



that women desire most. Beware, and guard your neck-bone from iron! And if you cannot tell it right now, I will still give you leave to go for twelve months and a day, to search out and learn an answer sufficient for this point. And before you depart, I will have security that you will yield up your body in this place."

This knight was woeful, and he sighed sorrowfully. But what! He could not do just as he pleased. And, with such a reply that God would provide for him, at last he chose to depart and come at the very end of the year; and he took his leave and went forth along his way.

He sought every house and place where he hoped to find such luck as to learn what women love most. But he could arrive at no coast where he could find two creatures agreeing together on this matter. Some said that women best love riches; some said honor; some said mirth; some, fancy clothes; some, pleasure, and to be widowed often and re-wed. Some said that our hearts are most eased when we be flattered and gratified.

They came very near the truth; a man shall best win us by flattery, I will not deny it, and we are caught by attentiveness and diligence, both great and small. And some said how we love best to be free and to do just as we wish, and that no man should reprove us for our faults, but say that we are wise and never foolish at all. For in truth there is nobody among us who will not kick if someone would claw us on a sore place, just because he tells us the truth. Try this, and he shall find it out that it is true. For though we may be full of vice within, we wish to be considered wise and clean of sin.

And some said that we have great delight to be accounted stable and trustworthy and steadfast in one purpose, and never reveal what men tell us. But that sort of talk is not worth a rake-handle, by God! We women can conceal nothing. Take witness of Midas. Would you like to hear the tale?

Ovid, among other little things, says that Midas had two donkey's ears growing upon his head under his long hair, which deformity he hid artfully from every man's sight, as best he could, so that nobody knew of it, except his wife. He loved her most and trusted her; and he asked her to tell of his disfigurement to no creature. She swore to him, "No," not even to gain all the world would she do that villainy and sin, to bring her husband so foul a name; for her own honor she would not do it.

But nevertheless she felt she should die, to hide a secret so long; it swelled so sorely about her heart, it seemed to her, that some word needed to burst from her. And since she dared tell it to no human creature, she ran down to a nearby marsh; her heart was ablaze until she arrived there.

And as a bittern bumbles in the mire, she laid her mouth down unto the water: "Betray me not, you water, with your sound," she said; "I tell it to you, and to nobody else. My husband has two long donkey's ears. Now my heart is whole and well again; now it is out. In very truth I could keep it in no longer."

By this you may see that though we wait a time, we can conceal no secret forever; it must come out. If you wish to hear the remainder of the tale, read Ovid; you can find it out there.

This knight, about whom my tale chiefly is, when he saw he could not come by it, that is to say, what women love most--the spirit in his breast was so sorrowful. But home he went, as he could not remain. The day had come when he had to turn homeward. And as he went, deep in care, it happened that he rode under the edge of a forest, where he saw twenty-four ladies and more in a dance. Eagerly he drew toward this dance, in hope of learning some piece of wisdom. But in truth, before he arrived there entirely, the dance vanished--he did not know where it went. He saw no living creature there, except a woman sitting on the grass--no one could imagine a fouler creature.

At the approach of the knight this old woman arose and said, "Sir knight, there is no path that lies this way. Tell me, by your faith, what do you seek? Per adventure it may be better for you; these old people know many things."

"My dear mother," said this knight, "in truth I am just a dead man, unless I can say what thing it is that women desire most. If you could instruct me, I would repay you well for your work."

"Pledge me your word here on my hand," she said, "that you will do the first thing that I require of you, if it should lie in your power; and before it is night I will tell it you."

"Take my pledge here," said the knight, "I agree."

"Then," she said, "I dare to boast that your life is safe; for upon my soul I will guarantee that the queen will say as I do. Show me the proudest of the whole court, who wears a kerchief or other head-dress and who dares say no to what I shall teach you. Let us go on, without further words." Then she whispered a word in his ear, and told him to be glad and have no fear.

When they had arrived at the court, this knight said he had kept his day, as he had promised, and his answer was ready. At that time many noble wives were assembled to hear his answer, and many maidens, and many widows (because they be wise); and the queen herself sat as judge. And then this knight was summoned.

Silence was commanded to every creature, and the knight was ordered to tell in public what thing mortal women most love. This knight stood not like a dumb beast, but without delay answered the question with manly voice, so that all the court heard it.

"My liege lady, over all this world" he said, "women wish to have sovereignty as well over her husband as her love, and to have mastery over him. This is your greatest desire, though you may slay me for this. Do as you wish; I am here at your will."

In all the court there was neither wife nor maiden nor widow to contradict what he replied, but all declared he was worthy to have his freedom. And at that word, the old woman, whom the knight had seen sitting on the grass, started up.

"Mercy, my sovereign lady!" she said. "Do me justice, before your court departs. I taught the knight this answer, for which he pledged me his word that he would do the first thing I should require of him, if it lay in his power. Before the court, then, I pray you, sir knight," she said, "that

you take me as your wife; for you well know that I have saved your life. If I speak falsely, say no to me, upon your faith!"

This knight answered, "Alas and alack! I know full well that this was my promise. But for the love of God, please choose another request! Take all my goods, and let my body go."

"No, then," she answered, "I curse us both. For though I may be ugly, poor, and old, I would like none of all the metal or ore that is buried under the earth or lies upon it, only that I would be your wife, and your love also."

"My love!" he said, "No, my damnation! Alas that any of my kindred should be so foully disgraced by such a match!"

But all this was for nothing. This is the conclusion, that he was constrained, and had to wed her. And he took his old wife and went home.

Now perhaps some men would say that through my negligence I take no care to tell you all the joy and all the preparations that there were at the celebration that day. To this point I shall briefly answer, and say there was no joy nor celebration at all; but only heaviness and much sorrow. For he wedded her secretly the next morning. And he was so miserable that he hid himself the rest of the day like an owl, as his wife looked so ugly.

Great was his misery when he was alone with his wife; he tossed about and turned back and forth. His old wife lay always smiling, and said, "Ah, God bless, dear husband! Does every knight act this way with his wife? Is this the way of King Arthur's household? Is every knight of his so hard to please? I am your own love and your wife also, and I have saved your life, and surely, I have never yet done you any wrong. Why do act this way on this first night? You act like a man who has lost his wit. What is my guilt? Tell me, for the love of God, and if I have the power, it shall be amended."

"Amended!" said this knight. "Alas! No, no! It cannot be amended forevermore! You are so loathly and so old, and come of so low a lineage as well, that it is small wonder that I toss and turn. I wish to God my heart would burst!"

'Is this,' she said, 'the cause of your unrest?'

'Yes, certainly, and no wonder,' he said.

"Now, sir," she replied, "I could amend all this before three days had passed, if I wish, so that you might bear yourself toward me well.

"But when you speak of such gentility as is descended from ancient wealth--so that you knights should therefore would be gentlemen of breeding--such arrogance is not worth a hen. Look who is always most virtuous, openly and secretly, and most inclines to do what gentle deeds he can; take him for the gentlest man. Christ wishes that we claim our gentility from Him, not from our ancestors' ancient wealth. For though all their heritage of our ancestors, by reason of which we

claim high rank, may descend to us, yet they cannot at all bequeath to any of us their virtuous living, which made them to be called gentle men and to bid us follow to them and do in like manner.

The wise poet of Florence, who is named Dante, speaks well on this matter. Lo, this is what Dante's says in his poetry: "Seldom does a man climb to excellence on his own slim branches, for God, from his goodness, wills that we claim or gentility from Him." For we may claim nothing from our ancestors, except for temporal things that can be injured and impaired.

"Every creature also knows this as well as I, that if gentility were planted by nature in a certain family all down the line, openly and privately, then they would never cease to do the fair duties of gentility; they could never do any base or vicious deed. Take fire and bear it into the darkest house between here and the mount of Caucasus, and let the doors be shut and leave that place. Nevertheless the fire will burn and blaze as fairly as though twenty thousand men witnessed it; on peril of my life, it will keep to its natural duty until it dies.

"Here you may well see how nobility hangs not from ancient possessions, since people do not always perform its works, as does the fire, according to its nature. For, God knows, one may often see a lord's son do vicious and shameful deeds; and he who wishes to be esteemed for his gentility because he was born of a noble house and had virtuous and noble ancestors, and yet himself will not perform the deeds of gentility nor follow after his gentle ancestor who is dead, he is not gentle, even if he is a duke or an earl; for base and sinful deeds make a commoner. For gentility then would be nothing but renown of your ancestors for their high worthiness, which is something that has nothing to do with you. Your gentility comes only from God. Then our true gentility comes from divine grace, and was in no fashion bequeathed to us with our earthly station.

"Think how noble was that Tullius Hostilius, as Valerius tells, who rose out of poverty to high nobility. Read Seneca, and Boethius as well; there you shall see expressly that he who does noble deeds is noble. And therefore, dear husband, I conclude in this way: albeit my ancestors were untutored, yet may the high God--and so I hope--grant me grace to live virtuously. Then I am noble, when I begin to live virtuously and to abandon evil.

"And you reproach me for poverty; but the high God on whom we believe chose freely to live in poverty. And surely every man, maiden, or wife, may well know that Jesus, King of Heaven, would not choose a wicked manner of living. Truly cheerful poverty is an honorable thing, so will Seneca say, and other clerks. Whoever keeps himself content with his poverty, I count as rich, even if he does not have not a shirt! He who covets is a poor creature, for he wishes to have that which is not within his power. But he who has nothing, nor covets things, is rich, albeit you count him as only a serving-lad.

Poverty is a hateful good, I suppose, a great remover from the busyness of the world, and a great teacher of wisdom to one who takes it in patience. All this is poverty, though it may seem wretched; and a possession that no creature will challenge. When a man is humbled, often poverty allows him to know his God and himself as well. It seems to me that poverty is a

magnifying glass through which he may see who his true friends are. And therefore, sir, I pray, so that I will not grieve you, scorn me no more for my poverty.

"Now, sir, you reproach me for my old age. And surely, sir, though there may be no authority in any book to tell you so, yet you honorable gentlefolk say that men should do courtesy to an old creature, and for your gentle manners call him Father. And I could find authorities to show this, I believe.

"Now you say I am old and foul: then have no fear that you will be a cuckold. For ugliness and age, upon my life, are great wardens over chastity. But nevertheless, since I know your delight, I shall fulfill your appetite.

"Choose," she said, "one of these two things: to have me foul and old until I die, and to you a true, humble wife, never in all my days displeasing you; or else to have me young and beautiful, and take your chance on how many visits there will be to your house--or perhaps to some other place--which will be for my sake. Now choose yourself which one you will have."

This knight thought hard about it and sighed deeply; but at last he spoke in this manner: "My lady and love, and my dear wife, I put myself into your wise governance. Please choose which may be the greatest pleasure and greatest honor to you and me also; I care not which of the two, for it is sufficient to me to please you."

"Then I have the mastery over you," she said, "since I may choose and govern as I wish"

"Yes, surely, wife," he said; "I believe that is for the best."

"Kiss me," she said, "we will be angered no longer. For by my faith I will be both unto you--that is to say, both beautiful, yes, and good. I pray to God that I may die mad, but I would be as good and faithful as ever a wife was since the world was new. And if I am not as beautiful to see in the morning as any lady, queen or empress, between the east and the west, do with my life and death as you will. Lift up the curtain, and look how it is."

And when the knight saw truly that she was so fair and so young, he clasped her in his two arms for joy, his heart bathed in a bath of bliss. A thousand times in a row he kissed her. And she obeyed him in all.

And thus they lived in perfect joy to the end of their lives. And may Jesus Christ send us husbands meek, young, and lusty, and grace to outlive them that we wed.

And I pray Jesus also to shorten their days that will not be ruled by their wives. And old, angry misers--may God send them a true pestilence soon!

Here ends the Wife of Bath's Tale