Book of the Duchess

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

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The Book of the Duchess

Geoffrey Chaucer

written sometime around 1370

Prologue

I have great wonder, by this lighte · how that I live, for day ne nighte · I may nat slepe wel nigh noght · I have so many an ygel thoght · purely for de-faute of slepe – As I sit here by this candle, I wonder that I’m still alive, for, day and night, I hardly get a wink of sleep. I’m so tired that I can’t concentrate properly on anything at all. My thoughts wander continually and I care nothing for the usual business of life. Joy and sorrow, it’s all one to me. It’s as though I’m completely numb, and so tormented by wild imaginings, and so distracted, that I seem constantly to be on the point of falling down in anguish.

You will agree that this is not a good state to be in. Nature doesn’t allow anything to remain alive for very long when it can’t sleep and is in continual distress. And I cannot sleep, day or night. Melancholy, the fear that I am going to die, lack of sleep and lassitude have killed my spirit and sapped my strength. I’m in such a state that I don’t know what to do.

Men might ask me: ‘Why can’t you sleep? What’s the matter?’ But they’d be wasting their breath. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I guess it must be some kind of illness that I’ve been suffering these past eight years, and I’m not getting any better. There’s only one physician who could cure me – but that’s finished. Leave it for another time. It’s no use. Let’s not speak about it. I’ll get back to what I was saying.

When I was lying awake in bed, late one evening, I sat up and asked for a book to be given to me. My servant passed me a romance, so I could while away the night by reading, for I preferred to do this than to play chess or anything like that. In this book were fables that learned men in ancient times, and other poets, had put into verse, to read and to think about, in the days when men worshipped nature. This book spoke of such things, and of the lives of kings and queens, and other trivialities, but amongst all this I came across a wonderful story. This is the tale:

There was a king called Ceyx who had a wife who could not be surpassed by any living creature. Her name was Alcyone. One day, not long after they were married, this king decided to journey overseas, and to get quickly to the point, while he was in his ship, such a storm blew up that it splintered the mast, broke the vessel and drowned them all. The story says that the ship vanished without trace, and this is how king Ceyx lost his life.

Now, Alcyone, who had remained at home, began to wonder why her husband didn’t return. When he’d been away for quite a long while, she began to worry, became increasingly sure that something was wrong and started to grieve. Soon, she became so sad that it is pitiful to have to describe the sorrowful life that this noble lady now led. Alas! She loved her husband dearly.
Alcyone sent messengers east and west to look for her husband, but they came back with no news at all. ‘Alas, that I was born!’ she cried. ‘Has my lord been killed? If so, I shall never eat again. I vow to my god here that no bread shall pass my lips until I hear word of my love.’ She became so distressed that truly, when I first read about her, I became quite upset all the next day for thinking about it.

When she’d received no word of her husband, and no one could find any sign of him, she would faint and cry: ‘Alas!’ Nearly mad with grief, she could think of only one recourse: she fell to her knees and, weeping pitifully, cried to Juno, her goddess: ‘Oh mercy, dear, sweet lady! Help me out of this distress! Let me see my lord soon, by your grace, or let me learn what has become of him and how he is, and then I’ll make a sacrifice to you and become wholly yours, with all my goodwill, body, heart and everything. And if you cannot do this, at least, sweet lady, give me the grace to sleep and to dream something that will indicate to me whether my husband is alive or dead.’

Having prayed thus, one day, she hung her head and collapsed to the ground in a faint, where she lay as cold as a stone. Her women ran to her aid and carried her naked to her bed where, for sorrow, and for sheer exhaustion through lack of sleep, she fell quickly into a deep slumber. And this was all because of Juno, who had heard her prayers and her request. Straight away, Juno called her messenger, and he dutifully approached.

‘Go at once to Morpheus, the god of sleep,’ she instructed. ‘You know who he is – listen carefully – ask him, on my behalf, to go quickly into the great sea and find the body of king Ceyx, which will be devoid of all colour, pale and lifeless. Ask him to creep into this body and send it to Alcyone, who lies sleeping, so that she can see that her husband has been drowned. Let the body speak to her as it did when it was alive. Go now, as quickly as you can.’

This messenger took his leave and went on his way, without stopping, until he came to a dark valley that stands between two rocks, where corn has never grown, nor any grass, nor tree, nor anything else at all. There is nothing in this place, neither beast nor man, except for a few springs issuing from the cliffs that make a deadly sound that will drive a man to sleep.

The springs ran past a cave beneath a rock in the middle of the valley and here, deep in this cave, the gods Morpheus, Eclymaste and all his brothers were lying – who slept, and did no other work. The cave was as dark as the pit of hell, and they had all the leisure in the world to gather together to compete with each other over who was the best at sleeping. Some hung their chin against their chest as they slept against the cave wall, others lay naked in their beds and slept all day. This messenger came flying in and cried: ‘Hoi! Awake at once!’

It was to no avail. They didn’t hear him. ‘Hoi! Awake at once!’ he cried again. ‘Who’s lying here?’ and he blew his horn into their ears and shouted: ‘Wake up! Wake up!’

The god of sleep opened one eye and said: ‘Who is making all this noise?’

‘It is I,’ cried the messenger. ‘Juno commands you –’ and then he explained what he’d been told to say, as you’ve already heard, so I won’t go through it all again. When he had finished, he left.

At once, Morpheus, this god of sleep, stretched and woke, and went off to do what the messenger had asked him to do. He took up the drowned body of king Ceyx and carried it to Alcyone as she lay sleep-
ing. It was past midnight, but a long while before dawn, and he stood at the foot of her bed, calling her by name and said: ‘My sweet wife. Awake! Stop all this sorrow. It will do you no good. I’m dead, my dear. You will never see me again. But sweetheart, see that you bury my body, which will shortly be washed up on the beach. Farewell, my sweet, my world’s bliss. I pray that God may lessen your sorrow. Our happiness lasted for too short a time.’

Alcyone woke with a start, looked to where the voice was coming from but saw nothing. ‘Alas! For sorrow!’ she cried, and she was dead within three days.

I cannot tell you the other things that this grief-stricken lady said, it would take too long to do so. I will stick to my point, because the reason I’ve related this story of Ceyx and Alcyone to you is because I dare say that I’d be dead and buried if I hadn’t read and taken heed of this tale, and I’ll tell you why: because I couldn’t sleep at all until I’d learned of the drowned king Ceyx and of the gods of sleeping, but when I’d read this tale thoroughly and absorbed every part of it, I thought it a wonder if it was true, for I had never before heard of any gods who could make men sleep and wake. I knew of only one God. And as something of a joke – although I was in no mood for fooling around – I said:

‘Rather than die for lack of sleep, I shall give this Morpheus the best gift that he’s ever received – or his goddess, Dame Juno, or someone else, I don’t know who, if they can make me sleep and have some rest – and I’ll do it right now, with great willingness, if he’ll allow me to sleep a little. I’ll give him a feather bed of white dove down, quilted with gold thread and lined in exotic black satin, with pillows and pillowcases of the softest cloth. He’ll sleep soundly in it and won’t have to toss and turn at all! And I’ll give him everything needed to furnish a private chamber, and decorate all his halls in gold leaf and give him a large suite of matching tapestries to hang in them, if I can find out where his cave is and if he could make me sleep soon, as the goddess did to Alcyone. This god Morpheus shall receive more wealth from me than he’s ever had before. And to Juno, his goddess, I shall proffer such gifts that she’ll consider herself well recompensed…’

I had scarcely finished saying this when suddenly, I have no idea how, but I felt so sleepy that my head fell into my book and straight away I began to dream. And this dream was so wonderful that I doubt that the man has ever been born who could interpret it correctly or explain it any better than the least of us – not even Joseph, I swear, who correctly interpreted the Pharaoh’s dream when he was in Egypt, or Macrobius, who wrote about the marvellous vision that Scipio received from his ancestor Scipio Africanus as he slept in Carthage – I’m sure that none of them could.

Here it is:

**The Dream**

I imagined that it was May and that the day was dawning. I lay naked in my bed, and I was awake, for numerous small birds had woken me up with their song. They were all perched upon the tiles of the roof above my ceiling, and all of them were fully occupied with the serious business of giving clear expression to their individual songs, some of which were high, some low, but all in such wonderful harmony that no man can ever have heard its like before. In all honesty, such a sweet sound can never have
been heard outside of heaven. The sound was so lovely that only the city of Tunes can ever have experienced such a thing before! My chamber began to resonate with a beautiful and contrapuntal melody, for the birds were giving it everything, and all of them were right on the note and eager to experiment with the most delightful harmony, with no concern for their throats!

My room was very well decorated, every window had glass in it, perfectly formed without a single broken pane anywhere – it was a joy to behold – and the entire story of the fall of Troy was depicted in this glass: of Hector and king Priam, Achilles and Paris, and also the stories of Medea and Jason, of Lavinia of Rome, and of Elaine of Astolat. All the walls were decorated in wonderful colours as well and they had written upon them the whole text of the *Romance of the Rose*. Through my east-facing windows the sun shone through the glass onto my bed with beams of gold, for the sky was clear, bright and blue and the air was very comfortable, neither too hot nor too cold. There was not a cloud in the sky.

As I lay there, I heard a loud blast from a hunting horn as a huntsman sought to test how shrill the sound from it was going to be. I heard the sound of men, horses and dogs coming and going, and all the words that I could make out were about hunting, how they would do their utmost to kill the deer and how it had hidden itself in the thickest part of the forest and I know not what. But when I understood that they were all going hunting, I was delighted and jumped out of bed. I got onto my horse and didn’t stop until I had caught up with them, a great throng of huntsmen and foresters, with many packs of hounds in reserve, dogs on leashes, all hurrying towards the forest, and me amongst them. At last I spoke to a man who was holding a hound on a leash and asked: ‘Tell me my friend, who’s hunting here?’

‘Sir, the emperor Octavian,’ he replied. ‘He’s hereabouts, somewhere.

‘In God’s name, then, let’s get cracking!’ I cried, and sped away.

When we came to the edge of the forest, every man did as he had been trained to do. The master huntsman blew three long notes on his horn as the hounds were unleashed, and it was not long before the stag was located and a great noise was raised in pursuit. The chase went on for a long time, back and forth, until at last the deer foiled the hounds. It had found a way of escape and given us the slip. The dogs lost the scent and came to a standstill. Immediately, the master huntsman blew the signal for us all to regroup.

I left the tree that I’d been posted at and, as I walked along, I encountered a young dog, one of those who had been follow-
ing the deer. It came up to me, went down on its front legs in a very friendly way, as though it knew me, held down its head, pricked up its ears and laid its coat flat as though waiting for a pat. But when I approached it, it darted off again.

I followed this dog down a grassy path that was thick with long grass and flowers and soft underfoot, a path that was very little used it seemed, and both Flora and Zephyras – those two who make the flowers grow – must have made it their home, for it seemed as though the Earth here had strived to be more beautiful even than heaven itself, and to have more flowers than there are stars in the sky – seven times more! – and had completely forgotten the poverty of Winter’s icy breath, his cold and his suffering. All the trees were leafy green, nourished by the sweet dew, and it is no use asking me how many trees there were, but whether they were growing in clumps and thickets I can tell you that every tree stood about ten or twelve feet from its neighbours, huge trees, very sturdy, each a hundred or a hundred and fifty feet high with no sticks or branches poking out lower down but with smooth trunks right up to the branches of a broad canopy, where the boughs met with not an inch to spare, leaving the ground below in perfect shade.

Deer were all around me, fawns and hinds, bucks and does, roe deer everywhere, and up in the trees, lots of squirrels sitting on their haunches and eating, feasting on what squirrels like to feast upon. Before long it was so full of animals that even if Argus – who had a hundred eyes and was not slow at counting! – tried to reckon it all up with his ten fingers on an abacus – for everything is counted in tens by those who know what they’re doing – he would fail to count up properly all the wonderful things that I dreamed in my dream. But these animals were moving through the forest very quickly, and shortly I became aware of a man clothed in black, sitting on the ground with his back against a huge oak tree.

‘Lord!’ I thought. ‘Who’s this? And what’s the matter with him, sitting here all alone like this?’

I approached this man and saw that he was a knight. He was well-proportioned, strong and good-looking, his beard not yet full, about twenty four years of age and sitting upright with his back against the oak. I skirted around and approached him from behind. He seemed not to be aware of me, even when I came up very close to him, for he was staring at the ground. I stood as still as I could, and listened.

With a voice that betrayed great sorrow, he was reciting to himself ten or twelve verses of a poem, a complaint or a lament, and one of the most pitiful and tear-inducing that I’ve ever heard. In all honesty, it’s a wonder that nature allows any creature to experience such grief and sorrow and not be dead! In a pitiful voice and with a pale face, he recited the verses of this song, just the words, without singing them. ‘I have such great sorrow that joy is a stranger to me,’ he intoned, ‘now that my dear, shining lady, whom I loved with all my might, has been taken from me. Alas! Oh death! What’s wrong with you, that you haven’t take me when you’ve taken my sweet lady, who was so young, so generous and so beautiful, as everybody knows. In goodness she had no equal!’

When he had finished this complaint to God, his grief-stricken heart began to fail him and his spirit seemed to die. His anxious blood fled from his face down to his heart in an attempt to warm it, I think, for it knew that his heart was in trouble. It wanted to help and to try to cheer his heart up, for it’s a principal organ of the body; but as a consequence, his pallor became even more pronounced, for there was no blood left in any of his extremities.

When I saw how upset he was, I went and stood right in front of him and greeted him. He made no acknowledgement of my presence, but seemed deep in argument with himself, disputing and question-
ing his own thoughts. His sorrow seemed unbearable to him, and lay so cold upon his heart that he had no inkling even that I was there. He had well nigh lost his mind through sorrow, despite the possibility that Pan, whom men call the god of nature, might be angry because of this.

At last, he became aware of me. I swept back my hood and gave him my very best greeting.

In a soft voice, and with great courtesy, he replied: ‘Please don’t be angry, I had no idea you were there.’

‘That’s not a problem,’ I replied, graciously. ‘I’m sorry to have disturbed you, or to have interrupted your thoughts. Please forgive me if I have.’

‘It is easy to forgive you, since you have done nothing wrong.’

Lo! How this knight sounded like someone else that I know! Courtesy came so easily to him, with nothing forced or insincere, and I found him so approachable and intelligent, despite his obviously debilitating sorrow, that I wanted to prolong our conversation in order to learn a little more about him and to discover why he was so desperately sad.

‘Sir,’ I said, ‘the chase is finished. I think the deer has escaped. The hunters have lost him completely.’

‘No matter,’ he replied. ‘It doesn’t concern me.’

‘By Our Lord, I believe you! I can see it in your face. But sir, would you like to know this? I think that if you were to speak to me a little about the great sorrow that is obviously weighing you down, I may be able to help, if God will allow it. Let me try, and we can see. I promise that I’ll do the best I can to help you. Explain to me why you are so sad, for just by doing so, some good may come of it. It may give some comfort to your ailing heart.’

He looked askance at me, as though to say: ‘You really think so?’

‘Thank you, my friend,’ he said. ‘I’m grateful to you for offering, but I don’t think it will be of any use. No one can heal the affliction that’s making me so pale and taking away all my judgement. Nothing can take this grief away, not even the wisdom and remedies of Ovid, nor Orpheus, the god of melody, nor even the cunning and wit of the skilful Daedalus. No physician could heal me, not even Hypocrites or Galen of Pergamon. I wish that I’d never been born. I lament bitterly that I have to live for another twelve hours. If any man wants to see if his heart is capable of any pity, let him look at me and judge. I am someone whom death has bereft of everything that has ever given joy to a man. I am the most miserable wretch alive. I hate the days and the nights. My interests no longer interest me. My life has become a burden to me and nothing gives me pleasure. Death is so much my enemy that, although I want to die, it will not let me do so. When I chase after it, it flees away. I’d have it, but it won’t have me! This is my agony, my dire agony, to be always dying and not be dead!

‘Sisyphus, who lies in hell, couldn’t complain that his sorrows were any greater than this! If any man knew the full extent of my grief, unless he had pity for the pain that I’m in he must have a heart of stone. Anyone who sees me first thing in the morning can rightly say that he has seen Sorrow itself. I am Sorrow. Sorrow is! Alas! My carefree song is now a dirge, my laughter is turned to weeping, my joy has become an unbearable weight. Where I used to rest, I engage now in a weary struggle, my good is harm, my happiness is agony, my play is a rage and my delight is sorrow. My health is a sickness, my security an anxiety, my light is darkness and my wit is folly. My day is night, my love is hate, my sleep is wakefulness and I fast at every feast.

‘I act like a fool and cannot do anything right, whether in the palace, the courtroom or on the battlefield. Alas! How can anything be worse than this? My courage has turned to shame. Fortune – that treacherous and untrustworthy vixen who promises a clear run and then goes lame on you, who turns a beautiful face in your direction only to scowl and curse, kind and merciless in the same breath, laughing at whomsoever she chooses to – she has played a game with me all this time. She’s the Gorgon’s
head in a sack, a lake of excrement made to seem firm underfoot by the pretty flowers strewn over it. Her greatest claim to fame is unreliability, and lying. This is what she is: faithless, untrustworthy, immoderate and unpredictable. One eye laughs while the other weeps. That which rises up, she makes fall. She is like a scorpion, that deceitful creature who’s jolly head seems friendly enough and full of fun while his tail is poised to sting you – and so will she. She’s the duplicitous benefactor who smiles at you with a knife behind her back. She turns her faithless wheel around, for there’s no stability in her – now you’re eating comfortably at the table, now roasting by the fire. She’s like a conjurer who makes you see things that aren’t really there. She’s a thief!

‘What has she done, do you think? I’ll tell you, by God! She began a game of chess with me, and her deceitful pieces stole up on mine and took my queen. When I saw that my queen had been taken, alas! I couldn’t play any more! I could only say: ‘Farewell, my sweet! Farewell to everything.’ Fortune said: ‘Check,’ And then: ‘Check mate!’ With a pawn, alas! She’s more devious to play chess with than Athalus of Pergamon, who first devised the game. I wish to God that once or twice I might have been able to use the tactics and stratagems of Pythagoras against her, for then I would have played a better game and kept my queen perhaps.

‘But then, to what purpose? What value would there have been in it? Experience tells me that it’s a forlorn hope. Fortune has so many tricks up her sleeve that there are few, indeed, who can pull a fast one on her. I can’t blame her for it. I’d have done the same, if I was her. I can’t really complain, I suppose. I’ll say this: if I was God and able to do anything I wanted to, when she took my queen, I would have done exactly the same in her position, for, may God give me comfort, but she took the very best of my pieces. But by losing this piece I have lost all my happiness.

‘Alas, that I was born! I truly believe that whatever I do now, and however hard I try, I will never be happy again.

‘So what’s to be done? By Our Lord, it is to die soon! Nothing else matters. There is no planet in the heavens, no element in the air, nor on the Earth, whose horoscope does not predict for me anything other than tears and loneliness. When I do an audit of all my joys and sorrows, I see the balance sheet so loaded against me that there is no joy that can hope to lift me from this depression. I have lost all contentment and can feel no pleasure, and I am well able to say that there is nothing left.’

When I had listened to all this, I was so upset that I could barely remain on my feet.

‘Ah, good sir,’ I said. ‘Don’t say this. Have regard for yourself and for your nature, that made you what you are. Remember Socrates, who didn’t give three straws for anything that Fortune could throw at him.’

‘I can’t do it,’ he replied.

‘Why not, good sir, by God?’ I asked. ‘Don’t say this. Even if you had lost twelve queens, if you killed yourself because of it, you’d be damned for self-murder, just as Medea was when she killed her children because of Jason, and Phyllis, who hanged herself for Demophon when he failed to show up when he said he would. Queen Dido of Carthage slew herself when Aeneas proved to be false. What a stupid thing to do! Echo died because Narcissus wouldn’t love her, and many others have foolishly killed themselves as well. Sampson died for Delilah when he brought the temple down upon himself. But nobody to my knowledge has ever killed themselves over a chess piece!’
‘I beg your pardon? No, you don’t understand. I’ve lost more than just a chess piece.’

‘Then what do you mean, good sir? Tell me the how and the why of it. How is it that you have abandoned all hope of ever being happy again?’

‘I will gladly tell you. Come and sit down. But I’ll tell you on condition that you listen to me very carefully and that you do your best to understand.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Will you swear it.’

‘Gladly.’

‘But do you agree to it?’

‘Yes, I do, with all my heart, may God save me. I’ll listen to you as attentively as I can.’

‘In God’s name, then. Sir, since I first became aware, in my youth, or had any comprehension, of what love was, or first had any understanding of it, I’ve been his follower and paid my dues in order to love with all my being and to willingly become his servant, with goodwill, body, heart and all. I gave this to him, as to my lord, and did homage to him and prayed to him devoutly, that he should employ my heart so that it might do what is pleasing to him, and worshipful to my dear lady. This was long before my heart was truly set anywhere, I was very young and I followed him without really knowing why. I suppose it just came naturally to me – I was like a white wall or a sheet of paper that is ready to take whatever is painted or drawn upon it, whatever the design might be.

‘From that time onwards, I kept love uppermost in my thoughts, although I would have been able to set my mind to anything I wanted to and to learn it as well, or better. But I chose love as my primary concern. I embraced it at so young an age that my courage had not yet been tested in any way. I was naïve at that time, and Youth, my mistress, kept me in idleness, for I was not able to do anything much, I was not capable of any sustained effort and could not keep my mind focused on anything for very long. Everything I knew was good to me, and that was how it was.

‘It happened one day that I came into a place where there was an array of the most stunningly beautiful ladies that a man can ever have seen. Shall I claim that it was anything other than Fortune who brought me there? No, it was Fortune, who is often deceitful, untrustworthy and perverse, and I wish to God that I could think of worse names to call her, for now she tortures me, and I shall tell you why.

‘Amongst these ladies was one who was not like any of the rest. I can swear, without doubt, that as the summer sun is brighter than any star or planet in the sky, then for all the world, she surpassed the others in beauty by just as much. By God and his twelve apostles, what more can I say? She had a certain confidence about her, she held herself with noble poise and carried herself with elegance. Love, who had heard my prayer, quickly got me into his sights and soon I could only gaze at her in adoration. Her eyes, I believe, so clearly saw what was in my heart that I was filled with the thought that I would rather serve her than any other woman, in any way that I could, even if I got nothing back in return. And I was right to do so.

‘She danced so elegantly, spoke so eloquently, sang so beautifully, laughed and joked in such a feminine
way and cast such meaningful glances, and with such friendship, that certainly, I believe that such a
marvellous treasure can never have been seen before, and never will be again. Every hair upon her head
was the colour of pure gold. And what beautiful eyes! Refined, friendly, happy or serious, of a pleas-
ing shape, not set too wide apart, and sincere; she didn't look askance at all or try to be coy, but took
in everything she saw with compassion and mercy – the man who couldn't see this was a fool – and it
was spontaneous and genuine. The goddess Dame Nature had formed her eyes in such a way that even
when she was laughing and joking, she never looked wildly about or in any way foolishly, even in play.
Always, I thought her eyes said: ‘By God, I've forgotten all my anger at you already.’

‘Idlers and wasters had much to fear from her, though. She was neither too serious nor too light-
hearted, but well able to put someone down with a look and took pleasure from doing so, for she often
had no idea how much these people admired her – although whether she knew that they'd be hurt by
her disapproval or not, it didn't matter a straw to her. A man who loafed about indoors, or followed her
around like a puppy, was no nearer to winning her love than a man in India! But good folk she loved as
much as a man does his brother, and she was very generous with her friendship to these people, where
it would make a difference.

‘And what a beautiful face she had! Alas! It distresses me that I can't find the words to describe her to
you, but my English is just not up to it. I don't have that way with words. I can't give enough detail
for you to picture her great beauty, but I can tell you this much: she had a healthy complexion and
seemed more beautiful with every day that passed. She was one of the prettiest women alive. Nature
had fashioned her face with such enthusiasm that it was her most cherished creation, the thing that
gave Nature the greatest pride and it was the foremost example of her work. However dark it is, I can
picture her face clearly in my mind's eye, even now.

‘If all those who have ever lived were still alive, not one of them would be able to find any sign of wick-
edness in her face. She was calm, modest and trustworthy, with a lovely way of speaking, that physician
to my soul. So friendly and so well-spoken, so rational and sensible, and so approachable that I dare
swear by the Holy Cross that no one has ever been found to be more fluent and eloquent, nor more
able to solve a problem or to settle an argument, more honest nor less prone to saying hurtful things,
than she. I dare swear by the Mass, even though the Pope was to sing it himself, that no man or woman
was ever harmed by her tongue. There was no slander in her at all, nor any propensity to flatter either,
but her word was as firm a commitment as any handshake between men. She was not one to take pleas-
ure in reminding people of their faults, either. Everybody knew this.

‘Her neck was perfect, white, smooth, straight and unblemished, with every bone in its proper place
and no depressions behind her collarbone; in fact, she was so well-built that her collarbone was not
evident at all. Her throat, as I picture it now, seemed like a tower of ivory, of just the right proportions.
Good, fair White she was called – that was my lady's name. Blanche. She was fair and bright and the
name suited her well. She had beautiful shoulders, a long body, her arms were not at all skinny but
well-fleshed, and she had white hands and red nails, round breasts, a straight back and broad hips.

‘Blanche had such a good sense of humour that, when she wanted to be, she was like a brightly burning
torch that illuminated everybody and lit them up. They all drew their warmth from her. Her etiquette
and courtesy were faultless. Everyone, if he wanted to, could learn from her, if he had eyes in his head.
She was the life and soul of any gathering and I would swear that if she was one among ten thousand
she would be the principal focus of the assembly, or one of them at the very least. Even if they were
all standing in a line, men's eyes were on her, and wherever men were congregated, if she was absent,
there was something tangibly missing, like a crown without its gemstones. Truly, she was to my eye the
Phoenix of Arabia, for there is only ever a single one of these birds living, and I never saw anyone to
compare with Blanche.

‘In all honesty, as far as virtue goes, she had as much graciousness as Esther had in the Bible, and more,
if more were possible. She had an intelligence that was so broad and all-encompassing, and so directed
towards the good, that her thoughts were entirely upon the well-being and happiness of others. I have never met anyone less inclined towards malice.

I’m not saying that she didn’t know what harmful things were, of course, otherwise she couldn’t have avoided them, could she? But as far as trustworthiness went, she had so much of it – I would swear to this – that Truth himself chose her, above all others, as his principal exemplar. He lived in her. She was the most steadfast and reliable, the most even-tempered and patient person I’ve ever known. And she understood every argument, so it follows that she always knew the right thing to do, and she was always happy to do it.

‘She loved doing the right thing, she refused to harm anybody and no one could get her into a compromising position because she was so concerned for her own good reputation. She wouldn’t try to lead anyone on, or give them the wrong idea, or try to put them down with unkind remarks – unless they were coming on too strongly, or threatening her – and wouldn’t hold a would-be lover on tender-hooks by ambiguous looks and phrases and didn’t send men on ridiculous quests to Turkey or to Prussia, Egypt, the Black Sea and onwards into central Asia, or send a man on pilgrimage to the Dead Sea, to return by way of the Syrian desert, and say to him: ‘Sir, make sure that you’re away for a long enough time to fully profit from your adventure, to my honour, before I see you again.’ She didn’t use any of these tricks.

‘But why am I saying all this? I’m saying it because this was the woman upon whom I laid all my love. Without any doubt, she was – that sweet wife! – my very reason for being, my fortune, my health and all my joy, my contentment and my life. I was hers, completely.’

‘By Our Lord, I believe you,’ I said. ‘And it is perfectly clear that your love was well targeted. I don’t see how you could have done any better.’

‘I certainly couldn’t have!’ he replied.

‘I’m sure of it,’ I said.

‘You must believe it.’

‘I do, sir. I truly believe that you imagined her to be the best and the fairest to behold, and that anyone looking at her through your eyes would have said the same.’

‘Through my eyes? No! Everybody who saw her said the same, and swore that it was so. But even if they hadn’t, I would have loved my generous lady best of all, even if I’d had the good looks of Alcibiades, the strength of Hercules and the worthiness of Alexander the Great, and therefore had the pick of anybody I chose – and all the wealth that was in Babylon, Carthage or Macedonia, Rome or Nineveh, the skill and stamina on the battlefield that Hector had – whom Achilles killed at Troy, and who was then himself killed in a temple, for both he and Antilochus were killed for the love of Polyxena, or so says Dares Phrygius – and the wisdom of Minerva. I would have loved her just the same if I had had all this. I was compelled to.

‘Compelled? No! I’m talking rubbish now. Not ‘compelled’. I was more than willing. I loved her of my own free will. Blanche was the fairest and the best, no question. She was as good as Odysseus’s wife Penelope, or the noble Lucretia, whom the Roman historian Livy praised to the rafters. She was their
equal – however authentic their stories might be – and every bit as faithful as they were.

‘I’ve already told you how I first set eyes on her. I was very young, to tell the truth, and still had a lot to learn. My heart was yearning with a desire to love, for it was the pinnacle of achievement as I saw it. So, as well as I was able to – given how young and inexperienced I was – I summoned all my wit and energy to love her as much as I could, to honour her and to serve her to the best of my ability, without deceit or laziness. I was always overjoyed to see her. It did me so much good if I saw her first thing in the morning that all my sorrows vanished and my joy lasted until evening. All my cares evaporated away for the rest of the day.

‘I thought that nothing could spoil my happiness. She sits there still, like this, in my heart, so that, I swear, I wouldn’t want my lady to leave my thoughts for anything in the world. Truly, I wouldn’t.’

‘It sounds as though you’ve made a confession to me without any repentance.’

‘Repentance? Certainly not! Why should I? If I were to repent the love that I felt, I would be worse than that treacherous Ahitophel in the Bible, who deserted King David, or Antenor, the man who betrayed Troy, or the faithless Ganelon, who betrayed king Charlemagne to the Muslims, and which led to the deaths of Roland and Olivier de Vienne. No! While breath remains in my body, I shall never forget her.’

‘Very well, good sir,’ I said. ‘You’ve already told me how you first saw her, so there’s no need to go over it all again, but tell me what you said the first time you actually spoke to her – please, I beg you, do this for me – and how she first came to be aware that you loved her, and tell me also – I know what you’ve already said – but tell me what it is that you have lost.’

‘Yes, but you don’t know what you’re saying. I’ve lost more than you think.’

‘Then what loss is that, sir? Doesn’t she love you any more? Is that it? Or have you done something wrong, something that has caused her to leave you? Is this it? For God’s love, tell me.’

‘I’ve told you already! I truly loved her. But she had no idea that this was the case, not for a long while. Believe me. I dared not tell her how I felt, not for all the world. I hadn’t the slightest intention of risking her anger. She’d captured my heart, and from that there is no escape.

‘So to keep me from idleness, I composed songs to the best of my ability, and I would often sing them at the top of my voice. I worked hard at this, although I was not as talented as Lamech’s son Tubal in the Bible, who first discovered the art of song while his brother was bringing his hammer up and down against the anvil, although the Greeks insist that it was Pythagoras who first discovered songs – Aurora tells us this – but no matter. I was always composing songs about how I felt, because it eased the pain a little to do so. Lo! This was the first one that I wrote, and I doubt it was one of my worst: ‘Lord, it makes my heart sing when I think about that sweet person, and I wish to God that she might come to accept me as her knight – my lady who is so beautiful.’ That was the first song that I wrote.

‘One day, I reflected upon the sorrow and anguish that I felt because of Blanche, and how I couldn’t find the courage to tell her, and I thought: ‘Alas! What can I do? She has no idea how I feel. If I don’t tell her quickly, I will die, but if I do tell her, in all honesty, I’m terrified that she’ll be angry. What can I do?’ I was in such a turmoil that I thought my heart would burst in two!
‘But at last I considered how unlikely it was that a creature who had been formed by nature to be so beautiful and virtuous would be lacking in all mercy, so in the hope of this I explained to her how I felt, things which I wouldn’t have told to anybody, and believe me, I needed to or I would have died. I can’t remember how I began – I can’t remember much of what I said at all, to be honest – but the moment I chose, so help me God, felt as ill-fated as the day when Egypt received the ten plagues. I stumbled over my words, desperate to say the right thing. I stuttered anxiously out of pure fear, my voice shook as it dropped to a whisper and I forgot what I wanted to say, my face went pale and then I blushed bright red. I was terrified. I hung my head and dared not look at her at all. Any vestige of wit and elegance that I might have possessed completely deserted me. I said: ‘Mercy!’ and nothing more. I was in deadly earnest and I hated myself for being so foolish.

‘But at last I was able to gather my thoughts, and I told her, in so many words, that I wanted her to be my lady, with all my heart – this was the essence of what I said. I swore that I meant every word of it and begged her to be mine, and I swore that I would be faithful to her and that my love for her would never wane. I swore that I would never look at another lady and would always hold her honour in the highest regard and do my utmost to defend it, and I promised all this ‘because you are all that matters to me,’ I told her. ‘I will never be untrue to you, not for anything.’

‘When I’d finished, God knows, it didn’t seem to me as though she’d taken any account of what I’d said at all! In a nutshell, this is what she said to me in reply – I can’t remember it word for word, but this was the gist of it – she said: ‘No.’

‘Alas, the pain I suffered all that day, and the sorrow! Truly, not even Cassandra, who so bitterly lamented the fall of Troy and the defeat of the land of Ilium, could have suffered as much anguish as I did. I couldn’t think of anything more to say. I just stole away, and so I remained, for a long while. I had no need to go any further than the bolster at the top of my bed to find sorrow. It was ready waiting for me every morning, and remained like this for a long time, I was so in love.

‘The next year, I decided to try again. I told Blanche how much I still loved her, and the sorrow that I was in because of her, and she acknowledged that I was genuine and that I wished her nothing but good, and accepted how distressed I would be to see her shamed and how I wanted above all things that she should keep her honour, and how occupied I was in serving her and what a shame it would be for me to die, since I wished her no harm; and when my lady understood all this, she offered me the noble gift of her mercy, unreservedly. But only on the understanding that her honour should be maintained, which I absolutely agreed to, by all means, I meant nothing else.

‘So she gave me a ring. There’s no need to ask if my heart leapt for joy! I was as delighted as if I’d been raised from the dead back into life! I was the happiest man alive, and the most contented.

We were so happy in each other’s company that our joy always seemed fresh and new. Our hearts were so alike that we never disagreed over anything important, not once. Honestly, that sweet and adorable creature would always forgive me, when I was in the wrong and she in the right, and so graciously that, throughout all my youthful years, whatever happened, she looked after me. We shared everything, our joys and our sorrows, and the same things made us happy and the same things angered us. We were a couple in true accord and there was no conflict, and we lived like this for many years, so happily that I cannot describe it.’

‘Sir,’ I asked, ‘where is she now?’

‘Now?’ he asked. He came to a sudden stop and looked as dead as a stone. ‘Alas!’ he exclaimed, sud-
denly. 'This is the thing that I told you about earlier. Do you remember when I said: 'You don't understand. I've lost more than you think.' God knows, alas! It's her! I've lost her!'

'Alas, sir! How? What are you saying? That she is dead?'

'No! Yes!'

'Yes.'

'Then this is your loss? By God, that is a great pity.'

The huntsmen set off for home. There was nothing more to do, the deer had escaped, the hunt was finished for the day.

I thought that this king rode quickly home to a nearby castle, which was not a great distance away, a castle with long, white walls – by saint John! – on a hill occupied by other fine buildings, so I dreamed. And in this castle I dreamed that there was a bell, which began ringing as though it was striking twelve o'clock...

…I awoke and found myself lying in bed, with the book about Alcyone and king Ceyx, and the gods of sleeping, still in my hands.

‘That was such a curious dream,’ I thought, ‘I'll try to put it all down into verse, as best I can. I'll begin this task right away.’

That was my dream. And now it is done.