

## The Nun's Priest's Tale

(a widow lived on a farm)  
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 pleasance,  
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.  
(she continues to chide him for his foolishness)  
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.  
(here follows several arguments as to why the  
dream is a warning)  
"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  
(he gives more examples along the lines of this  
one:)  
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). \* please  
 look up the Latin!  
 (later on . . . )  
 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, accursed 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,

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.  
(the fox continues to flatter Chanticleer)  
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?  
(more moralizing)  
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.