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# The Canterbury Tales: The Franklin’s Tale

**Geoffrey Chaucer**

**Late fourteenth century, Middle English**

Thise olde gentil Britons in hir dayes, of diverse aventures maden layes, rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge – Long ago the noble people of Brittany, in what is now northern France, recorded strange tales of diverse adventures rhymed in their original tongue, a language similar to Cornish, which they sung to the accompaniment of instruments or read to themselves for pleasure. I shall bring to mind one of these now, and recall it for you as faithfully as I can.

But first I should explain that I have studied neither at Oxford nor at Cambridge and please forgive my country accent. I have never slept on Mount Parnassus or been kissed by the nine Muses, to my knowledge, and I have never read the Roman author Cicero; I am a stranger to the colours of rhetoric – the only colours I know are those of the flowers in a meadow or the paints and dyes that artisans use.

So if you will listen, I will begin.

*Heer biginneth the Frankeleyns Tale*

In Armorik, that called is Britayne, ther was a knight that loved and dide his payne to serve a lady in his beste wyse; and many a labour, many a greet empryse he for his lady wroghte – In Brittany once there was a knight who fell in love with a lady and did his utmost to win her love. She was one of the fairest ladies in the world and so highborn that this brave knight could scarcely find the courage to speak to her. But through the endurance of many a hard adventure, the accomplishment of many a perilous deed and the chivalrous acts he performed in her name, she at last took pity upon him and confided that she would take him as her husband. And while accepting such lordship as men have over their wives, and to increase the happiness of their lives together, he in turn swore as a knight that he would never make her do anything she did not want to do, nor show her any jealousy, but he would obey her and follow her in all things. He gave everything to her except the name of ‘lord’, which he retained for himself, in order to protect the honour of his knighthood.

For his proven willingness to serve her she thanked him. ‘Sir,’ she said meekly, ‘since you offer me so much, I shall vow in turn to be your true and faithful wife for as long as I live.’ And I dare say one thing safely enough, that love will not survive long without a little give and take. When dominance arrives, the god of love beats his wings and – farewell! – he’s gone. Where love is concerned, women naturally desire liberty, and so do men, to be honest. But show me a man who exercises patience and I will show you a man who can rise above anything. Patience is a great virtue. It can move mountains. Learn to suffer rebukes with equanimity, for I vow that you will have to suffer them whether you want to or not. No one can be good all the time – drunkenness, depression, illness, an unfortunate planetary configuration, a man should not be punished for every slip or infidelity, or for every word spoken out of turn. But I digress.

This worthy knight secured the makings of a very pleasant life; he to obey her and she to be faithful to him. Here is a wise if modest contract: she takes to her bedroom both a servant and a lord, a servant in love and a lord in marriage. He is in both lordship and service – but a servant? No! Higher than a lord, since he has his lady and his love, his lady and his bed-companion, which the law of love permits.

When he had achieved all this he took his new wife home to the coast of Brittany where they lived together in great happiness. Who could be in any doubt that he was married? The joy, the comfort and the prosperity that is shared between husband and wife!

This blissful existence lasted for a year or more and then the knight, whose name was Arveragus of Caerrud, made preparations to set sail for England, which was called Britain in those days. All his effort was directed towards this end, for he intended to seek to advance his honour and reputation and to remain abroad for a year or two. He was absent for two years, the book says.

But I will turn from Arveragus and speak of his wife Dorigen, who loved him with all her heart. She wept and sighed, as noble wives do when they feel a mind to, she moaned, cried out spontaneously, wailed piteously and refused to eat. Her friends, seeing that she had lost all interest in everything, comforted her as best they could. They tried to console her, told her that there was no reason for her to starve herself and did everything they could think of to lessen her pain. And by a process that you will all know whereby a stone is rubbed and rubbed for so long that in the end the craftsman has engraved a design into it, so by degrees the imprint of their words made its mark upon her heart and her fears began to lessen. Such acute distress cannot last forever. And also, Arveragus sent letters to his wife telling her how he was getting on and promising to return as soon as he could, and but for these her heart would surely have broken.

The lady’s friends sensed that her mood was lightening and invited her to come walking with them to drive away her dark delusions. And finally, she agreed.

Arveragus’s castle was near the seashore and soon she was strolling often with her friends across the dunes and along the cliffs, looking at the many ships and barges sailing their course. But these served only to increase her anxiety. ‘Alas,’ she would say to herself. ‘Is there no ship, amongst all these that I can see, that will bring my husband home and relieve my heart of its loneliness and anxiety?’

At other times she would gaze over the edge of the cliffs towards the jagged rocks and her heart would quake so much with fear that she could not stand; she would sink to her knees in the grass and peer down at the water below and murmur: ‘Eternal God, you make provision for and govern everything in this world, and these fiendish black rocks seem more a mistake than the creation of a wise and perfect God. Why have you made them? For nowhere in this world is there any bird or beast or man they do any good to, but quite the opposite. A hundred thousand bodies have been torn apart by rocks such as these, countless men and women whom you have made in your own image, the fairest portion of your creation. If you have so favoured mankind, why create something so useless and menacing? I know that the religious will try to show by arguments, as they do, that it is not given to us to understand, but to that god who governs the wind I say – will you please keep my husband safe. This is all I ask. I wish those black rocks could sink into hell!’

She would murmur this with the tears running down her cheeks. Her friends soon saw that walking beside the sea brought her no pleasure and prepared other walks for her, beside rivers and lakes and other delightful places. They arranged dances and played board games with her, and organised other diversions.

One morning, she retired with all her friends to a nearby garden and here they spent the entire day with all the provisions they could wish for. It was the sixth of May and the spring rain had brought forth an abundance of flowers and pretty leaves and the gardeners had so designed the shrubberies and had set out the plants and trees so beautifully that never before had there been seen such a delightful place unless in Paradise itself! The colours of the spring blooms, and their perfumes, would have made any heart leap for joy!

After dinner, they all went to dance and to join in the songs; all except Dorigen who could not see her husband anywhere and therefore preferred to sit alone. So we must allow her to sit patiently and try to let her hopes defeat her fears.

Not far away danced a young squire, who to my mind was fresher and more jolly than the month of May itself! He danced and sung better than any of the young men around him, better than any man since the beginning of the world. He was young, strong, virtuous, wealthy and intelligent, his deportment was exemplary and he was held in the highest esteem by all those who knew him. And in brief, if I may be allowed to tell the truth, this lusty squire, this servant of the goddess Venus, and without Dorigen knowing anything about it at all, had loved her above all other women for more than two years. His name was Aurelius.

But Aurelius was in despair. He dared not approach her. He had to drink his agony without even a cup. Only in songs was he able to give voice to his love; in a general way, songs of a love that could not be returned, lays and dances that gave expression to a desire that could not be disclosed. Death, he said, must take him, as it had taken Echo, who could not tell Narcissus of the love she felt for him. He could give expression to his feelings in no other way; except sometimes, at dances, he would gaze at Dorigen in a way that the casual observer might have recognised as a betrayal of his true feelings. She, however, suspected nothing of this.

Before he left for home, and because he was a near neighbour and a man of some status and she had known him for a long time, Dorigen and Aurelius spoke some words to one another and, seizing his opportunity, he steered the conversation in the direction he wished it to go: ‘Madam,’ he said. ‘By God who made this world, in order to make you happy I wish that I, instead of your husband, had embarked upon the open sea, and forever! For I know that my love is in vain. But my heart aches for fulfilment. Madam, have pity upon my agony. For in a word, you can save my life or destroy it. Would that I was lying dead at your feet even now! I cannot say any more. Be my executioner, or have mercy upon me.’

The lady stared at Aurelius. ‘Is this true? I have had no idea! But I understand you plainly. I shall never knowingly be untrue to my marriage vows. And by the God who gave me soul and life, I shall never deceive my husband, you may take this as my final answer.’

But then she added playfully: ‘And yet, Aurelius, by the high God above I shall agree to be your lover, since I can see the state that you are in, on the day that you remove every rock and every stone that is a hazard to the ships that sail around the shores of Brittany. When you have so cleared the coast of rocks that there is not a single one left anywhere, then I will give you my love and on this you have my word.’

‘Is this all you have to say?’

‘It is,’ she said, ‘by the Lord that made me. So cast such ambition from your heart. What value can a man set upon himself when he goes after another man’s wife whose husband can make love to her whenever he pleases!’

Aurelius sighed when he heard this. ‘Madam,’ he said. ‘The task you set before me is impossible. You have condemned me to death.’ And with this, he turned away.

Some people came up, knowing nothing of what had just taken place and Dorigen mingled with her friends, then the music struck up for another dance and it lasted until the horizon had robbed the sun of all its brightness, which is to say that night was approaching.

Home they all went then, in joy and solace, except for poor Aurelius, alas! He made his way back to his house with a body that felt like lead. He could see nothing before him but the spectre of death. His heart had frozen inside him. He held his hands up to the heavens, fell onto his knees and prayed, not thinking about what he was saying but poured out a torrent of complaint to all the gods, and first of all to the sun.

‘Apollo,’ he cried. ‘You who control every plant, herb, tree and flower, and give to each its own season by your altitude as you soar high or skim low across the sky; lord Phoebus, cast a merciful eye upon wretched Aurelius! My lady has cast me to the dogs! Besides my lady, you are the one who can help me the most, if you desire to. Let me explain how you may help me, lord Apollo. Your serene sister, bright Lucina, is goddess of the sea, and she is as superior to Neptune as Neptune is to a minnow! And in the same way that her greatest wish is to be lit up and enlivened by the fire of your disk and so she follows you around the sky as well as she is able to, so the sea naturally desires to follow her, as she is goddess of the sea, with its tides and its currents. And, lord Phoebus, this is my request. Perform this miracle or let my heart break into two pieces – that at the next full moon, which will occur in the constellation of Leo, ask her to cause such a high tide to occur, such a high spring tide, that it will flood at least five fathoms over the highest wave-breaking rock in the whole of Brittany. And let the tide remain at this level for two years. Then I will be able to take my lady to the sea and say: ‘Lady, Hold to your promise! The rocks have all vanished!’

‘Please do this miracle for me, lord Phoebus. Please ask your sister to match her speed with yours and to make it a spring high tide both day and night for the next two years; and if she cannot, then ask her to sink every rock down into her dark depths and further still into the region where Pluto is lord of all. Ask her this, Lord Phoebus, and I shall go barefoot to your temple at Delphi. Look at the tears running down my cheeks and have pity upon the pain that I am suffering.’ And with this he sank down in a faint and lay unconscious for a long while. His brother, who knew how things stood with him, found him, lifted him up and carried him home to his bed.

I shall leave this tormented creature. He is in despair, his life hangs in a balance and I have no idea, to be honest, whether he will live or die. But Arveragus, the lady’s husband, the very flower of chivalry, has returned from Britain! Oh, how blissful you are now, Oh Dorigen! You hold a virile young warrior in your arms, a worthy husband who loves you as much as he loves his own life.

Arveragus gives no thought to whether any man has spoken to Dorigen of love during his absence, for he has such faith in his wife that it doesn’t even occur to him to do so. They dance and he jousts and gives all his thought to making her happy. So I shall let them dwell in joy, and return at once to the lovesick Aurelius.

Languishing hopelessly upon his bed, poor Aurelius lies in great torment.

For two long years he lay, without once leaving his room. The only person who tried to comfort him was his brother, who was a religious man, a cleric of the Breton faith, a druid. He knew the reason why his brother was in such a dreadful condition but dared not breathe a word about it to anyone. He gave no hint of his anguish to the outside world but inside, the arrow bit as deeply as it might and without remedy, and well you know, a wound which closes over without having been searched properly can look to be healed but still harbour splinters of steel that will hurt and harm and probably kill eventually. In this same way, his brother endured his pain unseen, in private; and at last, in desperation, he remembered his scholarly days at Orleans and how he and his fellow students had been hungry to broaden their studies, peering into every corner of the library to see what they could find; and he remembered that one day he had come across a book which one of his acquaintances, a bachelor of law who had gone there to augment his studies in another field, had left open upon a desk. A book of natural magic. It had included a lengthy analysis of the twenty-eight houses of the moon and other such rubbish which in our days is considered to be not worth a fly, for we believe in Holy Church and in a faith that does not permit such illusions.

When the druid remembered this book, his heart began to dance for joy! He thought to himself: ‘My brother’s cure is certain, for I’m sure that there are processes and procedures such as conjurers use at festivals; I’ve heard it said that a large hall can be made to appear as though it is flooded with water and a boat rows up and down it, or it can appear that a lion is prowling about or that flowers are growing everywhere, as though the benches have been placed in a meadow. It can even seem as though a castle has been built of lime and stone and then it disappears, to everyone’s amazement.

‘If I can find some old scholar at Orleans who is conversant with this science of illusion, who understands the stations of the moon or some other branch of natural magic, then my brother might obtain his lady, for by this means a skillful magician might be able to make it appear as though all the black rocks of Brittany have vanished and that ships are able to sail safely to and fro along the coast! And if he can make this happen, my brother will find his health again, for she will have to keep her promise or endure the unendurable shame of having reneged upon her word.’

What more is there to say? He went and spoke so enthusiastically of Orleans that his brother jumped up and made ready to embark at once!

When they were only two or three furlongs from that city’s gate, they met with a young druid who greeted them in Latin and said, to the brothers’ amazement: ‘I know why you have come.’ And before they could advance another foot, he revealed a knowledge of all that they intended to do. Aurelius’ brother asked after some of his old friends whom he had studied with many years before, but the young man said they were all dead, which caused tears to trickle down his cheeks. Aurelius dismounted and they went with this young druid to his house where they were invited to make themselves comfortable. They found nothing lacking; they had everything they could want. Aurelius had never seen such luxurious accommodation.

Before supper was served they went out to view the forests and parks round about, which were full of deer. There were stags with antlers so large that none larger can ever have been seen with the human eye. They watched a hundred deer brought down, with arrows and with dogs. Then, when the deer had been butchered, they went to view some falconers with their falcons taking herons beside a river. Then Aurelius went to watch some knights jousting in a meadow, and after this he thought that he saw his lady dancing, and he could see himself among the dancers! And when this magician, who had made all this magic, saw that the time had come to reveal it as an illusion, he clapped his hands and – farewell! – it all vanished. They hadn’t set foot outside the house even, but had been sitting in the study all this while, where all the books were, the three of them alone.

This druid magician called for his squire and said: ‘Is supper ready? It must have been almost an hour, I am sure, since we three came into the library and I asked you to prepare it.’

‘Sir,’ replied the squire, ‘it is ready and waiting.’

‘Then let’s go to it!’

After dinner, the conversation fell to the fee that would be owing should all the rocks of Brittany be made to disappear. The magic would have to extend from Bordeaux in the southwest to the mouth of the Seine in Normandy, they decided, and the young druid magician made much of the difficulty of doing this; he refused to consider anything less than a thousand pounds and was very hesitant to take only this. Aurelius, with joy in his heart, answered: ‘Fy on a thousand pounds! I would give that ball which men call the Earth, were it possible for me to give it! Consider the contract sealed. We are in agreement. You will be paid your thousand pounds, you have my word. Let us depart for Brittany tomorrow, and be sure that there is no carelessness or laziness on your part.’

‘You have my word on that,’ the druid assured him.

When Aurelius went to bed he slept soundly for the first time in a long while. Fatigue from the journey and sheer joy at the prospect of amorous fulfillment had unburdened his heart.

The next morning, as soon as it was light, they all set out for Brittany. And they came at last to the place where they intended to stay. It was, if I remember correctly, the cold, frosty season of December. Phoebus was old, his disc, that in summer is like gold, had turned to the colour of old, tarnished brass. He had slid into Capricorn where he smoldered miserably with a pale light. Bitter frosts, sleet and rain, had made the ground all brown. Janus sat by the fire, at the approach of the New Year, drinking wine from a horn. Broth of the wild boar was set before him. Every man with lungs to shout it, cried: ‘Noel!’

Aurelius treated the druid with respect and good humour, imploring him to fulfill his task to the utmost of his ability, since his heart would break otherwise. The young druid, for his part, was learned in all the subtleties of the magic arts and had such pity for Aurelius that he studied the heavens diligently, night and day, waiting for the right moment, that is to say, the proper alignment at which an illusion by appearances – I do not know the proper terms – could be made so that the lady and everyone else would believe that all the rocks off the coast of Brittany had vanished.

At last, the right planetary conjunctions presented themselves. The druid could now perform this conjuring trick, this feat of fiendish magic, and brought out his Ptolemaic tables, the corrected version, which contained all the timing of the cycles and epicycles of the planets, tables of square roots and other mathematical proportions, and algebraic devices for solving all the equations. He knew how far the planet in the eighth sphere had wandered from the constellation of Ares, which is fixed in the ninth sphere, and calculated this very accurately. When he had found the first house of the zodiac he knew all the rest by due proportion. He knew how to calculate the rising of the moon to the nearest degree, which phase it would be in and in which constellation, and all the other things he needed to know to bring about such magic as heathen people dabbled in, in those days. And to perform such druidry he no longer delayed but through his sorcery it genuinely appeared, for a week or two at least, that all the rocks of Brittany had completely disappeared.

Aurelius, who had been waiting night and day for this miracle to happen, fell at the young druid’s feet and said: ‘I, Aurelius, woeful wretch that I am, thank you with all my heart! And thank you lady Venus, for saving me from death!

Aurelius made his way at once to the temple where he knew his lady would be. And when he saw his moment, he bowed his head to her and with a quaking heart he said:

‘My good lady, I would be the last person in the world to want to displease you were it not that I must otherwise die here at your feet for the agony I feel. You bring me such mortal pain that I must try to cope with the fear I have of you and the love that I hold for you in the best way that I can. Consider the implications of my death before you break your promise. You are well aware of what you said; not that I challenge you in any way, sovereign lady, but I ask only that through your grace you remember the promise that you made to me in that garden, when you gave me your word that you would love me the best of all men if I caused a certain thing to happen. Madam, I remind you of this for the sake of your own honour and not just to save my life. I have done as you asked me. If you intend to be true to your word, go and look. Keep your promise in mind. I shall be waiting for you. My life or my death lies in your hands. Go and see for yourself that all the rocks have disappeared.’

He took his leave at once and she remained where she stood, as still as a stone. Her face drained of blood. She never imagined that she would be caught in such a trap: ‘Alas!’ she cried. ‘Alas, that this could happen, that sorcery can achieve so much!’ And home she went, in terrible anguish, scarcely able to put one foot in front of the other. She wept and fainted and wailed for a couple of days, and as to the reason, she could tell no one, for her husband was away.

Drained and downcast, she cried: ‘Fortune, to you I make my complaint. Fortune, you have crept up behind me and bound me in a chain from which the only release is death, or dishonour. I must choose one of these. But I would rather lose my life than lose my reputation. I would rather die than have to live with myself, knowing what I had done. Death will make an end of it.

‘Has not many a noble wife, and many a maiden also, killed herself rather than allow her body to be violated? The thirty tyrants of Athens murdered Phido at a banquet and ordered that his daughters be brought before them so that they could satisfy their filthy lusts upon them, and rather than endure this, the girls drowned themselves in a well, as the books say. The Messinians sent for fifty Lacedaemonian maidens as a means to indulge their carnal pleasures, but there was not one of them who did not prefer to kill herself than be forced to have sex in this way. Why, then, should I fear to die?

‘And what of Hasdrubal’s wife, who killed herself in Carthage? When she saw the victorious Roman army enter the city, she took her children and walked into the fire, choosing rather to die than to face what the Romans might force her to do. Did not Lucretia kill herself when she was deceived by Lucius Tarquinius and raped by him in Rome. Did she not chose to die rather than to endure the shame of it? And there must be a thousand other stories. Many have killed themselves rather than compromise their honour. So I will be faithful to Arveragus or, if I cannot, I will kill myself. Oh Scedasus, it is dreadful to read about the death of your daughters, alas! They, too, faced this same choice. And Oh Queen Teuta! May your wifely conduct be a mirror to us all!’

Dorigen suffered like this for a day or two, fully intending to kill herself, and on the third night, Arveragus arrived back. He immediately asked his wife why she was weeping, but this only made her cry all the more.

‘Alas!’ she wailed. ‘Why did I say what I did? Why did I swear it!’ And she told Arveragus everything – there is no need for me to go through the whole story again.

Arveragus was not angry. ‘Is there nothing else?’ he asked.

‘No! No, God help me, isn’t this enough?’

‘Wife,’ he replied, ‘you are making too much of it. We can bring this matter to a close today. You will hold to your promise, by my faith! I would prefer to be stabbed through the heart rather than that you should die or that you should fail to keep your word. The honour of one’s word is the highest thing that a person can possess – and then he broke down in tears. ‘But I ask you, I implore you,’ he cried, ‘tell no one about this. I will endure the pain as best I can. Nobody will know from me what has happened.’

Arveragus called to them a young man and a young lady, a squire and a maiden, and said: ‘Accompany my wife, if you will.’ But he did not tell them why.

And it happened that the young man Aurelius, who was so deeply in love with Dorigen, met her by chance before she reached the garden where they had arranged to meet. They came upon one another in the busiest part of town and he greeted her amicably and asked her where she was going.

In a voice that betrayed her horror at what was about to take place, she said: ‘To the garden, where my husband has commanded me to go, to keep my word to you.’

Aurelius was taken aback by her demeanour and felt in his heart a great compassion for her, and also for a husband who insisted, so it seemed, upon her holding to her promise. The whole situation suddenly achieved a broader clarity in his mind and made him feel a great pity for the lady. And in an instant he knew that he would rather abandon all hope of achieving any expression for his desires than commit such a villainous act upon her; it was an affront against all that he had been brought up to honour and respect. And so he quickly said: ‘Madam, tell your lord Arveragus that I would rather suffer for evermore than come between the two of you and the love that you so obviously bear for one another. I release you, Madam, from every promise that you have ever made to me. I give you my word, and farewell. I leave you the most faithful and perfect wife that I have ever known. And see how a young squire can do a noble deed as well as a knight!’

Dorigen fell onto her bare knees and thanked him. And now she goes back home to her husband to tell him all that has just taken place. Arveragus is ecstatically happy! It is impossible for me adequately to convey the joy that he feels, so why, then, should I try?

Arveragus and his loving wife Dorigen continued to live their lives together in happiness, with never a harsh word spoken between them. He treated her like a queen, and she, for her part, remained faithful to him for evermore. We must leave these two now. I shall speak of them no more.

Aurelius, who had wasted all this money, cursed the very day that he was born. ‘Alas!’ he cried. ‘I promised a thousand pounds in gold. What can I do? I am ruined! I will have to sell my inheritance and live a life of destitution. I will have to move out of the district and beg, since I cannot remain here in disgrace and to the shame of all my relatives. Perhaps I can renegotiate the terms of repayment. I will see if this young druid will accept a partial sum on a specified day each year. I would thank him for such a courtesy, but I will not default upon our bargain.’

With a heavy heart he went to his chest and took out, I believe, about five hundred pounds in gold, which he took straight to the druid and begged him to allow sufficient time for payment of the remainder.

‘Druid philosopher,’ he said, ‘I am able to boast that I have never once reneged upon a deal, and my debt to you will be paid in full. It will be paid even if I have to go around without a shirt, begging. But will you agree to allow me a breathing space of two or three years before I start to repay the rest that is owing, for otherwise I will have to sell my heritage?’

When the druid had heard this he answered gravely: ‘Have we not made a binding agreement?’

‘Yes, certainly, we have.’

‘Have you not obtained the lady, as you desired?’

‘No. No!’ said the young squire, and sighed.

‘Why is this?’

And Aurelius began his tale and told the young druid everything as you have already heard, I shall not repeat it.

‘She only made the promise she made to me through her naiveté,’ he concluded. ‘She had never before heard of magic, which caused me to have such compassion for her that I released her entirely from her obligation. That’s about it really. That’s all there is to say.’

The druid philosopher replied: ‘Each of you has behaved impeccably towards the other, it seems to me. Although Arveragus is a knight and you only a young nobleman, may God forbid that a clergyman couldn’t act so properly – although I wouldn’t count on it! – but Sir, I release you from all your obligations towards me as well, as though you were newly born. Sir, I will not take a penny off you. You have fully repaid the labour I have expended. It is enough. Farewell! Have a good day!’

He gathered his horse and rode off.

Lords, I would ask you this question. Who’s morality is the most to be admired? I shall say no more; my tale is at an end.