quoth he, 'let us forget all of it. Come down, my love, and if I have spoken amiss, God so help me as I am sorry for it.'

'Yea, sir,' quoth she, 'you may think as you will; but, sir, a man that wakes out of his sleep cannot speedily take good heed of a thing or see it perfectly, till he be thoroughly used to the daylight. Even so a man who has been blind a long time cannot straightway see so well, when his sight is newly restored, as he who has seen for a day or two. Till your vision be settled for a time, full many a sight may beguile you. Be careful, I pray you; for by the Queen of heaven full many a man thinks to see a thing, and it is all otherwise than it seems. He who misapprehends, misjudges.'

And with that she leaped down from the tree. Who was glad but this January? He kissed her and embraced her full often and gently stroked her, and led her home to his palace. Now, good men, I pray you be ever of good cheer. Thus ends my tale of January, and God bless us, and his mother, our Lady!

*Here is ended the Merchant's Tale of January.*

'Eh! God's mercy!' said our Host. 'Now I pray God keep me from such a wife! Lo what sleights and wiles be in women! They be ever as busy as bees to deceive us simple men, and they will ever swerve from the truth, it is well proved by this Merchant's tale. I have a wife as true as steel, without doubt, though she be otherwise a poor one; but she is a blabbing shrew with her tongue and has an heap of other faults. — No matter about that, let such things pass. But, know you what? Be it said secretly, sorely I rue that I am tied to her. But if I were to reckon up every fault of hers, of a certainty I were too foolish; and I say this with good reason, for it would be reported to her by some one of this company; by whom, it needs not to state, since it is women know how to give out such gear. And eke my wit suffices not to tell all. Wherefore my tale is ended. Squire, draw nearer, if you will vouchsafe, and tell us somewhat about love; for, certes, you know as much of that as any man.'

'Yea, sir,' quoth he, 'and I will tell you with hearty goodwill as much as I am able. For I will not rebel against your desire; I will tell a tale. Hold me excused if I speak amiss; my intention is good. Lo, this is my tale.'

*Here beginneth the Squire's Tale.*

There dwelt a king at Sarray, in the land of Tartary, who made war upon Russia, through which many a doughty man died. This noble king was named Cambuscan, who was so renowned in his time that nowhere, in any region, was there a