

The Reeve's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Prologue of the Reeve's Tale

When people had laughed at this plight of Absalom and of gentle Nicholas, various people said various things, but for the most part they laughed and made merry over the tale, and I did not see anyone take it badly except Oswald the Reeve. Because he was a carpenter by trade, a little anger was still lingering in his heart, and he began to grumble and to condemn it a little. 3863

“By my soul, I could pay you back well,” he said, “with a tale about the hoodwinking of a bold miller, if I wished to speak of ribaldry. But I am old and do not wish to make sport; my grass-time is over, all my fodder now is hay; this white pate writes me as an old man, and my heart is as dried up as my hair. If not, I am like a medlar¹ that grows softer and worse until it lies rotten among muck or straw. We old men, I fear, we move along in such a way that we cannot be ripe until we are rotten. 3875

“We dance as long as the world will pipe to us, for we are always pricked by our desire to have a hoary head and a tail as green as a leek. Though our strength may be gone, our will always desires for folly, for when we cannot do it we will still talk about it. Still there is fire, if you rake over our old ashes. We have four burning coals--boasting, lying, anger and greed. These four sparks belong to old age. In truth, our old limbs may be feeble, but our desire does not fail us. 3887

“As many a year as has passed since my tap of life began to run, I have always kept my colt's tooth. Truly, when I was born, Death drew out the tap of life and let it run, and ever since it has so run until now the cask is nearly empty. The stream of life now trickles in upon the rim. The poor old tongue may well ring and chime of wretchedness long past; with old folk nothing is left except senility.” 3898

When our Host had heard this homily, he began to speak as lordly as a king. “What does all this wisdom

¹ Medlar. Small fruit resembling a crab apple.

amount to?” he said. “Are we to talk all day of Holy Scripture? The Devil made a shipman or a doctor out of a cobbler, and the Devil made a reeve into a preacher! Do not dally with the time. Tell us your tale. Lo, Deptford², and it is half-way to prime³; lo, Greenwich⁴, where there are many rascals! It is surely time to begin your tale.” 3908

“Now, sirs, I pray you all not to take it badly,” said this Oswald the Reeve, “though I may answer this Miller and make a fool of him. For it is lawful for a man to shove away force with force. This drunken Miller has told us here how a carpenter was beguiled, perhaps in mockery, because I am one. And by your leave I shall requite him directly, even in his own churlish language. I pray to God, may his neck break! He can well see a stick a sliver in my eye, but cannot see a beam of wood in his own. 3920

Here begins the Reeve's Tale.

At Trumpington, not far from Cambridge, there goes a brook over which stand a bridge and a mill. And this is the very truth that I tell you. For a long time there was a miller dwelling there, as proud and gay as any peacock. He could play the bagpipes, fish, mend nets, turn cups⁵, wrestle well, and shoot. He wore by his belt a very sharp-bladed sword, and a long cutlass, and in his pouch he carried a jolly dagger. 3936

There was no man who dared to touch him for fear of peril! And in his hose he carried a Sheffield knife as well. His skull was as bald as an ape's, round his face was round and his nose a pug. He was a notable swaggerer at markets. No creature dared to lay a hand on him, for he swore he should pay dearly for it. He was a thief of grain and ground meal, and a sly and tiresome one at that, in truth. He was called Simkin the Bully. 3941

He had a wife, of noble blood; the parson of the town was her father, who gave as her dowry many pieces of brass kitchen ware, so that Simkin might marry into his kin. She had been brought up in a nunnery; Simkin would have no wife, he affirmed, unless she were well nurtured and a virgin, for the sake of his social rank as a yeoman. And she was

² Deptford. About five miles from London.

³ Half-way to Prime. This might mean half-way between the prayer service of Lauds, at dawn, and Prime, an hour or so later, around 6:00, but most scholars agree that it means around 7:30.

⁴ Greenwich. About one-half mile beyond Deptford.

⁵ Turn cups. This may mean that he can make wooden cups on a lathe or that he can drink (turn over his cup) well.

proud and pert as a magpie. The two together were a fair sight on holy days; he would walk before her with the tail of his hood wound about his head, and she came after him in a red petticoat, and Simkin wore hose of the same color. 3955

No creature dared call her anything but "madam." There was no man so bold that he would walk near her or dared once to flirt or dally with her, unless he wished to be slain by Simkin with a cutlass or knife or dagger. For jealous people are always perilous—at least they would have their wives believe so. And because she was somewhat smirched in her name⁶, she was as repellent as water in a ditch, and full of disdain and of insolence. She thought ladies should treat her with respect, on account of her lineage and of the nurturing she had gained in the nunnery. 3968

They had between them a twenty-year-old daughter and no other children, except one of six months; it lay in a cradle, and was a proper lad. This young lady was sturdy and well grown, with broad hips and round high breasts, and a pug-nose and eyes gray as glass. Her hair was rather pretty, I will not deny it. 3976

Because she was attractive, the parson of the town intended to make her his heir of both his movable property and his house. And he made plenty of fuss about her marriage; his purpose was to present her well into some family of exalted lineage and blood. For Holy Church's goods must be spent on the blood that is descended from Holy Church; therefore, he meant to dignify his holy blood, even if he should devour Holy Church. 3986

This miller surely collected a great toll on the wheat and malt from all the surrounding lands. And most notably there was a great college that is called King's Hall at Cambridge, all the wheat and malt for which were ground by him. It happened one day that the manciple⁷ of the college fell ill of some sickness; they deemed that surely he could never recover. Therefore this miller stole a hundred times more of the meal and corn than any other time. Before this he stole only courteously, but now he was a thief outrageously. The warden reproached him for this and made much ado about it, but the miller did not care one straw about it, and blustered fiercely and said it was not so. 4001

⁶ Smirched in her name. She is the illegitimate daughter of a priest or parson.

⁷ Manciple. A steward, or a purchase of provisions.

Now there dwelt in this Hall that I tell of two young poor clerks. They were bold and headstrong and lusty in sport, and they eagerly begged of the warden, only for the fun and joy of it, to grant them a leave for only a little while to go to the mill and see their corn ground. And truly they would wager their own heads that the miller would steal half a peck of corn from them by cunning or plunder it from them by force. And at last the warden gave them leave. One of them was named John, and the other, Alan. They were born in the same town; it was called Strother, far in the north. I cannot tell exactly where. 4015

This Alan, the clerk, prepared everything that he needed to take, cast the sack of corn over a horse, and went forth with John. And they wore good swords and bucklers by their thighs. John knew the way; so they needed no guide. And he laid down the sack at the mill door. 4021

Alan spoke first: "All hail, Simon, in faith! How is your wife, and your fair daughter?" 4023

"Alan, welcome, by my head!" Simkin said. "And John too! How are you, and what are you doing here?" 4025

"Simon," replied John, "by God, need has na peer⁸. It behooves him to serve himself that has na equal, as clerks say, or else he is a fool. I believe our manciple will die soon, so the jaws waggle in his head. And therefore I have come with Alan to grind our corn and carry it home. I pray you help us along from here as fast as you can." 4033

"In faith it shall be done," Simkin said. "What will you do while it is being milled?" 4035

"By God, I will be here right by the hopper," John said, "and see how the corn gaes in. By my father's soul, I never yet saw how the hopper wags to and fra." 4039

"And do you wish to do swa?" answered Alan. "Then, by my pate, I will be beneath, and see how the meal falls down into the trough; that sail be my amusement. In faith, John, I must be of your class, I am as poor a miller as you." 4045

⁸ Na peer. As noted a bit earlier in the story, John and Alan are from northern England, which Chaucer shows in their dialect. In this translation, many of Chaucer's touches have been maintained, such as na (no), swa (so), fra (fro), sall (shall), gane (gone), alsa (also), bath (both), ga or gae (go), ane (one), twa (two), sang (song), and sawl (soul).

This miller smiled at their simplicity. "All this is only done as a stratagem," he thought; "they deem no man can beguile them. But I vow by my trade, for all the craftiness in their philosophy, I shall still blear their eyes. The more cunning trick they try, the more I will take when I steal. I shall give them bran yet in the place of flour. "The greatest clerks are not the wisest men," as the mare once said to the wolf⁹. I would not give a weed for their art. 4056

Out the door he secretly went when he saw his time. He looked up and down until he found the clerks' horse where it stood tied under an arbor behind the mill; and went softly to the horse and swiftly stripped off the bridle. And when the horse was loose, he started forth with a "Wehee!" through thick and thin toward the fen, where wild mares ran. 4066

This miller went back. He did not say a word, but did his business and chatted with the clerks until their corn was ground nicely and well. And when the meal was sacked and fastened, John went out and found his horse gone, and began to cry, "Help! Alack! Our horse is lost! Alan, for God's sake, man, step on your feet, come out at once! Alas, our warden has lost his palfrey!" 4075

Alan forgot everything, including the meal and wheat. His careful management of the situation entirely escaped his mind. "What!" he began to cry. "Which way is he gane?" 4078

The wife came leaping in with a run. "Alas!" she said, your horse is going to the fen with wild mares, as fast as he can gallop. Curses on the hand that bound him so poorly, he should have tied the rein better." 4083

"Alas!" said John. "By the Cross, Alan, lay down your sword, and I will mine also. I am nimble, God knows, as a deer. By God, he shall not escape us bath! Why had you not pit the nag in the barn? A curse on you, Alan. You are a fool." 4089

These poor clerks ran hard toward the marsh, both Alan and John. And when the miller saw they were off, he took half a bushel of their flour, and told his wife to go and knead it in a loaf. 4094

"I believe the clerks were afraid of what I might do. A miller can still," he said, "trim a clerk's beard for all his art; now let them go where they will. Lo, there

⁹ Mare to the wolf. The mare told the wolf, who wanted to buy her foal, that the price was written on her hind foot. When he tried to read it, she kicked him. (Benson)

they go! By my pate, it's not so easy for them to get that horse. Yes, let the children play!" 4099

These poor clerks ran up and down, with "Whoa, whoa! Gee! Stop, stop! Ha! Look out behind! Gae whistle you while I head him off here!" But, in brief, they could not with all their power catch their nag, he always ran so fast, until at length they caught him in a ditch when it was dark night. 4106

Wet and weary, like a beast in the rain, poor John came, and Alan with him. "Alack the day I was born!" said John. "Now we are brought to mockery and ridicule; our corn is stolen. People will call us fools, bath the warden and all our friends, and especially the miller. Alack the day!" 4113

Thus John lamented as he walked along the road toward the mill, leading Bayard the horse by the bridle. He found the miller sitting by the fire, for it was night. They could go no further then, but begged him for the love of God to give them lodging and food, for their payment. 4119

"If there be any," the miller replied, "such as it is, you shall have your part in it. My house is small; but you have studied book learning, so you know how to make twenty feet of space a mile wide through argumentation. Let see now if this house may suffice, or make it bigger by your talking, as you clerks usually do." 4126

"Now, Simon," said John, "you are always merry, by Saint Cuthbert, and that was fairly answered. I have heard it said that a man shall choose one of two things: either just as he finds or just as he brings. But especially I pray you, dear host, get us some food and drink and be friendly, and we will pay faithfully and completely. One can lure no hawks with an empty hand; lo, here is our silver, all ready to spend!" 4135

This miller dispatched his daughter into town for ale and bread, and roasted a goose for them, and secured their horse so that it would not go astray any more. He made them a bed in his own chamber, nicely decked with sheets and blankets, only eight or ten feet from his own bed. His daughter had a bed to herself right in the same chamber very close at hand. It could be no other way, and the reason is that there was no larger room in the place. 4145

They supped and talked and amused themselves, and drank ever deeper of the strong ale, and about midnight went to rest. 4148

Well had this miller varnished his head with the beer, for he had drunk himself all pale and lost all the red in his flesh. He belches and speaks through his nose as if he had a frog in his throat or a cold. His wife went to bed also, as light and frisky as any jay, so well had she wet her jolly whistle. The cradle was put at the foot of her bed, so that she might rock it and nurse the child. 4157

And when all that was in the crock had been drunk, the daughter went to bed. And Alan and John went to bed as well. None of them took anything else; they needed no sleeping potion! Truly, the miller had so gulped his ale that he snorted in his sleep like a horse. His wife bore him a full strong bass; one could have heard their snoring two furlongs away. The daughter snored also, to keep them company. 4167

Alan the clerk, hearing all this tunefulness, poked John and said, "Are you sleeping? Have you ever heard such a sang before this? Lo, what a compline¹⁰ they are singing among them. May Saint Antony's fire¹¹ fall on their bodies! Wha ever heard such an amazing thing? Yea, may they come to the best of bad ends! This lang night I shall get na sleep; but yet na matter, all shall be for the best. For, John, if I could sleep with that young lady over there, the law would allow us some compensation. For, John, there is a law that says that if a man be harmed in one point, he shall be relieved in another. Our corn is stolen, without a doubt, and all day we have had an bad time; and since all that cannot be remedied, I shall have some easement to counter my loss. By my sawl, it shall nat be otherwise. 4187

"Be careful, Alan," John answered. "The miller is a dangerous man, and if he would start out of his sleep he might do us bath a shrewd turn. 4191

"I do not count him as much as a fly," Alan replied, and up he rose. He crept up to the young woman (she lay on her back and slept soundly) until he was so close to her that, before she could see him, it was too late fro her to cry out. And, to make a long story short, they were soon one. Go ahead and play, Alan, for I will now speak of John. 4198

John lay still for about five minutes or so, and pities himself, and feels woeful. "Alan" he said, "this is a

¹⁰ Compline. The last prayer office of the day, after darkness falls.

¹¹ St. Anthony's Fire. Ergotism, a disease that comes from eating grain infected by the ergot fungus and affects the sufferer with inflamed skin. (Chaucer only mentions "wylde fyr," but most have assumed that he means St. Anthon's Fire.

wicked trick. I would say now that I am just a fool. Yet my friend has gained something for his trouble; he has the Miller's daughter in his arms. He took a risk and has accomplished his purpose, and I lie here like a sack of chaff¹² in my bed; and when this prank is retold another day, I shall be thought a fool, a weakling. I will rise and risk it, by my faith! "One who is not bold is not lucky!" as they say." And up he rose, and softly he went to the cradle, took it up with his hand, and bore it to the foot of his own bed. 4213

Soon after this the wife stopped snoring, awoke, went out to pee, returned again, could not find her cradle, and groped here and there but did not find it. "Alas," she said, "I almost went to the wrong place; I almost went to the clerk's bed. Ah, God bless! Then I would have made a bad mistake. And she went forth and found the cradle. She groped along with her hand, found the bed, and thought all was well since the cradle stood next to it. And she did not know where she was since it was dark. 4225

And softly and carefully she crept into bed with the clerk, and lay perfectly still, and would have fallen asleep. In a while John the clerk leapt up and with all his energy laid on this wife. She had had such a good time for a long time. He pierced hard and deep, as if her were mad. 4231

These two clerks led this jolly life until the cock crowed the third time.¹³ Alan grew weary in the time before dawn, for he had labored all night long, and said Farewell Malyne, sweet one! The day has come; I can stay no longer. But forever, wherever I may ride or go, I am your own clerk, I swear!" 4239

"Dear sweetheart," she said, "now go, and farewell! But before you go, I will tell you one thing. When you pass the mill going homeward, right at the entrance behind the door you will find a loaf that was made of a half a bushel of your own meal, which I helped my father to take. And now, good friend, may God save and keep you." And with that word she began to weep. 4248

Alan rose up and thought, "Before it is day I will go creep in next to my fellow;" and then his hand touched the cradle. "By God," he thought, "I have gone all wrang; my head is all giddy tonight, and therefore I am not walking straight. I know well by

¹² Chaff. The discarded part of a grain, used to feed livestock.

¹³ Cock crowed. This usually occurs about an hour before dawn.

the cradle, here lie the miller and his wife, and I have gone the wrong way." 4256

And with the Devil's own luck, he went forth to the bed where the miller lay. He thought to have crept in next to his fellow John, but he crept in by the miller and caught him by the neck and said softly, "John, you swine's head, awake, for Christ's soul, and listen to this noble game! For, by the lord who is called Saint James, in this short night I have coupled three times with the miller's daughter lying flat on her back, while you have, you coward, been afraid." 4267

"You--false knave!" said the miller. "Ah, false traitor, false clerk! You shall die, by God's dignity!" And he caught Alan by the throat. Alan caught him in turn furiously, and struck him on the nose with his fist. Down ran the bloody stream onto the miller's breast, and on the floor they wallowed like two pigs in a poke, with nose and mouth crushed and bleeding. 4278

Up they got, and down again, until the miller stumbled against a stone and fell down backward upon his wife, who knew nothing of this ridiculous fight. With a shock she started up, and cried, "Help, Holy Cross of Bromholm¹⁴! Lord, I call to you! *In manus tuas*¹⁵! Awake, Simon, the fiend has dropped on us. My heart is crushed! Help, I have been killed! Some one lies on my head and body; help, Simon! The false clerks are fighting!" 4291

John started up as fast as ever he could, and groped to and fro by the wall to find a staff. She started up also, and knew the room better than John did, and directly found a staff by the wall. She saw a little shimmer of light where the moon shone in through a hole, and by it she saw the two on the floor, but in truth knew not which was which. 4301

When she caught a sight of a white thing, she thought one of the clerks had worn a night-cap, and drew nearer with the staff and thought to strike this Alan a shrewd rap, but struck the miller on the bald pate. Down he went, crying, "Help, I am dying!" These clerks beat him well, and let him lie. They dressed and quickly took their horse and their meal and went their way. And at the mill they took their loaf also, baked with half a bushel of flour. 4312

¹⁴ Holy Cross of Bromholm. A famous shrine in Norfolk.

¹⁵ *In manus tuas*. Luke 23:46: *Into your hands I commend my spirit*. The phrase was uttered by Christ on the cross just before his death.

Thus was the proud miller well beaten, and has lost his toll for grinding their wheat, and paid every penny for the supper of Alan and John who beat him well. Lo, such a thing it is for a miller to be false! And therefore this proverb is entirely true: "An evil-doer should not hope for good deeds." And may God Who sits on high in glory save all this company, high and low. Thus have I requited the Miller in my tale. 4324

Here is ended the Reeve's Tale.

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