

**The Shipman's Tale**  
**Geoffrey Chaucer**



**Here begins the Shipman's Tale**

At St. Denis there once dwelt a merchant, who was rich and therefore men deemed him wise. His wife was of excellent beauty and loved company and revelry, which is a thing that causes more expense than all the attention and respect are worth that men give such ladies at feasts and dances. Such salutations and fair looks pass away like a shadow upon the wall. But woe to him who must always pay! For his own honor's sake the hapless husband must clothe us and deck us out in the rich array in which we merrily dance. If by chance he cannot, or else will not allow such expenditure, but deem it only loss and waste, then some other man must pay our cost or lend us gold; and that is perilous. 19

This worthy merchant kept a noble house, to which there were many visitors every day on account of his generosity and his beautiful wife. But listen to my tale. Among his other guests great and small was a monk, a bold and handsome man, I believe, thirty winters in age, who was always visiting that place. This young monk who was so fine-looking in face had been so well acquainted with the husband of the house since they had known each other, that he was as familiar in his house as any friend could be. Inasmuch as they had both been born in one village, the monk claimed cousinship with the husband; and he spoke nothing against him, but was as glad of it as a bird is of the dawn. Thus they were knit in eternal alliance and each assured the other of brotherhood as long as each should live. 42

Free and generous was Brother John, and especially with his money in that house, and diligent about giving pleasure; he forgot not to tip the smallest page in the entire house, and when he came would give some manner of fit and handsome thing to the lord and after that to all his household according to their station. For this reason they were as glad of his coming as a bird is glad of sunrise. But no more of this now, for this suffices. 52

It so happened one day that this merchant made ready to go to the town of Bruges to buy there certain

quantity of goods. Therefore he then sent a messenger to Paris, praying Brother John to come to St. Denis to amuse himself with him and his wife for a day or two before he went to Bruges. This noble monk had permission from his abbot to go when he wished, because he was a man of great discretion, and bailiff of the convent as well, and rode about to inspect their granaries and spacious barns; and he came then to St. Denis. Who was so welcome as my lord Brother John, our dear cousin, full of courtesy? He brought with him a great jug of Malmsey and another full of fine Vernage, and certain wild fowl, as he was accustomed. Thus I leave them eating and drinking and amusing themselves for a day or two. 74

The third day the merchant rose up and seriously considered his business. Up he went into his counting-house to estimate for himself how things this year stood with him and how he had spent his money, and whether he had made a profit or not. 81

He laid many ledgers and bags before him on his counting-board. Very rich were his treasure and his money-bags, and therefore he shut the counting-house door firmly; and he wished that nobody should break in upon his figuring as well; and thus he sat until past prime<sup>1</sup>. 88

Brother John had also risen on this morning and walked back and forth in the garden, saying his morning prayers like a gentleman. The wife came walking secretly into the garden where he was pacing softly, and greeted him as she had often done before. A maid-child came into her company, whom she could rule and guided as she likes, for the maiden was still under her authority. "Oh my dear cousin, Brother John," she said, "what prompts you to rise so early?" 99

"Niece," he said, "it ought to suffice to sleep five hours, unless one is an old enfeebled creature, like these married men who lie and cower, as a tired hare distracted by the hounds sits in her form. But, dear niece, why are you so pale? I believe you need to rest yourself soon." And with that word he laughed merrily, and grew all red at his own thought. 111

This lovely wife began to shake her head. "Yes, God knows all," she said; "well may I sing 'Alack! and Alas that I was born!' But dare I tell how it stands with me to no creature. For this reason I have decided either to take myself away from this land or else to make an end of myself; I am so full of fear and sorrow." 123

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<sup>1</sup> Prime. 9 am.

The monk began to stare upon this wife. "Alack, my niece," he said, "God forbid that for any sorrow or fear you should destroy yourself! But tell me your trouble; perhaps I may counsel or help you in your misfortune, and therefore tell me all, for it shall be a secret. For on my breviary<sup>2</sup> here I take my oath never to betray your counsel for friend or foe." 132

"I say the same to you again," she said. "By God and this breviary I swear, though I may be torn in pieces or though I go to hell for it, never to betray a word of what you tell me. This I say not for our kinship but truly for friendship and good trust." 140

"Thus they swore and kissed upon it, and each said to the other what they pleased. 142

"Cousin," she said, "if I had a fit opportunity, though I have none in this place, I would tell you the legend of my life, what I have suffered from my husband since I wedded him, even though he is your kin. 147

"Nay," said the monk, by God and St. Martin, he is no more my kin than is this leaf hanging on the tree! By St. Denis of France, I call him so to have the more ground for acquaintance with you, whom of a truth I have loved especially above all women; this I swear on my profession. Tell me your grief and hasten yourself, and then go your way, lest he come down." 157

"My dear love, oh my Brother John!" she said. "I wish I could keep this secret, but it must come out: I can wait no longer. My husband is the worst man to me that ever was since the world was created. But since I am a wife, it is inappropriate for me not to tell any person of our private matters, those in bed or elsewhere. God of His grace forbid that I tell them. A wife should say nothing but honor of her husband, I know full well, except that to you thus much I may say: so may God help me, as he is not worth in any degree at all the value of a fly! Yet most of all his stinginess grieves me. You well know that all women by nature desire six things as well as I do; they would have their husbands brave and wise and rich, and generous too, and obedient to their wives, and lively in bed. But by the very Lord who for us bled, for his honor, to array myself, I must pay on next Sunday a hundred francs, or else I am lost. Rather would I never have been born than there should be scandal or dishonor for it; yet if my husband should learn of it, I am as good as lost; therefore, I pray you, lend me this

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<sup>2</sup> Breviary. A book of prayers in which the various daily prayer services, or offices, are contained.

sum or I must die. Brother John, I say, lend me these hundred francs, and by God, I will not fail in gratitude if you grant to do what I ask. At a certain day I will repay you and do you whatever pleasure and service I can, just as you suggest. If I do not, may God take vengeance upon me as shamefully as ever had Ganelon for his treason to France." 194

This noble monk answered, "Now truly, my own dear lady, I have such pity for you that I swear to you and pledge you my word that when your husband has gone to Flanders I will deliver you from this trouble. I will bring you a hundred francs." 201

And at that he caught her by the flanks and kissed her many times. "Now go," he said, "all quietly and gently, and let us dine as soon as may be, for it is prime of day by the sun-dial. Go now, and be as true as I shall be." 206

"God forbid that it would be otherwise, Sir," she said, and went forth as merry as a magpie, and told the cooks make haste that they all might dine soon. Then up to her husband she went and knocked at his counting-house door very boldly. "Qui la<sup>3</sup>?" he said. 214

"By Peter, it is I," she said; "What, sir, how long do you wish to fast? How long will you calculate and figure your sums and your books and things? May the Devil have a share in all such sums! You have enough of God's gifts, by God! Come down today and leave your bags alone. Are you not ashamed that Brother John should fast wretchedly all this long day? What! Let us hear a mass and then to dinner!" 223

This man said, "Wife, little can you fancy this intricate and anxious business of ours. For so may God help me and my lord St. Ivo, among twelve of us merchants scarcely shall two prosper continually until old age. We are glad to make good cheer and put as good a face on it as may be, and make what show we can in the world and keep our affairs private, until we are dead; or, if this fails, find relaxation on a pilgrimage or take ourselves away somewhere. Therefore it is of great necessity for me to plan my course in this queer world, for in trade we must always stand in fear of chance and fortune. 238

"Tomorrow at sunrise I will go to Flanders, and return as soon as ever I can. Therefore I beseech you, dear wife, be gentle and meek toward every creature and careful to watch over our goods, and govern our

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<sup>3</sup> Qui la? Who is there?

house honorably and well. You have enough, in every way, for a thrifty household. You are lacking in neither clothes nor food, and you shall lack no silver in your purse. 248

With that he shut his counting-house door and went directly down. Without delay a mass was said and quickly the tables were set and they hurried themselves to dinner; and this merchant fed the monk richly. 254

After dinner Brother John took the merchant aside seriously and said to him secretly, "Cousin, I see it is planned that you will go to Bruges. May God and St. Augustine aid and guide you! I pray you, cousin, be careful in your journey; govern your diet temperately also, especially in this heat. And so, farewell, cousin; there is no need of more ceremony between us; may God shield you from trouble! Day or night, if there is anything in my power that you wish to command me in any way, it shall be done, just as you wish to have it. One thing before you go, I would pray you, if it may be; to lend me a hundred francs, a week or two, for certain beasts that I must buy to stock a place with that is ours. God so help me, I wish it were yours! I will surely not fail my day, by an hour, not for a thousand francs. But let this thing be secret, I beg, for I must buy these beasts tonight. And now farewell, my own dear cousin; may God have mercy for your generosity and hospitality." 280

This noble merchant then answered courteously, "Brother John, dear cousin, truly this is a small request. My gold is yours whenever you wish to have it, and not only my gold but my goods. Take what you like, God forbid you should spare. But there is one thing with us merchants, as you know very well, that our money is our plough. We may borrow while we have credit, but it is no jest to be without gold. Pay it again at your ease. I am glad to serve you as I can." He fetched these hundred francs then and delivered them secretly to the monk, and no creature in all the world knew of this loan except these two. 296

They drank and talked and rambled about a while and amused themselves until Brother John rode away to his abbey. 298

The morning came and the merchant rode toward Flanders; his apprentice guided him until he came merrily into Bruges. There he went diligently about his needs, buying and borrowing; he neither played at dice nor danced, but only minded his merchandise; and thus I leave him. 306

The next Sunday after this merchant had gone, Brother John arrived at St. Denis, his crown and head all freshly shaven. In that entire house was no servant so lowly nor any other creature who was not glad that my lord Brother John had returned. But to go shortly to the point, this fair wife agreed with Brother John that for these hundred francs he would have her flat on her back all night in his arms. And this agreement was indeed carried out. 317

All night they led a busy life in mirth until it was day when Brother John went his way, bidding the household "farewell, adieu!" None of them and no creature in the town had suspicion of my lord John. And he rode back to his abbey, or wherever he liked; I say no more of him. 324

When his business trip was over, the merchant returned to St. Denis, where he feasted and enjoyed the company of his wife. He told her that merchandise was so expensive that he would need to borrow money, for he was bound by law to pay soon twenty thousand crowns, for which reason he went to Paris to borrow a sum of francs from certain of his friends and took certain moneys with him. When he came to the town, because of true charity and great fondness he went first to Brother John for a friendly visit; not to ask or borrow money of him, but to learn of his welfare and to tell him of his business, as friends do when they meet together. Brother John receives him warmly and entertains him well, and the merchant in turn told how favorably he had bought his goods, God be thanked; except that he must without fail secure a loan; and then he should be in joy and rest. 348

"Surely," Brother John answered, "I am glad that you have come back safe and sound. If I were rich, as I hope for bliss, you should not want for twenty thousand crowns, because you so kindly lent me gold the other day; and as I best can, I thank you, by heaven and by St. Peter! But nevertheless I paid down that money upon your counting-house bench to our lady, your wife at home. She knows it well, in faith, by certain tokens that I can tell her. Now, by your leave, I cannot delay longer; our abbot will leave this town soon and I must go in his company. Greet well our lady, my own dear niece, and farewell, dear cousin, until we meet. This merchant who was cautious and prudent made his borrowing and paid down the money in Paris to certain Lombards, into their hands, and got his bond back from them. Then he went home as merry as a popinjay, for he well knew the affair so stood that he had to gain on that journey a thousand francs above all his expenses. 372

His wife met him at the gate as she was accustomed to do. That entire night they enjoyed themselves, for he was rich and entirely out of debt. 376

When it was day this merchant embraced his wife all over again and kissed her on her face, and up he started and put all of his energy into it. "No more," she said, "by God, you have enough!" And again she played with him wantonly until at last the merchant said, "In faith I am a little angry with you, my wife, though I am unwilling to be so. And do you know why? I deem you have caused some unfriendliness between me and my cousin, Brother John. You should have warned me before I went that he had paid you a hundred francs in cash. He was ill-pleased; he seemed so by his face, when I spoke to him about my borrowing. Yet by our heavenly King, I did not think to ask anything of him. I pray you, wife, do so no more. Always tell me before I leave you, if any debtor may have paid you in my absence, lest by your negligence I might ask him for something which he has paid." 399

His wife was never a bit afraid, but said boldly and at once, "Marry, I defy the false monk, Brother John! I care not a bit for his cash. He gave me certain gold; that I know well. What! Bad luck to his monkish snout! God knows, I thought he had given it me for your sake, to spend for my own credit and profit in a cousinly way and by reason of the good spirit he has often had in this house. But since I see I am in this pickle, I will answer you to the point. You have slacker debtors than I. For I will pay you readily from day to day; and if it so happens that I fail, I am your wife: charge it to my account and I will pay it as soon as I can. By my word, I have bestowed every bit of it upon my garment, and not on waste! And because I have bestowed it so well and to your credit, for heaven's love, I say, be not angry, but let us laugh and enjoy ourselves. You shall have my merry face as a pledge; forgive me for it, my own dear spouse. Turn to me again and cheer up." 426

This merchant saw there was no help, and that it would only be folly to scold her, since the thing could not be amended. "Now, wife," he said, "I forgive you, but on your soul be not so lavish again. Take better care of our means, I charge you." 432

Thus ends my tale now, and may God send us tales enough to the end of our lives. 434

Amen.

Here ends the Shipman's Tale.

**Behold the merry words of the Host  
to the Shipman and to the Lady Prioress.**

"Well said," said our Host, "by *Corpus Dominus*<sup>4</sup>! Long may you sail by the shore, sir gentle master, gentle mariner. May God give this monk a thousand cartloads of bad years! Aha, comrades, beware of such a trick! The monk put an ape in the man's hood<sup>5</sup> and in his wife's too, by St. Augustine<sup>6</sup>! Never bring monks to your house again! 442

"But let that pass and now let us look about; who among this company shall tell another tale?" And with that word he spoke as courteously as a maiden: "My lady Prioress, by your leave, as I do not wish to vex you, I would deem that you should tell a tale next, if you would. Now will you agree, my lady dear?" 451

"Gladly," she said, and spoke as I will now tell you. 452

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<sup>4</sup> *Corpus Dominus*. "The body of the lord (Christ)."

<sup>5</sup> An ape in the man's hood. He has made an ape, or fool, of him.

<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430).