

The Physician's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



Here follows the Physician's Tale.

There was a knight, as Titus Livius¹ tells, called Virginius, full of honor and nobility, strong in friends and in wealth. 4

He had one daughter by his wife, and never another child. The maiden was fair and of excellent beauty above every creature; for Nature had wrought her with singular diligence, and so excellently as though she would say, "Lo, I, Nature, when I wish, can thus form and color a creature; who can imitate me? Not Pygmalion², even if he may forge and hammer or carve or paint forever, and I dare swear that Apelles³ and Zeuxis⁴ would toil in vain if they presumed to carve or paint, forge or hammer, and counterfeit me. 18

"For He that is the chief shaper has made me His vicar-general to form and paint earthly creatures just as I wish; and each thing under the waxing and waning moon is in my care. And I ask counsel of none; my Lord and I are in full accord, and in honor of Him I made her, as I make all my other creatures, whatever their hue or form." Thus, it seems to me, Nature would say. 29

This maiden, in whom Nature took such joy, was fourteen years old. Just as she paints a lily white and a rose red, so upon the gracious limbs of this noble creature, before she was born, did Nature paint these colors where such colors should be. And Phoebus⁵ did dye her great tresses in similar fashion to the streams of his burning heat. And if her beauty was

¹ Titus Livius. Livy, the Roman historian (59 BC – 17 AD).

² Pygmalion. Mythological King of Cyprus and sculptor of Galatea, who came to life upon Venus' granting of Pygmalion's request.

³ Apelles. Legendary Greek sculptor (fl. 4th century BC) of the tomb of Darius the Great. Court painter to Philip and Alexander.

⁴ Zeuxis. Athenian artist who developed techniques of the use light and shadow. Painted so well that in a painting contest his painting of grapes was so real that birds flew down to peck them; his rival won the contest when the judges tried to lift the painted veil, which was the painting.

⁵ Phoebus. The god of the sun.

excellent, a thousand-fold more was she virtuous; in her there lacked no quality that discerning people can praise. 42

She was chaste, as well in spirit as in body, for which reason she bloomed in virginity with all humility and abstinence, temperance and patience, and with moderation in her bearing and adornment. She was ever discreet in replying. Though I dare to say she was as wise as Pallas⁶ and her speech was womanly and direct, she used no artificial terms to appear wise. She spoke according to her degree, and all her words, great and small, were full of virtue and good breeding. 54

She was modest with a young maiden's modesty, constant in heart and at all times busy to drive out sloth. Bacchus⁷ had no mastery over her mouth, for wine and youth foster Venus⁸, as fire when men cast oil or grease in it. For virtue itself and not by any constraint, she often pretended to be sick, to flee company where folly was likely to be talked about, as at feasts, revels and dances, that might be occasions for wantonness. Such things make children too soon mature and bold, which has always been perilous. All too soon may the child learn to be bold when she has become a wife. 71

And you elderly handmaids, who have the governing of lords' daughters, do not neglect my words, but remember that you are set over them only for one of two reasons; either because you have kept virtue, or because you have fallen into frailty, and, having wholly forsaken such misconduct forevermore, know well the old dance⁹. 81

Therefore, for Christ's sake, see that you are not slack in teaching them virtue. A poacher of venison, who has forsworn his old greed and cunning, can keep a forest the best of any. Now watch over them well, for you can if you wish. Look well that you agree to no vice, lest you be condemned for your evil mind, for whoever does so is surely a traitor. 89

And take heed of this: of all treason the most pestilent and hellish is when a creature betrays innocence. You fathers and mothers as well, who have one or two children, the responsibility of protection over them is all yours, while they are under your care. Beware that by the example of your life or by your negligence in correcting they perish

⁶ Pallas. Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom.

⁷ Bacchus. God of wine.

⁸ Venus. Goddess of love.

⁹ Old dance. The game of love and its tricks.

not, for if they do, I dare truly say you shall dearly pay for it. Under a soft and negligent shepherd, the wolf has torn to pieces many sheep and lambs. Let this one example suffice here, for I must return to my tale. 105

This maiden of whom I tell so kept herself in such a way that she needed no governess, for in her life maidens might read, as in a book, every good word and act that is fitting for a virtuous maiden; so prudent and kind was she. In every direction the fame of her beauty and goodness spread, so that throughout that land all who loved virtue praised her; except envy alone, that is ever sorry for other people's happiness and glad for their sorrow and sickness (the doctor Augustine¹⁰ so describes it). 117

One day this maiden went toward a temple in the town, with her dear mother, as is the manner of young maidens. Now in this town was a justice, who was the governor of this region, and it so happened that he cast his eye upon this maiden, noting her well as she came past where he stood. Immediately his heart and thought were changed, he was so caught by her beauty, and he said privately to himself, "This maiden shall be mine in spite of any man." 129

Then the fiend slipped into his heart and showed him right soon how by cunning he might win the maiden for his purpose; neither by force nor bribe, he thought, could he succeed, for she was strong in her friends and confirmed in such extreme goodness that well he knew he could never move her to evil. For this reason after great deliberation he sent for a churl in that city whom he knew to be both bold and cunning. To him this judge told his tale in secret fashion and took his assurance to tell no creature; and if he did, he should lose his head. When this cursed plan was agreed to, the judge was glad, and thanked him greatly and gave him rich and precious gifts. 148

When the conspiracy was planned from point to point, how his sin should be subtly performed, as you shall soon hear plainly, the churl whose name was Claudius went home. This false judge was called Appius. (So was his name, for this is no fable but a notable historical thing; the substance of it is true without any doubt.) This judge went about to hasten his joy as much as he was able. And so it happened soon after, as the book tells us, that he was sitting in his court, as he was accustomed, and giving out his judgments upon various cases. This false churl came

rushing in and said, "So please you, lord, give me justice on this piteous petition of complaint against Virginius. And if he shall say it is not true, I will prove it and find good witnesses who will prove that my petition tells the truth." 170

The judge answered, "Unless he is here I cannot give a final sentence. Let him be called, and after that I will listen gladly. You shall have full justice here, and no wrong." 174

Virginius came to know what the judge desired, and the cursed petition was read without delay, the effect of which you shall hear: "To you my dear lord, Sir Appius, show your poor servant Claudius how a knight, called Virginius, against the law and all equity, and expressly against my will, holds my servant, my rightful slave, who one night was stolen from my house while she was very young. This will I prove by witness, lord, as will please you. She was never his daughter, whatever he may say. For this reason I petition you, my lord the judge, so please you, yield to me my servant." Lo, this was the substance of his petition. 190

Virginius began to stare upon the churl; but before he could tell his tale (which he would have proven as a knight should, and have certified by many witnesses, that his adversary said was false), this cursed judge would not wait at all nor hear a word more from him, but gave his judgment in this way: "I decree that this churl shall have his servant immediately; you shall keep her in your house no longer. This is my award; go bring her forth and put her in our keeping; this churl shall have his servant." 202

When the worthy knight by the justice's sentence must by force give his daughter to the judge, to live in sin, he went home and sat him down in his hall, summoned his dear daughter, and with a face deathlike as cold ashes gazed upon her humble face with a father's pity striking through his heart, albeit he would not turn from his purpose. "Daughter," he said, "Virginia, there are two ways, death or shame, that you may follow, alas that I was born! For never have you deserved to die by blade or sword. O ender of my life, daughter dear, whom I fostered with such joy that you were never out of my memory! 220

"O daughter who are my last woe and last joy of my life, oh gem of chastity, take your death in patience, for this is my judgment. 224

"For love and not for hate you must die. My merciful hand must strike off your head. Alas that Appius ever

¹⁰ Augustine. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who defined envy in his *Commentary on the Psalms* as "the hatred of another's good fortune."

saw you! He has given you this false judgment today." And he told her the entire case as you have heard; there is no need to tell it again. 230

"Mercy, dear father," said the maiden, and laid her two arms about his neck, as she was accustomed to do; the tears burst from her two eyes as she said, "Good father, must I die? Is there no help?" 236

"No, dear daughter mine," he said. 237

"Then give me space," she said, "my father, to bewail my death a little; for Jephthah¹¹ surely gave his daughter time to lament before he slew her, alas! And God knows that she had no guilt except that she ran to meet her father first to welcome him with great honor." And with that word she fell down in a swoon. When her swoon was past, she rose up and said to her father, "Blessed be God, I die a maiden. Give me my death before I have dishonor. Do your will with your child, in the name of God!" 250

And then she prayed him repeatedly to strike gently with his sword, and then she swooned again. Her father, with sorrowful heart and will, struck off her head, and holding it by the hair, went to display it to the judge where he still sat in court. When the judge saw it, the book tells, he ordered that he be taken and hanged immediately. But soon a thousand people burst in to save the knight, by their pity and compassion. For this false iniquity was known; the people immediately had suspicion, by reason of the churl's claim, that it was by Appius's consent; they well knew that he was lecherous. For this reason they came immediately against this Appius and cast him into a prison, where he slew himself. And Claudius, the servant of Appius, was condemned to be hanged upon a tree; but that Virginius, by his clemency, so prayed for him that he was exiled, or else surely he would have been killed. The remnant were hanged, great and small, who were acquiescent to this cursedness. 276

Here all may see how sin has its deserts. Beware, for no man knows a bit whom God will strike, nor how the worm of conscience may tremble at a wicked life, though it be so privy that none knows of it but the sinner and God. For whether one may be ignorant or learned, he knows not how soon he shall be made afraid. 284

Therefore I counsel you, receive this warning: forsake sin before sin will forsake you. 286

Here ends the Physician's Tale.

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¹¹ Jephthah. Judge of Israel who, because of a rash promise, had to sacrifice his daughter, his only child. See Judges 1.1-12.