**The Wife of Bath’s Prologue**

*The prologe of the Wives Tale of Bathe*

‘I don’t care what anyone says. Experience of the world is the best thing. It may not be the main authority but, in relationships, it is a good teacher. I know all about unhappiness in marriage. Goodness me. Oh yes. I was twelve years old when I first got a husband. I’ve had five altogether, thanks be to God. Five of them trooping up to the church door. That is a lot of men. By and large they were gentlemen, or so I was led to believe. Yet I was told quite recently – I forget by whom – that our Saviour attended only one wedding. It was in the town of Cana. So, the argument goes, I should only ever have been married once. And then there was the time when Jesus rebuked the Samaritan woman. They were standing beside a well, weren’t they? “You have had five husbands,” He said. “And the man you are living with is not your husband.” He was God and man, so I suppose He knew what He was talking about. I don’t understand what His point was, but I am sure He had one. Why was the fifth man not her husband? It doesn’t make any sense. How many husbands had she actually had? How many husbands was she allowed? In all my life I never heard there was a limit. Have you?

‘There will be ever so many experts telling us one thing and another. But I know this much. God told us to go forth and multiply. Am I right? I can understand that part of the Bible, at any rate. And wasn’t it God who commanded my husband to “leave father and mother” and belong to me alone? But He never mentioned a number. It could be two. It could be eight. Who knows? There’s nothing wrong with it, anyway.

‘What about that Solomon? He was a clever man. Didn’t he have more than one wife? I wish to God I had his luck. If I had half as many husbands as he had wives, I would be laughing. Think of it. I could be God’s gift to men. And what about all those wedding nights? I bet that he did you-know-what as hard as a hammer with a nail. I bet he gave them a right pounding.

‘Well, thank God, I have had five at least. Roll on number six. I don’t care where or when, as long as he comes. I am not going to sew myself up. When my present husband goes the way of all flesh, I shall be looking for another. You can bet on it. What is the name of that apostle who said that was the best thing to do? “Better to marry than to burn.” That’s what he said. And he can say it again. I don’t give a damn what people think. The father of Noah had two wives, didn’t he? I saw them in the pageant play. It made no difference to him. And what about Abraham? What about Jacob? They were old holies, weren’t they? And they had more than two wives. Plenty of these prophets did. Show me the passage where God forbids more than one marriage? Go on. Show me. You can’t. Where is the part of the Bible that commands virginity? There isn’t one. The apostle Paul says that he had no firm opinion on the matter. He may advise a woman to keep her virginity. That’s fair enough. But he cannot order her. He leaves it up to her. If God Himself had wanted us all to be virgins He would not have invented marriage, would he? If we were never allowed to mate, then where would the next generation of virgins come from? Not even Paul dared to touch a subject that his master left alone. If there’s a prize for virginity, I’m not going to compete for it. That’s for sure. And I bet there won’t be many runners.

‘Not everyone will agree with me, of course. There are some people who stay virgins because they believe that they are performing God’s will. Paul himself was a virgin, wasn’t he? He may have wished that everyone else would follow his example, but he was just stating an opinion. He did not forbid me from marrying. How could he? So it is no sin to marry me, once the old man is dead. It will not count as bigamy. Of course it is always dangerous for a man to touch a woman, in bed at least. It is like putting a flame to dry wood. You know what I mean. But that is as far as I will go. Paul said only that he preferred the virgin to the married couple. The virgin is stronger.

‘I grant you that. I have no quarrel with virgins. If they want to remain pure, in body and soul, I will not stop them. I can’t criticize and, in any case, I make no great claims for myself. But let me put it this way. Not all the vessels in a house are necessarily made of gold. The wooden ones are good for certain purposes. A man can put his lips to wood as well as gold. Although it may not glitter, it serves its function. God calls men and women to different vocations. All of us have different talents – some can do *this*, others can do *that*. I can do *that*.

‘I know that virginity is a form of perfection. Chastity is close to holiness. Christ Himself is perfection. But He did not tell people to surrender everything for the sake of the poor. He did not order them to give up their worldly goods and follow His footsteps. That was reserved for perfectionists, as I said. But, my lords, I am not one of those. I have a few years left in me yet, and I am going to devote them to the arts of married life. I will couple and thrive.

‘And tell me this. Why does God give us those parts between our legs? Cunts are not made for nothing, are they? They are not unnecessary. Some will say that they have been created so that we can urinate. Others will say that they are just the marks to distinguish female from male. You know that isn’t true. All experience tells us otherwise. I hope that none of you priests and nuns will be angry with me, but I must say this. We have been given our private parts for pleasure as well as necessity. We must procreate as well as pee, within the limits set by God. Why else is there the ruling that a wife must freely render her body to her husband? How is he going to receive it without using his you-know-what? I’ll say it once again. Our parts are there for two purposes, for purging piss and for propagation.

‘Now I am not claiming that every man and woman is bound to propagate. That would be absurd. That would be to deny the virtue of chastity. Christ was a virgin. And He had a male body, did He not? Many saints have been virginal, too. I expect that they had private parts. I will say nothing against them. They are loaves of the purest white bread, and we wives are buns of coarse barley. And yet Mark tells us that Christ Himself fed the multitude with barley bread. I am not fussy. I will fulfil the role that God gave me. I will use my hole, my instrument, my cunt, with as good a grace as He bequeathed it to me. If I am grudging about it, God will never forgive me. My husband can have it morning and night, whenever it pleases him. He can pay his debt any time. I want him to be my debtor and my slave. I will be troubling his flesh, as they put it, while I am married to him. I am given power over his body for the rest of my life. Is that not so? That is what Paul says. Paul also orders husbands to love their wives. I quite agree -’

The Pardoner suddenly rose from his saddle and interrupted her. ‘Now, dame,’ he said. ‘By God and the cross you have been a noble orator in your cause. I was just about to get married myself but, hearing you, I am having second thoughts. Why should I put my flesh to so much trouble, as you put it? I don’t think I will be wed at all.’

‘Just wait a minute,’ she said. ‘I haven’t begun my story yet. You may not find it a wholesome draught. It will not be as sweet as ale. But drink it down. I will tell you a story about unhappiness in marriage. I am old enough to be experienced in the subject – well, I was the one who held the whip. I know all about it. Do you still want to sip out of my barrel? I have given you fair warning. I will give you ten different examples of marital disaster. There may be more than ten. I am not sure. There is an old saying, “Forewarned is forearmed.” I think those are the exact words of Ptolemy. Look it up. It’s in one of his books.’

‘Dame,’ the Pardoner said to her, ‘do begin. We are on tenterhooks until we hear you. Tell us the story, and spare no man in the process. Teach all the young men here your techniques.’

‘Gladly,’ she replied. ‘If that is what you want. But yet I beg all of you to remember this. Don’t get upset about anything I say. Don’t take offence. I mean no harm. I just want to entertain you all.

‘So now I will begin. I shall tell you the truth, so help me God. May I never taste wine or ale again if I deceive you. I have had, as I said, five husbands. Three of them were good, and two of them were bad. The three good ones were rich, and they were old. They were so old that they could hardly fulfil their duties. They could hardly rise to the occasion. You know what I mean. God help me, I can’t help laughing when I remember how hard they tried. God, did they sweat. I set no store by them in any case. Once they had given me their land and their fortune, I wasn’t bothered about the rest. I did not have to flatter or beguile them.

‘They loved me so much that I took their love for granted. That is the truth of it. A wise woman will be busy looking for a lover only when she hasn’t got one. But since I had them in the palm of my hand – and got all their money, too – why should I go to the trouble of pleasing them further? I could please myself instead. So I set them to work. Many nights they were exhausted and miserable. Were they unhappy with me? Well, let me put it like this. We would not have won many prizes for domestic bliss. Yet I got my way. I kept them sweet enough. They were always bringing me gifts from the local fair. And they were always happy when I spoke nicely to them. God alone knows that there were many times when I scolded them. Oh, did I nag them! Now, all you wives, listen to me carefully. Always be mistress in your household. If you need to, accuse your husbands of things they haven’t done. That is the way to behave towards men. I tell you this much. Women are much better at lying and cheating than men. I am not telling this to experienced wives. They have no need of my advice. I am talking to those who are having trouble. A wise wife, if she knows what she is doing, can swear that fire is water. If a little bird whispers in her husband’s ear, about something or other, she will call the little bird a liar. She will even get her maid to swear to her virtue. That’s the way to do it.

‘So this is the kind of thing I said: “Now, you old dotard, what have you got to tell me? Why is our neighbour’s wife looking so pleased with herself? She is respected and flattered wherever she goes. And what about me? I am obliged to sit at home. I don’t have any clothes to wear. And why are you always next door? Is that woman so good-looking? Or are you just randy? Why are you always whispering with my maid? Good God, man! Button up your trousers, you old lecher. And what if I do have a man friend? What’s that to you? Why do you always complain if I just pop into his house for a minute or two? Then you come home rat-arsed, stinking of drink, and start lecturing me on my behaviour. What a load of nonsense. You go drivelling on about the curse of marriage. If you marry a poor woman, you say, then it costs a fortune. If you marry a rich woman, or a woman of high birth, you have to put up with her airs and graces. If she is good-looking, then you have to put up with her easy virtue. Oh yes, you say, any lecher can take her. Her virtue comes cheap. Everyone wants her, and everyone can have her. And all the while you are looking at me. How dare you?”

‘I pause for breath and start again. “Then you start talking about women. Some men want them for their looks, and some for their money. Some men are only interested in their figures. Others are pleased if their women can sing or dance, or talk well, or are sociable. Some like slender hands and arms. Some like long legs. Oh, you say, no man can keep guard over these castles. The enemy is sure to get over the wall and make it inside.

‘“An ugly woman lusts for any man she sees. According to you. She will leap on anyone with her tongue hanging out, like a spaniel, until she finds one who is willing to do it. There never was a goose so grey that it did not find its gander. Any itch can be scratched. This is your so-called philosophy. This is what you dole out to me when you come to bed. You say that no man needs to get married. No man who wants to get to heaven should consider it. Well, old man, may thunder and lightning strike you down! May your ancient withered neck be broken!

‘“You tell me that there is an old proverb, ‘The sight of a leaking roof, the smell of smoke, and the sound of wives, are enough to make a man flee from his home.’ You silly old fool. What are you talking about? You say women will hide their vices until they are safely married. Only then will they show them. That is an idiot’s opinion. They say that a good Englishman takes stock of his oxen and his cattle, his horses and his hounds, before he buys them. He tries out his bowls and his washbasins, his stools and his spoons, to make sure that they are sound. He even checks his chamber pots. Why does he not take the same precaution with his wife? You old dotard! You fool! How dare you say that we show our vices only when we are married?

‘“And another thing. You say that I am only happy when you are praising my good looks. That I expect you to gaze lovingly upon me, and call me ‘my most lovely wife’ in public. I expect you to make my birthday a holy day, do I? And receive expensive presents? I never heard such nonsense in my life. You are supposed to receive my old nurse and my chambermaid in great state, and to entertain my father and all his relatives? Lies. All lies from the mouth of an old goat.

‘“Oh yes. Then you make a fuss about our apprentice, Johnny. Just because he has lovely blond hair – it shines like gold, it really does – and just because he accompanies me on my shopping expeditions, you become suspicious. Johnny means nothing to me. If you died tomorrow, I would not give him a second look. And tell me this. Why do you hide the keys to your chest? It is as much mine as yours. Do you think you are going to make a fool out of me? You are not going to get my body and my goods. You must be mad even to consider it. You can have one or the other. But not both. Think about it, old man. What is the point of spying on me, and questioning the servants? If you had your way, I would be locked up in that damned chest as well. What you should be saying is this. ‘Oh dear wife, please go wherever you like. Feel free. I won’t listen to any rumours about you. I know you, Dame Alice, to be a true and faithful wife.’ That is what you should say. We wives never like husbands who pry or who try to control us. We must be at liberty. That’s the truth of it.

‘“The best of all you men was that wise astrologer, Ptolemy. He was from Egypt, wasn’t he? He wrote down a proverb in one of his books that sums it all up. ‘The wisest man,’ he said, ‘is the one who minds his own business and does not worry about the conduct of the world.’ You understand what he meant by that, I suppose? If you have enough, or more than enough, why should you bother about the pleasures of other people? Let me tell you this, you old goat. You will get cunt enough at night. Only a miser would stop a man lighting a candle with the flame from his lantern. Do you understand me? You will still be able to see in the dark. Don’t worry. No one has stolen your flame.

‘“I’m sick to death of hearing you say that we women should ‘dress demurely and discreetly’ just as if we were still virgins. You love to quote from the Bible, don’t you? What is that text? ‘No woman should be apparelled in precious stones or walk abroad with braided hair. No woman should dress herself in pearls or gold or fine fabrics.’ What a load of nonsense. I can’t even be bothered to argue with you about it.

‘“What is that? I am like a cat, am I? You only have to singe my skin, and I will never roam from home? Is that what you think? But if the skin of a cat is sleek and shiny, then she will not stay in the house for half an hour. She will be on the tiles before daybreak, showing herself off and setting up such a caterwaul that every cat in the neighbourhood will know she’s on heat. Do you get my drift? If I am in the mood, I will stray.

‘“What good is it spying on me, you old fool? Argus was supposed to have a hundred eyes, but even he would not be able to stop me. Not unless I wanted him to lay his hands on me. Even so, I would still be able to fool him. You can count on it. You say that there are three types that torment the whole earth. They are – an upstart servant, a well-fed fool and a maid who is heir to her mistress. You tell me that the world cannot bear a fourth, namely a wife who is a shrew. You hateful old man. May God send you an early death. Why should you pick on wives, shrewish or not? Surely there are other candidates for that honour? Leave off your preaching.

‘“And then you say that a woman’s love is nothing but hell on earth, a piece of barren land without water. You compare it to wild fire; it burns out of control; the more it consumes in flame, the more it wishes to destroy. Then you change your metaphor. You compare the poor wife to a worm eating its way up a tree; she gets hold of her husband’s vital parts, and eventually pulls him down. All husbands are supposed to know this, are they? Old dotard. Goat. Wait till I get my hands on you.”

‘And that, in a nutshell, is the way I talked to my five husbands. I really flattened them. I swore that they were drunk when they accused me of anything. I got dear Johnny and my maid to back me up. Oh Lord, the amount of trouble I caused them! And, to tell you the truth, they were quite innocent. I was like a filly. I could bite and whinny. I would scold them when I was really in the wrong. Otherwise I would have got the worst of it. That could not be allowed. The first one who comes to the mill is the first one to get bread. I called foul first. So I won the battle. They were quite ready to beg forgiveness for sins they had never committed. I accused them of having affairs with women, when they were so ill that they could hardly stand.

‘Yet they put up with it. They really believed that I complained so much because, deep down, I loved them. Oh, I used to say, I go out at night because I want to check up on all the women you are screwing. With that excuse, I had quite a lot of fun myself. Women are born with these skills, you see. God gave us the gift of weeping and trimming and deceiving. I have been doing it all my life and, if I am allowed to boast, I must say that I managed to get the better of all of my husbands. Whether it was by trick or force, by nagging or complaining, I had the mastery. They got the worst of it in bed, of course. That’s where I really gave them hell. If I felt their hands reaching out for me, I threatened to make a quick exit – unless, that is, they paid me some form of ransom. Once they had paid up, I let them do whatever they liked. I wasn’t particular.

‘So I tell you all this. You must pay for what you want. Everything in this world is for sale. An empty hand lures no hawk. You know that expression, I suppose. I would satisfy all their lusts, once my purse was full. Sometimes I even pretended to enjoy it. In fact I never really enjoyed the taste of tough old meat. That was probably the reason I gave them such a hard time. The pope himself could have been sitting right beside them, at table, and I would still have nagged them. I gave as good as I got. If I were making my last will and testament, I would still owe them nothing. I paid them word for word, so help me God. I was so smart and tricky that they gave up the fight. It was the best thing they could have done, believe me. Otherwise they would have had no rest. One or two of them may have looked at me like tigers, but they would never have got me in their jaws.

‘This is what I said to one of them. “Oh look, sweetheart, at Willy.” Willy was the name of our sheep. “Look at him. Look how meek and lovely he is. Come over to me now, dear, and let me give you a little kiss on your cheek. You should be like Willy. You should be patient and humble. You are always telling me about the patience of Job. Why not follow suit? You should practise what you preach. Is that not so? Otherwise I will have to teach you a harder lesson – that it is a good thing to keep a wife peaceful. One of us must give in. That’s for sure. And it’s not going to be me. A man is more reasonable than a woman, in any case, and must surely be able to bear more hardship. Why are you always moaning and complaining? Do you want to reserve my pussy for yourself? You can have it. Take it all. Go on. Take it. I know how much you love it. If I were able to sell it, I would be walking around in luxury. I can tell you that. But, no, I will keep it for you alone to graze on. But, by God, you do me wrong!” Those were my exact words to him.

‘Let me tell you about my fourth husband. He was an old dog. He had a mistress, anyway. I was still young and full of life. I was a bit wanton, I admit, but I was strong and stubborn with it. I was as pert as a magpie. If anyone played the harp, I was up on my feet dancing. When I had drunk a glass of sweet white wine, I could sing like a nightingale in spring. Do you know the story of Metellius, who beat his wife to death because she liked her liquor? He would not have stopped me, even if I had been his wife. No one can keep me away from it. Once I have had a few, of course, I start thinking about you-know-what. Love is on my mind. Just as surely as cold weather makes hail or snow, so a greedy mouth makes for a greedy tail. A drunken woman is not going to be able to protect her virtue, is she? Every lecher knows that.

‘Jesus, when I think about my youth, I can’t help but laugh. All that fun. All that sex. The memories cheer me even now. I was on top of the world in those days. I was hot. Of course age poisons everything. It has taken my beauty. It has robbed me of strength. Well, let them go. Farewell to both of them. Let the devil take them. Now that the flour has gone, I have got to sell the bran. That’s the sum of it. But I’m trying to keep up my spirits. Can’t you tell?

‘What was I saying about my fourth husband? Oh yes. I was furious when I imagined him in the arms of another woman. But I got my own back. My God. I made a cross for him out of the same wood. That’s all I can say. I did not prostitute myself. Certainly not. But I was so friendly to other men, so approachable, that I made him fry in his own fat. He simmered with anger and jealousy. I was his purgatory on earth. He suffered so much that his soul must have gone straight to heaven. When the shoe pinched, he cried out loudly enough. But no one, except God and my husband, knows how bitterly I tormented him. He died when I came back from my pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Now he lies buried before the main altar. I can’t say that his tomb is as sumptuous as that of a king or emperor, but it will serve. It would have been a waste of money to build anything grand. Well goodbye, old man. May God give you rest in your coffin. Sweet dreams.

‘Now I will tell you all about my fifth husband. I sincerely hope that he will not end in hell although, to tell you the truth, he was the worst behaved of all of them. God, he did beat me. I can still feel it in my ribs, and will do until my dying day. Ouch. Yet in bed he was so strong and supple that I have no complaints. He knew how to get the best out of me, especially when he grabbed hold of my fanny*.* I don’t care how often he beat me. He knew how to kiss and make up. I loved him better than all the others. He played hard to get. He excited me. You know that we women have strange inclinations sometimes: we long most for the things we cannot have. It is perverse, isn’t it? We will cry out and beg for the one thing forbidden to us. Deny us something, and we will desire it. Offer it to us, and we will run away. We spread out our wares and put on a show of indifference. You have seen it in the market. Nobody wants things that are sold too cheaply. A throng of buyers always puts up the price. Every woman knows this, if she knows anything.

‘So I was talking about my fifth husband, Jankyn. God bless him. I took him for his looks and not for his money. He had been a student at Oxford but then he left university and took lodgings in the house of my old friend and townswoman Alison. God bless her, too. We used to gossip all the time. So she knew all my little secrets and desires better than our parish priest. I would not have told them to him in any case. But I told her everything. If my husband had pissed against the wall, she would have known about it. If he had done some dirty deed, I would have informed her straight away. I also used to whisper in the ear of my niece and another lady-friend, but I swear to you that otherwise I was very discreet. There were times when Jankyn got very hot and bothered about all this; he went red and grew short of breath. But, as I said to him, he only had himself to blame. He should not entrust his secrets to me, should he? It stands to reason.

‘So it happened that one day, in the season of Lent, I was on my way to have an intimate chat with Alison. I did this all the time – March, April, May, whatever – since there is nothing I like more than hearing all the news of the town. You should see me darting from house to house! Well, on this day, in the company of dear Alison and of her new lodger, I decided to walk into the fields. My husband was in London for the whole of Lent. Thank God for that. I was not constantly looking over my shoulder. I had the chance of eyeing up some hunk. And I would be pretty visible, too. How did I know where luck might lead me? I did not really care what places we went to, as long as there were plenty of people around. So I went to vigils and to processions, to open-air preachings and to festivals. And of course I loved going on pilgrimages. You meet a better class of person, don’t you think? Then I attended miracle plays and marriages. I always wore the same lovely red robes. There was no chance that the worms or moths would get at them, either. I put them on every day. They were gorgeous.

‘Now I will tell you what happened next. I told you that the three of us were walking in the fields. I was having such a delicious conversation with Jankyn that, before I knew what I was saying, I told him that if I were a widow-woman he could have me. He could marry me there and then. Well, I did know what I was saying in actual fact. I am not boasting, but I do have a little bit of foresight left in me. I am prudent in marital matters, as in much else. If a mouse has only one hole, then it is asking for trouble; if that hole is blocked, then goodbye mouse. So I led him to believe that I had fallen madly in love with him (that’s an old trick my mother taught me, by the way). I told him that I dreamed of him every night. I dreamed that he came into my bed and killed me, and that the sheets were drenched in blood. “But,” I said to him, “this is a lucky dream. It is a good omen. Blood signifies gold, doesn’t it?” Of course it was all a lie. I never dreamed of him at all. I always followed my mother’s advice, though, in more ways than one. Now where was I? Oh yes!

‘Fortunately my fourth husband was soon in his coffin. I wept buckets, as wives are supposed to do. Boo-hoo. I kept a sorrowful look upon my face and draped a black kerchief over my head. I followed the proper custom, in other words. But since I already had my eye on my next husband, you may believe that I mourned less in private. So my late husband was carried to the church, with all our neighbours following his bier. Jankyn was with them, too. What a great pair of legs he had! I had never seen a more handsome face in that church-yard. Even before I had entered the church, I had fallen for him. Do you blame me? He was only twenty years old. My age. No, I’m lying. I was forty by then, but I had the desires of a twenty-year-old. I had the hot blood of a colt. Venus was in my ascendant. What did I have to lose? I was fair, and rich, and well set up. And I wasn’t that old. As my husbands always told me, I had the nicest pussy in England. I have got Mars in my heart, but Venus everywhere else. Venus gives me lust and lecherousness, but Mars grants me boldness. I was born under a good sign. So I ask you this. Why was love ever considered to be a sin? I have followed all my inclinations, by virtue of the constellations. I could no more withdraw my love from a handsome young man than I could disobey the stars. I will tell you something else. I have a red birthmark on my face, just where my hood hides it, and I have another one in a more private place.

‘So God be my judge I have never been discreet. I have never been backward. I have always followed my appetites. I didn’t mind if he was short or tall, black or white – if he liked me, I was on. I didn’t care if he was rich or poor, noble or serf, as long as I had him.

‘What else is there to say? At the end of the month, Jankyn was my new husband. We had a grand wedding. I gave him all my worldly goods, inherited from the previous four husbands. That is what marriage is all about. But, God, did I regret doing it! He was hard. He never let me do what I wanted. And he did beat me. Once I accidentally tore a page out of his book, and he went for me. He bashed me around the head so much that I became deaf in one ear. I still am. Yet I was stubborn. I was a lioness. And I had a loose tongue, too. He told me not to gossip in the neighbourhood, but I paid no attention to him. I still made my visits to Alison and the other dames. So then he began to preach at me, and cite all the ancient examples. There was one old Roman called Simplicius Gallus – I think that was his name – who left his wife for ever. What was her crime? One day he saw her standing on the doorstep with her head uncovered. Then there was another Roman who left his wife because she went to a midsummer revel without his permission. Can you believe it? Of course he quoted the Bible at me, too. He would recite that passage from Ecclesiastes which forbids men from letting their wives roam abroad. Then he would tell me this in a solemn voice: “A man cannot build a house with reeds. A man cannot ride a blind horse. It is even more foolish to have a wife that longs to go on pilgrimages. Such a man deserves to be hanged.” What was I supposed to make of that? I made nothing of it. I ignored him. I despised his old sayings and proverbs. I was not going to be corrected by him. I hate anyone who tells me what my vices are. I’m sure that you all feel the same. This really made him mad, of course. But I was not going to put up with his whining.

‘Let me tell you what happened about this book. I tore a page out of it, if you remember, and he beat me around the head. As I said, I am still deaf in one ear. He read this book all the time, night and day. He said that it was written by Valerius and Theophrastus, and that it was an attack upon women. He loved it. He lapped it up. There were other books bound up in the same volume. There was some cardinal at Rome, called Saint Jerome, who had written an attack on someone called Jovinian. Don’t ask me what that was all about. Then there was a work by Tertullian, one by Chrysippus and one by Heloise who was an abbess near Paris. She was the one who ran after Abelard. I know all about her. Let me try to remember the other books. Oh yes. There was a copy of Solomon’s proverbs and a book called *Ars Amatoria* by Ovid. There they all were, collected together.

‘So he spent his time – when he wasn’t working, that is – reading and rereading these old books. He loved to pore over the stories of wicked wives. He knew more stories about them than any scholar. He was not so interested in tales of good wives, even if they came from the Bible. I know for a fact, in any case, that no priest will ever speak well of wives or even of women. Unless they are saints, of course, when they don’t really count as female. Who called the lion a savage beast? It certainly was not the lion itself. By God, if women had written the stories, instead of the monks in their cloisters, they would have made men so wicked that they would have been an accursed sex. Scholars and lovers are miles apart. Those under the sway of Mercury love study and learning, while those in the power of Venus love love itself. They love to party. That is why there is such a difference in temperament. When Venus rises, Mercury falls. When Mercury is in the ascendant, Venus is desolate. So no priest will ever praise a woman. When these pious men are old, and can no more make love than my old boot, then they will sit down and complain that women cannot keep their marriage vows. What old dolts!

‘Let me get back to the point. I was about to tell you why Jankyn beat me up for meddling with his book. One evening the master of the house, as he liked to call himself, was sitting by the fire and reading. He read out to me the story of Eve, through whose wickedness all humankind was brought into woe. Only Jesus could save us, when He purchased our redemption with His holy blood. That is clear evidence, Jankyn told me, that a woman was responsible for the fall of mankind. It is an old argument. Then he read to me the tale of how Sampson lost his hair. It was cut off by his mistress, Delilah, while he slept. As a result, he was captured and blinded by the Philistines. Then he told me the story of Hercules and Deianira, and how the shirt she wove him consumed him in flames. Jankyn was thorough. He did not forget the trouble that the two wives of Socrates caused him. And how one of them, Xantippa, had thrown piss into his face. The poor innocent man stayed very still, as if he were dead, and then just wiped his face with a cloth. All he said was – “After the thunder comes the rain.”

‘As soon as he had finished that story, he told me all about Pasiphae, queen of Crete. He thought it was an excellent example of mad lechery and bestiality. I don’t want to think about it. It was all too horrible. She must have been mad. And there was Clytemnestra, who, for the sake of her adulterous lusts, murdered her husband. He read out her history with great pleasure. He lectured me about the reason Amphiorax of Argos met his death. He knew the whole story. He was betrayed by his wife, Eriphily, who for a brooch of gold led the Greeks to the place where her husband was hiding. As a result, he died at the siege of Thebes. He was very indignant with Livia, wife of Sejanus, and with Lucia, wife of Lucretius. One killed her husband out of love, and the other out of hate. Livia poisoned her man, late one night, because he had become her enemy. Lucia, on the other hand, was so lecherous that she prepared an aphrodisiac for her husband. It was meant to ensure that he was besotted with her. But it was too powerful. He drank it and died before morning. Whatever way you look at it, the husbands come off worse. I am so sorry for them.

‘That wasn’t the end of it. Oh no. Jankyn told me about another Roman of old times, Latumyus, who complained to a friend of his that in his garden there grew a tree of sorrow. Apparently, three of his wives had hanged themselves from its branches. Out of spite, I imagine. This friend, Arrius, clapped him on the back and said, “Listen, mate, let me have a cutting from that tree. It sounds great. I’d love to have one in my garden.” Then Jankyn told me all about the wives that had killed their husbands in their beds. With the corpse lying on the floor, they would have sex in bed with another man. Other wives have driven nails into the brains of their husbands as they slept, while others have administered poison. He knew of more evil deeds than even I could imagine. And he knew more proverbs, too, than there are blades of grass or sands on the shore. “It is better,” he said, “to live with a lion or a dragon rather than a nagging woman. It is better to live on the roof than share your bed with a shrewish wife. These women are so cantankerous and contrary that they hold in contempt what their husbands hold dear.” That is what Jankyn said. You can imagine my reply. Then he told me another saying. “A woman casts off her shame when she takes off her dress.” Oh, and here’s another. “A good-looking women who has lost her virtue is like a gold ring in a sow’s nose.” Can you imagine how I felt? I was angry. I was in pain.

‘When I realized that he was going to carry on reading that book – all bloody night, if necessary – I lost it. I grabbed the book from his hands and tore three pages out of it. Then I punched him in the face so hard that he toppled back into the fire. He got up like a wild animal and knocked me down with his fist; it was a powerful blow, and I lay on the floor as if I were dead. When he saw how still I was lying he got scared and would have run away. Men are like that. But then quick as a flash I came round. “Oh false thief,” I whispered. “Have you finally killed me? Have you murdered me for the sake of my property? Oh Jankyn. Come to me. Let me kiss you before I die.”

‘That did it. He came over to me and kneeled down beside me. “Oh sweet Alison,” he said. “So help me God, I shall never strike you again! You know yourself what I have done. Forgive me, dearest. Have pity on me, I beseech you!”

‘Then I got up and hit him again. “Now we are quits,” I said. “I can die in peace. These are my last words.” They were not, of course, and eventually we made up with much sighing and crying. I had won. He gave me the reins and I took control of my house and property. I also ruled over his tongue – and over his fists. What do you think I did with that book? I made him burn it. When I had taken charge of the household he came up to me and said, “My own true wife, my Alison, do as you please for the rest of your life. Just preserve my honour and my standing.”

‘From that day forward we never had an argument. I swear to God that I became the best wife in the world. I was loyal to him, and he was true to me. I hope his soul is now at peace in a better world. Shall I tell you my story now?’

**Biholde the wordes bitwene the Somonour and the Frere**

The Friar laughed when he heard all this. ‘Now, ma dame,’ he said, ‘by God that was a long preamble to a tale!’

The Summoner was listening. ‘What do you think?’ he asked the other pilgrims. ‘A friar will always be interfering. A friar is like a fly. He will alight on any dish and any meat. What is all this about preamble or perambulation, whatever you call it? Preamble yourself. Or trot, if you like. Or gallop ahead. You are spoiling our fun.’

‘Is that all you have to say, sir Summoner?’ the Friar replied. ‘By God, before I leave you all, I will tell you a story about a summoner that will keep you in fits of laughter.’

‘Fuck you, Friar. Before we get to Sittingbourne I will have told two or three tales about your profession that will reduce you to tears. I can see that you have already lost your temper.’

Harry Bailey intervened. ‘Peace! No more squabbling. Let the woman begin her story. You two are behaving like drunks. Go on now, mistress, and tell us your tale.’

‘I am ready, Mr Bailey. That is, if the worthy Friar here will let me continue.’

‘Ma dame,’ the Friar replied. ‘Nothing would give me greater pleasure.’