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# The Canterbury Tales: the Man of Law’s tale

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**Late fourteenth century, Middle English**

In Surrie whylom dwelte a companye · Of chapmen riche, and thereto sadde and trewe, · That wyde-wher senten her spycerye, · Clothes of gold, and satins riche of hewe · Her chaffar was so thrifty and so newe · That every wight hath deyntee to chaffare · With hem, and eek to sellen hem hir ware – In Syria, there once dwelt a rich company of merchants who sent their spices and their fine and expensive cloths all over the world. Their merchandise was of such quality and so fairly priced that both buyers and sellers flocked to do business with them.

Now it came about that the senior partners of this thriving concern decided to go to Rome; whether for business or for pleasure I have no idea, but whatever the reason, they insisted upon going in person and quickly found lodgings that suited whatever it was they had in mind to do.

And whilst in Rome, they could not help but learn about the emperor’s daughter. And the opinion of everybody was that not since the beginning of the world had such striking beauty been matched by such virtue! This was the considered judgement of all – that she was beautiful without being arrogant or vain, young without being immature, that she was willing to listen to other people’s opinions and to accommodate her own desires to their wishes – that she was, indeed, the very mirror of courtesy. ‘May God keep her and protect her!’ they all cried. ‘Her heart is as much the source of holiness as her hands are of generosity.’

And all this was the truth!

But let us turn to our purpose. These merchants filled their ship and having seen the maiden for themselves, sailed happily back to Syria and went about their business. I know no more than this. But it happened that these merchants were on friendly terms with the sultan, and whenever they returned from a foreign expedition, he would summon them to his palace and get them to tell him all the news they had learnt. And amongst all the things they told him on this occasion, they especially remarked upon Constance, and their glowing descriptions of her beauty and her virtue so inflamed the sultan’s desires that he could think of nothing but possessing her for himself.

By chance, it was written in that great book that men call ‘the sky’ that this sultan would die through love. For in the stars at one’s birth is written – if only we could read it! – the end of every man, though men’s wits are so dull that no one knows how to extract all this information.

This sultan sent for his advisors and told them that unless he could be relieved of his longing he would soon be dead, and he urged them all quickly to come up with some remedy. Different counsellors said different things – they argued, spoke of magic spells and other obscenities, but at last came to the conclusion that there was no other course but for him to marry her. They felt obliged to caution, however, that it would be very unlikely that a Christian emperor would allow his daughter to be married under Islamic law. And the sultan answered:

‘Rather than lose all hope of gaining Constance as my wife, I shall be christened. I must have her! I have no other choice!’

Why expand upon this any further? By letters, by the exchange of ambassadors, by the mediation of the Pope, the Church and the emperor’s knights, Islam was abolished in Syria and Christ’s law introduced. Preparations were made for the wedding. The sultan decreed that all his nobility should be christened, and upon payment of a certain quantity of gold – how much I cannot say – it was agreed that Constance would be his. This was sworn to by both sides. Now, fair Constance – may God guide you!

Some of you, I should imagine, will be waiting to hear all about the wonderful arrangements made by the Emperor of Rome for his daughter’s journey. But you should know that such things cannot be described in a few words. Bishops were assigned to accompany her, lords, ladies and valiant knights – I shall say no more. Everybody in Rome was asked to pray to Christ that he should look favourably upon this marriage and give his blessing to the voyage.

The day came for Constance to depart. The fatal day has arrived! Everybody made ready to do what was required of them. Alas! Is it any wonder that Constance weeps? She is to be taken to a foreign land, parted from friends who have cherished her all her life, and married to a man she does not know. All husbands are good and always have been, as every wife knows! I shall say no more.

‘Father,’ she said, ‘and you, mother, my highest joy save that of Christ above – give your child Constance your blessing, for I shall soon be bound for Syria and you will never see me again. Alas! But may Christ, who died for our redemption, give me the grace to do his bidding, even I, a wretched woman whose death would matter little, for women are born to servitude and penance, and to be under man’s governance.’

Never has such weeping been heard! But forth she must go, whether she weeps or sings. Oh cruel firmament, that throws from east to west even those planets that might naturally wish to take another course! Imprudent Emperor of Rome, alas! Were there no astrologers in your city? Are no astrological charts drawn up by your philosophers before important people set out on journeys? Is every time deemed to be no better and no worse than any other? Alas! We are all too ignorant, or too stupid.

Constance was brought to the ship in solemn procession. ‘Now may Jesus Christ be with you all,’ she said. ‘There is nothing more I can say but farewell.’

‘Farewell, fair Constance!’

She made every effort to be of good heart, and so I shall let her sail onwards and turn to the matter in hand.

The sultan’s mother – that wellspring of evil! – knew of her son’s intentions and sent for her own advisors. When they were assembled, she sat and said: ‘Lords, you all know how my son is on the point of abandoning the holy laws of Allah as given to us by the prophet Mohammed. But I make one vow to the great God – that I would sooner see the departure of life from my body than the laws of Mohammed from my heart.

‘What does this new religion offer us but servitude and penance? And afterwards, an eternity in hell for reneging upon our beliefs! But lords, will you agree to do as I shall tell you, so that we may all be safe for evermore?’

They all swore, every one of them – ‘Yes!’ They would stand by her, come life or death, and seek out their friends to strengthen their numbers; and she in turn agreed to do as I shall now explain.

‘First,’ she said, ‘we will pretend to embrace Christianity. Cold water on the forehead cannot do us very much harm. And I shall put on such a banquet that the sultan will be handsomely repaid. For though his wife may be as spotless as the driven snow in the mountains, she will need a fontful of water to wash away the red!’

Oh sultaness! Root of all iniquity! Like the serpent bound in hell. Oh deceitful woman, everything that can confound virtue finds nourishment in you – a nest of evil! Oh Satan, well can you teach women the old ways. You made Eve condemn us to toil. And now you will destroy this Christian marriage. You make women your instruments when you have a mind to beguile.

This sultaness, whom I blame and curse, let her advisors go quietly away. Why should I string this story out? She rode to the sultan and said that she would gladly renounce Islam and receive Christianity from the hands of priests, repenting only that she had been a heathen for so long. She begged her son to allow her the honour of putting on a banquet for the Christians.

‘I would like to do my utmost to please them,’ she said.

The Christian folk arrived in Syria with much pomp and splendour and quickly the sultan sent word, first to his mother and then to all his lords and noblemen, that his wife was here and that they should ride out to meet her, for his own honour and for hers.

A crowd of finely dressed noblemen and ladies gathered and mixed with one another – Syrians and Romans. The sultan’s mother received Constance with the joy one would expect from any mother greeting her daughter, and they rode slowly and solemnly to the city nearby. I do not believe that the triumph of Julius Caesar, so lavishly described by Lucan, was any more magnificent that this happy procession.

Soon afterwards, the sultan himself appeared, in such magnificence that it was a marvel to see. He welcomed his wife with all joy! And so I leave them to their happiness. My concern is with the outcome of it all.

The evening approached on which the sultaness was to hold her feast. All the Christian folk arrived at the banquet – everybody, both young and old. And why not? Here at this gathering it was possible to meet royalty and to partake of more dainty dishes that I could ever put a name to. But they would pay a high price for it before they rose. Oh, sudden grief! – always successor to worldly happiness. Listen to this truth and bear in mind during your days of gladness the unperceived calamity that is sure to be just around the corner.

For to cut a long story short, the Christians and the sultan, everybody, were hacked to pieces and stabbed at the table; and only Constance alone was spared. Not one of those who had received Christianity managed to get to his feet before he was cut down. Constance was quickly bundled out of the hall and put into a ship without a rudder, and told to learn quickly how to sail if she wished to get back to Italy again!

With a little money and some clothes they had given her, she was cast upon the salty sea. Oh Constance! Daughter of an emperor and the very model of virtue. May he who is the lord of fortune guide you!

Days and years passed. Years and days! This sorry creature drifted throughout the Aegean Sea and on through the Straits of Gibraltar, waiting for death to claim her; for she harboured no hope of surviving to see her boat cast at last onto a shore.

You may ask why she was not killed at the banquet. Who was there to save her? And I answer – who saved Daniel from the lion’s mouth?

But, if she was not killed along with everybody else at the banquet, who kept her from drowning in the sea? Who kept Jonas safe in the whale’s mouth before he was vomited up at Nineveh? Only God. God chose to show us a miracle through her so that we might see His mighty works.

Who provided her with food for three years? Three years! No one but Christ, who fed five thousand folk with five loaves and two fishes! She was driven into our ocean and survived in our wild seas until at last, beneath a castle in Northumberland whose name I do not know, she was cast up by the waves and beached upon the sand. No tide could move her

The constable of the castle came down onto the shore to view the wreck and found the weary woman on board. She begged for mercy, in her own language – begged that her life might be spared and that he might help her. She spoke a corrupt form of Latin, but it was possible for them to understand her a little and when the constable had finished inspecting the vessel he brought her up into the castle. She knelt in thanks to God. But who she was, she would not say, not to anybody. She told them that she had been traumatised by her voyage and that she had forgotten everything that had happened to her before setting out. The constable and his wife wept out of pity for her. And she was so hardworking and willing to serve and to please everybody in the castle that soon everybody grew to love her.

This constable, and Hermangild his wife, were pagans. It was a pagan land. But Hermangild grew to love the woman as much as her own life and Constance stayed for so long, singing her prayers, that Jesus saw the grace to convert Hermangild to Christianity.

No Christians dared gather in that country for they had all been driven out many years before by the pagans who had occupied the North by land and by sea. The Christians of old Britain had all fled into Wales. But yet, Christian Britons had not been so totally exiled that Christ was not honoured in the privacy of some private homes, to beguile the heathens. Near to the castle were three such folk, and one of them was a blind man. He saw only with his mind’s eye.

The sun shone brightly one summer’s day as the constable, his wife and Constance strolled along the seashore; and as they walked they came upon this blind man. He was crooked and old and his eyes were tightly shut.

‘In the name of Christ!’ cried this old blind Britain. ‘Dame Hermangild, give me my sight again!’

This lady was afraid, in case her husband might hear. But Constance gave her strength and urged her to work Christ’s will, as a daughter of his Church. The old man’s sight was restored. The constable was flabbergasted and said: ‘What does this miracle mean?’

Constance answered: ‘Sir, it is due to the strength of Christ, who helps people to escape from the devil’s clutches.’ And she went on to explain our law so well, that before the evening was out the constable was converted and believed in Christ.

This constable was not the lord of this castle but kept it securely, as he had done for many winters, for Alla, the King of Northumberland, who was a wise ruler and a firm defender against the Scots. But I stray from my subject.

Satan, ever waiting for an opportunity to bring harm upon us all, saw the perfection of Constance and planned how to repay her for all she had done. He made a young knight, who lived in the town, fall so madly in love with her that he thought that he would die if he could not quickly have his will of her. He wooed her, but to no avail. She had no intention of committing sin! And out of a desire for revenge, he planned a shameful death for her. He waited until the constable had gone away from the castle on business and then secretly, one night, he crept into Hermangild’s bedroom as she slept. Constance was asleep in the room also, exhausted from singing prayers. This knight, through Satan’s guidance, softly crept to the bed and cut Hermangild’s throat! Then he laid the bloody knife beside Constance and left the room the way he had entered it.

Soon afterwards the constable returned home with Alla, the king, and quickly discovered his wife’s body. He wept and wrung his hands, and saw the knife lying beside Constance. Alas! What could she say? She was so frightened she could hardly speak!

King Alla was told what had happened, the circumstances of Constance’s arrival in Northumberland and her gentle disposition, and like a lamb to the slaughter Constance was hauled up before him. The false knight who had committed this outrage accused her of being the instigator of this murder. But nonetheless, there was great mourning among the people, who exclaimed: ‘How could she possibly have committed such wickedness?’ For they knew her to be a virtuous woman and more fond of Hermangild than of her own life! Everybody in the castle bore witness to this.

This gentle king, this pagan king, was therefore not happy that he had got to the bottom of the matter and sought to enquire further. But alas! Constance! Unless Christ works a miracle, you will quickly be killed!

She fell upon her knees and said: ‘Immortal God, you saved Susannah from wicked slander. Mary, merciful maid, daughter of Saint Anne, before whose child we sing hosanna, if I am innocent, help me, for I shall otherwise die!’

Have you not seen sometimes a man being led through the crowd towards his death where it is obvious by his face who is the one to be executed? Such was Constance, her face was so drained of blood. King Alla felt such compassion for her that the tears ran down his cheeks. ‘Fetch a book,’ he commanded, ‘and if this knight will swear upon it that what he says is the truth and that this woman killed Hermangild, then we will take things from there.’

A British book was fetched, one containing the gospels, and upon this tome the knight swore that Constance was guilty. Instantly, a hand mysteriously appeared and struck him on the back of the neck. He fell like a stone as both his eyes popped out of their sockets! Then a voice was heard. ‘You have slandered an innocent daughter of Holy Church in the presence of the Almighty! And yet, I shall do no more to you.’

Everybody was astounded at this. They all stood transfixed, rooted to the spot. And to conclude; as a result of this miracle and through the mediation of Constance herself, the king and many others were converted to Christianity. By the judgement of the king this false knight was executed for his lies, and yet Constance found it in her heart to pity him. And soon afterwards, Christ caused Alla and Constance to marry.

But who might we suspect of displeasure at this marriage but Donegild, the king’s mother! She thought her heart would break in two! She thought it an offence that her son should take such a strange woman to be his wife. But I have no interest in the chaff and the straw of a tale; what can I say about the majesty of the wedding – that between Constance and King Alla. They ate, they drank, they danced and sang and made merry, and then they went to bed, as was proper; for although wives are holy things, they must lie patiently at night and take willingly such necessities as are pleasing to those who have exchanged rings with them, and lay holiness aside for a little while.

The king gave Constance a child, and put her into the safekeeping of a bishop and a constable while he went into Scotland to seek out his enemies. Fair Constance is in such an advanced state of pregnancy that she has taken to her room, awaiting Christ’s will.

The time arrived and she gave birth to a little boy. They called him Maurice at the font, and the constable drew up a letter informing the king of this happy event, and gave it to a messenger.

This messenger thought it might be advantageous for him to visit Donegild’s castle first.

‘Madam,’ he said, in his language, ‘you may be happy and joyful and thank God a hundred thousand times! My lady has given birth to a healthy little boy. Here are the letters given to me to take quickly to the king. If you have anything to send to your son, I am your servant, night and day.’

‘I have nothing to send at the moment,’ replied Donegild. ‘But please rest here for the night and I will speak to you again in the morning.’

This messenger drank a large quantity of ale and wine and while he slept, his letters were stolen from his box. Another letter was forged very subtly, purporting to be from the constable to the king. The gist of it was this: that the queen had given birth to such a horrible monster that there was no man who dared remain in the castle with her! The mother of this child was obviously an elf, delivered through spells or sorcery into this land.’

The king was distraught when he read this letter, but told nobody and replied: ‘A welcome to whatever Christ may send. I, who am now aware of his teaching, wish only to receive what He sees fit to give. Keep safe this child, whatever he looks like, and my wife also, until I return. Christ, as he pleases, may send me a more agreeable heir in the fullness of time.’

The king sealed this letter, weeping inwardly, and gave it to the messenger to take back with him. There is no more to say.

Oh, messenger! Your breath reeks of alcohol once more and you cannot even keep your balance, let alone your secrets! Your mind is lost, you jabber like a jay! And Oh, Donegild! I have insufficient English to do justice to your wickedness. Though your body walks this Earth, your spirit is in hell! The letters have been stolen, every one, and counterfeits substituted in their place. They read: ‘The king commands his constable, who shall be hanged if these orders are not carried out, that he shall in no way suffer Constance to remain in the kingdom for more than another three days. She must be placed in the boat in which she was first found, she and her young son, pushed from the land and told never to return.’

Oh Constance! Well may your dreams be full of anxiety and your spirit fearful.

‘Lord Christ!’ exclaimed the constable when he read the king’s reply. ‘Alas! Almighty God, as all things happen through your will, how is it that you allow the unjust death of innocents and suffer the wicked to prosper?’

Young and old wept when they heard what was contained in this letter. ‘Alas, Constance!’ cried the constable. ‘I must be your persecutor or die a shameful death myself!’ And Constance, on the fourth day, went, with her face drained of blood, towards her boat. Notwithstanding, she accepted the will of Christ with good spirit and, kneeling upon the sand, said: ‘Lord, whatever you wish for me I shall always welcome. He who protected me on the land shall look after me upon the salt sea, although it is not given to me to know how.’

Her little child lay weeping in her arms and as she knelt upon the beach she said: ‘Peace, little son, I will do you no harm.’ And she took the cloth from her head and wrapped him in it, and sang him a lullaby and cast her eyes up to heaven.

‘Mother,’ she said, ‘and bright maiden, Mary, it is true that through a woman’s failing mankind was lost and doomed always to die, for which reason your son was nailed to the cross. You had to watch your child killed before your very eyes, a greater sorrow than any man could bear, and yet my little child lives, in faith! Oh little child, alas, what guilt can you have – you who have never sinned? Why does your father want you dead?’

With that, she looked backwards towards the land and said: ‘Farewell, pitiless husband.’

Then she rose from her knees and walked down the beach towards the boat. Everybody followed her as she tried to stop her child from crying; then she blessed herself and got into the vessel.

King Alla returned home shortly afterwards, went to his castle and asked where his wife and child were. The constable’s heart grew cold the moment he heard this and quickly showed the king his own letter. ‘Lord,’ said the constable, ‘as you commanded me to do, upon pain of death, so have I done!’

The messenger was forced to give a full account of his movements during the period in question, and by intelligent guesswork and by some discreet enquiries, they soon had an idea of the full horror of what had taken place. King Alla had his mother executed for treason. And so ended Donegild!

No tongue may describe the grief that King Alla felt for his wife and child. But I shall turn to Constance, who floats upon the sea, in sorrow and discomfort. For five years and more she drifted! And only after the passage of all this time did Christ guide her to land.

She drifted onto the shore beneath a heathen castle, whose name I cannot find in my source. The sea cast Constance and her child upon the sand. Almighty God, hold Constance in your thoughts! She has arrived once more in a heathen land and her well-being is far from certain! Many people came down from the castle to stare at the boat and at Constance and shortly, as it got dark, there came the lord’s steward - may God send him ill-fortune! He climbed on board and made plain his intention to rape her. Her child cried, and so did she; but Mary was not slow in sending help, for in the struggle he fell overboard and drowned.

Forth went her ship, through the narrow mouth of Gibraltar and northwards, then westwards, sometimes southwards, then eastwards, for many a weary day, until Christ’s mother saw fit, through her endless goodness, to make an end of all her journeying.

But let us leave Constance for a moment and speak of the Emperor of Rome. He has learned by the transmission of letters from Syria of the dreadful slaughter of the Christians and the dishonour done to his daughter by the wicked sultaness. For which reason this emperor quickly sent his senator with royal instructions, and with many other great lords, God knows, to take vengeance upon the Syrians. They burned, killed and brought many Syrians to grief; but having vented their spleen sufficiently, they made ready to sail homewards again to Rome.

This senator sailed home in victory and met, as the story says, a drifting boat in which Constance was sitting in great discomfort and distress. Ten years had elapsed – or was it much less? He had no idea who this woman was, nor why she was drifting in a boat, and she refused to tell him her name. Can you believe this? She refused to tell him her name! So the senator brought her to Rome and gave her to his wife, along with her young son, and with the senator she led her life. Thus can Our Lady bring Constance out of sorrow, and many others besides. She lived for a long time with the senator and his wife, doing good and working hard. The senator’s wife was her aunt, although she did not recognise Constance at all and had no idea who she was. No idea who she was! I shall say no more!

King Alla, who had had his mother executed, was so filled with remorse that he went to Rome to crave penance from the Pope and to implore Jesus to forgive him all his sins. The senator, as was the custom, rode to meet the king on his arrival in Rome, with many members of his family, as much to display the magnificence of the Imperial City as to honour any king. They met one another gladly and with great honour; and after the space of a day or two this senator was invited to a banquet put on by King Alla. He took Constance’s son along with him.

Some say that it was at Constance’s own request that Maurice was taken to the feast, but whatever the truth of this, he was certainly there. The king wondered at him and asked the senator: ‘Who is this fair child standing here?’

‘I do not know!’ he replied. ‘He has a mother but no father that I know of.’

Now this child was the image of his mother, and Alla saw this and fell silent. He sighed to himself and as soon as he could, made an excuse and left the table. ‘By my faith!’ he thought. ‘There is a phantom in my head! My wife has drowned in the salt sea!’ Then he thought to himself: ‘But how do I know that she has not been carried to this land by the same strange means that brought her to my country in the first place?’

After the meal, King Alla went with the senator to his house to see for himself. The senator received the king into his home with all honour and sent for Constance. When Alla saw her he greeted her and burst into tears, for he immediately recognised her. And she was so upset that she could barely stand. Twice she nearly fell in a faint. King Alla wept and tried to explain: ‘May God and all his saints have mercy – I am guiltless of harming you; else may the devil fetch me out of this place!’ There were many tears shed before their sorrowful hearts were reconciled. All those around felt great pity to hear such accusation and agony! I beg you, don’t make me rehearse it all. I cannot write of this sorrow!

Finally, when the truth was known, that Alla was guiltless, they kissed a hundred times, I swear, and were so happy that their joy was greater than anyone has ever seen before, or ever shall do, while the world lasts, excepting only, of course, the joy of heaven.

Constance asked her husband if he might try to persuade her father to agree, in his majesty, to arrange to come to dine with them. She also asked that the king should say nothing at all about her to him. Some say that it was Maurice who went to the emperor with this invitation; but I would assume that King Alla was not so lacking in etiquette as to send a child as envoy to the Emperor of Rome, so let us assume that he went himself.

The emperor was happy to accept the invitation, looked intently at the child and thought of his daughter Constance. King Alla went back to his lodgings and made every possible arrangement for the banquet. It was to be as lavish as he could devise. Morning came and, as was fitting, he and his wife Constance dressed themselves for the feast as magnificently as their wardrobes would allow. Then they rode in all splendour, and when Constance saw her father in the street, she dismounted and fell at his feet.

‘Father!’ she cried. ‘You have forgotten your young child Constance! I am your daughter whom you sent to Syria. It is I, who was put in the salt sea and left to die! Mercy, father! I beg you, please do not send me to any more heathen lands, but thank my lord here, instead, for his kindness.’

Who can then describe the joy there was between Constance, her father, and her husband King Alla? But I must make an end of this tale. King Alla, when he had stayed in Rome for long enough, brought Constance back to England with him and here they lived in peace and joy. But only for a short while, sadly. The happiness of this world lasts but a little while, I tell you, for time will not stand still – it changes as though from day to night, like the tides of the sea. Backwards and forwards it goes; backwards and forwards like the tides, like the coming of day and night. The joy that prevailed between Alla and Constance could not last forever, and Death, who comes to collect his rent, his periodic payment, from both high and low, took Alla out of this world within a year.

Constance made her way back to Rome and prostrated herself before her father. And here she lived, with her friends, in virtue and charity. Now may Jesus Christ, whose power may bring joy after woe, govern us in his grace and protect all of us who remain here on Earth.

Amen.