

The Floure and the Leafe

anon

fifteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

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late fourteenth century

When that Phebus his chaire of gold so hie had whirled up the sterry sky aloft, and in the Boole was entred **certainly** – When Phoebus Apollo’s golden throne had circumscribed the starry sky and ascended into the constellation of Taurus once again, and when showers of sweet rain fell and, by their soft and repeated drenching, caused a wholesome air to rise and a fresh dewy mantle to cover the ground in a new green – and small flowers began to spring up everywhere in field and meadow, for so very good and wholesome are the showers that renew what was old and dead in winter, and out of every seed springs a young seedling – then every creature, as always, grew happy and light-hearted.

And I, so glad that spring had come, happened upon a certain night, as I lay in my bed – though I marvel greatly that I lay for so long unable to sleep – but I rose at about three o’clock in the morning, before dawn, put on my clothes and went to a pleasant grove, long before the sun arose; a grove in which some great oaks, great druid oaks, stood in a line amidst the fresh parkland grasses. They stood about eight or nine feet apart with broad branches covered in new leaves that had sprung forth in anticipation of the sun. Some were green and others red – purple English Oaks – and I marvelled at the sight, and at the sound also, for the birds had begun to sing their dawn chorus.

I strained my ears, eager to discover if I could hear the nightingale, and found a tiny little path, so overgrown with grass and weeds – left untrodden, so it seemed, for such a long while – that it was scarcely visible, and I thought to myself: ‘This path must go

somewhere.’ And so I followed it until it brought me to a very pleasant garden, with grass-topped earthen knolls to sit upon and freshly-turfed lawns that were as soft as velvet; a hedge encircled me completely and the garden was so shaded that anyone whose fancy took him to stand outside could walk about there all day long and not be aware of anyone inside; but within, one could see everything that was going on outside, and particularly in a field of corn and grass that lay nearby; and without doubt, though one might search the whole wide world, so magnifi-

This poem was written by an unknown hand sometime in the mid- to late-fifteenth century and erroneously incorporated into an Elizabethan edition of the collected works of Geoffrey Chaucer. The Elizabethan text has up until now been our earliest copy of the poem, although reference is made to it in a list of contents in the incomplete MS Longleat 258 of the late-fifteenth century.



cent a meadow would not be found anywhere, for there was such an abundance of everything in it.

And as I stood, I saw within the garden the most beautiful medlar tree I had ever seen. It was covered in blossom and in its branches a goldfinch hopped prettily from bough to bough, eating the buds as he pleased. The tree was close to the edge of the garden, and after a while the goldfinch began to sing, and a nightingale took up the refrain from within a laurel tree and answered with such merry notes that all the woods round about echoed with the sound. Enraptured, I stood for so long that I quite forgot where I was, and I resolved to spend the whole day there. Everything was so fresh and so sweet-smelling that I guessed that since the beginning of the world no earthly man had ever before encountered such a pleasant place.

And as I sat listening to the birds, I caught the sound of voices, and out of a grove nearby came a world of ladies; and properly to describe their great beauty and the melody of their voices lies beyond my power. They were clad in white overgarments, the seams set with emeralds, and elsewhere, sewn on the sleeves and on the trains, were pearls, diamonds and rubies; and each wore on her head a gold net studded with many gems. And every lady wore a chaplet of fresh green leaves upon her head, so wonderfully made that it was marvellous to see. Some were of laurel and others of woodbine, and sadly, some were of willow. But whether joyfully or soberly, they all danced in a circle. And one lady stood by herself in the middle, and the others kept time to her movements, and she was the most beautiful of all, for her face and her figure were beyond compare, and on her head she wore a crown of gold, as would befit a king, and in her hand a branch of willow; and truly, she seemed to me to be the lady of the company.



And she began to sing the verse of a song, the others danced to it and waited to echo the chorus; it was the song of a lady whose love shall remain constant. And they came singing and dancing into the centre of the meadow, in full view of the secluded garden where I was sitting. And I thought myself very privileged to be able to see them so closely.

They had not danced for very long when I heard, not far off, suddenly, such a noise of trumpets blowing that I feared the sky would be blown away. And then I saw, from the same grove that the ladies had emerged from, an army of knights, as if all the men on Earth had been assembled in that place; all well horsed and riding so fast that the ground trembled beneath them. And they were so richly clad and finely armed that the treasury and wealth of the richest Christian monarch would scarcely have paid for a tenth of it. Out of the grove came first a company clad in white cloaks, wearing chaplets of fresh

evergreen oak and all bearing trumpets. And on every trumpet hung a broad banner of finely-embroidered silk, bearing his lord's coat of arms; their broad collars were studded with pearls and no expense had been spared on their coats. And after them came nine kings' heralds, in cloaks of white cloth-of-gold, with chaplets on their heads and with crowns embroidered on their tunics, studded with diamonds; and all the horses were decked out in silk. They led the way perfectly. And behind them, on fresh warhorses, came such a stampede of armed knights that they filled the field completely. All wore chaplets of leaves on their heads, some of laurel, others of oak and some of other trees. Some held laurel branches in their hands, others branches of oak, or hawthorn, or woodbine, and they came galloping on fresh horses, the trumpets sounding a bloodcurdling call. And there I saw many a strange new device in the emblems of these proud knights. And at last, they formed up into opposing sides in the middle of the field, as evenly as they could, and at his place each turned his horse's head to face his opponent and laid his lance in its rest.

And so the jousting began.

Here and there, some broke a lance and others brought down horse and man, sending loose horses about the field; and it was a pleasure to see the organisation and the discipline of it all. The jousting lasted for an hour or more; and at the end, those in the laurel chaplets were adjudged to have won the prize. Then every lady took a knight by the hand and together they walked to a nearby laurel tree that was very broad and heavy with leaves; and for the rest of my life, I don't suppose that I will meet a man who has ever seen a tree half so magnificent nor as beautiful as this one; for it was able to shelter nigh a hundred people from the sun's heat and to protect them from the discomforts of rain and hail. And the smell of this laurel would lighten the heart of anyone unwell, so soothing it was, and so efficacious. And with great reverence they bowed low to this beautiful tree, and then they began to sing and dance again; some of love, some of love's hurt, and around and around the tree they danced, all in pairs, a lady and a knight.

At last I looked about and became aware of a young and energetic crowd coming across the meadow hand in hand, each knight with a lady; and all the ladies wore frocks studded with gemstones, and the men all wore green coats, embroidered as beautifully as the ladies' dresses. And each wore a chaplet, a circlet of red and white flowers. And in front walked minstrels playing harps and lutes and pipes and flutes, all dressed in green; and on their heads were diverse flowers wreathed skilfully together. And so they came dancing into the meadow and found a large clump of wild flowers. And on coming upon this, they bowed down, each one, in great reverence and humility. And a lady began to sing a pastoral song in praise of the daisy; for, as I thought, among her notes I could discern the words of a popular song: 'So sweet is the daisy...' But then, I know not how, but about noon the sun suddenly grew so hot that the flowers lost the beauty of their colours and wilted in the heat; and the ladies also, they became distressed and began to burn up, and the knights collapsed as though about to die through lack of shade. And shortly after this a wind began to blow so strongly that down went all the flowers, so that not one

of them was left in the meadow, save those that were sheltered by the leaves and grasses or beneath a hedge or a bush. And after this came such a storm of rain and hail that the ladies and the knights soon had not a thread on them that was not soaked completely, so dripping wet were their clothes.

When the storm had passed, those who stood under the tree – for they had felt nothing of the effects of this terrible squall – went to them in sympathy. The Lady in white took the hand of the Lady dressed in green, and then every lady in white took a lady in green



by the hand; which, when the knights had seen, they followed the lead given to them and each accompanied a knight clad in green, and off they went to a hedge, where they made some stately fires to dry all the wet clothes.

And then I saw a marvellous thing; for then the nightingale who all day had been sitting in the laurel tree and singing with all her voice, rehearsing the whole service belonging to May, suddenly took to the air and landed on the hand of the Lady of the Leaf. And then the goldfinch, who had earlier fled from the heat into the shade of the bushes, flew over to the Lady of the Flower and settled on her hand and folded his wings; and both these birds began to sing, as beautifully as they had been doing all day.

I stepped outside the garden and happened to meet a young lady dressed all in white, riding alone and looking very demure. I greeted her and wished her success in everything, very humbly, and she replied: ‘My daughter, thank you.’

‘But if I may be so bold as to ask,’ I said, ‘what is the nature of this procession and who are these knights and ladies?’

‘The lady in white is Diana,’ she replied. ‘The goddess Diana. And those who hold boughs of the precious laurel in their hands are those who were once knights of the Round Table, and Charlemagne’s retainers, and the laurel signifies the mighty deeds they have done. And there are old knights that King Edward raised to the Order of the Garter.’

‘And as for she who is crowned in green, it is Flora, goddess of the flowers.’

‘Then may I dare ask why all the knights bear the sign of the leaf and not of the flower?’

‘Truly, daughter,’ she replied, ‘this is the reason; for knights should always seek honour with perseverance, improving themselves in all ways; in sign of which they are given the leaf, that is hardy and retains its vigour. But the flower will soon be lost, so simple is its nature and unable to suffer any hardship – and for this reason it cannot be put to the



same occupation.'

'Madam,' I said, 'with all my heart I thank you, and I am now very much at your service, for I understand everything I desired to know.'

'I am very glad to have been able to help,' she replied. 'But tell me, to whom do you bear allegiance, and to which will you give your loyalty this year, to the Leaf or to the Flower?'

'Madam,' said I, 'although I am the least deserving, I have the honour of owing fealty to the Leaf.'

'Splendid!' she cried. 'I pray that you will be honoured with advancement and protected from slander and from the attentions of denouncers; and may nothing but good befall you. But I can stay no longer, for I must follow this great company that you see riding before me.'

So I took my leave of her and she departed as quickly as she could. And I drew homeward, for the sun had set and the evening was drawing to a close. And I have put all that I have seen into writing, for the support of those who may be pleased to read it. Oh little book! You who are so unskilfully composed, how dare you, for fear, put yourself into the midst of battle? It is a wonder that you do not blush for shame.