

CANTERBURY TALES

THE LAWYER'S TALE

by Geoffrey Chaucer

In Syria, once, there dwelt a company
Of traders rich, all sober men and true,
That far abroad did send their spicery,
And cloth of gold, and satins rich in hue;
Their wares were all so excellent and new
That everyone was eager to exchange
With them, and sell them divers things and strange,
It came to pass, the masters of this sort
Decided that to Rome they all would wend,
Were it for business or for only sport;
No other message would they thither send,
But went themselves to Rome; this is the end.
And there they found an inn and took their rest
As seemed to their advantage suited best.
Sojourned have now these merchants in that town
A certain time, as fell to their pleasure.
And so it happened that the high renown
Of th' emperor's daughter, called the fair Constance.
Reported was, with every circumstance,
Unto these Syrian merchants, in such wise,
From day to day, as I will now apprise.
This was the common voice of every man:
"Our emperor of Rome, God save and see,
A daughter has that since the world began.
To reckon as well her goodness as beauty,
Was never such another as is she;
I pray that God her fame will keep, serene,
And would she were of all Europe the queen.
"In her is beauty high, and without pride;
Youth, without crudity or levity;
In an endeavours, virtue is her guide;
Meekness in her has humbled tyranny;
She is the mirror of all courtesy;
Her heart's a very shrine of holiness;
Her hand is freedom's agent for largess."
And all this voice said truth, as God is true.
But to our story let us turn again.
These merchants all have freighted ships anew,
And when they'd seen the lovely maid, they fain
Would seek their Syrian homes with all their train,
To do their business as they'd done yore,
And live in weal; I cannot tell you more.
Now so it was, these merchants stood in grace
Of Syria's sultan; and so wise was he

That when they came from any foreign place
He would, of his benignant courtesy,
Make them good cheer, inquiring earnestly
For news of sundry realms, to learn, by word,
The wonders that they might have seen and heard.
Among some other things, especially
These merchants told him tales of fair Constance;
From such nobility, told of earnestly,
This sultan caught a dream of great pleasance,
And she so figured in his remembrance
That all his wish and all his busy care
Were, throughout life, to love that lady fair.
Now peradventure, in that mighty book
Which men call heaven, it had come to pass,
In stars, when first a living breath he took,
That he for love should get his death, alas!
For in the stars, far dearer than is glass,
Is written, God knows, read it he who can,-
And truth it is- the death of every man.
In stars, full many a winter over-worn,
Was written the death of Hector, Achilles,
Of Pompey, Julius, long ere they were born;
The strife at Thebes; and of great Hercules,
Of Samson, of Turnus, of Socrates,
The death to each; but men's wits are so dull
There is no man may read this to the full.
This sultan for his privy-council sent,
And, but to tell it briefly in this place,
He did to them declare his whole intent,
And said that, surely, save he might have grace
To gain Constance within a little space,
He was but dead; and charged them, speedily
To find out, for his life, some remedy.
By divers men, then, divers things were said;
They reasoned, and they argued up and down;
Full much with subtle logic there they sped;
They spoke of spells, of treachery in Rome town;
But finally, as to an end foreknown,
They were agreed that nothing should gainsay
A marriage, for there was no other way.
Then saw they therein so much difficulty,
When reasoning of it, (to make all plain,
Because such conflict and diversity
Between the laws of both lands long had lain)
They held: "No Christian emperor were fain
To have his child wed under our sweet laws,
Given us by Mahomet for God's cause."
But he replied: "Nay, rather than lose
The Lady Constance, I'll be christened, yes!"

I must be hers, I can no other choose.
I pray you let be no rebelliousness;
Save me my life, and do not be careless
In getting her who thus alone may cure
The woe whereof I cannot long endure."
What needs a copious dilation now?
I say: By treaties and by embassy,
And the pope's mediation, high and low,
And all the Church and all the chivalry,
That, to destruction of Mahometry
And to augmenting Christian faith so dear,
They were agreed, at last, as you shall hear.
The sultan and his entire baronage
And all his vassals, they must christened be,
And he shall have Constance in true marriage,
And gold (I know not in what quantity),
For which was found enough security;
This, being agreed, was sworn by either side.
Now, Constance fair, may great God be your guide!
Now would some men expect, as I may guess,
That I should tell of all the purveyance
The emperor, of his great nobleness,
Has destined for his daughter, fair Constance.
But men must know that so great ordinance
May no one tell within a little clause
As was arrayed there for so high a cause.
Bishops were named who were with her to wend,
Ladies and lords and knights of high renown,
And other folk- but I will make an end,
Except that it was ordered through the town
That everyone, with great devotion shown,
Should pray to Christ that He this marriage lead
To happy end, and the long voyage speed.
The day is come, at last, for leave-taking,
I say, the woeful, fatal day is come,
When there may be no longer tarrying,
But to go forth make ready all and some;
Constance, who was with sorrow overcome,
Rose, sad and pale, and dressed herself to wend;
For well she saw there was no other end.
Alas! What wonder is it that she wept?
She shall be sent to a strange. country, far
From friends that her so tenderly have kept,
And bound to one her joy to make or mar
Whom she knows not, nor what his people are.
Husbands are all good, and have been of yore,
That know their wives, but I dare say no more.
"Father," she said, "your wretched child, Constance,
Your daughter reared in luxury so soft,

And you, my mother, and my chief pleasance,
 Above all things, save Christ Who rules aloft,
 Constance your child would be remembered oft
 Within your prayers, for I to Syria go,
 Nor shall I ever see you more, ah no!
 "Unto the land of Barbary my fate
 Compels me now, because it is your will;
 But Christ, Who died to save our sad estate,
 So give me grace, His mandates I'll fulfill;
 I, wretched woman, though I die, 'tis nil.
 Women are born to slave and to repent,
 And to be subject to man's government."
 I think, at Troy, when Pyrrhus broke the wall;
 When Ilium burned; when Thebes fell, that city;
 At Rome, for all the harm from Hannibal,
 Who vanquished Roman arms in campaigns three-
 I think was heard no weeping for pity
 As in the chamber at her leave-taking;
 Yet go she must, whether she weep or sing.
 O primal-moving, cruel Firmament,
 With thy diurnal pressure, that doth sway
 And hurl all things from East to Occident,
 Which otherwise would hold another way,
 Thy pressure set the heavens in such array,
 At the beginning of this wild voyage,
 That cruel Mars hath murdered this marriage.
 Unfortunate ascendant tortuous,
 Of which the lord has helpless fall'n, alas,
 Out of his angle to the darkest house!
 O Mars! O Atazir in present case!
 O feeble Moon, unhappy is thy pace!
 Thou'rt in conjunction where thou'rt not received,
 And where thou should'st go, thou hast not achieved.
 Imprudent emperor of Rome, alas!
 Was no philosopher in all thy town?
 Is one time like another in such case?
 Indeed, can there be no election shown,
 Especially to folk of high renown,
 And when their dates of birth may all men know?
 Alas! We are too ignorant or too slow.
 To ship is brought this fair and woeful maid,
 Full decorously, with every circumstance.
 "Now Jesus Christ be with you all," she said;
 And there's no more, save "Farewell, fair Constance!"
 She strove to keep a cheerful countenance,
 And forth I let her sail in this manner,
 And turn again to matters far from her.
 The mother of the sultan, well of vices,
 Has heard the news of her son's full intent,

How he will leave the ancient sacrifices;
 And she at once for her own council sent;
 And so they came to learn what thing she meant.
 And when they were assembled, each compeer,
 She took her seat and spoke as you shall hear.
 "My lords," said she, "you know well, every man,
 My son intends to forgo and forget
 The holy precepts of our Alkoran,
 Given by God's own prophet, Mahomet.
 But I will make one vow to great God yet:
 The life shall rather from my body start
 Than Islam's laws out of my faithful heart!
 "What should we get from taking this new creed
 But thralldom for our bodies and penance?
 And afterward, be drawn to Hell, indeed,
 For thus denying our faith's inheritance?
 But, lords, if you will give your sustenance,
 And join me for the wisdom I've in store,
 I swear to save us all for evermore."
 They swore and they assented, every man,
 To live by her and die, and by her stand;
 And each of them, in what best wise he can,
 Shall gather friends and followers into band;
 And she shall take the enterprise in hand,
 The form of which I soon will you apprise,
 And to them all she spoke, then, in this wise.
 "We will first feign the Christian faith to take;
 Cold water will not harm us from the rite;
 And I will such a feast and revel make
 As will, I trust, to lull be requisite.
 For though his wife be christened ever so white,
 She shall have need to wash away the red,
 Though a full font of water be there sped."
 O sultana, root of iniquity!
 Virago, you Semiramis second!
 O serpent hid in femininity,
 Just as the Serpent deep in Hell is bound!
 O pseudo-woman, all that may confound
 Virtue and innocence, through your malice,
 Is bred in you, the nest of every vice!
 O Satan, envious since that same day
 When thou wert banished from our heritage,
 Well know'st thou unto woman thine old way!
 Thou made'st Eve bring us into long bondage.
 Thou wilt destroy this Christian marriage.
 Thine instrument- ah welaway the while!
 Make'st thou of woman when thou wilt beguile!
 Now this sultana whom I blame and harry,
 Let, secretly, her council go their way.

Why should I longer in my story tarry?
She rode unto the sultan, on a day,
And told him she'd renounce her old faith, yea,
Be christened at priests' hands, with all the throng,
Repentant she'd been heathen for so long.
Beseeching him to do her the honour
To let her have the Christian men to feast:
"To entertain them will be my labour."
The sultan said: "I'll be at your behest."
And, kneeling, thanked her for that fair request,
So glad he was he knew not what to say;
She kissed her son, and homeward went her way.

Explicit prima pars.

Sequitur pars secunda.

Arrived now are these Christian folk at land,
In Syria, with a great stately rout,
And hastily this sultan gave command,
First to his mother and all the realm about,
Saying his wife was come, beyond a doubt,
And prayed her that she ride to meet the queen,
That all due honour might be shown and seen.
Great was the crush and rich was the array
Of Syrians and Romans, meeting here;
The mother of the sultan, rich and gay,
Received her open-armed, with smiling cheer,
As any mother might a daughter dear;
And to the nearest city, with the bride,
At gentle pace, right festively they ride.
I think the triumph of great Julius,
Whereof old Lucan make so long a boast,
Was not more royal nor more curious
Than was the assembling of this happy host.
But this same Scorpion, this wicked ghost-
The old sultana, for all her flattering,
Chose in that sign full mortally to sting.
The sultan came himself, soon after this,
So regally 'twere wonderful to tell,
And welcomed her into all joy and bliss.
And thus in such delight I let them dwell.
The fruit of all is what I now shall tell.
When came the time, men thought it for the best
Their revels cease, and got them home to rest.
The time came when this old sultana there
Has ordered up the feast of which I told,
Whereto the Christian folk did them prepare,
The company together, young and old.
There men might feast and royalty behold,
With dainties more than I can e'en surmise;
But all too dear they've bought it, ere they rise.

O sudden woe! that ever will succeed
On worldly bliss, infused with bitterness;
That ends the joy of earthly toil, indeed;
Woe holds at last the place of our gladness.
Hear, now, this counsel for your certainness:
Upon your most glad day, bear then in mind
The unknown harm and woe that come behind.
For, but to tell you briefly, in one word-
The sultan and the Christians, every one,
Were all hewed down and thrust through at the board,
Save the fair Lady Constance, she alone.
This old sultana, aye, this cursed crone
Has, with her followers, done this wicked deed,
For she herself would all the nation lead.
There was no Syrian that had been converted,
Being of the sultan's council resolute,
But was struck down, ere from the board he'd started
And Constance have they taken now, hot-foot,
And on a ship, of rudder destitute,
They her have placed, bidding her learn to sail
From Syria to Italy- or fail.
A certain treasure that she'd brought, they add,
And, truth to tell, of food great quantity
They have her given, and clothing too she had;
And forth she sails upon the wide salt sea.
O Constance mine, full of benignity,
O emperor's young daughter, from afar
He that is Lord of fortune be your star!
She crossed herself, and in a pious voice
Unto the Cross of Jesus thus said she:
"O bright, O blessed Altar of my choice,
Red with the Lamb's blood full of all pity,
That washed the world from old iniquity,
Me from the Fiend and from his claws, oh keep
That day when I shall drown within the deep!
"Victorious Tree, Protection of the true,
The only thing that worthy was to bear
The King of Heaven with His wounds so new,
The White Lamb Who was pierced through with the spear,
Driver of devils out of him and her
Who on Thine arms do lay themselves in faith,
Keep me and give me grace before my death!"
For years and days drifted this maiden pure,
Through all the seas of Greece and to the strait
Of dark Gibraltar dier she adventure;
On many a sorry meal now may she bait;
Upon her death full often may she wait
Before the wild waves and the winds shall drive
Her vessel where it shall some day arrive.

Men might well ask: But why was she not slain?
And at that feast who could her body save?
And I reply to that demand, again:
Who saved young Daniel in the dreadful cave
Where every other man, master and knave,
Was killed by lions ere he might up-start?
No one, save God, Whom he bore in his heart.
God willed to show this wondrous miracle
Through her, that we should see His mighty works;
And Christ Who every evil can dispel,
By certain means does oft, as know all clerks,
Do that whereof the end in darkness lurks
For man's poor wit, which of its ignorance
Cannot conceive His careful purveyance.
Now, since she was not slain at feast we saw,
Who kept her that she drowned not in the sea?
But who kept Jonah in the fish's maw
Till he was spewed forth there at Nineveh?
Well may men know it was no one but He
Who saved the Hebrew people from drowning
When, dry-shod, through the sea they went walking.
Who bade the four great spirits of tempest,
That power have to harry land and sea,
"Not north, nor south, nor yet to east, nor west
Shall ye molest the ocean, land, or tree"?
Truly, the Captain of all this was He
Who from the storm has aye this woman kept,
As well when waking as in hours she slept.
Where might this woman get her drink and meat?
Three years and more, how lasted her supply?
Who gave Egyptian Mary food to eat
In cave desert? None but Christ, say I.
Five thousand folk, the gospels testify,
On five loaves and two fishes once did feed.
And thus God sent abundance for her need.
Forth into our own ocean then she came,
Through all our wild white seas, until at last,
Under a keep, whose name I cannot name,
Far up Northumberland, her ship was cast,
And on the sands drove hard and stuck so fast
That thence it moved not, no, for all the tide,
It being Christ's will that she should there abide.
The warden of the castle down did fare
To view this wreck, and through the ship he sought
And found this weary woman, full of care;
He found, also, the treasure she had brought.
In her own language mercy she besought
That he would help her soul from body win
To free her from the plight that she was in.

A kind of bastard Latin did she speak,
But, nevertheless, these folk could understand;
The constable no longer thought to seek,
But led the sorrowing woman to the land;
There she knelt down and thanked God, on the sand.
But who or what she was, she would not say,
For threat or promise, though she died that day.
She said she'd been bewildered by the sea,
And had lost recollection, by her truth;
The warden had for her so great pity,
As had his wife, that both they wept for ruth.
She was so diligent to toil, in sooth,
To serve and please all folk within that place,
That all loved her who looked upon her face.
This warden and Dame Hermengild, his wife,
Were pagans, and that country, everywhere;
But Hermengild now loved her as her life,
And Constance has so long abided there,
And prayed so oft, with many a tearful prayer,
That Jesus has converted, through His grace,
Dame Hermengild, the lady of that place.
In all that land no Christian dared speak out
All Christians having fled from that country,
For pagan men had conquered all about
The regions of the north, by land and sea;
To Wales was fled the Christianity
Of the old Britons dwelling in this isle;
That was their refuge in the wild meanwhile.
Yet ne'er were Christian Britons so exiled
But some of them assembled, privately,
To honour Christ, and heathen folk beguiled;
And near the castle dwelt of such men three.
But one of them was blind and could not see,
Save with the inner optics of his mind,
Wherewith all men see after they go blind.
Bright was the sun upon that summer's day
When went the warden and his wife also,
And Constance, down the hill, along the way
Toward the sea, a furlong off, or so,
To frolic and to wander to and fro;
And in their walk on this blind man they came,
With eyes fast shut, a creature old and lame.
"In name of Christ!" this blind old Briton cried,
"Dame Hermengild, give me my sight again."
But she was frightened of the words, and sighed,
Lest that her husband, briefly to be plain,
Should have her, for her love of Jesus, slain;
Till Constance strengthened her and bade her work
The will of God, as daughter of His kirk.

The warden was confounded by that sight,
And asked: "What mean these words and this affair?"
Constance replied: "Sir, it is Jesus' might
That helps all poor folk from the foul Fiend's snare."
And so far did she our sweet faith declare
That she the constable, before 'twas eve,
Converted, and in Christ made him believe.
This constable, though not lord of that place
Where he'd found Constance, wrecked upon the sand,
Had held it well for many a winter's space,
For Alla, king of all Northumberland,
Who was full wise and hardy of his hand
Against the Scots, as men may read and hear,
But I will to my tale again- give ear.
Satan, that ever waits, men to beguile,
Saw now, in Constance, all perfection grown,
And wondering how to be revenged the while,
He made a young knight, living in the town,
Love her so madly, with foul passion flown,
That verily he thought his life should spill,
Save that, of her, be once might have his will.
He wooed her, but it all availed him naught;
She would not sin in any wise or way;
And, for despite, he plotted in his thought
To make her die a death of shame some day.
He waited till the warden was away,
And, stealthily by night, he went and crept
To Hermengild's bed-chamber, while she slept.
Weary with waking for her orisons,
Slept Constance, and Dame Hermengild also.
This knight, by Satan's tempting, came at once
And softly to the bedside he did go.
And cut the throat of Hermengild, and so
Laid the hot reeking knife by fair Constance,
And went his way- where God give him mischance!
Soon after came the warden home again,
And with him Alla, king of all that land,
And saw his wife so pitilessly slain,
For which he wept and cried and wrung his hand;
And in the bed the bloody dagger, and
The Lady Constance. Ah! What could she say?
For very woe her wits went all away.
King Alla was apprised of this sad chance,
And told the time, and where, and in what wise
Was found in a wrecked ship the fair Constance,
As heretofore you've heard my tale apprise.
But in the king's heart pity did arise
When he saw so benignant a creature
Fallen in distress of such misadventure.

For as the lamb unto his death is brought,
So stood this innocent before the king;
And the false knight that had this treason wrought,
He swore that it was she had done this thing.
Nevertheless, there was much sorrowing
Among the people, saying, "We cannot guess
That she has done so great a wickedness.
"For we have seen her always virtuous,
And loving Hermengild as she loved life."
To this bore witness each one in that house,
Save he that slew the victim with his knife.
The gentle king suspected. motive rife
In that man's heart; and thought he would inquire
Deeper therein, the truth to learn entire.
Alas, Constance! You have no champion,
And since you cannot fight, it's welaway!
But He Who died for us the cross upon,
And Satan bound (who lies yet where he lay),
So be your doughty Champion this day!
For, except Christ a miracle make known,
You shall be slain, though guiltless, and right soon.
She dropped upon her knees and thus she prayed:
"Immortal God, Who saved the fair Susanna
From lying blame, and Thou, O gracious Maid
(Mary, I mean, the daughter of Saint Anna),
Before Child the angels sing hosanna,
If I be guiltless of this felony,
My succour be, for otherwise I die!"
Have you not sometime seen a pallid face
Among the crowd, of one that's being led
Toward his death- one who had got no grace?
And such a pallor on his face was spread
All men must mark it, full of horrid dread,
Among the other faces in the rout.
So stood fair Constance there and looked about.
O queens that live in all prosperity,
Duchesses, and you ladies, every one,
Have pity, now, on her adversity;
An emperor's young daughter stands alone;
She has no one to whom to make her moan.
O royal blood that stands there in such dread,
Far are your friends away in your great need!
This King Alla has such compassion shown
(Since gentle heart is full of all pity),
That from his two eyes ran the tears right down.
"Now hastily go fetch a book," quoth he,
"And if this knight will swear that it was she
Who slew the woman, then will we make clear
The judge we shall appoint the case to hear."

A book of Gospels writ in British tongue
Was brought, and on this Book he swore anon
Her guilt; but then the people all among
A clenched hand smote him on the shoulder-bone,
And down he fell, as stunned as by a stone,
And both his eyes burst forth out of his face
In sight of everybody in that place.
A voice was heard by all that audience,
Saying: "You have here slandered the guiltless
Daughter of Holy Church, in high Presence;
Thus have you done, and further I'll not press."
Whereat were all the folk aghast, no less;
As men amazed they stand there, every one,
For dread of vengeance, save Constance alone.
Great was the fear and, too, the repentance
Of those that held a wrong suspicion there
Against this simple innocent Constance;
And by this miracle so wondrous fair,
And by her mediation and her prayer,
The king, with many another in that place,
Was there converted, thanks to Christ His grace!
This lying knight was slain for his untruth,
By sentence of King Alla, hastily;
Yet Constance had upon his death great ruth.
And after this, Jesus, of His mercy,
Caused Alla take in marriage, solemnly,
This holy maiden, so bright and serene,
And thus has Christ made fair Constance a queen.
But who was sad, if I am not to lie,
At this but Lady Donegild, she who
Was the king's mother, full of tyranny?
She thought her wicked heart must burst in two;
She would he'd never thought this thing to do;
And so she hugged her anger that he'd take
So strange a wife as this creature must make.
Neither with chaff nor straw it pleases me
To make a long tale, here, but with the corn.
Why should I tell of all the royalty
At that wedding, or who went first, well-born,
Or who blew out a trumpet or a horn?
The fruit of every tale is but to say,
They eat and drink and dance and sing and play.
They went to bed, as was but just and right,
For though some wives are pure and saintly things,
They must endure, in patience, in the night,
Such necessaries as make pleasurings
To men whom they have wedded well with rings,
And lay their holiness a while aside;
There may no better destiny betide.

On her he got a man-child right anon;
And to a bishop and the warden eke
He gave his wife to guard, while he was gone
To Scotland, there his enemies to seek;
Now Constance, who so humble is, and meek,
So long is gone with child that, hushed and still,
She keeps her chamber, waiting on Christ's will.
The time was come, a baby boy she bore;
Mauritius they did name him at the font;
This constable sent forth a messenger
And wrote unto King Alla at the front
Of all this glad event, a full account,
And other pressing matters did he say.
He took the letter and went on his way.
This messenger, to forward his own ends,
To the king's mother rode with swiftest speed,
Humbly saluting her as down he bends:
"Madam," quoth he, "be joyful now indeed!
To God a hundred thousand thanks proceed.
The queen has borne a child, beyond all doubt,
To joy and bliss of all this land about.
"Lo, here are letters sealed that say this thing,
Which I must bear with all the speed I may;
If you will send aught to your son, the king,
I am your humble servant, night and day."
Donegild answered: "As for this time, nay;
But here tonight I'd have you take your rest;
Tomorrow I will say what I think best."
This messenger drank deep of ale and wine,
And stolen were his letters, stealthily,
Out of his box, while slept he like a swine;
And counterfeited was, right cleverly,
Another letter, wrought full sinfully,
Unto the king; of this event so near,
All from the constable, as you shall hear.
The letter said, the queen delivered was
Of such a fiendish, horrible creature,
That in the castle none so hardy as
Durst, for a lengthy time, there to endure.
The mother was an elf or fairy, sure,
Come there by chance of charm, or sorcery,
And all good men hated her company.
Sad was the king when this letter he'd seen;
But to no man he told his sorrows sore,
But with his own hand he wrote back again:
"Welcome what's sent from Christ, for evermore,
To me, who now am learned in His lore;
Lord, welcome be Thy wish, though hidden still,
My own desire is but to do Thy will.

"Guard well this child, though foul it be or fair,
And guard my wife until my home-coming;
Christ, when He wills it, may send me an heir
More consonant than this with my liking."
This letter sealed, and inwardly weeping,
To the same messenger 'twas taken soon,
And forth he went; there's no more to be done.
O messenger, possessed of drunkenness,
Strong is your breath, your limbs do falter aye,
And you betray all secrets, great and less;
Your mind is gone, you jangle like a jay;
Your face is mottled in a new array!
Where drunkenness can reign, in any rout,
There is no counsel kept, beyond a doubt.
O Donegild, there is no English mine
Fit for your malice and your tyranny!
Therefore you to the Fiend I do resign,
Let him go write of your foul treachery!
Fie, mannish women! Nay, by God, I lie!
Fie, fiendish spirit, for I dare well tell,
Though you walk here, your spirit is in Hell!
This messenger came from the king again,
And at the king's old mother's court did light,
And she was of this messenger full fain
To please him in whatever way she might.
He drank until his girdle was too tight,
He slept and snored and mumbled, drunken-wise,
All night, until the sun began to rise.
Again were his letters stolen, every one,
And others counterfeited, in this wise:
"The king commands his constable, anon,
On pain of hanging by the high justice,
That he shall suffer not, in any guise,
Constance within the kingdom to abide
Beyond three days and quarter of a tide.
"But in the ship wherein she came to strand
She and her infant son and all her gear
Shall be embarked and pushed out from the land,
And charge her that she never again come here."
O Constance mine, well might your spirit fear,
And, sleeping, in your dream have great grievance
When Donegild arranged this ordinance.
This messenger, the morrow, when he woke,
Unto the castle held the nearest way,
And to the constable the letter took;
And when he'd read and learned what it did say,
Often he cried "Alas!" and "Welaway!
Lord Christ," quoth he, "how may this world endure?
So full of sin is many a bad creature.

"O mighty God, and is it then Thy will?
Since Thou art righteous judge, how can it be
That innocence may suffer so much ill
And wicked folk reign in prosperity?
O good Constance, alas! Ah, woe is me
That I must be your torturer, or die
A shameful death! There is no other way."
Wept both the young and old of all that place
Because the king this cursed letter sent,
And Constance, with a deathly pallid face,
Upon the fourth day to the ship she went.
Nevertheless, she took as good intent
The will of Christ, and kneeling on the strand,
She said: "Lord, always welcome Thy command!
"He that did keep me from all lying blame
The while I lived among you, sun and snow,
He can still guard me from all harm and shame
Upon salt seas, albeit I see not how.
As strong as ever He was, so is He now.
In Him I trust and in His Mother dear,
He is my sail, the star by which I steer."
Her little child lay crying in her arm,
And kneeling, piteously to him she said:
"Peace, little son, I will do you no harm."
With that the kerchief took she from her braid,
And binding it across his eyes, she laid
Again her arm about and lulled him fast
Asleep, and then to Heaven her eyes up-cast.
"Mother," she said, "O Thou bright Maid, Mary,
True is it that through woman's incitement
Mankind was banished and is doomed to die,
For which Thy Son upon the cross was rent;
Thy blessed eyes saw all of His torment;
Wherefore there's no comparison between
Thy woe and any woe of man, though keen.
"Thou sawest them slay Thy Son before Thine eyes;
And yet lives now my little child, I say!
O Lady bright, to Whom affliction cries,
Thou glory of womanhood, O Thou fair May,
Haven of refuge, bright star of the day,
Pity my child, Who of Thy gentleness
Hast pity on mankind in all distress!
"O little child, alas! What is your guilt,
Who never wrought the smallest sin? Ah me,
Why will your too hard father have you killed?
Have mercy, O dear constable!" cried she,
"And let my little child bide, safe from sea;
And if you dare not save him, lest they blame
Then kiss him once in his dear father's name!"

Therewith she gazed long backward at the land,
And said: "Farewell, my husband merciless!"
And up she rose and walked right down the strand
Toward the ship; followed her all the press;
And ever she prayed her child to cry the less;
And took her leave; and with a high intent
She crossed herself; and aboard ship she went.
Victualled had been the ship, 'tis true- indeed
Abundantly- for her, and for long space;
Of many other things that she should need
She had great plenty, thanks be to God's grace!
Through wind and weather may God find her place
And bring her home! I can no better say;
But out to sea she stood upon her way.

Explicit secunda pars.

Sequitur pars tertia.

Alla the king came home soon after this
Unto his castle, of the which I've told,
And asked for wife and child, whom he did miss.
The constable about his heart grew cold,
And plainly all the story he then told,
As you have heard, I cannot tell it better,
And showed the king his seal and the false letter.
And said: "My lord, as you commanded me,
On pain of death, so have I done- in vain!"
The messenger was tortured until he
Made known the facts to all men, full and plain,
From night to night, in what beds he had lain.
And thus, by dint of subtle questioning,
'Twas reasoned out from whom this harm did spring.
The hand was known, now, that the letter wrote,
And all the venom of this cursed deed,
But in what wise I certainly know not,
The effect is this, that Alla, for her meed,
His mother slew, as men may plainly read,
She being false to her sworn allegiance,
And thus old Donegild ended with mischance.
The sorrow that this Alla, night and day,
Felt for his wife, and for his child also,
There is no human tongue on earth to say.
But now will I back to fair Constance go,
Who drifted on the seas, in pain and woe,
Five years and more, as was Lord Christ's command,
Before her ship approached to any land.
Under a heathen castle, at the last,
Whereof the name not in my text I find,
Constance and her young son the sea did cast.
Almighty God, Redeemer of mankind,
Have Constance and her little child in mind!

Who must fall into heathen hands and soon
Be near to death, as I shall tell anon.
Down from the castle came full many a wight
To stare upon the ship and on Constance.
But briefly, from the castle, on a night,
The warden's steward- God give him mischance!-
A thief who had renounced allegiance
To Christ, came to the ship and said he should
Possess her body, whether or not she would.
Woe for this wretched woman then began,
Her child cried out and she cried, piteously;
But blessed Mary helped her soon; the man
With whom she struggled well and mightily,
This thief fell overboard all suddenly,
And in the sea was drowned by God's vengeance;
And thus has Christ unsullied kept Constance.
O foul desire of lechery, lo thine end!
Not only dost thou cripple a man's mind,
But verily dost thou his body rend;
The end of all thy work and thy lusts blind
Is bitterness; how many may we find
That not for actions but for mere intent
To do this sin, to shame or death are sent.
How could this poor weak woman have the strength
To keep herself against that renegade?
Goliath of immeasurable length,
How could young David such a death have made,
So slight and without armour? How arrayed
Himself to look upon that dreadful face?
Men may well see, it was but God's own grace!
Who gave to Judith courage all reckless
To slay him, Holofernes, in his tent,
And to deliver out of wretchedness
The folk of God? I say, for this intent
That just as God a soul of vigour sent
To them, and saved them out of their mischance,
So sent He might and vigour to Constance.
Forth went her ship and through the narrow mouth
Of Ceuta and Gibraltar, on its way,
Sometimes to west, and sometimes north or south,
Aye and sometimes east, many a weary day,
Until Christ's Mother (blest be She for aye!)
Did destine, out of good that is endless,
To make an end of Constance' heaviness.
But let us leave this Constance now, and turn
To speak of that same Roman emperor
Who does, from Syria, by letters, learn
The slaughter of Christians and the dishonour
Done to his daughter by a vile traitor-

I mean that old sultana, years ago,
Who, at the feast, slew all men, high and low.
For which this emperor did send anon
A senator, with royal ordinance,
And other lords, God knows, and many a one,
On Syrians to take full high vengeance.
They burn, they slay, they give them all mischance
Through many a day; but, briefly to make end,
Homeward to Rome, at last, the victors wend.
This senator returned with victory
To Rome again, sailing right royally,
And spoke the ship (so goes the old story)
In which our Constance sat so piteously,
Nothing he knew of who she was, or why
She was in such a plight; nor would she say
Aught of herself, though she might die that day.
He took her into Rome, and to his wife
Gave her in charge, and her young son also;
And in his house she lived awhile her life.
Thus can Our Lady bring from deepest woe
Most woeful Constance, aye and more, we know.
And for a long time dwelt she in that place,
Engaged in God's good works, such was her grace.
The senator's good wife her own aunt was,
Yet for all that she knew her never the more;
I will no longer tarry in this case,
But to King Alla, whom we left, of yore,
Weeping for his lost wife and sighing sore.
I will return, and I will leave Constance
Under the senator's roof and governance.
King Alla, who had had his mother slain,
Upon a day fell to such repentance,
That, but to tell it briefly and be plain,
To Rome he came to pay his just penance
And put himself in the pope's ordinance,
In high and low; and Jesus Christ he sought
To pardon all the wicked deeds he'd wrought.
The news anon through all Rome town was borne,
How King Alla would come on pilgrimage,
By harbingers that unto him were sworn;
Whereat the senator, as was usage,
Rode out to him, with many of his lineage,
As well to show his own magnificence
As do to any king a reverence.
Great welcome gave this noble senator
To King Alla, and he to him also;
Each of them showed the other much honour;
And so befell that, in a day or so,
This senator to King Alla did go

To feast, and briefly, if I may not lie,
Constance' young son went in his company.
Some men would say, 'twas instance of Constance
That sent him with the senator to feast;
I cannot tell you every circumstance,
Be it as may be, he was there, at least.
But truth is that, at his mother's behest,
Before the king, during the banquet's space,
The child stood, looking in King Alla's face.
This child aroused within the king great wonder,
And to the senator he said, anon:
"Whose is the fair child that is standing yonder?"
"I know not," quoth he, "by God and Saint John!
A mother he has, but father has he none
That I know of"- and briefly, at a bound,
He told King Alla how this child was found.
"But God knows," said this senator, as well,
"So virtuous a liver, in my life
I never saw, as she is, nor heard tell
Of earthly woman, maiden, no nor wife.
I dare say, she would rather have a knife
Thrust through her breast than play a female trick;
There is no man could bring her to the prick."
Now this boy was as like unto Constance
As it was possible for one to be.
Alla had kept the face in remembrance
Of Dame Constance, and thereon now mused he:
Mayhap the mother of the child was she
Who was his wife. And inwardly he sighed,
And left the table with a hasty stride.
"In faith," thought he, "a phantom's in my head!
I ought to hold, by any right judgment,
That in the wide salt sea my wife is dead."
And afterward he made this argument:
"How know I but that Christ has hither sent
My wife by sea, as surely as she went
To my own land, the which was evident?"
And, after noon, home with the senator
Went Alla, all to test this wondrous chance.
The senator did Alla great honour,
And hastily he sent for fair Constance.
But, trust me, she was little fain to dance
When she had heard the cause of that command.
Scarcely upon her two feet could she stand.
When Alla saw his wife, he greeted her,
Then wept till it was a sad thing to see.
For, at the first glance, when she entered there,
He knew full verily that it was she.
And she for grief stood dumb as ever tree;

So was her heart shut up in her distress
When she remembered his unkindliness.
Twice did she swoon away there, in his sight;
He wept and he protested piteously.
"Now God," quoth he, "and all His angels bright
So truly on my spirit have mercy
As of your ills all innocent am I,
As is Maurice, my son, so like your face,
Or may the foul Fiend take me from this place!"
Long was the sobbing and the bitter pain
Before their woeful hearts could find surcease;
Great was the pity to hear them complain,
Whereof their sorrows surely did increase.
I pray you all my labour to release;
I cannot tell their grief until tomorrow,
I am so weary, speaking long of sorrow.
But, truth being known and all doubt now dismissed,
And Alla proven guiltless of her woe,
I think a hundred times they must have kissed,
And such great bliss there was between the two
That, save the joy that nevermore shall go,
There was naught like it, present time or past,
Nor shall be, ever, while the world shall last.
Then prayed she of her husband, all meekly,
As for her pain a splendid anodyne,
That he would pray her father, specially,
That, of his majesty, he would incline
And that, some day, would come with him to dine;
She prayed him, also, he should in no way
Unto her father one word of her say.
Some men would say, it was the child Maurice
Did bear this message to the emperor;
But, as I guess, King Alla was too nice
In etiquette to one of such honour
As he that was of Christendom the flower,
To send a child; and it is best to deem
He went himself, and so it well may seem.
This emperor has granted, graciously,
To come to dinner, as he's been besought,
And, well I think, he pondered busily
Upon the child, and on his daughter thought.
Alla went to his inn, and, as he ought,
Made ready for the feast in every wise
As far as his experience could devise.
The morrow came, and Alla rose to dress,
And, too, his wife, the emperor to meet;
And forth they rode in joy and happiness.
And when she saw her father in the street,
She lighted down, and falling at his feet,

"Father," quoth she, "your young child, your Constance,
Is now gone clean out of your remembrance.
"I am your daughter Constance," then said she,
"That once you sent to Syria. 'Tis I.
It is I, father, who, on the salt sea,
Was sent, alone to drift and doomed to die.
But now, good father, mercy must I cry:
Send me no more to heathendom, godless,
But thank my lord, here, for his kindness."
But all the tender joy, who'll tell it all
That was between the three who thus are met?
But of my tale, now, make an end I shall;
The day goes fast, I will no longer fret.
These happy folk at dinner are all set,
And there, in joy and bliss, I let them dwell;
Happier a thousand fold than I can tell.
This child Maurice was, since then, emperor
Made by the pope, and lived right christianly.
Unto Christ's Church he did a great honour;
But I let all his story pass me by.
Of Constance is my tale, especially.
In ancient Roman histories men may find
The life of Maurice; I've it not in mind.
This King Alla, when came the proper day,
With his Constance, his saintly wife so sweet,
To England went again, by the straight way,
Where they did live in joy and quiet meet.
But little while it lasts us, thus complete.
Joy of this world, for time will not abide;
From day to day it changes as the tide.
Who ever lived in such delight one day
That was not stirred therefrom by his conscience,
Desire, or anger, or some kindred fray,
Envy, or pride, or passion, or offense?
I say but to one ending this sentence:
That but a little while in joy's pleasance
Lasted the bliss of Alla and Constance.
For death, that takes from high and low his rent,
When but a year had passed, as I should guess,
Out of the world King Alla quickly sent,
For whom Constance felt heavy wretchedness.
Now let us pray that God his soul will bless!
And of Dame Constance, finally to say,
Towards the town of Rome she took her way.
To Rome is come this holy one and pure,
And finds that all her friends are safe and sound;
For now she's done with all her adventure;
And when she'd come there, and her father found,
Down on her two knees fell she to the ground,

Weeping but joyful gave she God her praise
A hundred thousand times for all His ways.
In virtue, and with alms and holy deed,
They all live there, nor ever asunder wend;
Till death does part them, such a life they lead.
And fare now well, my tale is at an end.
And Jesus Christ, Who of His might may send
Joy after woe, govern us by His grace
And keep us all that now are in this place! Amen.
HERE ENDS THE LAWYER'S TALE