

The Cook's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Prologue of the Cook's Tale

While the Reeve was speaking, the Cook from London clawed him on the back for joy. "Ha, ha!" he said. "By the cross, this miller had a sharp experience in the matter of lodging for the night. Solomon said it well in his words, 'Bring not every man into your house,' for lodging by night is perilous. A man ought to be very careful about whom he brings into his private space. I pray to God to give me sorrow and trouble if ever, as long as I have been called Roger of Ware¹, I heard of a miller who was tricked better than this; he received a spiteful trick in the dark. But God forbid that we stop here! And therefore, if you promise to listen to a tale from me, a poor man, I will tell you as well as I am able a little jest that happened in our town." 4343

Our Host answered and said, "I agree; now tell us, Roger, make sure it is good. You have drained the gravy from many meat pies have served many other Jacks of Dover² warmed over. You've received Christ's curse from many pilgrims, who have felt the effects of your parsley that they have eaten with your fatted goose; there are plenty of flies loose in your shop. Now tell on, gentle Roger. But yet I beg you not to be angry over a game; a man may tell the complete truth in jest." 4355

"You speak the entire truth, by my faith," answered Roger. "A true jest is a bad jest' as the Flemings say. And therefore, Harry Bailey³, do not be angered, by your faith, if my tale before we leave here may be of an inn-keeper. Nevertheless, I will not tell it yet, but before we part you shall surely be paid back." At that he laughed and made merry, and thus he began his tale. 4364

Here begins the Cook's Tale.

An apprentice in the food-seller guild dwelt once in our city. He was as joyful as a goldfinch in the woods, a short good-looking fellow, as brown as a berry, with black, neatly combed locks. He could dance so merrily and well that he was called Perkin the Reveller. He was

as full of love and the game of love as the hive of sweet honey; happy was the girl that happened to meet him. At every wedding party he would sing and dance; he loved the tavern more than the food-shop. 4376

For when there was any procession in Cheapside⁴ he would spring from the shop towards it; until he had seen all that was to be seen and danced well, he would not return to the shop. And he would gather to him a crew of his own sort to dance and sing and make such fun, and they would set an hour to meet in such and such a lane to play at dice. For there was no apprentice in the town who could cast a pair of dice more handsomely than Perkin could, and he spent his money freely in his secret resorts. His master found this rather often in his accounts; often he found the cash box bare. Truly, with a reveling apprentice that spends all his time with dice, reveling, and chasing women, his master shall suffer for it in his shop, though he may have no part in the merry-making. 4394

For revelry and theft turn into one another, regardless of how well the apprentice may play on guitar or fiddle. Revel and honesty, among people of low degree, are always at odds, as one may well observe. 4399

This jolly apprentice stayed with his master until he had nearly served his full apprenticeship, though he was reprimanded morning and night, and sometimes escorted to Newgate⁵ with a band of minstrels ahead. But one day, when his master was looking over his accounts, his master thought of a proverb that says, "Better is a rotten apple kept out of the batch than one that rots the rest." 4407

So it is with an unruly servant; it is far less harm to let him go than to let him corrupt all the servants in the place. Therefore his master discharged him and told him to go, and wished bad luck and sorrow on him. And thus the jolly apprentice was given his leave. Now let him revel all night if he wishes! 4413

And as there is no thief without an accomplice who helps him to waste and embezzle all that he can steal or borrow, he immediately sent his bed and belongings to a companion, one of his own type, who loved dice, revelry, and games, and who had a wife who kept a shop for the sake of appearances, and made her living as a prostitute. 4422

[This tale is left unfinished.]

Translated and Edited by Gerard NeCastro
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¹ Roger of Ware. (Hogge of Ware in Chaucer's text.) Ware is a town in Hertfordshire, around thirty miles from London.

² Jacks of Dover. A type of simple pie.

³ Harry Bailey. The host of the Pilgrims to Canterbury.

⁴ Cheapside. The main market street in London,

⁵ Newgate. The prison in London. The minstrels were to call attention to and disgrace the prisoners.

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