**The Lawyer’s Prologue**

1 O Hateful evil! State of Poverty!

2 With thirst, with cold, with hunger so confounded!

3 To ask help shameth thy heart's delicacy;

4 If none thou ask, by need thou art so wounded

5 That need itself uncovereth all the wound hid!

6 Spite of thy will thou must, for indigence,

7 Go steal, or beg, or borrow thine expense.

8 Thou blamest Christ, and thou say'st bitterly,

9 He misdistributes riches temporal;

10 Thy neighbour dost thou censure, sinfully,

11 Saying thou hast too little and he hath all.

12 My faith, sayest thou, sometime the reckoning shall

13 Come on him, when his tail shall burn for greed,

14 Not having helped the needy in their need.

15 Hear now what is the judgment of the wise:

16 Better to die than live in indigence;

17 Thy very pauper neighbours thee despise.

18 If thou be poor, farewell thy reverence!

19 Still of the wise man take this full sentence:

20 The days of the afflicted are all sin.

21 Beware, therefore, that thou come not therein!

22 If thou be poor, thy brother hateth thee,

23 And all thy friends will flee from thee, alas!

24 O wealthy merchants, full of weal ye be,

25 O noble, prudent folk in happier case!

26 Your dice-box doth not tumble out ambsace,

27 But with six-cinq ye throw against your chance;

28 And so, at Christmas, merrily may ye dance!

29 Ye search all land and sea for your winnings,

30 And, as wise folk, ye know well the estate

31 Of all realms; ye are sires of happenings

32 And tales of peace and tales of war's debate.

33 But I were now of tales all desolate,

34 Were 't not a merchant, gone this many a year,

35 Taught me the story which you now shall hear.

**The Lawyer’s Tale**

1 In Syria, once, there dwelt a company

2 Of traders rich, all sober men and true,

3 That far abroad did send their spicery,

4 And cloth of gold, and satins rich in hue;

5 Their wares were all so excellent and new

6 That everyone was eager to exchange

7 With them, and sell them divers things and strange,

8 It came to pass, the masters of this sort

9 Decided that to Rome they all would wend,

10 Were it for business or for only sport;

11 No other message would they thither send,

12 But went themselves to Rome; this is the end.

13 And there they found an inn and took their rest

14 As seemed to their advantage suited best.

15 Sojourned have now these merchants in that town

16 A certain time, as fell to their pleasance.

17 And so it happened that the high renown

18 Of th' emperor's daughter, called the fair Constance.

19 Reported was, with every circumstance,

20 Unto these Syrian merchants, in such wise,

21 From day to day, as I will now apprise.

22 This was the common voice of every man:

23 Our emperor of Rome, God save and see,

24 A daughter has that since the world began.

25 To reckon as well her goodness as beauty,

26 Was never such another as is she;

27 I pray that God her fame will keep, serene,

28 And would she were of all Europe the queen.

29 In her is beauty high, and without pride;

30 Youth, without crudity or levity;

31 In an endeavours, virtue is her guide;

32 Meekness in her has humbled tyranny;

33 She is the mirror of all courtesy;

34 Her heart's a very shrine of holiness;

35 Her hand is freedom's agent for largess.

36 And all this voice said truth, as God is true.

37 But to our story let us turn again.

38 These merchants all have freighted ships anew,

39 And when they'd seen the lovely maid, they fain

40 Would seek their Syrian homes with all their train,

41 To do their business as they'd done yore,

42 And live in weal; I cannot tell you more.

43 Now so it was, these merchants stood in grace

44 Of Syria's sultan; and so wise was he

45 That when they came from any foreign place

46 He would, of his benignant courtesy,

47 Make them good cheer, inquiring earnestly

48 For news of sundry realms, to learn, by word,

49 The wonders that they might have seen and heard.

50 Among some other things, especially

51 These merchants told him tales of fair Constance;

52 From such nobility, told of earnestly,

53 This sultan caught a dream of great pleasance,

54 And she so figured in his remembrance

55 That all his wish and all his busy care

56 Were, throughout life, to love that lady fair.

57 Now peradventure, in that mighty book

58 Which men call heaven, it had come to pass,

59 In stars, when first a living breath he took,

60 That he for love should get his death, alas!

61 For in the stars, far dearer than is glass,

62 Is written, God knows, read it he who can,-

63 And truth it is- the death of every man.

64 In stars, full many a winter over-worn,

65 Was written the death of Hector, Achilles,

66 Of Pompey, Julius, long ere they were born;

67 The strife at Thebes; and of great Hercules,

68 Of Samson, of Turnus, of Socrates,

69 The death to each; but men's wits are so dull

70 There is no man may read this to the full.

71 This sultan for his privy-council sent,

72 And, but to tell it briefly in this place,

73 He did to them declare his whole intent,

74 And said that, surely, save he might have grace

75 To gain Constance within a little space,

76 He was but dead; and charged them, speedily

77 To find out, for his life, some remedy.

78 By divers men, then, divers things were said;

79 They reasoned, and they argued up and down;

80 Full much with subtle logic there they sped;

81 They spoke of spells, of treachery in Rome town;

82 But finally, as to an end foreknown,

83 They were agreed that nothing should gainsay

84 A marriage, for there was no other way.

85 Then saw they therein so much difficulty,

86 When reasoning of it, (to make all plain,

87 Because such conflict and diversity

88 Between the laws of both lands long had lain)

89 They held: No Christian emperor were fain

90 To have his child wed under our sweet laws,

91 Given us by Mahomet for God's cause.

92 But he replied: Nay, rather then than lose

93 The Lady Constance, I'll be christened, yes!

94 I must be hers, I can no other choose.

95 I pray you let be no rebelliousness;

96 Save me my life, and do not be careless

97 In getting her who thus alone may cure

98 The woe whereof I cannot long endure.

99 What needs a copious dilation now?

100 I say: By treaties and by embassy,

101 And the pope's mediation, high and low,

102 And all the Church and all the chivalry,

103 That, to destruction of Mahometry

104 And to augmenting Christian faith so dear,

105 They were agreed, at last, as you shall hear.

106 The sultan and his entire baronage

107 And all his vassals, they must christened be,

108 And he shall have Constance in true marriage,

109 And gold (I know not in what quantity),

110 For which was found enough security;

111 This, being agreed, was sworn by either side.

112 Now, Constance fair, may great God be your guide!

113 Now would some men expect, as I may guess,

114 That I should tell of all the purveyance

115 The emperor, of his great nobleness,

116 Has destined for his daughter, fair Constance.

117 But men must know that so great ordinance

118 May no one tell within a little clause

119 As was arrayed there for so high a cause.

120 Bishops were named who were with her to wend,

121 Ladies and lords and knights of high renown,

122 And other folk- but I will make an end,

123 Except that it was ordered through the town

124 That everyone, with great devotion shown,

125 Should pray to Christ that He this marriage lead

126 To happy end, and the long voyage speed.

127 The day is come, at last, for leave-taking,

128 I say, the woeful, fatal day is come,

129 When there may be no longer tarrying,

130 But to go forth make ready all and some;

131 Constance, who was with sorrow overcome,

132 Rose, sad and pale, and dressed herself to wend;

133 For well she saw there was no other end.

134 Alas! What wonder is it that she wept?

135 She shall be sent to a strange. country, far

136 From friends that her so tenderly have kept,

137 And bound to one her joy to make or mar

138 Whom she knows not, nor what his people are.

139 Husbands are all good, and have been of yore,

140 That know their wives, but I dare say no more.

141 Father, she said, your wretched child, Constance,

142 Your daughter reared in luxury so soft,

143 And you, my mother, and my chief pleasance,

144 Above all things, save Christ Who rules aloft,

145 Constance your child would be remembered oft

146 Within your prayers, for I to Syria go,

147 Nor shall I ever see you more, ah no!

148 Unto the land of Barbary my fate

149 Compels me now, because it is your will;

150 But Christ, Who died to save our sad estate,

151 So give me grace, His mandates I'll fulfill;

152 I, wretched woman, though I die, 'tis nil.

153 Women are born to slave and to repent,

154 And to be subject to man's government.

155 I think, at Troy, when Pyrrhus broke the wall;

156 When Ilium burned; when Thebes fell, that city;

157 At Rome, for all the harm from Hannibal,

158 Who vanquished Roman arms in campaigns three-

159 I think was heard no weeping for pity

160 As in the chamber at her leave-taking;

161 Yet go she must, whether she weep or sing.

162 O primal-moving, cruel Firmament,

163 With thy diurnal pressure, that doth sway

164 And hurl all things from East to Occident,

165 Which otherwise would hold another way,

166 Thy pressure set the heavens in such array,

167 At the beginning of this wild voyage,

168 That cruel Mars hath murdered this marriage.

169 Unfortunate ascendant tortuous,

170 Of which the lord has helpless fall'n, alas,

171 Out of his angle to the darkest house!

172 O Mars! O Atazir in present case!

173 O feeble Moon, unhappy is thy pace!

174 Thou'rt in conjunction where thou'rt not received,

175 And where thou should'st go, thou hast not achieved.

176 Imprudent emperor of Rome, alas!

177 Was no philosopher in all thy town?

178 Is one time like another in such case?

179 Indeed, can there be no election shown,

180 Especially to folk of high renown,

181 And when their dates of birth may all men know?

182 Alas! We are too ignorant or too slow.

183 To ship is brought this fair and woeful maid,

184 Full decorously, with every circumstance.

185 Now Jesus Christ be with you all, she said;

186 And there's no more, save Farewell, fair Constance!

187 She strove to keep a cheerful countenance,

188 And forth I let her sail in this manner,

189 And turn again to matters far from her.

190 The mother of the sultan, well of vices,

191 Has heard the news of her son's full intent,

192 How he will leave the ancient sacrifices;

193 And she at once for her own council sent;

194 And so they came to learn what thing she meant.

195 And when they were assembled, each compeer,

196 She took her seat and spoke as you shall hear.

197 My lords, said she, you know well, every man,

198 My son intends to forgo and forget

199 The holy precepts of our Alkoran,

200 Given by God's own prophet, Mahomet.

201 But I will make one vow to great God yet:

202 The life shall rather from my body start

203 Than Islam's laws out of my faithful heart!

204 What should we get from taking this new creed

205 But thralldom for our bodies and penance?

206 And afterward, be drawn to Hell, indeed,

207 For thus denying our faith's inheritance?

208 But, lords, if you will give your sustenance,

209 And join me for the wisdom I've in store,

210 I swear to save us all for evermore.

211 They swore and they assented, every man,

212 To live by her and die, and by her stand;

213 And each of them, in what best wise he can,

214 Shall gather friends and followers into band;

215 And she shall take the enterprise in hand,

216 The form of which I soon will you apprise,

217 And to them all she spoke, then, in this wise.

218 We will first feign the Christian faith to take;

219 Cold water will not harm us from the rite;

220 And I will such a feast and revel make

221 As will, I trust, to lull be requisite.

222 For though his wife be christened ever so white,

223 She shall have need to wash away the red,

224 Though a full font of water be there sped.

225 O sultana, root of iniquity!

226 Virago, you Semiramis second!

227 O serpent hid in femininity,

228 Just as the Serpent deep in Hell is bound!

229 O pseudo-woman, all that may confound

230 Virtue and innocence, through your malice,

231 Is bred in you, the nest of every vice!

232 O Satan, envious since that same day

233 When thou wert banished from our heritage,

234 Well know'st thou unto woman thine old way!

235 Thou made'st Eve bring us into long bondage.

236 Thou wilt destroy this Christian marriage.

237 Thine instrument- ah welaway the while!-

238 Make'st thou of woman when thou wilt beguile!

239 Now this sultana whom I blame and harry,

240 Let, secretly, her council go their way.

241 Why should I longer in my story tarry?

242 She rode unto the sultan, on a day,

243 And told him she'd renounce her old faith, yea,

244 Be christened at priests' hands, with all the throng,

245 Repentant she'd been heathen for so long.

246 Beseeching him to do her the honour

247 To let her have the Christian men to feast:

248 To entertain them will be my labour.

249 The sultan said: I'll be at your behest.

250 And, kneeling, thanked her for that fair request,

251 So glad he was he knew not what to say;

252 She kissed her son, and homeward went her way.

253 Explicit prima pars.

254 Sequitur pars secunda.

255 Arrived now are these Christian folk at land,

256 In Syria, with a great stately rout,

257 And hastily this sultan gave command,

258 First to his mother and all the realm about,

259 Saying his wife was come, beyond a doubt,

260 And prayed her that she ride to meet the queen,

261 That all due honour might be shown and seen.

262 Great was the crush and rich was the array

263 Of Syrians and Romans, meeting here;

264 The mother of the sultan, rich and gay,

265 Received her open-armed, with smiling cheer,

266 As any mother might a daughter dear;

267 And to the nearest city, with the bride,

268 At gentle pace, right festively they ride.

269 I think the triumph of great Julius,

270 Whereof old Lucan make so long a boast,

271 Was not more royal nor more curious

272 Than was the assembling of this happy host.

273 But this same Scorpion, this wicked ghost-

274 The old sultana, for all her flattering,

275 Chose in that sign full mortally to sting.

276 The sultan came himself, soon after this,

277 So regally 'twere wonderful to tell,

278 And welcomed her into all joy and bliss.

279 And thus in such delight I let them dwell.

280 The fruit of all is what I now shall tell.

281 When came the time, men thought it for the best

282 Their revels cease, and got them home to rest.

283 The time came when this old sultana there

284 Has ordered up the feast of which I told,

285 Whereto the Christian folk did them prepare,

286 The company together, young and old.

287 There men might feast and royalty behold,

288 With dainties more than I can e'en surmise;

289 But all too dear they've bought it, ere they rise.

290 O sudden woe! that ever will succeed

291 On worldly bliss, infused with bitterness;

292 That ends the joy of earthly toil, indeed;

293 Woe holds at last the place of our gladness.

294 Hear, now, this counsel for your certainness:

295 Upon your most glad day, bear then in mind

296 The unknown harm and woe that come behind.

297 For, but to tell you briefly, in one word-

298 The sultan and the Christians, every one,

299 Were all hewed down and thrust through at the board,

300 Save the fair Lady Constance, she alone.

301 This old sultana, aye, this cursed crone

302 Has, with her followers, done this wicked deed,

303 For she herself would all the nation lead.

304 There was no Syrian that had been converted,

305 Being of the sultan's council resolute,

306 But was struck down, ere from the board he'd started

307 And Constance have they taken now, hot-foot,

308 And on a ship, of rudder destitute,

309 They her have placed, bidding her learn to sail

310 From Syria to Italy- or fail.

311 A certain treasure that she'd brought, they add,

312 And, truth to tell, of food great quantity

313 They have her given, and clothing too she had;

314 And forth she sails upon the wide salt sea.

315 O Constance mine, full of benignity,

316 O emperor's young daughter, from afar

317 He that is Lord of fortune be your star!

318 She crossed herself, and in a pious voice

319 Unto the Cross of Jesus thus said she:

320 O bright, O blessed Altar of my choice,

321 Red with the Lamb's blood full of all pity,

322 That washed the world from old iniquity,

323 Me from the Fiend and from his claws, oh keep

324 That day when I shall drown within the deep!

325 Victorious Tree, Protection of the true,

326 The only thing that worthy was to bear

327 The King of Heaven with His wounds so new,

328 The White Lamb Who was pierced through with the spear,

329 Driver of devils out of him and her

330 Who on Thine arms do lay themselves in faith,

331 Keep me and give me grace before my death!

332 For years and days drifted this maiden pure,

333 Through all the seas of Greece and to the strait

334 Of dark Gibraltar dier she adventure;

335 On many a sorry meal now may she bait;

336 Upon her death full often may she wait

337 Before the wild waves and the winds shall drive

338 Her vessel where it shall some day arrive.

339 Men might well ask: But why was she not slain?

340 And at that feast who could her body save?

341 And I reply to that demand, again:

342 Who saved young Daniel in the dreadful cave

343 Where every other man, master and knave,

344 Was killed by lions ere he might up-start?

345 No one, save God, Whom he bore in his heart.

346 God willed to show this wondrous miracle

347 Through her, that we should see His mighty works;

348 And Christ Who every evil can dispel,

349 By certain means does oft, as know all clerks,

350 Do that whereof the end in darkness lurks

351 For man's poor wit, which of its ignorance

352 Cannot conceive His careful purveyance.

353 Now, since she was not slain at feast we saw,

354 Who kept her that she drowned not in the sea?

355 But who kept Jonah in the fish's maw

356 Till he was spewed forth there at Nineveh?

357 Well may men know it was no one but He

358 Who saved the Hebrew people from drowning

359 When, dry-shod, through the sea they went walking.

360 Who bade the four great spirits of tempest,

361 That power have to harry land and sea,

362 Not north, nor south, nor yet to east, nor west

363 Shall ye molest the ocean, land, or tree?

364 Truly, the Captain of all this was He

365 Who from the storm has aye this woman kept,

366 As well when waking as in hours she slept.

367 Where might this woman get her drink and meat?

368 Three years and more, how lasted her supply?

369 Who gave Egyptian Mary food to eat

370 In cave desert? None but Christ, say I.

371 Five thousand folk, the gospels testify,

372 On five loaves and two fishes once did feed.

373 And thus God sent abundance for her need.

374 Forth into our own ocean then she came,

375 Through all our wild white seas, until at last,

376 Under a keep, whose name I cannot name,

377 Far up Northumberland, her ship was cast,

378 And on the sands drove hard and stuck so fast

379 That thence it moved not, no, for all the tide,

380 It being Christ's will that she should there abide.

381 The warden of the castle down did fare

382 To view this wreck, and through the ship he sought

383 And found this weary woman, full of care;

384 He found, also, the treasure she had brought.

385 In her own language mercy she besought

386 That he would help her soul from body win

387 To free her from the plight that she was in.

388 A kind of bastard Latin did she speak,

389 But, nevertheless, these folk could understand;

390 The constable no longer thought to seek,

391 But led the sorrowing woman to the land;

392 There she knelt down and thanked God, on the sand.

393 But who or what she was, she would not say,

394 For threat or promise, though she died that day.

395 She said she'd been bewildered by the sea,

396 And had lost recollection, by her truth;

397 The warden had for her so great pity,

398 As had his wife, that both they wept for ruth.

399 She was so diligent to toil, in sooth,

400 To serve and please all folk within that place,

401 That all loved her who looked upon her face.

402 This warden and Dame Hermengild, his wife,

403 Were pagans, and that country, everywhere;

404 But Hermengild now loved her as her life,

405 And Constance has so long abided there,

406 And prayed so oft, with many a tearful prayer,

407 That Jesus has converted, through His grace,

408 Dame Hermengild, the lady of that place.

409 In all that land no Christian dared speak out

410 All Christians having fled from that country,

411 For pagan men had conquered all about

412 The regions of the north, by land and sea;

413 To Wales was fled the Christianity

414 Of the old Britons dwelling in this isle;

415 That was their refuge in the wild meanwhile.

416 Yet ne'er were Christian Britons so exiled

417 But some of them assembled, privately,

418 To honour Christ, and heathen folk beguiled;

419 And near the castle dwelt of such men three.

420 But one of them was blind and could not see,

421 Save with the inner optics of his mind,

422 Wherewith all men see after they go blind.

423 Bright was the sun upon that summer's day

424 When went the warden and his wife also,

425 And Constance, down the hill, along the way

426 Toward the sea, a furlong off, or so,

427 To frolic and to wander to and fro;

428 And in their walk on this blind man they came,

429 With eyes fast shut, a creature old and lame.

430 In name of Christ! this blind old Briton cried,

431 Dame Hermengild, give me my sight again.

432 But she was frightened of the words, and sighed,

433 Lest that her husband, briefly to be plain,

434 Should have her, for her love of Jesus, slain;

435 Till Constance strengthened her and bade her work

436 The will of God, as daughter of His kirk.

437 The warden was confounded by that sight,

438 And asked: What mean these words and this affair?

439 Constance replied: Sir, it is Jesus' might

440 That helps all poor folk from the foul Fiend's snare.

441 And so far did she our sweet faith declare

442 That she the constable, before 'twas eve,

443 Converted, and in Christ made him believe.

444 This constable, though not lord of that place

445 Where he'd found Constance, wrecked upon the sand,

446 Had held it well for many a winter's space,

447 For Alla, king of all Northumberland,

448 Who was full wise and hardy of his hand

449 Against the Scots, as men may read and hear,

450 But I will to my tale again- give ear.

451 Satan, that ever waits, men to beguile,

452 Saw now, in Constance, all perfection grown,

453 And wondering how to be revenged the while,

454 He made a young knight, living in the town,

455 Love her so madly, with foul passion flown,

456 That verily he thought his life should spill,

457 Save that, of her, be once might have his will.

458 He wooed her, but it all availed him naught;

459 She would not sin in any wise or way;

460 And, for despite, he plotted in his thought

461 To make her die a death of shame some day.

462 He waited till the warden was away,

463 And, stealthily by night, he went and crept

464 To Hermengild's bed-chamber, while she slept.

465 Weary with waking for her orisons,

466 Slept Constance, and Dame Hermengild also.

467 This knight, by Satan's tempting, came at once

468 And softly to the bedside he did go.

469 And cut the throat of Hermengild, and so

470 Laid the hot reeking knife by fair Constance,

471 And went his way- where God give him mischance!

472 Soon after came the warden home again,

473 And with him Alla, king of all that land,

474 And saw his wife so pitilessly slain,

475 For which he wept and cried and wrung his hand;

476 And in the bed the bloody dagger, and

477 The Lady Constance. Ah! What could she say?

478 For very woe her wits went all away.

479 King Alla was apprised of this sad chance,

480 And told the time, and where, and in what wise

481 Was found in a wrecked ship the fair Constance,

482 As heretofore you've heard my tale apprise.

483 But in the king's heart pity did arise

484 When he saw so benignant a creature

485 Fallen in distress of such misadventure.

486 For as the lamb unto his death is brought,

487 So stood this innocent before the king;

488 And the false knight that had this treason wrought,

489 He swore that it was she had done this thing.

490 Nevertheless, there was much sorrowing

491 Among the people, saying, We cannot gues

492 That she has done so great a wickedness.

493 For we have seen her always virtuous,

494 And loving Hermengild as she loved life.

495 To this bore witness each one in that house,

496 Save he that slew the victim with his knife.

497 The gentle king suspected. motive rife

498 In that man's heart; and thought he would inquire

499 Deeper therein, the truth to learn entire.

500 Alas, Constance! You have no champion,

501 And since you cannot fight, it's welaway!

502 But He Who died for us the cross upon,

503 And Satan bound (who lies yet where he lay),

504 So be your doughty Champion this day!

505 For, except Christ a miracle make known,

506 You shall be slain, though guiltless, and right soon.

507 She dropped upon her knees and thus she prayed:

508 Immortal God, Who saved the fair Susanna

509 From lying blame, and Thou, O gracious Maid

510 (Mary, I mean, the daughter of Saint Anna),

511 Before Child the angels sing hosanna,

512 If I be guiltless of this felony,

513 My succour be, for otherwise I die!

514 Have you not sometime seen a pallid face

515 Among the crowd, of one that's being led

516 Toward his death- one who had got no grace?

517 And such a pallor on his face was spread

518 All men must mark it, full of horrid dread,

519 Among the other faces in the rout.

520 So stood fair Constance there and looked about.

521 O queens that live in all prosperity,

522 Duchesses, and you ladies, every one,

523 Have pity, now, on her adversity;

524 An emperor's young daughter stands alone;

525 She has no one to whom to make her moan.

526 O royal blood that stands there in such dread,

527 Far are your friends away in your great need!

528 This King Alla has such compassion shown

529 (Since gentle heart is full of all pity),

530 That from his two eyes ran the tears right down.

531 Now hastily go fetch a book, quoth he,

532 And if this knight will swear that it was she

533 Who slew the woman, then will we make clear

534 The judge we shall appoint the case to hear.

535 A book of Gospels writ in British tongue

536 Was brought, and on this Book he swore anon

537 Her guilt; but then the people all among

538 A clenched hand smote him on the shoulder-bone,

539 And down he fell, as stunned as by a stone,

540 And both his eyes burst forth out of his face

541 In sight of everybody in that place.

542 A voice was heard by all that audience,

543 Saying: You have here slandered the guiltless

544 Daughter of Holy Church, in high Presence;

545 Thus have you done, and further I'll not press.

546 Whereat were all the folk aghast, no less;

547 As men amazed they stand there, every one,

548 For dread of vengeance, save Constance alone.

549 Great was the fear and, too, the repentance

550 Of those that held a wrong suspicion there

551 Against this simple innocent Constance;

552 And by this miracle so wondrous fair,

553 And by her mediation and her prayer,

554 The king, with many another in that place,

555 Was there converted, thanks to Christ His grace!

556 This lying knight was slain for his untruth,

557 By sentence of King Alla, hastily;

558 Yet Constance had upon his death great ruth.

559 And after this, Jesus, of His mercy,

560 Caused Alla take in marriage, solemnly,

561 This holy maiden, so bright and serene,

562 And thus has Christ made fair Constance a queen.

563 But who was sad, if I am not to lie,

564 At this but Lady Donegild, she who

565 Was the king's mother, full of tyranny?

566 She thought her wicked heart must burst in two;

567 She would he'd never thought this thing to do;

568 And so she hugged her anger that he'd take

569 So strange a wife as this creature must make.

570 Neither with chaff nor straw it pleases me

571 To make a long tale, here, but with the corn.

572 Why should I tell of all the royalty

573 At that wedding, or who went first, well-born,

574 Or who blew out a trumpet or a horn?

575 The fruit of every tale is but to say,

576 They eat and drink and dance and sing and play.

577 They went to bed, as was but just and right,

578 For though some wives are pure and saintly things,

579 They must endure, in patience, in the night,

580 Such necessaries as make pleasurings

581 To men whom they have wedded well with rings,

582 And lay their holiness a while aside;

583 There may no better destiny betide.

584 On her he got a man-child right anon;

585 And to a bishop and the warden eke

586 He gave his wife to guard, while he was gone

587 To Scotland, there his enemies to seek;

588 Now Constance, who so humble is, and meek,

589 So long is gone with child that, hushed and still,

590 She keeps her chamber, waiting on Christ's will.

591 The time was come, a baby boy she bore;

592 Mauritius they did name him at the font;

593 This constable sent forth a messenger

594 And wrote unto King Alla at the front

595 Of all this glad event, a full account,

596 And other pressing matters did he say.

597 He took the letter and went on his way.

598 This messenger, to forward his own ends,

599 To the king's mother rode with swiftest speed,

600 Humbly saluting her as down he bends:

601 Madam, quoth he, be joyful now indeed!

602 To God a hundred thousand thanks proceed.

603 The queen has borne a child, beyond all doubt,

604 To joy and bliss of all this land about.

605 Lo, here are letters sealed that say this thing,

606 Which I must bear with all the speed I may;

607 If you will send aught to your son, the king,

608 I am your humble servant, night and day.

609 Donegild answered: As for this time, nay;

610 But here tonight I'd have you take your rest;

611 Tomorrow I will say what I think best.

612 This messenger drank deep of ale and wine,

613 And stolen were his letters, stealthily,

614 Out of his box, while slept he like a swine;

615 And counterfeited was, right cleverly,

616 Another letter, wrought full sinfully,

617 Unto the king; of this event so near,

618 All from the constable, as you shall hear.

619 The letter said, the queen delivered was

620 Of such a fiendish, horrible creature,

621 That in the castle none so hardy as

622 Durst, for a lengthy time, there to endure.

623 The mother was an elf or fairy, sure,

624 Come there by chance of charm, or sorcery,

625 And all good men hated her company.

626 Sad was the king when this letter he'd seen;

627 But to no man he told his sorrows sore,

628 But with his own hand he wrote back again:

629 Welcome what's sent from Christ, for evermore,

630 To me, who now am learned in His lore;

631 Lord, welcome be Thy wish, though hidden still,

632 My own desire is but to do Thy will.

633 Guard well this child, though foul it be or fair,

634 And guard my wife until my home-coming;

635 Christ, when He wills it, may send me an heir

636 More consonant than this with my liking.

637 This letter sealed, and inwardly weeping,

638 To the same messenger 'twas taken soon,

639 And forth he went; there's no more to be done.

640 O messenger, possessed of drunkenness,

641 Strong is your breath, your limbs do falter aye,

642 And you betray all secrets, great and less;

643 Your mind is gone, you jangle like a jay;

644 Your face is mottled in a new array!

645 Where drunkenness can reign, in any rout,

646 There is no counsel kept, beyond a doubt.

647 O Donegild, there is no English mine

648 Fit for your malice and your tyranny!

649 Therefore you to the Fiend I do resign,

650 Let him go write of your foul treachery!

651 Fie, mannish women! Nay, by God, I lie!

652 Fie, fiendish spirit, for I dare well tell,

653 Though you walk here, your spirit is in Hell!

654 This messenger came from the king again,

655 And at the king's old mother's court did light,

656 And she was of this messenger full fain

657 To please him in whatever way she might.

658 He drank until his girdle was too tight,

659 He slept and snored and mumbled, drunken-wise,

660 All night, until the sun began to rise.

661 Again were his letters stolen, every one,

662 And others counterfeited, in this wise:

663 The king commands his constable, anon,

664 On pain of hanging by the high justice,

665 That he shall suffer not, in any guise,

666 Constance within the kingdom to abide

667 Beyond three days and quarter of a tide.

668 But in the ship wherein she came to strand

669 She and her infant son and all her gear

670 Shall be embarked and pushed out from the land,

671 And charge her that she never again come here.

672 O Constance mine, well might your spirit fear,

673 And, sleeping, in your dream have great grievance

674 When Donegild arranged this ordinance.

675 This messenger, the morrow, when he woke,

676 Unto the castle held the nearest way,

677 And to the constable the letter took;

678 And when he'd read and learned what it did say,

679 Often he cried Alas! and Welaway!

680 Lord Christ, quoth he, how may this world endure?

681 So full of sin is many a bad creature.

682 O mighty God, and is it then Thy will?

683 Since Thou art righteous judge, how can it be

684 That innocence may suffer so much ill

685 And wicked folk reign in prosperity?

686 O good Constance, alas! Ah, woe is me

687 That I must be your torturer, or die

688 A shameful death! There is no other way.

689 Wept both the young and old of all that place

690 Because the king this cursed letter sent,

691 And Constance, with a deathly pallid face,

692 Upon the fourth day to the ship she went.

693 Nevertheless, she took as good intent

694 The will of Christ, and kneeling on the strand,

695 She said: Lord, always welcome Thy command!

696 He that did keep me from all lying blame

697 The while I lived among you, sun and snow,

698 He can still guard me from all harm and shame

699 Upon salt seas, albeit I see not how.

700 As strong as ever He was, so is He now.

701 In Him I trust and in His Mother dear,

702 He is my sail, the star by which I steer.

703 Her little child lay crying in her arm,

704 And kneeling, piteously to him she said:

705 Peace, little son, I will do you no harm.

706 With that the kerchief took she from her braid,

707 And binding it across his eyes, she laid

708 Again her arm about and lulled him fast

709 Asleep, and then to Heaven her eyes up-cast.

710 Mother, she said, O Thou bright Maid, Mary,

711 True is it that through woman's incitement

712 Mankind was banished and is doomed to die,

713 For which Thy Son upon the cross was rent;

714 Thy blessed eyes saw all of His torment;

715 Wherefore there's no comparison between

716 Thy woe and any woe of man, though keen.

717 Thou sawest them slay Thy Son before Thine eyes;

718 And yet lives now my little child, I say!

719 O Lady bright, to Whom affliction cries,

720 Thou glory of womanhood, O Thou fair May,

721 Haven of refuge, bright star of the day,

722 Pity my child, Who of Thy gentleness

723 Hast pity on mankind in all distress!

724 O little child, alas! What is your guilt,

725 Who never wrought the smallest sin? Ah me,

726 Why will your too hard father have you killed?

727 Have mercy, O dear constable! cried she,

728 And let my little child bide, safe from sea;

729 And if you dare not save him, lest they blame

730 Then kiss him once in his dear father's name!

731 Therewith she gazed long backward at the land,

732 And said: Farewell, my husband merciless!

733 And up she rose and walked right down the strand

734 Toward the ship; followed her all the press;

735 And ever she prayed her child to cry the less;

736 And took her leave; and with a high intent

737 She crossed herself; and aboard ship she went.

738 Victualled had been the ship, 'tis true- indeed

739 Abundantly- for her, and for long space;

740 Of many other things that she should need

741 She had great plenty, thanks be to God's grace!

742 Through wind and weather may God find her place

743 And bring her home! I can no better say;

744 But out to sea she stood upon her way.

745 Explicit secunda pars.

746 Sequitur pars tercia.

747 Alla the king came home soon after this

748 Unto his castle, of the which I've told,

749 And asked for wife and child, whom he did miss.

750 The constable about his heart grew cold,

751 And plainly all the story he then told,

752 As you have heard, I cannot tell it better,

753 And showed the king his seal and the false letter.

754 And said: My lord, as you commanded me,

755 On pain of death, so have I done- in vain!

756 The messenger was tortured until he

757 Made known the facts to all men, full and plain,

758 From night to night, in what beds he had lain.

759 And thus, by dint of subtle questioning,

760 'Twas reasoned out from whom this harm did spring.

761 The hand was known, now, that the letter wrote,

762 And all the venom of this cursed deed,

763 But in what wise I certainly know not,

764 The effect is this, that Alla, for her meed,

765 His mother slew, as men may plainly read,

766 She being false to her sworn allegiance,

767 And thus old Donegild ended with mischance.

768 The sorrow that this Alla, night and day,

769 Felt for his wife, and for his child also,

770 There is no human tongue on earth to say.

771 But now will I back to fair Constance go,

772 Who drifted on the seas, in pain and woe,

773 Five years and more, as was Lord Christ's command,

774 Before her ship approached to any land.

775 Under a heathen castle, at the last,

776 Whereof the name not in my text I find,

777 Constance and her young son the sea did cast.

778 Almighty God, Redeemer of mankind,

779 Have Constance and her little child in mind!

780 Who must fall into heathen hands and soon

781 Be near to death, as I shall tell anon.

782 Down from the castle came full many a wight

783 To stare upon the ship and on Constance.

784 But briefly, from the castle, on a night,

785 The warden's steward- God give him mischance!-

786 A thief who had renounced allegiance

787 To Christ, came to the ship and said he should

788 Possess her body, whether or not she would.

789 Woe for this wretched woman then began,

790 Her child cried out and she cried, piteously;

791 But blessed Mary helped her soon; the man

792 With whom she struggled well and mightily,

793 This thief fell overboard all suddenly,

794 And in the sea was drowned by God's vengeance;

795 And thus has Christ unsullied kept Constance.

796 O foul desire of lechery, lo thine end!

797 Not only dost thou cripple a man's mind,

798 But verily dost thou his body rend;

799 The end of all thy work and thy lusts blind

800 Is bitterness; how many may we find

801 That not for actions but for mere intent

802 To do this sin, to shame or death are sent.

803 How could this poor weak woman have the strength

804 To keep herself against that renegade?

805 Goliath of immeasurable length,

806 How could young David such a death have made,

807 So slight and without armour? How arrayed

808 Himself to look upon that dreadful face?

809 Men may well see, it was but God's own grace!

810 Who gave to Judith courage all reckless

811 To slay him, Holofernes, in his tent,

812 And to deliver out of wretchedness

813 The folk of God? I say, for this intent

814 That just as God a soul of vigour sent

815 To them, and saved them out of their mischance,

816 So sent He might and vigour to Constance.

817 Forth went her ship and through the narrow mouth

818 Of Ceuta and Gibraltar, on its way,

819 Sometimes to west, and sometimes north or south,

820 Aye and sometimes east, many a weary day,

821 Until Christ's Mother (blest be She for aye!)

822 Did destine, out of good that is endless,

823 To make an end of Constance' heaviness.

824 But let us leave this Constance now, and turn

825 To speak of that same Roman emperor

826 Who does, from Syria, by letters, learn

827 The slaughter of Christians and the dishonour

828 Done to his daughter by a vile traitor-

829 I mean that old sultana, years ago,

830 Who, at the feast, slew all men, high and low.

831 For which this emperor did send anon

832 A senator, with royal ordinance,

833 And other lords, God knows, and many a one,

834 On Syrians to take full high vengeance.

835 They burn, they slay, they give them all mischance

836 Through many a day; but, briefly to make end,

837 Homeward to Rome, at last, the victors wend.

838 This senator returned with victory

839 To Rome again, sailing right royally,

840 And spoke the ship (so goes the old story)

841 In which our Constance sat so piteously,

842 Nothing he knew of who she was, or why

843 She was in such a plight; nor would she say

844 Aught of herself, though she might die that day.

845 He took her into Rome, and to his wife

846 Gave her in charge, and her young son also;

847 And in his house she lived awhile her life.

848 Thus can Our Lady bring from deepest woe

849 Most woeful Constance, aye and more, we know.

850 And for a long time dwelt she in that place,

851 Engaged in God's good works, such was her grace.

852 The senator's good wife her own aunt was,

853 Yet for all that she knew her never the more;

854 I will no longer tarry in this case,

855 But to King Alla, whom we left, of yore,

856 Weeping for his lost wife and sighing sore.

857 I will return, and I will leave Constance

858 Under the senator's roof and governance.

859 King Alla, who had had his mother slain,

860 Upon a day fell to such repentance,

861 That, but to tell it briefly and be plain,

862 To Rome he came to pay his just penance

863 And put himself in the pope's ordinance,

864 In high and low; and Jesus Christ he sought

865 To pardon all the wicked deeds he'd wrought.

866 The news anon through all Rome town was borne,

867 How King Alla would come on pilgrimage,

868 By harbingers that unto him were sworn;

869 Whereat the senator, as was usage,

870 Rode out to him, with many of his lineage,

871 As well to show his own magnificence

872 As do to any king a reverence.

873 Great welcome gave this noble senator

874 To King Alla, and he to him also;

875 Each of them showed the other much honour;

876 And so befell that, in a day or so,

877 This senator to King Alla did go

878 To feast, and briefly, if I may not lie,

879 Constance' young son went in his company.

880 Some men would say, 'twas instance of Constance

881 That sent him with the senator to feast;

882 I cannot tell you every circumstance,

883 Be it as may be, he was there, at least.

884 But truth is that, at his mother's behest,

885 Before the king, during the banquet's space,

886 The child stood, looking in King Alla's face.

887 This child aroused within the king great wonder,

888 And to the senator he said, anon:

889 Whose is the fair child that is standing yonder?

890 I know not, quoth he, by God and Saint John!

891 A mother he has, but father has he none

892 That I know of- and briefly, at a bound,

893 He told King Alla how this child was found.

894 But God knows, said this senator, as well,

895 So virtuous a liver, in my life

896 I never saw, as she is, nor heard tell

897 Of earthly woman, maiden, no nor wife.

898 I dare say, she would rather have a knife

899 Thrust through her breast than play a female trick;

900 There is no man could bring her to the prick.

901 Now this boy was as like unto Constance

902 As it was possible for one to be.

903 Alla had kept the face in remembrance

904 Of Dame Constance, and thereon now mused he:

905 Mayhap the mother of the child was she

906 Who was his wife. And inwardly he sighed,

907 And left the table with a hasty stride.

908 In faith, thought he, a phantom's in my head!

909 I ought to hold, by any right judgment,

910 That in the wide salt sea my wife is dead.

911 And afterward he made this argument:

912 How know I but that Christ has hither sent

913 My wife by sea, as surely as she went

914 To my own land, the which was evident?

915 And, after noon, home with the senator

916 Went Alla, all to test this wondrous chance.

917 The senator did Alla great honour,

918 And hastily he sent for fair Constance.

919 But, trust me, she was little fain to dance

920 When she had heard the cause of that command.

921 Scarcely upon her two feet could she stand.

922 When Alla saw his wife, he greeted her,

923 Then wept till it was a sad thing to see.

924 For, at the first glance, when she entered there,

925 He knew full verily that it was she.

926 And she for grief stood dumb as ever tree;

927 So was her heart shut up in her distress

928 When she remembered his unkindliness.

929 Twice did she swoon away there, in his sight;

930 He wept and he protested piteously.

931 Now God, quoth he, and all His angels bright

932 So truly on my spirit have mercy

933 As of your ills all innocent am I,

934 As is Maurice, my son, so like your face,

935 Or may the foul Fiend take me from this place!

936 Long was the sobbing and the bitter pain

937 Before their woeful hearts could find surcease;

938 Great was the pity to hear them complain,

939 Whereof their sorrows surely did increase.

940 I pray you all my labour to release;

941 I cannot tell their grief until tomorrow,

942 I am so weary, speaking long of sorrow.

943 But, truth being known and all doubt now dismissed,

944 And Alla proven guiltless of her woe,

945 I think a hundred times they must have kissed,

946 And such great bliss there was between the two

947 That, save the joy that nevermore shall go,

948 There was naught like it, present time or past,

949 Nor shall be, ever, while the world shall last.

950 Then prayed she of her husband, all meekly,

951 As for her pain a splendid anodyne,

952 That he would pray her father, specially,

953 That, of his majesty, he would incline

954 And that, some day, would come with him to dine;

955 She prayed him, also, he should in no way

956 Unto her father one word of her say.

957 Some men would say, it was the child Maurice

958 Did bear this message to the emperor;

959 But, as I guess, King Alla was too nice

960 In etiquette to one of such honour

961 As he that was of Christendom the flower,

962 To send a child; and it is best to deem

963 He went himself, and so it well may seem.

964 This emperor has granted, graciously,

965 To come to dinner, as he's been besought,

966 And, well I think, he pondered busily

967 Upon the child, and on his daughter thought.

968 Alla went to his inn, and, as he ought,

969 Made ready for the feast in every wise

970 As far as his experience could devise.

971 The morrow came, and Alla rose to dress,

972 And, too, his wife, the emperor to meet;

973 And forth they rode in joy and happiness.

974 And when she saw her father in the street,

975 She lighted down, and falling at his feet,

976 Father, quoth she, your young child, your Constance,

977 Is now gone clean out of your remembrance.

978 I am your daughter Constance, then said she,

979 That once you sent to Syria. 'Tis I.

980 It is I, father, who, on the salt sea,

981 Was sent, alone to drift and doomed to die.

982 But now, good father, mercy must I cry:

983 Send me no more to heathendom, godless,

984 But thank my lord, here, for his kindliness.

985 But all the tender joy, who'll tell it all

986 That was between the three who thus are met?

987 But of my tale, now, make an end I shall;

988 The day goes fast, I will no longer fret.

989 These happy folk at dinner are all set,

990 And there, in joy and bliss, I let them dwell;

991 Happier a thousand fold than I can tell.

992 This child Maurice was, since then, emperor

993 Made by the pope, and lived right christianly.

994 Unto Christ's Church he did a great honour;

995 But I let all his story pass me by.

996 Of Constance is my tale, especially.

997 In ancient Roman histories men may find

998 The life of Maurice; I've it not in mind.

999 This King Alla, when came the proper day,

1000 With his Constance, his saintly wife so sweet,

1001 To England went again, by the straight way,

1002 Where they did live in joy and quiet meet.

1003 But little while it lasts us, thus complete.

1004 Joy of this world, for time will not abide;

1005 From day to day it changes as the tide.

1006 Who ever lived in such delight one day

1007 That was not stirred therefrom by his conscience,

1008 Desire, or anger, or some kindred fray,

1009 Envy, or pride, or passion, or offense?

1010 I say but to one ending this sentence:

1011 That but a little while in joy's pleasance

1012 Lasted the bliss of Alla and Constance.

1013 For death, that takes from high and low his rent,

1014 When but a year had passed, as I should guess,

1015 Out of the world King Alla quickly sent,

1016 For whom Constance felt heavy wretchedness.

1017 Now let us pray that God his soul will bless!

1018 And of Dame Constance, finally to say,

1019 Towards the town of Rome she took her way.

1020 To Rome is come this holy one and pure,

1021 And finds that all her friends are safe and sound;

1022 For now she's done with all her adventure;

1023 And when she'd come there, and her father found,

1024 Down on her two knees fell she to the ground,

1025 Weeping but joyful gave she God her praise

1026 A hundred thousand times for all His ways.

1027 In virtue, and with alms and holy deed,

1028 They all live there, nor ever asunder wend;

1029 Till death does part them, such a life they lead.

1030 And fare now well, my tale is at an end.

1031 And Jesus Christ, Who of His might may send

1032 Joy after woe, govern us by His grace

1033 And keep us all that now are in this place! Amen.