

Canterbury Tales

Chaucer's tale of Prudence and Melibeus

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English

Translated and retold in Modern English

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

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Chaucer's Tale: Prudence and Melibeus

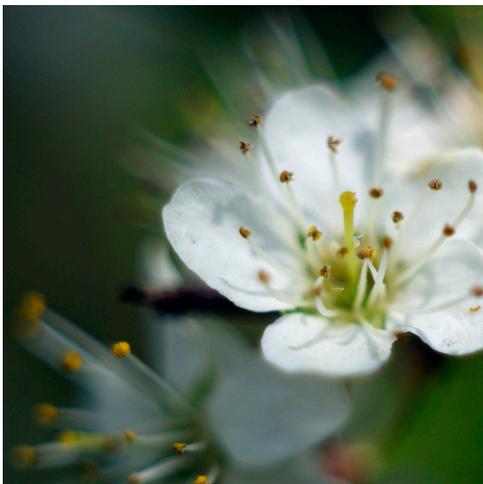
Here the Host stinteth Chaucer of his Tale of Thopas

‘No more of this, for goddes dignitee,’ quod oure hoste, ‘for thou makest me so wery – ‘No more of this, for God’s sake!’ exclaimed our host. ‘It hurts my ears to have to listen to such crap! The devil take your story!’

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Geoffrey. ‘Why have you stopped me so soon when it’s the best story I know and you’ve let many others drone on for much longer than this?’

‘Because such rubbish is not worth a turd!’ shouted Herry Bailly. ‘You waste our time! Sir, in a word, stop! Tell us a joke instead, or something in prose at the very least. Tell us something humorous or uplifting.’

‘Gladly,’ I replied. ‘By God’s sweet pain, I shall tell you in prose a little thing that ought to please you, or else you must be beyond all pleasing. It’s a moral tale that’s been told many



times before, by various writers in slightly different ways. But listen – you know that not every gospel that tells us about the crucifixion repeats everything that the others do, and yet they all tell the truth, they all agree with one another, although some say more and some less when they describe Christ’s woe-ful suffering – I mean the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Although they all mention different details, certainly they express the same meaning, every one of them.

‘Therefore everybody, I implore you, if you think I’m at variance in what I’m saying, if I tell more in the way of proverbs, for example, than you’ve heard before, I ask you all not to blame me. As regards the meaning of what I say, you won’t find much difference between what’s gone before and the story I’m about to tell you. Therefore, listen to what I say, and let me tell all of it, I beg you.’

Here biginneth Chaucers Tale of Melibee

A rich and powerful young man whose name was Melibeus gave to his wife Prudence a daughter whom they named Sophie. One day, while Melibeus was out, leaving his wife and daughter alone inside the house, three of his long-standing enemies put ladders against the wall and, despite all the doors being secured, they forced an entry and

attacked Prudence and Sophie, giving to Sophie some particularly severe injuries, especially to the hands and face; and leaving her for dead, they made their escape.

When Melibeus returned home and saw what had happened he shouted, then began weeping and raging and tearing at his clothes. Prudence, his wife, as boldly as she dared, tried to stop him from such uncontrollable excess, but he only wept and raged the more. Prudence remembered a passage from Ovid's *The Remedy of Love* where the poet says: 'only a fool disturbs a mother's weeping over the death of her child, and only when she has wept enough should a man seek to comfort her with words.' So she allowed her husband time to give vent to his distress and only spoke when she considered that a long enough period had elapsed.

'Alas!' she then exclaimed. 'Why do you allow yourself to look so foolish! Your daughter, with the grace of God, will live! And even were she lying there dead, you would be well-advised not to destroy yourself over it. The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca once said: 'A wise man shall not grieve too much over the death of a child but should bear it with patience, just as he waits for his own death.' Remember that Ben Sira, a Jewish scholar of the second century AD, said: 'A happy man will jump and skip in his old age, while a sorrowful man's bones will crumble to dust.' He also said: 'Sorrow has killed many a man.' Solomon said: 'Just as moths can ruin woollen clothes and small worms destroy a tree, so sorrow can eat away at a man's heart.' Therefore we ought to exercise patience, as much in the death of our children as at the loss of our possessions.

'Remember the patient Job, when he had lost his children and all his worldly wealth and endured all sorts of hardship; yet he said: 'Our Lord gave, our Lord has taken away; as our Lord wishes, so shall it be done. Blessed be the name of the Lord!''

Melibeus answered: 'I am so upset that I cannot think properly. What ought I to do?'

'Let's call together all your friends and associates,' suggested Prudence, 'and all your relatives, tell them how you feel, ask them for their advice and act upon it. Solomon said: 'Work all things in consultation with others and you will never regret it.'

So Melibeus gathered together a large assembly: surgeons, physicians, old folk and young, even some of his old enemies who now professed a love for him, and there were also many of his neighbours present as well, but only because they felt they had to at-

Following his aborted attempt to tell the story of Sir Thopas, Geoffrey Chaucer embarks upon another tale in which a woman features significantly. She is not an elf-queen this time but the wife of a man whose desire for violent revenge is slowly quelled through his wife's persistent and learned persuasion. So in both these tales, Chaucer wishes to acknowledge a female authority in men's lives and, in different ways, to celebrate it (as, of course, he does in the Wife of Bath's tale as well – the actual tale, that is).

This tale of Melibeus and his wife Prudence is a translation of a didactic work in Old French, itself a translation of a Latin work written in Lombardy, in Italy, in 1246. Geoffrey tells us in the prologue to the tale that there is little difference between what he is about to say and what has gone before. It is hard to know whether he means his own tale of Sir Thopas or other versions of the tale of Melibeus. Perhaps this was his intention. If so, then he obviously really means that this tale of Prudence has the same imperative as his laughable story of the elf-queen.

This tale, from Geoffrey himself, follows his abandoned tale of Sir Thopas in all versions of the sequence and is another of Geoffrey's Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

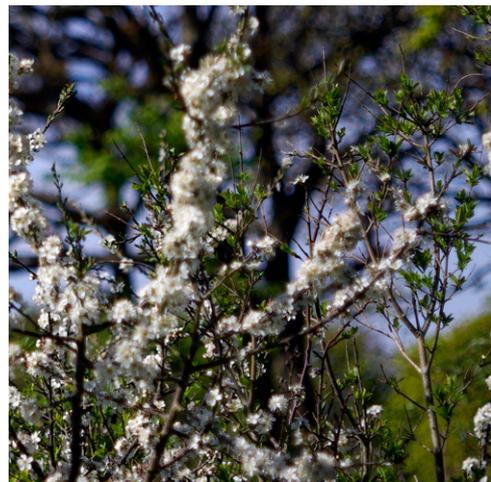
tend, to be honest, as is often the case. And to speak the truth, there were many, too, who were inclined to flattery and who might be expected therefore to say only what they thought he might wish to hear. But when they were all assembled, Melibeus explained to them what had happened. And as he spoke, it became clear just how angry he was and how desperately inclined to seek vengeance he was. He intended to take their views into consideration but clearly felt that conflict was the only possible solution.

A surgeon, with the support of the more intelligent of the gathering, rose to speak. 'Sir,' he said. 'For us surgeons it is often the case that we are called upon to treat both of the injured combatants in a fight and our instinct is to do so impartially, without taking sides, and therefore we have no interest in fuelling a war. But certainly, regarding the healing of your daughter, although she is severely injured, we will give her such attention, both night and day, that by the grace of God she will make a full recovery.'

The physicians answered in a similar manner but with this proviso; that just as maladies are cured by their contraries so should men cure violent injustice by just vengeance.'

His neighbours, those who were all envious of his position in society, as well as his old enemies who now professed friendship and the flatterers, all pretended to be greatly upset. They aggravated matters by making much of Melibeus's power, wealth and standing and agreed with him wholeheartedly that he should seek revenge and that the war should begin immediately.

Then up stood an experienced lawyer, with the support of those around him, and said: 'The reason we are here is a serious matter, both because of the seriousness of the crime committed and because of the gravity of the events that are likely to follow because of it, due to the wealth and power of the parties involved. For these reasons, then, it is imperative that we make the right decisions now. And so, Melibeus, this is what we advise; that above all you put yourself in no unnecessary danger and that you set a guard over your house to defend your family and your possessions. But as to war, or the swift revenge that you are contemplating, we have not yet been able to weigh it accurately. Therefore we ask for more time to deliberate the matter. For it is commonly said that: 'He who acts hastily may quickly regret what he has done.' And it is a wise man, they say, who swiftly understands an issue but decides upon it at his leisure. For although such a delay may be irritating, it is often the wisest course.'



Immediately the young folk all jumped up noisily, derisively, at the old men's advice, saying that one should strike while the iron is hot! That wrongs should be addressed while they are fresh in the mind. And with a loud clamour they cried: 'War! War!'

One of the old men stood up and held up a hand to crave silence. 'Lords,' he cried. 'Many are screaming for War! War! when they do not know what war is! War, when it

begins, bars no participants and its entry fee is small. But how expensively it shall end is much less easy to determine. Certainly, when war is begun, there is many an unborn child who will die before he is a man because of that war, or live in sorrow and perish in wretchedness because of it. And therefore, before beginning a conflict, there must be full deliberation and wide agreement.'

But as this old man tried to expand upon his theme, all the young folk and the flatterers began to shout him down. They refused to listen because they did not agree with what he said. And when this wise man saw that nobody was listening to him, he sat down in shame. For Solomon said: 'If no one listens, what use is there to speak?' 'I see well,' said this wise man, 'that the saying is true, that: Good advice fails where it is needed most.'

Melibeus also had many people who told him one thing in private and quite another from the floor of the assembly. But when he found that the majority were for war, he assented to their council. War it would be.

Prudence, when the meeting had dispersed and she saw how things were developing, chose her moment and then addressed her husband in all humility. 'My Lord,' she said, 'I beg you as forcefully as I dare, slow down a little and listen to me. A proverb says: Be quick to wait!'

Melibeus answered: 'I do not intend to be guided by you, Prudence, not least because everyone would think me a fool if I changed my mind on the strength of what my wife had told me to do! All women are tainted and no good can come of them! And also, if I followed your instruction it would appear that I had given you sovereignty over me and God forbid that! Ben Sira said: 'If a wife has the upper hand, she will soon compromise her husband.' And also, if I would be advised by you, this guidance must be confidential, and this is impossible, for it is well-known that: 'Womens' gossip hides only those things that it does not know.' And it has also been said that: 'Women destroy men by harmful advice.' And for these reasons I shall not ask you for your opinion.'

When Prudence, with good grace and patience, had heard her husband out, she asked if she may speak: 'My Lord,' she said, 'as to your first reason, it is easily refuted. For it is no mark of stupidity to change one's mind when the facts have changed or when you can now see them from a different angle. And though you have decided upon a course of action, were you then, with good reason, to change your mind, it does not follow that you are then a liar or untrustworthy. For the Bible says: 'The man is not false who aims his courage a little more accurately.'

'And despite it being endorsed by so many, you are under no obligation to follow a course of action unless you want to. For truth and profit is more likely to be found in a few wise and reasonable people than in a multitude who are clamouring for blood. And as for saying that all women have strange and unfathomable minds, such things as one does not understand, one should enquire and learn from those who do, those who may know less than you in other ways, and not be ashamed to do so. And as to the objection

that if you follow my guidance it might seem to everybody as though you had given your authority over to me. Sir, this is not so. For if it were so, and if no man could be advised except by those who had authority over him, the seeking of advice would be a much rarer activity than it is! A man may seek consultation upon a certain point, but he has a free choice as to whether he uses that advice or not. And as to the saying: 'A woman cannot hide what she knows,' Sir, this opinion applies only to those women who *are* gossips, and of whom men say: 'Three things drive a man out of his house, smoke, dripping rain and wives who can never shut up!,' And Sir, by your leave, I am not one of those! – for often you have seen how patient and discrete I can be.

'And as to saying: 'Women destroy men by their wicked council,' God knows, you must understand that you yourself are contemplating wickedness and if your wife seeks to restrain you and persuade you to follow another path, she ought rather to be praised than to be blamed. Jacob, by the advice of his mother Rebecca, won the favour of his father Isaac and lordship over his brothers. Abigail rescued her husband from the clutches of



King David. Esther greatly enhanced the people of God in the reign of Ahasuerus. And Sir, in countless other ways it can be shown that many women are good and their advice well worth listening to. And therefore, Sir, trust me and I will restore your daughter to you safe and sound and in such a way that it will bring you nothing but honour.'

When Melibeus heard these words he said: 'I clearly see that the words of Solomon are true when he said: 'Fine arguments are like honeycombs that bring sweetness to the soul.' And Prudence, because of

your pleasing words and because many times before now I have had occasion to accept your wisdom and fidelity, I will listen to what you have to say.'

'Then, Sir,' replied Prudence, 'I will first tell you how you should choose those who would advise you. First of all, in everything you do you should humbly submit to the High God and ask him to guide you, and you should take all necessary means to receive his guidance and his comfort; as Tobias's son taught: 'At all times bless God and ask for his support,' and see that your thoughts are in him always. Saint James said: 'If any of you have need of understanding, ask it of God.' But when you have done this, you should be alone with your own thoughts, examine them, consider your best interests and what is likely to be profitable to you. And then drive from your heart three things that act against wise decision-making; and these are anger, greed and haste.

'Whoever deliberates with himself must do so without anger, and for many reasons. The first is this; that anyone who is angry inside has an unbalanced sense of his own abilities. Secondly, he who is in a temper cannot reason properly and if he is incapable of reasoning he cannot give any proper advice to anybody, let alone himself. The third reason is that an angry man, as Seneca said: 'cannot speak without casting blame,' and with vi-

cious words he simply stirs others around him into anger.

‘And Sir, you must drive greed out of your heart. Believe me when I say that the covetous man cannot judge anything properly or think anything at all except how to acquire the thing he wants. And Sir, you must also drive hastiness out of your heart, for it is impossible to weigh a thought that leaps into and out of your mind in a moment. As you know: ‘He who judges quickly, quickly repents.’ Sir, you are not always in the same frame of mind as you were and a thing that seems to be good at one time may at another time seem quite the contrary.

‘So when you have rehearsed the arguments to yourself and judged those that seem to you to be the best, then I advise you to keep them under wraps for a while! Keep them a secret! Betray them to no one, unless you can see an advantage in doing so. For Ben Sira said: ‘Keep your thoughts from becoming common currency; or you will receive support and encouragement to your face and have fun made of you behind your back.’ Another author said: ‘Few people can keep a secret.’ And Seneca said: ‘If you are unable to keep your own secrets, how can you expect anyone else to keep them for you!’ However, once you are ready to disclose your innermost thoughts, set about it in this way: first give only a slight indication of what you intend to do, whether peace or war, or this or that, for believe me, the people you are speaking with are often flatterers, I mean the advisors of great lords, and they are concerned to say only what they imagine may be well-received rather than anything they might think to be true. Of your friends, then, decide which have been the most faithful and have shown the most intelligence and good sense, and which have the most experience and are most to be trusted, and to those you may now speak your mind, as the occasion demands.

‘So first seek out your true friends. For Solomon said: ‘A true friend is a strong defence and anyone who finds true friendship has found a great treasure.’ But then you must consider whether your true friends are wise, and whether they are discrete. For the Bible says: ‘Always seek advice from those who are wise.’ And for this reason you should seek out those of your friends who possess the experience of years. For as the Bible says: ‘Age brings with it the prudence of reflection and the wisdom of experience.’ And the great Roman Republican statesman Cicero said: ‘Great things are not always accompanied by strength or fitness of body but by good reasoning, by understanding and by strength and fitness of mind.’ This may be taken as a general rule: first, confide in only a few of your special friends. For Solomon said: ‘You may have many friends, but among a thousand choose only one to be your advisor.’ For even if you tell only one or two initially, you may confide in more later if need be.

‘Now that I have told you who you should seek out for advice, I will tell you who you should avoid. First and foremost, avoid the advice of fools. Solomon said: ‘Don’t listen to an idiot! – he follows only his own lusts and obsessions!’ The Bible says: ‘A fool can very easily believe himself to be right and everybody else to be wrong.’ You should also avoid the advice of those who are more concerned to flatter than to tell you the truth. Cicero said: ‘Flattery can be counted amongst the greatest pestilences to be found in

friendship.’ Avoid flatterers like the plague!

‘It is important also to avoid acting upon the advice of old enemies who now profess to be your friends. The Bible says: ‘No one returns safely into the arms of his old enemy.’ Aesop said: ‘Don’t trust those you have fought with and be cautious about what you say to them.’ And Seneca tells us why. ‘It is not possible,’ he says, ‘where a great fire has raged for a long time for there not to be some smouldering embers remaining,’ and though you may both appear to be reconciled and on good terms now, don’t trust him, for he feigns humility more for his own profit than for yours and imagines that he gains a victory over you by such falseness where he cannot gain an ascendancy over you by any other means. Also avoid the advice of servants and those who look up to you with awe, for they will speak more out of fear than out of love. As a philosopher once said: ‘No one can be honest with someone they are afraid of.’

‘And you should also avoid the advice of those who frequently get drunk, for they are unable to be discrete. Solomon once said: ‘Drunks cannot keep their mouths shut!’ Also suspect those who say one thing to you in private and another out in the open. The Roman statesman Cassiodorus said: ‘It is a form of deception when someone advises one thing openly and in private the contrary.’



And you should also distrust the advice of scheming, unpleasant folk. For the Bible says: ‘The advice of shrews is always fraudulent.’ And King David said: ‘Happy is the man who disregards the advice of the devious!’ And you should also avoid consulting the young, for their wisdom has still to ripen.

‘Now, Sir, I have shown you who you should approach for advice, and whose advice you should avoid. Now I will show you how you should gather this advice, and how you should deliberate upon it. By the method of the Roman statesman Cicero. First, and most

importantly, you should always, concerning the matter upon which you seek advice, state your case with truth and honesty; that is to say, tell the whole story. For he who deceives his advisors cannot hope to be properly advised! And after you have explained your position, you should put to them what it is that you require of them. Then, when they have had their say, you must consider the consequences of the advice they have given you, whether it be war or peace, hate or mercy, profit or harm, or whatever. And you should consider what is likely to grow from each root that you may decide to plant, what fruit you might expect to be produced from it. And you must do this for every course of action you consider. And when you have examined your friends and given thought to whose advice is best and likely to be the most profitable and sought the approval of others who are old and wise, then you must consider whether it lies within your power

to do as they suggest. For certainly, it is stupid to begin a thing that you have no good hope of bringing to a conclusion! No one should ever take on more than they can reasonably manage. For the proverb says: 'He who clutches at more than he can hold, will come away with nothing.'

'And afterwards, when you have examined the advice that you have been given, and you are confident that you can finish whatever it is that you have decided to start, carry it through with all seriousness until it is finished.

'Now, having said all this, I must show you that it is reasonable to change your mind without fear of castigation. Clearly, a man may alter his course if the cause of the problem vanishes or if a new problem arises. And Seneca said: 'If your plans have come to the ear of your enemy, change your plans!' You may also change your plans if it seems that, inadvertently or as a result of error, harm is being caused by them. Also, if your advice has been false, or the reasoning behind it false, then you should abandon the strategy based upon it.

'And take this for a general rule. If any advice is set so securely in stone that it cannot be adapted to changing circumstances, it is bad advice and not to be relied upon.

Melibeus, when he had heard his wife say all this, replied: 'You have advised me how I should proceed regarding my choice of advisors. But now I would be very happy if you would tell me what you think of the advice I have received so far.'

'My Lord,' she said, 'I ask you in all humility that you will not take offense at what I am about to say. For God knows I speak only for your own good, for your honour and for your profit. And truly, I hope you will listen to what I am about to say with patience. But trust me when I tell you that the advice you have received so far in this case cannot be called advice at all, but the ranting of fools, and you have made many mistakes.

'First of all, you were foolish in the choice of people you assembled. You should have approached only a few people initially and only afterwards called together such a large gathering, and then only if you had felt there was a need. But you immediately called together a rabble of folk whose opinions were horrible to listen to! Where you should have called only those of your true friends who were old and wise, you gathered together strangers, young people, flatterers, reconciled enemies and people who hold you in awe. And you also made the mistake of bringing to the gathering anger, greed and haste; those three things you should not have entertained at all but which you took no pains to suppress, neither in the crowd nor in yourself. You made the mistake, too, of marking out the course you favoured at the very outset so that everyone could plainly see that it was vengeance you wanted. The majority therefore inclined themselves to your desire rather than trying to advise you in your best interests. And also you have deemed one short meeting to be enough, when such a serious matter ought to require more deliberation. And you did not sufficiently examine what was said. You did not adequately judge who were your true friends and whom your false friends – you cast all the words you

heard into a stew and based your decision upon the biggest ladleful to come out of it! And since you well know that there are always a greater number of fools in any gathering than there are wise men, it must follow that where numbers are of more account than the wisdom of individuals, the fools will carry the day.'

Melibeus answered: 'I admit that I have made a mistake, but since the proverb says: 'To sin is only human but to persist in sin is the work of the devil,' and since you have already explained that there is no shame in changing one's advisors, I am ready to do so if you think that I should.'

To this, Prudence replied: 'Then let's look first then at who said what and see who gave you the best advice. And let's begin at the point where the surgeons and physicians rose to speak. They told the truth when they said it was their vocation to do harm to nobody but as much good to those in their care as their skill and knowledge would allow. And Sir, for their commendable words I suggest you reward them well, and especially since they may then apply themselves more strenuously to the welfare of your daughter. For although they are your friends, you should not expect them to serve you without recompense. Rather, you should reveal to them the depth of your generosity. And touching the proposition that the physicians made - that in the case of illness, one contrary is healed by another, I desire to know what you understand by this and what is your opinion of it.'

'I understand it in this way,' replied Melibeus: 'That if they have done me a 'contrary' then I should do one to them. Just as they have avenged themselves upon me and wronged me, so I should avenge myself upon them and do them a wrong. And by this I will have cured one 'contrary' by another.'



'Lo!' said Prudence. 'How quickly is a man persuaded to go in the direction he's already decided he wants to go! The words of the physicians should not be understood in this way. For wickedness is not contrary to wickedness, nor vengeance to vengeance - they are alike! One act of revenge cannot be healed by another, nor one wrong by another. Each aggravates the other and increases the harm! The words of the physicians should be understood thus: that goodness and wickedness are two contraries, as are peace and war, vengeance and forbearance, discord and harmony, and many other things. So wickedness shall be healed by good, discord by harmony, war by peace, and so forth.'

'And as to the advice that was given to you by the men of law and the wise folk who all said that above all you should do everything in your power to protect yourself and your household, they also said that from this place of safety you should plan your next move with caution and deliberation. And if it comes to war you must devoutly and with humility pray to Jesus Christ to keep you in his protection and help you in your need.'

For certainly no amount of advice will help you if you are not in Christ's keeping. King David once said: 'If God is not protecting this city, the watch may just as well sleep!' But next, put your trust in your friends. For it says in the proverbs of the Latin moralist Cato: 'If you have need of help, ask it of your friends.' You should avoid strangers. Avoid liars. And make sure that you do not become so confident in your own strength, and dismissive of your opponent's, that your safety is compromised as a result. Every wise man fears his enemies. Solomon said: 'Safe is he who trusts no one!' Seneca said: 'The wise man who fears harm will avoid harm.' And although it may seem as though you are in a safe place, always be alert to danger and do not be negligent, neither with regard to your greatest enemy nor to your least. Seneca said: 'A wise man fears all his enemies.' Ovid said: 'A little weasel can kill a great bull.' But this is not to say that you should be scared of everything! Do not be a coward! But make sure that the company you keep is that of your friends. The Bible says: 'Flee the poison of a slanderer and do not keep company with him.'

'Now as to the second point, where you were advised to secure your house with great diligence - what do you think they meant by this?'

Melibeus answered: 'In this way - that I should built towers and battlements and other defences, and surround my home with artillery so that all my enemies will be frightened to approach.'

Prudence answered: 'Towers and battlements are sometimes built just so that men can show off. One can build high towers and great defensive edifices at immense cost but none of it, in the end, is worth a straw if not defended by true friends. And be in no doubt that the strongest fortress a man can have is to be loved by his friends and by those over whom he has authority. Cicero said: 'There is a fortress that no enemy can successfully lay siege to, and that is the love of one's people.'

'Now as to the third point made by the men of law, that you should not act with haste but gather together your arguments and clothe them with a careful deliberation - they were right! Cicero said: 'Prepare everything well before you begin.' And I say that in the taking of vengeance, in war, battle and the building of defences, prepare *very* well. For Cicero said: 'Long preparation before battle makes for a quick victory!' And Cassiodorus said: 'The defence is stronger when it has been long in the making.'

'But what of the advice given to you by those of your neighbours who pay lip service to your friendship, by your old enemies who now profess to be reconciled, by those who said one thing to you in public and then another in private and by the young folk who urged you to war immediately? As I said before, you made a mistake to gather all of these people together in the first place. But you should now proceed after the doctrine of Cicero. Regarding the facts of the matter there is nothing in doubt. We know what was done and who did it. Those who are clamouring for war are not your friends. But who are your friends? For although you are wealthy and you wield a degree of power in the land, you are in a very real sense alone. For your only child is a daughter and you

have no brothers nor any close cousins who might cause your enemies to think again before engaging in action that will cause harm to you. You are aware that your estate will be widely distributed when you die and nobody is due to receive enough wealth from it to gain sufficient motivation to want to risk avenging your death. Your enemies know this too. And your enemies are three in number, and they have many children, and brothers, cousins and other near-relatives. So what if you exact revenge and kill two of them, or even slay all three? There will remain more than enough people with an



interest in killing you and few with a strong reason to defend you. In this they have the advantage. So now let's consider whether this call to vengeance is a reasonable one. And you already know the answer to this. The answer is no! For nobody is empowered to exact revenge upon anyone except a judge who has it within his jurisdiction, swiftly and measuredly, to do as the law requires of him.

'Following Cicero's method to the next step, you must now consider whether it lies in your power to proceed in accordance with your wishes and with those of your advisors. And to this as well it must be stated – no! Because we can only act correctly when we act in a way that is right, and it is not right to take power without the authority to do so.

'So your desire to take vengeance is matched neither by your ability to carry it through nor by your authority to attempt it. Let's examine then what Cicero next requires you to consider. The consequences of your decision, which in this case are the consequences of taking the revenge that you propose. Because following from this act of revenge will be another cycle of vengeance, war and uncertainty whose end cannot be predicted and whose perils may be numerous.

'And concerning the following step that Cicero recommends, which I take to mean considering the root of the trouble, you must be aware that this crime has at its very core the hatred that your enemies bear towards you. This hatred will be exacerbated by any vengeance you take and can only lead to an escalation of violence.

'Now, Sir, as to this consideration of causes, you must understand that the crime that has been committed against you has a distant cause and an immediate cause. The distant cause is the will of God, who is the cause of all things. The immediate cause is your three enemies. The 'cause accidental' is hate, the 'cause material' being the wounds received by your daughter. The 'cause formal' is the way they found access to your house via ladders and accessible windows. The 'cause final' was their intention to kill your daughter. As regards the distant cause, I cannot speculate except to assume that the perpetrators of this crime are destined to come to a sticky end; for it is written: 'Seldom can good be forced out of bad.'

‘Now, Sir, if you ask me why God has allowed this to happen, I cannot tell you. Nevertheless, it is my belief that God, who is full of justice and good, will have had a good reason for doing this to you. perhaps you have not paid enough heed to the words of Ovid: ‘Under the honey of material wealth lies a poison that destroys the soul.’ And Solomon said: ‘If you find honey, eat some by all means; but too much will make you sick!’ Christ has turned away from you and is punishing you in a way that is befitting; for you have allowed the three enemies of mankind, that is, flesh, the devil and the world, to enter into your heart through the windows of your body. You have not defended yourself sufficiently against them so they have wounded your soul in five places; that is to say, the deadly sins that have entered your heart through the five senses. And so in the same manner Christ has allowed your enemies to enter your home by the windows and wound your daughter in the same number of places.’

‘I can see,’ replied Melibeus, ‘that you are intent upon trying to talk me out of taking revenge. But if everyone was to dwell upon the harm and destruction that might follow an act of revenge, no revenge would ever be taken, and that itself would be harmful! For it is through revenge that the wicked are punished.’

Prudence answered: ‘Certainly, I grant that from vengeance comes much that is evil and much that is good. But vengeance is not lawful to everyone, only to judges and those to whom authority has been given. And I would go further. Just as an individual commits a sin by taking vengeance, so a judge also sins if he fails to take the vengeance required of him by the seriousness of the crime. So if you wish to take vengeance upon your enemies, go to the judge who has proper jurisdiction and he shall punish them as the law not only allows, but requires.’

‘Ah!’ exclaimed Melibeus. ‘But I don’t call that revenge! Fortune has favoured me since I was a child and will do so again, if I can test her with God’s help!’

‘You will do no such thing if you will follow my advice!’ replied Prudence. ‘You will not lean upon Fortune and trust her to support your weight! For as Seneca said: ‘Endeavours that depend upon good luck to succeed are stupid and almost certain to fail.’ Do not trust her for she is not to be trusted! When you think yourself most secure, she will all the more readily fail you! Seneca said: ‘He who is nursed as Fortune’s darling, grows up to be her fool!’ If it is revenge you desire and you have no faith in the law, then you have no other recourse but to seek a remedy from that sovereign judge who dispenses justice for all crimes and who said: ‘Leave the vengeance to me, and I shall do it.’

‘But if I leave such an act of blatant aggression against me unavenged,’ replied Melibeus, ‘I give notice to my enemies that they can repeat such violence with impunity. For it is written: ‘If you don’t avenge a villainy, you invite your enemies to commit another.’ Men say: ‘If you let insults pass, they will soon grow to such a magnitude that you will be forced to do something in the end.’

‘I agree,’ replied Prudence. ‘Excessive leniency is a bad thing, but it does not follow that everyone who has had a crime committed against him should take revenge, for that is

the job of the judges, as I have said. And judges and sovereigns who allow deceit and lawlessness to run rife, themselves run the risk that one day the criminals will become so powerful that their own position will be in jeopardy. So it is in their own best interests to tackle it.

‘But let’s for a moment pretend that you are allowed to take revenge. I must point out that you have no power to do so. For if you compare your might with that of your en-



emies, as I have explained to you already, you must see they are in a better position. There is a saying: ‘It is foolish to battle with the unknown or with something mightier than oneself; an even struggle holds an even chance of defeat and to cross swords with the weak is a sign of weakness.’ If it happens that you find yourself opposed by a stronger man than you, try rather to discover how to heal the grievance. For Seneca said: ‘It is perilous to wrestle with a stronger man.’

‘But let’s pretend for a moment that you have both the authority and the ability to take revenge for the attack upon your daughter. I maintain that there are still many things to persuade you to suffer it with patience rather than to take revenge. First and foremost, consider the faults within your own person, which God has chosen to punish. For the poet said: ‘We ought patiently to suffer the trials sent to us when we consider how well we have deserved them!’ And Saint Gregory said: ‘When a man numbers his sins honestly the more bearable becomes his pain.’ Also, you ought to incline your heart towards the justice and patience of our lord Jesus Christ, as Saint Peter said in his epistles: ‘Christ suffered for us as an encouragement to follow him. When men cursed him, he cursed them not, when they beat him, he did not retaliate.’ Moreover, you should stir yourself to practicing patience when you consider that the tribulations of this world last only for a short while and are soon gone. And the joy that a man hopes to achieve through patience and endurance is eternal. Also to lack patience is a sign of a poor upbringing and a bad education. For Solomon said: ‘What singles humankind out from all other creatures is patience.’ Saint James wrote in his epistle: ‘Patience is a sign of perfection.’

‘Certainly,’ replied Melibeus, ‘I grant you, dame Prudence, that patience is a sign of perfection, but not every man may achieve perfection and I am not to be numbered among the perfect! My heart cannot rest until it is avenged! And my enemies took no heed of the risk they ran by forcing entry into my home. They carried out their ruthless plan regardless. And therefore, I don’t think I can be blamed if I choose to put myself in a little danger in return and seek to reciprocate their outrage with interest!’

‘Ah!’ exclaimed Prudence. ‘You speak your mind! But under no circumstances should a man seek to escalate a conflict. Cassiodorus said: ‘Retaliation can be no less wicked than

the act which prompted it.' And therefore you must take revenge in the right way, that is, through the law. Seneca said: 'A man should never meet evil with evil.' And even if a man may rightfully act in self-defence, he should defend himself with moderation so that nobody afterwards can accuse him of outrage and murder. Christ knows, you are under no immediate threat now; it is revenge that you are planning, not self-defence; and it is likely, therefore, to be disproportionate. For this reason I think it is good for you to pause.'

'I will concede' replied Melibeus, 'that it is wrong to contemplate violence over something that is of no immediate threat or that is none of your business. The law says: 'He is to be censured, who meddles with things that are no concern of his.' But you know that this affair touches me intimately, therefore it should be no wonder that I am angry and involved in it. And with respect, I cannot see that it will harm me very much if I take revenge, for I am richer and more powerful than they are and all things in this world are governed and brought about by money and wealth. Solomon said: 'All things obey money.'

When Prudence heard her husband boasting about his wealth she said: 'It is true that you are rich and powerful and that wealth in the right hands counts for a lot. Wealth can buy friendship. Pamphilus said: 'If the daughter of a cowherd suddenly becomes rich, she will find a thousand men queuing up to marry her!' Pamphilus also said: 'If you are well placed and well off, friends will flock to you; but come poverty, then farewell friendship!' He also said: 'They who are servants and servants born may become worthy and noble by the acquisition of wealth.' And just as wealth brings many good things, so poverty is accompanied by many harms. Great penury forces a man into sin. I grant that wealth is a valuable commodity to those who have acquired it fairly and know how to use it. And therefore, I shall show you how properly to acquire your wealth and how properly to use it.

'First of all you should take time over its accumulation. Don't be greedy or over-zealous. For a man who is too keen to become rich falls into theft and other crimes. Sir, gain wealth through hard work and the use of your wits and harm no one in the process. For the law says: 'No man shall enrich himself by the harm of another.' That is to say, it is only natural to prohibit theft. Solomon said: 'He shall eat bread, who occupies himself tilling his land, but the idle shall die of hunger.' Therefore to gain wealth requires that you shun idleness. And afterwards, you must use the riches you have gained in a way that will leave you open neither to accusations of profligacy nor to the disgrace of being a miser. For just as the tight-fisted, so also the spendthrift lays himself open to censure. Cato says: 'Do not spend money like water and do not hoard it like a squirrel; for it is a great shame for a man to have an ample purse and a mean heart.' Cicero said: 'Your possessions should not be so stashed away that charity cannot release them. But let not your wealth be every man's wealth.'

'In both the getting and the management of your wealth, then, always have three things in mind: Our Lord God, conscience, and your good name. In acquiring wealth do noth-

ing that might displease God. And always strive to gain wealth with a good conscience. Paul in the New Testament said: ‘There is nothing in this world more pleasant than the enjoyment of a clear conscience. Then, in the acquisition of wealth, always protect and conserve your good name. Solomon said: ‘A good name is more valuable to a man than his wealth.’ Cassiodorus said: ‘It is a sign of nobility when a man values his good name.’

‘Now, Sir, I see that the faith you have in the power of wealth inclines you towards war. But I advise you strongly - do not begin a war in the belief that wealth alone can win it for you. Wealth soon runs out in times of struggle! A philosopher once said: ‘A man will always exhaust his means if he goes looking for conflict.’ And Sir, though your wealth may allow you to recruit a great army, it is neither prudent nor wise to start a war when you could instead have peace. Caution will earn you respect and save you money into the bargain! Battle is not always decided by the size of an army; it is decided by God. And Sir, since no one can be certain where God will send victory, every man should fear the onset of war. And because the uncertainties of war can bring down a great man as easily as a small one – as it is written in the Second Book of Kings: ‘The last man is as easily killed by a spear as the first’ – for these reasons a man should avoid the perils of war if he can honourably do so. Solomon said: ‘He who loves peril will probably meet with a perilous end!’

When Prudence had finished speaking Melibeus answered: ‘I see that you are not persuaded by a need for war! But I have yet to hear what you would propose in its place.’

‘I advise you to make peace with your enemies,’ Prudence replied. Saint James said in his epistle: ‘Peace sees the growth of wealth and war its swift dispersal.’ And you know that the highest thing in this world is unity and peace. It was because of this that Jesus said to his apostles: ‘Happy are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.’

‘Ah!’ exclaimed Melibeus. ‘Now I can see that you have no concern for my honour! My enemies have committed an outrage against me and you ask that I go and prostrate myself before them begging for mercy!’

‘Sir, by your leave!’ shouted Prudence angrily. ‘I love your honour as though it were my own! I always have done and I have never given you any cause to doubt me! And yet, if I had suggested that you should try to buy off your enemies, would I have said anything necessarily amiss? For the wise say: ‘Dissent from another requires reconciliation from you.’ The Bible says: ‘Search out peace and shadow it closely.’ Solomon said: ‘Too hard a heart will come to a rocky end!’

When Melibeus had heard his wife out, he said: ‘Please do not be angry at me, for I am



angry myself, and those who are angry are not in full command of what they do or say. As it is said in the Bible: 'An inflamed eye cannot see properly.' But give me your advice, for I am ready to act in any way you think fit. If you reproach me, I am the more bound to love and praise you, for Solomon said: 'He who rebukes a man for his folly earns more praise than a deceiver or a flatterer.'

'I became angry with you only because I want you to do the right thing,' replied Prudence. Solomon said: 'The man who supports a fool and indulges his foolery does him no favours.' Solomon also said: 'By a man's disapproving look does a fool correct himself.'

'I shall not seek to compose counter-arguments to what you have said,' replied Melibeus. 'But upon your fine words, tell me quickly, how may I build my response? I am ready to do anything you ask.'

Prudence then laid bare all her thoughts to him. 'I advise you,' she said, 'above all things to make peace with God and to be reconciled into his grace. For as I have said before, God has sent you all this for your sins. And if you do as I say, God will deliver your enemies to you and make them fall at your feet. Solomon said: 'When God smiles, he softens the heart of a man's enemy and guides him along the paths of peace. So I ask that you let me speak with them in a secluded place, and they shall not know that you have any knowledge of the meeting. Then, when I know their mood and I have learned their intentions, we will be better placed to plan our response.'

'Do whatever you feel is best,' replied Melibeus. 'I will follow your directions to the letter.'

Now that Prudence was sure of her husband's compliance, she searched her own thoughts for the best way to take things forward. And when she saw her moment, she sent for these three men and met them in private, and explained to them the great benefits that could accrue from peace, and the perils of war, and painted in graphic terms for them an image of the repentance they ought to feel for injuring herself and her daughter.

And when these three men had heard Prudence speak, they were so surprised and so captivated by her voice and found such truth in her words that it is a wonder to tell! 'Ah, lady!' they said. 'You are offering to us a reconciliation that we do not deserve, but which we will accept nonetheless, with contrition and humility.' See that the words of Solomon are true, that: 'Kind words augment friendship and turn wrongdoers into lambs!'

'We put ourselves entirely into your hands,' they said, 'and are ready to obey the will of our lord Melibeus. And we ask you, dear and benign lady, as humbly as we can, that it might please you to fulfil your offer to intercede on our behalf. For we know that we have wronged Melibeus badly and hold ourselves bound to comply with whatever he decides to do. But it is possible that he is so angry with us, because of what we have done to his daughter, that he will inflict upon us a punishment that we may not be able to bear. And therefore, lady, we throw ourselves on your mercy.'

‘It is certainly a terrible thing to be utterly at the mercy of another man,’ replied Prudence. ‘Solomon said: ‘Give away control over your life to no one, neither to son nor wife nor friend.’ And since he argues this of a son or a wife, what then would he say to giving away control over one’s life to an enemy! But despite this, I urge you not to distrust my lord. I know for certain that he has no desire to be ungenerous nor to enrich himself at your expense. There is nothing in this world he desires more than respect and honour. Furthermore, I know that he will not act without consulting me first. And I shall work things that, with God’s will, you will be reconciled.’

They replied with one voice: ‘Worshipful lady! We put ourselves into your hands and will appear upon the appointed day to confirm our obligation to your lord and do whatever you wish us to do.’

Prudence then asked them to go quietly back to their homes and she returned to Melibeus and told him that she had found his enemies to be aware of their wrongdoing, repentant and ready to suffer punishment for their crime, while begging him to be merciful.

Melibeus answered: ‘It may be possible to forgive when no excuse is offered but only contrition. Seneca said: ‘Confession is but a short way from innocence, and makes forgiveness easier.’ And in another place Seneca said: ‘To acknowledge one’s actions and be ashamed of them makes one worthy of forgiveness.’ And therefore I agree to make peace; but it would be best if we could persuade our friends to support us.’



Prudence was overjoyed and said happily: ‘Sir, that is a fine answer! For it was partly through the advice of your friends that you opted for war, and the law says: ‘There is no natural process better than that an injury should be healed by its cause, a wrong by its perpetrator.’

Then Prudence immediately sent for all their friends and relations who were faithful and wise and told them all that you have just heard, and asked them to give their opinion as to which would be the best way to proceed. And when they had deliberated amongst themselves and examined the arguments thoroughly, they were unanimous in recommending peace, and that Melibeus should receive his enemies in a spirit of forgiveness and mercy. And when Prudence had the agreement of her husband and the support of all their friends, she was very happy and said: ‘There is an old saying: ‘Don’t wait to do tomorrow the good that you can do today!’ and therefore I advise that we send for those men immediately; instruct messengers to tell them that if they will contemplate peace, they should make their way here without delay.’

And this was quickly done!

And when the enemies of Melibeus heard what the messengers had to say, they were very happy and made ready in all humility to come before the man they now intended to obey without question. Bringing some friends who were willing to act as their guarantors, they came into the presence of Melibeus.

‘As things stand,’ Melibeus said to them, ‘the truth is that you have, without any cause or justification, done great injury to myself, to my wife Prudence and especially to my daughter Sophie. You have broken into my house and committed such crimes that everybody knows you deserve to die for them. And I would like to know, therefore, whether you are prepared to submit to the punishment that Prudence and I determine to be just and right, or whether you do not.’

The wisest of the three answered for them all and said: ‘Sir, we know that we are unworthy freely to come into the court of so great a lord as you; for we have committed such dreadful things that, truly, we deserve to die for them. And yet, for all the justice and compassion that the world recognises in you, we submit ourselves to your excellence and are ready to obey you in everything, beseeching you, for pity, to consider our repentance and our submission to your will, and to grant us forgiveness for the terrible things that we have done. For we know that your liberal grace and unbounded mercy extends further into goodness even than does our outrageous guilt into wickedness, and we have acted damnably against your high lordship.’

Melibeus extended his hand and helped them up from the floor with good grace, received their pledges and their guarantees and appointed a certain day upon which they should return to his court to receive the judgment and sentence that he would pass upon them; and when all this was over everyone departed.

When Prudence saw her time, she asked Melibeus what he intended to do with the men. And Melibeus answered: ‘I think I shall strip them of everything they possess and send them into permanent exile.’

‘That is a very cruel sentence!’ exclaimed Prudence. ‘You are rich enough to have no need of another man’s possessions and you could quickly gain a reputation for being covetous, which is a vicious thing to acquire and something to be avoided at all costs. For as Paul says in the New Testament: ‘A love of money is the root of all evil.’ Rather than taking wealth from these men it would be better to lose an equal amount from your own coffers! It is much better to lose possessions honourably than to gain them dishonourably, and every man ought to do his utmost to protect his honour. And not only to protect his honour but to augment and renew it, for ‘the reputation of a man’, it is written, ‘is soon gone if he does not constantly maintain and build upon his good name.’

‘And as regards exiling your enemies, that, too, is unreasonable and out of proportion, considering that they have of their own volition put themselves at your mercy. It is written: ‘He deserves to forego his privilege who abuses the power invested in him.’ And even if the law allows you to pass this sentence upon them, there is every possibility that you would be unable to enforce it and that there would only be a resumption of war

between you. If you wish men to obey you, you must exercise compassion and not set harsh sentences. For it is written: 'He who commands fairly is the more readily obeyed.' Therefore, I urge you to overcome your passions. Seneca said: 'He who gains victory over his emotions shall gain victory twice.' Cicero said: 'There is nothing more commendable in a great lord than a swiftness to mercy.' I had hoped by now that you had abandoned all thoughts of gaining revenge! Seneca said: 'It makes for an ugly triumph should victory later be a cause for regret!' Therefore, I beg you, let mercy be your guide, allow it into your heart, that it may be in God's heart to have mercy upon you at the Last Judgment. Saint James said in his epistle: 'Judgment without mercy will be shown to one who is merciless himself.'

When Melibeus heard all that Prudence had to say, his heart began to incline towards her and he agreed to do as she advised. And he thanked God, from whom proceeds all virtue and goodness, that he had been given a wife of such fine judgment and intelligence.

When the day arrived for his enemies to appear before him once more, he spoke courteously to them and said: 'Although your pride and presumption, your negligence and folly has led you to behave as you have towards me and to commit a heinous crime against my family, yet, I can see from your contrition and repentance that it falls upon me to show mercy. Therefore, I forgive you all the offenses and wrongs you have done against me, just as God in his infinite mercy will forgive us the sins that we have committed against him in this wretched world when we die. For doubtless, if we are sorry for the sins that we have committed, in the sight of our lord God, he is so generous that he will forgive us and bring us into that bliss that lasts without end. Amen.'