

The Nun's Priest's Tale Summary

Writer: Geoffrey Chaucer | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Summary

The Simple and Peaceful Life of the Poor Widow: A poor widow lived in a small cottage. She was somewhat old. Her house stood beside a grove, in a low valley. After her husband's death, she lived a very simple life with great patience. Her wealth was very little. She managed her living through her own hard work and the small blessings that God had given her. She had two daughters. She kept three large pigs, three cows, and a sheep named "Malle." Her house was dark with smoke because she cooked on a fire. She ate very simple food: milk, brown bread, fried bacon, and sometimes one or two eggs. She never ate spicy or luxurious dishes. She drank no wine. Her body was healthy because she never overate. Her life was calm and happy. She was content with little. For her, happiness meant hard work, moderation, and peace of mind. Her small yard was surrounded by a bamboo fence and a dry ditch.

The Glorious Life of Chauntecleer and Pertelote: In the widow's yard lived a beautiful rooster named Chauntecleer. In all the land, there was no better singer than him. His crowing was as sweet as the sound of a church organ. He crowed at such an exact time that he was more accurate than any clock or bell. He could tell the rising and setting of the sun by nature itself. Chauntecleer's appearance was as royal as a king's. His comb was red like coral, his beak black and shining, his legs bluish, his claws white as a lily, and his feathers gleamed like gold. He was proud and strong.

He had seven wives, the most beautiful of whom was Pertelote. She was gentle, wise, sweet-spoken, and Chauntecleer's beloved. From the seventh day of her birth, she had captured his whole heart. Every morning, when the sun rose, they sang together, "My lief is faren in londe!" ("My love has gone to the land!"). In those days, animals and birds could speak and sing just like humans. One dawn, as Chauntecleer sat on a branch beside his wife, the real story began.

Chauntecleer's Terrible Dream and Pertelote's Reasoning: One morning, Chauntecleer shivered in fear during his sleep. A painful sound came from his throat. Pertelote, who was beside him, woke up in fright and saw him trembling. She asked what had happened. Chauntecleer said he had seen a terrible dream. In it, a dreadful beast came into their yard, it looked like a dog, with yellowish-red fur and eyes blazing like fire. The creature tried to seize and kill him. Chauntecleer was still shaking in fear. Pertelote grew angry at his words. She

thought Chauntecleer was cowardly. She said a brave man should not be afraid like this. Women, she argued, want their husbands to be brave, wise, and generous. Fear is a sign of weakness.

Then Pertelote explained that dreams have no meaning. According to her, dreams come from the heat of the body, overeating, or illness. They are merely illusions born from the body's humors and vapors, not reality.

Pertelote continued to explain to Chauntecleer. She said that dreams actually come from the heat inside the body and from an excess of blood. Often, people see frightening things in their sleep because different gases and humors mix inside the body. Some dream of fire, dogs, or red animals; others see black bears or devils and become afraid. Pertelote believed that all these are only effects of the body, not real events. She mentioned the wise philosopher Cato, saying that dreams should not be taken seriously. Then she advised Chauntecleer to take some medicine. According to her, if the body is kept clean, such dreams will not return. She recommended herbs like laurel, centaury, fumitory, hellebore, and ivy as good remedies for the body. In the end, Pertelote cheerfully told Chauntecleer to be happy and not to worry about dreams anymore.

The Truth of Dreams - The Tale of the Two Pilgrims: Chauntecleer did not agree with Pertelote. He said that many wise men had claimed dreams to be meaningful. Though the philosopher Cato said dreams should be ignored, many ancient books say that dreams often foretell real events. Some dreams bring messages of happiness, and others warn of danger. Therefore, Chauntecleer believed that dreams were not just imagination, but real warnings of what might come. Then he began to tell a story.

Once, two friends went on a pilgrimage together. When they reached a certain town, they found that there were very few places to stay. So they decided to sleep in separate lodgings for the night. One stayed in a stable with oxen, while the other found a better place to rest. During the night, the man who was in the better place dreamt that his friend came to him, calling for help, saying he was in great danger. He told him that he would be murdered that night in the stable with the oxen and begged him to come quickly to save him.

The man woke up in fear, but soon thought it was only a dream and went back to sleep. The same dream came again. Then, a third time, the dead friend appeared and said he had already been killed. Showing the deep wounds on his body, he told him that his corpse had been hidden in a cart full of dung near the west gate of the city. He said that the reason for his death was gold and asked his friend to stop the cart before it was too late.

In the morning, the man woke up thinking this time the dream might be true. He went to the inn where his friend had stayed and asked about him. The innkeeper said his friend had left early that morning. The man became suspicious and remembered the dream. He went to the west gate, and there he saw a dung cart — just as his friend had described. When he looked inside, he found his friend's dead body hidden beneath the dung. Then he cried out loudly for justice and punishment for the murderers.

In the morning, the townspeople gathered and overturned the dung cart. There, they found the dead body of the man, just as the dream had revealed. Everyone was astonished and praised the justice of God. They realized that the truth of a murder can never remain hidden. Even if it is kept secret for years, it will surely be revealed one day. Later, the town officers captured the cart driver and the innkeeper. They were severely questioned, and in the end, they confessed to their crime. Both were hanged as punishment. This incident proved that dreams often bring real warnings of danger, and therefore, dreams should never be ignored.

The Warning of a Dream - The Death of a Sailor: Chauntecleer then began another story. He said that once two men planned to sail to a distant country. But because of unfavorable winds, they had to stay for a few days in a certain town. One evening, the wind changed, and they went to sleep joyfully, planning to start their voyage the next morning. But that night, one of them had a strange dream. In his dream, a man came to him and told him not to set out on the journey. The man warned that if he sailed the next day, he would drown at sea.

When morning came, the man who had the dream told his friend to delay the journey. But his friend laughed and said dreams were false and foolish. The second man said that dreams meant nothing — they were only imagination. He refused to wait and happily went aboard the ship. Unfortunately, after traveling only a short distance, the bottom of the ship broke open, and the man drowned in the sea with the vessel. Chauntecleer concluded that dreams should never be taken lightly, for many dreams warn us of real danger.

The Truth of Dreams and the Wisdom of Great Thinkers: Chauntecleer gave more examples. He said that a young prince named Saint Kenelm once saw in a dream how he would be murdered, but being a child, he ignored it. Later, just as in his dream, he was indeed killed. Chauntecleer also said that many wise men, like Macrobius, wrote in their books that dreams have deep and hidden meanings. So, Pertelote should not mock dreams but be cautious instead.

Chauntecleer continued, saying that many great philosophers and holy men believed that dreams reveal truth. The philosopher Macrobius had written about the dream of Scipio of Africa, explaining that dreams can serve as warnings of future events. Chauntecleer even gave

examples from the Bible. He said that in the Old Testament, Daniel and Joseph interpreted dreams that foretold future happenings. Even Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, saw a dream that came true, one that revealed the fates of his baker and his cupbearer.

Chauntecleer added more examples from history. He said that Croesus, the king of Lydia, once dreamed that he was sitting upon a tree, which was actually a sign of his coming death. Again, Andromache, the wife of Hector, the hero of Troy, dreamed that her husband would die on the day of battle. She warned Hector not to fight, but he did not listen, and at last, he was killed by Achilles. Chauntecleer said that these stories prove dreams sometimes come true and serve as warnings of danger. Therefore, one should never mock dreams. He also said that the medicines and purgatives suggested by Pertelote were useless and harmful, like poison. He declared that he hated such things. At last, laughing, he changed the subject and brought back cheerful conversation with Pertelote.

Chauntecleer Forgets His Fear and Returns to Joy: Chauntecleer looked into Pertelote's face and smiled. Seeing the red glow around her eyes and her beauty, he forgot all his fear. He thought that God had truly blessed him with such a lovely wife. Then he quoted a Latin saying but humorously changed its meaning. The saying originally meant, "Woman is the ruin of man," but he cheerfully twisted it into, "Woman is man's joy and blessing." Chauntecleer said that with Pertelote beside him, all his fears vanished. Once again, his heart filled with happiness.

When the sun rose, he came down from the perch and called out to his hens because he had found some grains in the yard. Now he was fearless, proud, and majestic like a king. He lovingly embraced Pertelote and stroked her again and again. He looked like a brave lion walking proudly across the yard. Hearing his crow, all his hens gathered around him. He shone with royal pride like a prince in his palace. In this peaceful moment, Chaucer shows that Chauntecleer had returned to his old pride, love, and joy. But soon, a new danger was coming into his life; his "adventure" would begin with the arrival of the fox.

The Coming of the Fox and the Warning of Danger: Chauntecleer was filled with happiness. He told Pertelote that his heart was full of joy because the flowers were blooming, the birds were singing, and the world looked beautiful. But suddenly, sorrow followed this joy, for worldly happiness never lasts long. At that moment, a clever and deceitful fox named Russel, who had lived in the nearby woods for three years, quietly entered their yard. During the night, hiding behind the bushes, he slipped through the fence. When morning came and all was calm, he hid among the cabbage leaves, waiting for a chance to attack Chauntecleer. Chaucer compared this fox to a wicked murderer, calling him a new Judas Iscariot or a Greek

Sinon, both symbols of betrayal. The poet warned in advance that danger was approaching Chauntecleer's life.

Chauntecleer's happy day turned into a cursed one. He came down from the tree branch into the yard, although he had already been warned in his dream about danger. That warning was about to come true, but he ignored it. Chaucer commented that what God knows beforehand can never be avoided. Yet, whether human actions are guided by free will or divine control has always been a subject of great debate among scholars. Chaucer humorously said that he would not enter such deep arguments because his story was only about a rooster. This rooster, following his wife's advice, came out to walk in the yard, where danger was waiting for him. The poet playfully added that women's advice sometimes brings trouble, just as Eve's counsel led Adam out of Paradise. However, Chaucer immediately clarified that this was said in jest, not to blame women. These were Chauntecleer's words, not the poet's. Chaucer ended by saying that he meant no harm to women, for he held them in great respect.

The Fox's Flattery and Chauntecleer's Pride: One bright morning, Pertelote and the other hens were joyfully dust-bathing in the sunlight. Chauntecleer walked proudly among them, singing in a voice as sweet as a mermaid's song, full of melody and cheer. As he watched a butterfly resting on a cabbage leaf, he suddenly noticed a fox hiding behind the bushes. Startled, he tried to run away, for it is natural for animals to flee from their enemies.

But the sly fox, Russel, quickly spoke to stop him. In a soft, flattering voice, he said he was no enemy but a friend. Then he began praising Chauntecleer's beauty and voice, saying he had come only to hear him sing because his voice was as sweet as that of an angel in heaven. Russel continued his flattery, saying Chauntecleer's parents had once visited his home, and his father's song was so powerful that he closed his eyes, stretched his neck high, and filled the forest with his voice. Hearing all this, Chauntecleer felt delighted and proud. His vanity grew, and he forgot all caution.

The fox trapped him completely with his sweet words, adding that Chauntecleer's voice was even better than his father's and begging him to sing just once. Foolish with pride, Chauntecleer did not suspect any danger.

The Fox's Attack and Chauntecleer's Capture: Overjoyed by the praise, Chauntecleer flapped his wings, closed his eyes, stretched his neck, and began to crow loudly. At that very moment, Russel leapt up, seized him by the throat, and ran off toward the woods with him on his back. No one in the yard noticed what had happened at first. Chaucer remarks that fate cannot be avoided. Chauntecleer had been warned in his dream, but he ignored it because of his wife's advice, and thus, on a Friday, disaster struck him. Chaucer vividly describes the

scene of panic. Pertelote and the other hens screamed in terror, crying like the women of Troy when their city fell. Pertelote's grief was compared to the cries of the women of Carthage when their city was destroyed.

As the fox ran off with Chauntecleer, the whole yard filled with chaos. Pertelote and the hens cried out in fear and sorrow. The poor widow and her two daughters rushed outside and saw the fox carrying the rooster away. They screamed, "The fox! The fox!" and the neighbors ran with sticks and clubs. The household dogs barked madly, Colle, Talbot, and Gerland, all joining the chase. Even the cows, calves, pigs, ducks, and bees ran or flew in confusion. The noise became so loud that it seemed as though the sky itself would break apart.

Chauntecleer's Wisdom and the Moral of the Story: Amid all the chaos, the fox kept running proudly with Chauntecleer on his back. But suddenly, Chauntecleer used his wit. He said, "If I were in your place, I would mock them all and shout that I have won!" The fox, filled with pride, opened his mouth to boast, and in that very moment, Chauntecleer escaped from his grip, flew up, and perched safely on a tree branch.

The fox, pretending to be sorry, looked up and said he had no evil intent. He claimed he had only taken Chauntecleer for fun and begged him to come down so he could explain. But Chauntecleer had learned his lesson. He refused to trust the fox again and said, "I have been fooled once, but never again. Whoever closes his eyes and trusts blindly brings his own ruin." Then the fox replied, "And whoever cannot keep his mouth shut invites his own misfortune." Through this final exchange, the moral lesson of the story shines clearly.

At the end of the tale, Chaucer advises that those who see this only as a funny story of a cock and a fox should look deeper and take its moral wisdom. As Saint Paul said, all that is written is meant for human learning and guidance. Therefore, readers should take the fruit of the moral lesson and leave aside the empty chaff. Chaucer ends with a prayer, asking God to make everyone good, wise, and just.