

Canterbury Tales

Canon's Yeoman's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

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Canon's Yeoman's Tale

The prologue of the Chanons Yemannes Tale

Whan ended was the lyf of seint Cecyle, er we had riden fully fyve myle – When the Second Nun had finished telling us about the life of Saint Cecilia, and before we had completed five miles on this final leg of our journey, at Boughton-under-Bleen, we were overtaken by a man clothed in black with a white surplice visible underneath his outer clothes. His horse was dapple-grey and sweating profusely, as though it had just galloped for three miles; its chest and withers were covered in so much white foam that it looked piebald, like a magpie! A pannier was strapped on either side behind his saddle, but it seemed as though he was traveling light and I began to wonder what sort of a man he was, until I noticed that his cloak was sewn onto his hood and I began to realise that he must be some sort of canon. His hat hung halfway down his back from a lace, for he had been riding at much more than a walk or a trot. He had obviously been spurring his horse like a maniac! He wore a burdock leaf beneath his hood to keep his face dry, and to keep the sun off, so it was a joy to see him sweat so! The perspiration dripped down his forehead like the condensation from a medical distillation process.

The horse belonging to his yeoman looked so tired it could barely stay on its feet. When this canon was alongside us he cried: ‘God save your jolly selves! I have galloped hard, but I wanted to catch up with you so that I could ride with your merry company.’

His yeoman was just as courteous. ‘Sirs, early this morning I saw you ride out of your hostelry and warned my sovereign lord here who is very keen to join you, for he loves chatting and telling tall stories.’

‘Friend, may God reward you for doing so,’ laughed our host, ‘for it certainly seems that your lord is very learned and, if my eyes do not deceive me, he enjoys a good joke as well. Can he tell a merry tale or two, to gladden the hearts of this company?’

‘Who, sir? My lord? – I should say so! He can tell you a tall tale or two, a fairy story or something to make you laugh, that’s for sure. But also, Sir, trust me, you’d be amazed, if

The Canon's Yeoman does not appear at all in Geoffrey's prologue to the Canterbury Tales and nor does the canon himself, they arrive at a gallop near the end of the pilgrimage, where the yeoman quickly proceeds to divulge all the scurrilous secrets of his disreputable master. It is so embarrassing and incriminating to the canon that he gallops away again before his assistant has even begun.

The canon is an alchemist, the yeoman reveals to us, and therefore willing to endure poverty for the promise of future riches; for as he explains: those who believe in a great prize and are willing to abandon themselves to their faith will give everything they can – they will withdraw from the world and suffer any degree of poverty – for the hope of bringing about this blissful future. But unlike hermits, anchorites, monks and friars, this canon and his assistant eek out their living amongst thieves and confidence tricksters.

The tale from the Canon's Yeoman follows the tale from the Second Nun in all versions and is another of Geoffrey's Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

you knew him as well as I do, how accomplished he is, and how crafty he can be. He's taken upon himself many an ambitious enterprise that would be almost impossible for any of you here to successfully complete, unless you had learnt the art from him first. However ordinary he might look to you, his company is worth keeping, I can tell you! You'll pay a great deal of money to retain his friendship, I'll lay everything I own on that. He's a man of great wisdom, an excellent man.'

'Well,' said our host, 'please tell us then, is he a cleric or not? Tell us what he is.'

'He's greater than a cleric. I can describe something of his craft in only a few words if you like. My lord can work so subtly – although I don't understand everything that he does, of course, for I'm only his assistant – but all the ground upon which we're riding, from here as far as Canterbury, he could strip away and pave with gold and silver!'

'Bless us all!' exclaimed our host. 'This is truly marvellous to hear, especially since, given his worth and ability, which should instil such admiration in men, he chooses to waive



all their respect and wear an outer garment that isn't worth a gnat! It earns him no respect at all! It's all dirty and torn. Why is your lord so dreadfully scruffy when he can obviously afford much better clothes, if what you say is true? Explain that!'

'You'd better ask him yourself,' replied the yeoman. 'God knows, I don't think he'll ever prosper, although don't hold me to oath on this, it's just between you and me you understand, but I think he's probably too clever for his own good. If something is overdone, as the clerics say, it borders upon pride and

excess, it's a vice, and for this I count him unworldly and stupid. When a man's too intelligent and gifted, his abilities can be misguided, just like my lord here, which I think is a shame. Let God change things for the better, that's all I'm going to say about it.'

'That's alright, good yeoman,' cried our host. 'But since you know all about your lord's schemes, tell us what he actually does, since he's so crafty and so sly – go on, tell us! Where do you both live, for example, if you're at liberty to say?'

'We live in the suburbs of a town, lurking in secret places and concealed alleyways where thieves and robbers live, and all those who are in hiding. Our life is just like theirs, to be honest.'

'Now, tell me this then,' said our host. 'Why is your face so discoloured?'

'By Saint Peter! Is it? I'm so used to blowing on that damn fire it must have scorched my face. I haven't looked into a mirror for months I'm so hard at work, learning how to make silver and gold. We're always chasing after shadows, pouring things into a fire. And because all our experiments fail, we resort to performing conjuring tricks on people by borrowing gold, be it a pound or two, or ten or even twelve, and then making

out that we can take a pound of gold and turn it quickly into two pounds. We can't, of course, but we always believe that our next experiment will be the one that works, as we grope after this dream. But if it's possible at all, the methods are so far in advance of our understanding that they're obviously beyond our grasp. We're incapable of pinning them down and we always fall short in our endeavours, although he might swear to the contrary. It will ruin us in the end.'

While the yeoman had been telling us all this, the canon had been drawing his horse closer and closer to try to hear everything his yeoman was saying about him. Cato said: 'a man who is guilty imagines everything that is spoken is said about *him*,' and this canon was always suspicious about conversations that were going on out of earshot. This was why he drew so near to his yeoman, to listen to what he was saying.

'Shut up you fool!' he cried suddenly. 'Don't say any more! If you continue, you'll regret it. You're slandering me in front of all these people and revealing things that you shouldn't.'

'On the contrary!' cried our host. 'Carry on, yeoman, don't pay attention to any of his threats. They're not worth a gnat!'

'No, I'd better not,' replied the yeoman.

But when the canon saw that his yeoman, at our host's prompting, was likely to disclose all his private business, he spurred his horse and galloped quickly away, for shame.

'Ah, now I can have some fun!' exclaimed the yeoman. 'I'll tell you everything I know, now he's gone. May the devil take him! I'll never meet with him again, not for anything. May he endure sorrow and shame before he dies, for introducing me to that hateful charade – I mean it!

'And yet, for all my hurt and all my grief, for all the sorrow, hard work and mishap that I've endured, I never believed in what we were doing at all. I wish to God I had the ability to expose it all properly to you. But nonetheless, I can say something of this art. Since my lord has gone, I will tell you everything I know.'

Here biginneth the Chanouns Yeman his Tale

I have lived with that canon for seven years, but I've never come anywhere near to understanding what he was doing. I've lost everything because of him, and God knows, so have many others as well. I was young and carefree once. I dressed myself in fine clothes, but now I wear my stockings on my head! My complexion, which was once rosy and healthy, is now pale and leaden. Whoever follows this path will surely come to regret it. My study has ruined my eyesight, Lo! Who would want to be an alchemist? The shifting sands of this science have taken so much from me that I am left with nothing. I'm so in debt because of all the gold I've borrowed that I'll never be able to pay it all back, however long I live. Let my example be a warning to you all. Whoever sets out along this

path can say goodbye to success. So help me God, he won't gain anything from it at all. It'll only empty his purse and drive him mad into the bargain. And when, through his own stupidity, he has chanced everything and lost it all, he will urge others to enter the game and lose their own wealth as well. It's a joy and a comfort to all scoundrels when they cause trouble to those around them, so a cleric once told me. But enough of that, I shall speak of our work.

When we had arrived at the place where we were to perform our elfish craft, we made ourselves appear very knowledgeable. We used terms that sounded learned and occult and I would blow the fire until I became faint. There is no need to tell you about the proportions of all the things we used, five or six ounces, or whatever, of silver, or some other quantity, or to burden you with all their names: like trisulphide of arsenic, calcium phosphate and iron filings, ground together into a fine powder, nor how it was all put into a clay pot with some salt and pepper, covered with a thin sheet of glass, and all the other things as well; nor how the glass was sealed against the lip of the pot with clay so that none of the gasses could escape, nor will I describe the crackling fire, nor the care and attention we paid to the process of sublimation, or calcification, or the creation of an amalgam of quicksilver, which is known as mercury. For nothing ever worked. Our trisulphide of arsenic, our sublimation of mercury, lead oxide powdered in a stone mortar or whatever, however we mixed them all together, in whatever proportions, the experiment always failed.



Neither the gasses that rose nor the lumps that stuck to the bottom of our pot were of any use to us. All our work and effort was lost, and all the money that we had spent on the ingredients wasted. May it all go to hell!

And there are lots of other things that we used in addition to these, although I cannot list them all in their proper order because I'm not a learned man. I will describe them as they come to mind, although I won't be able to classify them properly. There was Armenian clay, copper salts and borax, various vessels made of earthenware and glass, bottles of urine, vessels for extracting the oil from things, phials, crucibles and vessels for sublimation, beakers and retorts, and other things which weren't nearly so expensive like bull's blood, spring water, arsenic, sulphur, ammonium chloride, and a great many herbs like agrimony, moonwort, valerian and others I could describe to you if I had the time. Our lamps were burning day and night as we laboured in our endeavour.

We had a furnace for calcination, water that went milky when exhaled breath was bubbled through it, we had calcium oxide, calcium carbonate and albumen, various powders, ashes, dung, urine and clay, waterproof sample bags, potassium nitrate, sulphuric acid, charcoal fires, wood fires, potassium carbonate, ammonia, salts precipitating from

solution, solutions for precipitating salts, combustible materials, decomposed horse hair, decomposed human hair, oil impregnated with potassium hydrogen tartrate, potassium hydrogen tartrate crystals, alum, glass, yeast and beer ready for fermentation, arsenic disulphide, clays, gauzes and papers to absorb or to hold an active ingredient. We had equipment for producing yellow, light-sensitive silver iodide, cements and fermentation vessels, our ingots and our touchstones for assaying, and much more.

I could tell you about the four spirits and the seven bodies, as it was taught to me by my master, who knew them all by rote. The first spirit is mercury, the second is honey-coloured arsenic disulphide, the third is ammonium chloride and the fourth is sulphur. And the seven bodies – Lo! Here they are: the sun is gold, the moon is silver, Mars is iron and Mercury quicksilver, Saturn is lead and Jupiter tin. Venus is copper, by all my father's relatives!

Whoever wishes to practice this cursed craft won't derive any benefit from it though. All the money he spends on it will be completely lost, that's for sure. If anybody wants to reveal to the world how utterly stupid he is, let him come and learn alchemy. If any idiot has a little money in his chest, let him become a natural philosopher!

Do you ask me if it's an easy science to learn? No! No! The finest intellects, even a monk or a friar, a priest or a canon, won't be able to understand any of it, even if he sits at his books day and night learning about this elfish, arcane science. He's wasting his time at the very least. And if you were to try to teach an uneducated man all about it – impossible! Don't even think about it! Although whether a man can read or write makes no difference really, the result is just the same as far as alchemy is concerned – just a total failure in the end.

Oh, I forgot to tell you about corrosive water and metal filings, softening agents, hardening agents, oils, fluxes, metal alloys containing lead, tin and bismuth that melt at low temperatures – but to describe everything would fill a book bigger than the Bible so I won't begin to try. I've already said enough to raise a devil.

Ah, no! I haven't told you about the Philosopher's Stone. It's called the Elixir, which we all desperately sought for – if we had found *him*, we would have been made! But I vow to God, for all our knowledge, our experiments and our cunning, his presence always eluded us. He caused us to spend a great deal of money, the loss of which nearly drove us mad, but we always supposed that success was just around the corner and that once we had found him, all our troubles would be over. Such misplaced optimism is cruel, I warn you; you can go on like that forever – such an unfounded belief in a blissful future causes men to disassociate themselves from all that they see and know, and to distrust it. Yet they never lose their faith in this belief and to them it's a sweet hardship, for as long as they have a sheet to wrap themselves in at night and something to cover their backs during the day, they'll give everything they have for their faith; they will not stop until they are destitute. Wherever they go, they smell of sulphur. They stink like goats! The smell is so horrible that you can spot them a mile off by their threadbare clothes and by

their stink. The stench will infect you even at that great distance, I'm sure.

If you ask one of them why they are so shabbily dressed, they will whisper into your ear as though divulging a great secret and say that they have to conceal their occupation because, if people knew, they would be killed because of their science. But enough of this, I will proceed with my story.

Before the pot is placed in the fire, my lord mixes together some metals, in certain proportions which no man – now he is gone I can say this boldly – which no other man knows about, for I was always aware that he had a reputation for cunning; but all the same, it often went wrong. Can you guess how? Well, sometimes the pot would explode and farewell the lot! Everything gone! These metals were as violent as sodium and potassium and even the walls offered no resistance to it, unless they were made of lime and stone; the explosion shot right through them. Sometimes the metal would be blasted into the earth – we lost many a pound of the stuff that way – or else scattered all about the floor or spattered up into the rafters. Without any doubt, even though the devil never actually showed himself in person, I'm sure he was there with us, the cunning fiend! There is no more distress and bad-temper to be found in hell, where he is lord, than there was in that room when a pot exploded; for everybody accused each other and said that it was the foolish way in which the fire had been made, or that the blowing was to blame – which always frightened me, because that was my job. 'Rubbish,' another would cry, 'you're all fools, you didn't mix it properly.' 'No,' a fourth would cry. 'Listen to me, stop! It was because the fire wasn't made of beech wood, that's all.'

I never had any idea why it had exploded, but it certainly caused huge arguments to break out amongst us. 'Alright,' my lord would say. 'There's nothing more to be done. We'll learn from this mistake. I think the pot might have been cracked but never mind, don't worry, we can sweep the floor as usual, as quickly as we can. Come on, it's not a problem, don't be downhearted!'

So the mess would all be swept into a heap, a canvas sheet thrown over the floor and then all of it thrown into a sieve, shaken through onto the canvas, searched through and all the recoverable bits and pieces picked out. 'By God,' said one, 'there's some of our metal here but by no means all of it. Although this experiment went wrong, however, it might work next time and we must all take a financial risk to make money. A merchant cannot get it right every time – believe me, his cargo can arrive safely in port or it can all be lost at sea.'

'Peace!' my master would cry. 'Next time this experiment will work. There was probably something wrong with the equipment.'

But then another would insist that the fire was too hot; but whether hot or cold, I can tell you this, our conclusions were always wrong. We always failed in our endeavours. But like madmen, we continued to rave. When we were together, we all seemed to be as wise as Solomon. But all that glisters is not gold, as I've heard it said. An apple that looks rosy and delicious on the outside may be rotten inside. And so it was with us. He

who seems the wisest, by Christ, is often shown to be the most stupid when the chips are down. He who appears the most honest is often a thief. You'll know this for a fact when I've finished telling you this following tale:

There is a religious person at large, a canon, who will infect an entire city, even if it's as large as was Nineveh, Rome, Alexandria, Troy or three other great cities like it. His tricks and deceptions would be too much for a man to record even if he lived for a thousand years. In all this world of appearances, he has no equal. He will speak his words so cunningly and wrap a person so tightly in the false paradigm that he creates when he converses with them, that he will soon make them believe the most ridiculous things; unless that person is as much a fiend as he is, of course. He has beguiled many a man before now and will do so still, for as long as he lives. And yet, men ride and walk miles to seek him out and make his acquaintance, not realising that his authority is dishonest. If it pleases you to let me speak, I will explain.

But worshipful canons, please don't imagine that I wish to slander your order in particular, although I speak of a canon. There is a scoundrel in every abbey, and God forbid that a whole monastery should suffer for a single man's disgrace! It is not my intention to spread slander but to put to rights something that is wrong. This tale not only concerns you canons, but many others as well. Among Christ's twelve apostles there was a single traitor, and that was Judas, so why should all the others receive blame when they were blameless? I say the same for you, except to say this – if you will listen – that if any Judas lurks in your convent, get rid of him! I urge you to do this, or risk shame and spiritual ruin. Please don't take offence, but listen to this cautionary tale.

In London there was a priest who was living as a chaplain; he had been there for many years and was so good-natured and accommodating to the wife with whom he took lodgings that she wouldn't let him pay for anything, neither his food nor his clothes, however affluent he seemed; and he did seem to have plenty of silver to spend. But no matter, I shall go straight on to tell you about this canon.

This dishonest canon arrived one day at the room where the priest lay resting, and at once launched into a desperate request for the loan of a certain quantity of gold, which he said he would quickly repay. 'Lend me a mark,' he said, 'for three days, and at the end of this time I will settle up with you in full. If I don't keep my word, you can have me hanged the very next day.'

The priest quickly produced a gold mark, the canon thanked him profusely for it, took his leave, went away and returned three days later with the priest's money. He gave him back the gold, which the priest was delighted to see.

'I have no qualms at all,' this priest declared, 'about lending a man a noble, or two or three or however many I possess, in fact, if he is true and honest and I can be certain of getting the money back when he says I will. As long as there is no likelihood of dishonesty.'

‘What, me be dishonest?’ exclaimed the canon. ‘That would be a first! Good faith is a thing that I have always made certain of, and I shall continue to do so until the day that I creep into my grave – you should believe this as surely as you believe in the Christian faith. I thank God, but there has never been anyone who was not completely happy to have leant me money, and I have never acted in bad faith, ever. Now sir, between you and me, since you have been so good to me and shown me such courtesy, I would like to repay your kindness and, if it pleases you to hear me out, I will explain to you how I practice natural philosophy. Be assured, you will see with your own eyes how I shall perform a miracle before I go.’

‘Will you really? By sweet Mary! Please proceed.’

‘I’m at your command,’ replied the canon. Lo! How this thief could offer his services! Cold callers always carry a chill in with them! Our ancient sources say so, and I can corroborate it by the example of this canon, who is the root of all deception and takes delight, and ever shall do, in bringing mischief to Christian folk – for such evil thoughts are ingrained in his heart. God protect us from his cunning and his duplicity. This priest had no idea who he was dealing with, and he had no inkling of the harm that was to come to him. Oh foolish priest! Oh naive innocent! Your covetousness will be your downfall. Oh you unworldly idiot, blind to the wiles of this fox who is out to get you. It’s too late to escape him now. I shall quickly make haste towards the conclusion of this story, you unhappy man, and describe in detail your stupidity and credulity, and also the deceit of that other wretch, as far as my wits will allow.

But is this canon my lord, you are asking? Sir host, in faith and by the Queen of Heaven, no it isn’t. It is another canon, one who is a hundred times more cunning. He has pulled the wool over people’s eyes dozens of times and it would tire me to have to make rhymes about it all. Whenever I speak of his duplicity and his deviousness I blush for shame – my cheeks go scarlet red, I can feel them doing so now, even though they’re normally leaden pale and have no colour at all, having been so consumed and wasted from all the fumes which you have already heard me describe. But listen to this canon’s cussedness.

‘Sir,’ he said to the priest. ‘Send your man for some quicksilver, quickly. Two or three ounces will do, and when he comes back you will see, just as swiftly, something wonderful that you will never have seen before.’

‘Sir,’ replied the priest, ‘it shall be done.’ He instructed his servant to fetch what had been asked for; his servant got ready to go at once, went off, shortly returned with the quicksilver and gave three ounces to the canon. The canon laid it down and asked for charcoal to be fetched, so that he could do what he intended to do. The coals were brought and the canon produced a crucible from inside his coat and showed it to the priest.

‘Take this instrument that you can see, in your hands,’ he said, ‘put an ounce of quicksilver into it and take your first step, in the name of Christ, towards becoming a philosopher. There are few men indeed whom I honour with a demonstration of my science. You will see that this quicksilver will disappear, right before your eyes, and change into

silver as pure as any coin that is in your purse or mine, or anywhere else – silver of such quality that it could be minted. Or else may I be branded a charlatan and unworthy to be in anybody’s company. I have a powder here that is very expensive, but it will do the job, for it is my secret ingredient in all that I am about to demonstrate. Send your servant away and shut the door while we are about our business, so that no one can have a peek at what we are doing while we practice this natural philosophy.’

All that he had asked for was quickly done, the servant departed, the priest closed the door and they set to work at once. The priest, under the instructions of this cursed canon, set the crucible on the fire and became engrossed in blowing the charcoal into a red heat while the canon emptied a powder into the crucible – I have no idea what this powder contained, whether chalk or ground glass or something else that is worthless I don’t know, but it was certainly not worth a fly, its purpose was solely to deceive the priest. This poor cleric was instructed to pile the glowing charcoal up around the crucible. ‘Out of affection for you,’ assured the canon, ‘I intend that this demonstration shall be the work of your own two hands and yours alone.’

‘Thank you,’ said the priest, for he was truly absorbed and delighted with what he was doing. He stacked the charcoal as he had been instructed and while he was busy at this, this fiendish wretch, this dishonest canon – may the devil take him! – took out from his coat a piece of beech wood charcoal which he had cleverly drilled a hole into and stuffed with an ounce of silver filings, kept in place with a wax bung. Be in no doubt, this conjuring trick had been prepared in advance, and so had all the other things that I’ll tell you about in a moment. The priest lapped it all up, I have to say, and the canon didn’t intend to stop until he had fleeced him.



It pains me to have to speak of it, in fact. I would gladly bring him to the attention of the authorities if I knew how to, but he is here and there, never in one place for long enough and has no fixed abode. But pay attention now, sirs, for God’s love! He took this piece of charcoal that I told you about and craftily hid it in his hand. Then, as the priest was busy piling up the hot cinders around the crucible, this canon said: ‘Friend, you are doing it all wrong. It isn’t piled up correctly but never mind, I’ll fix it. Give me the tongs a moment, for I want this to work for you, by Saint Giles! You’re hot – see how you’re sweating? Take this cloth and wipe the moisture from your eyes.’

While this credulous priest was wiping his face with the cloth, the canon placed the piece of charcoal on top of the crucible and blew hard until all the coals were glowing red; then: ‘Fetch us something to drink,’ he said, ‘for everything will soon be working now, I guarantee. Let’s sit down and enjoy the moment.’

When the canon's charcoal began to burn to a grey powder, all the silver filings inside it fell down into the crucible – as they had to really, they had no power to do anything else. The priest, alas, had no inkling that this was happening, he thought that all the pieces of charcoal were alike and had no idea that he was being deceived.

When this alchemist saw that everything was ready: 'Rise up,' he told the priest, 'come and stand by me; and since I know that you don't have a mould for an ingot here, go and fetch a lump of chalk that I can fashion into a mould. Bring a bowlful of water as well, or a panful, and then I shall convince you how our business will thrive and be a great success. And so that you may be certain that what you are about to see is for real, I will come along with you, and return with you.'



The door to the room was opened and quickly shut, and off they went, carrying the key with them. They returned as swiftly as they could. But why should I prolong this story? The canon took the chalk and carved out a depression in the shape of an ingot as I will describe: he produced from his sleeve a strip of silver that weighed about an ounce – and now listen to what he did, may he rot in hell! – he carved out this depression in the chalk the same length and width as the strip of silver, using it as a template, without the priest seeing what he was doing. Then

he concealed the strip of silver back into his sleeve again, took the crucible from the fire, poured the contents into the mould and then, when it had cooled a little, threw it into the bowl of water and said to the priest: 'Look what is here. Put your hand in and feel around. You will find an ingot of silver, I expect.'

Well, what else was the priest going to find? An ingot cast from silver filings is obviously going to be made of silver, isn't it!

The priest put his hand into the water and took out the silver ingot, and was he pleased! 'God's blessing upon you, and that of Christ's mother and all the saints!' he exclaimed. 'May they all curse me if I don't beg you to teach me this subtle craft – I'm yours, to do your bidding in any way that I can.'

'Well, first we must give it another go,' said the canon. 'Then you will have the technique fixed more firmly in your mind and be able to perform it by yourself, whenever you wish. Let us take another ounce of mercury and do exactly the same with it as we did with the other one that is now silver.'

The priest busied himself with the task that the canon had given him, blew the fire and waited for the alchemy to work once again. Meanwhile, this canon, may a curse be upon him, was waiting to perform another trick. In his hand he held a hollow stick as though ready to help the priest stir the coals. Concealed in the end of this stick was an ounce of silver filings, just like those he had hidden in the piece of charcoal, and sealed with wax

in the same way. While the priest was busy, the canon prodded the fire with this stick, threw in the worthless powder as before (I pray God, may the devil skin him alive!) and holding this stick above the crucible, the one with the silver hidden in it, he stirred the charcoal until the wax melted and all the silver filings fell into the crucible.

Now sirs, what do you think happened next?

When this priest had been deceived yet again, he held his two silver ingots in his hands and, continuing to suspect nothing, was so happy that I cannot express his glee. He offered this canon his services and all his wealth. 'Hey,' thought the canon. 'Although I may be poor, you will find that I am cunning – I warn you, I have plenty more tricks where these came from.'

'Is there any copper in this house?' he asked.

'Yes, I'm sure there is,' replied the priest.

'Well, go and fetch it or if not, buy some straight away. Good sir, quickly get us some.'

The priest went off at once to get some copper, came back with it, the canon took it in his hands and weighed out an ounce – but I find myself without the words to describe this deceitfulness, this cursed duplicity and dastardliness, my mind will not sink so low. He seemed friendly to those who didn't know him, but he was an absolute fiend, both in his mind and in his heart. It tires me to have to speak about it; and yet, I will describe what he did so that men may be warned about it.

This canon put the ounce of copper into the crucible, placed it on the fire, threw in the powder and asked the priest to stoop down low above the coals and blow, as he had done before. But it was all a joke – just as the canon intended, he was making a complete monkey out of the priest. When the crucible was hot enough, the canon cast the contents into the mould and from there into the pan of water, putting his hand in to swish it about. And in his sleeve (as I explained before) he still had this strip of silver which he let fall into the bowl and sink to the bottom, this cursed wretch. The priest suspected nothing at all. Then, swishing the water about some more, the canon retrieved the copper with great dexterity, hid it at once, then clasped the priest around the shoulders and said: 'Lean over, man, come on, help me to find the ingot.'

The priest found the strip of silver without any difficulty and took it out. The canon said: 'Let's go at once to a goldsmith, to have these three silver ingots tested for purity; for, by my hood, we can't be sure whether the silver is pure or not until we've done so. Let's get them quickly assayed.'

So off they went to a goldsmith, the metal was investigated with fire and hammer and there was no doubt; it was all pure silver. Who was more pleased than this ecstatic priest! No bird was ever more pleased to see the dawn, no nightingale more delighted to sing, no lady more pleased to speak about love and no knight more eager to perform deeds of arms than this priest was to learn alchemy. 'For the love of God, who died for us all,' he

implored, 'if I am in any way deserving of it, please tell me how much I can give you for the recipe for this magic powder? Tell me!'

'By Our Lady, it is very expensive, I warn you,' replied the canon. 'Apart from a friar and myself, nobody else in England knows how to make it.'

'No matter!' exclaimed the priest. 'Sir, for God's sake, how much? Tell me!'

'Oh, it is very expensive, as I have said, Sir. To give you a figure, if you wish to own the recipe for making this powder, it will cost you forty pounds, so save me God. If we hadn't made friends and worked together, it would be much more.'

This priest fetched forty pounds in coin at once and gave it to the canon, in return for a list of ingredients and instructions, which was nothing but a fraud and a deceit. 'Sir priest,' said the canon, 'I don't wish for any fame from my craft and I would rather that it was kept a secret. If you hold any affection for me, please keep this recipe to yourself. If ordinary men were to discover what I can do through alchemy and natural philosophy, by God, they would all be so envious that they would kill me because of it, I'm certain.'

'God forbid that that should happen!' exclaimed the priest. 'What are you saying? I would rather spend everything I have than that you should fall into such mischief.'

'You have every reason to feel this way,' replied the canon. 'Thank you, and farewell.'

The canon departed. This is the last the priest will ever see of him, I'm sure. When he chooses to test his new powder, he'll have to say another farewell – to his money!

The priest was deceived and made a fool of. This was the way that the canon made his living. Consider sirs, how in every walk of

life there is such a constant struggle to take possession of gold that there can scarcely be any left. Alchemy deceives so many that I'm honestly convinced that it's the principal cause of this scarcity. Lo! Such a lust for money lies in this enterprise that it turns good humour into rage, empties the heaviest purse of all its gold and inspires folk to buy curses against all those they have lent money to. Oh, for shame! Can those who have had their fingers burnt not escape from this fire? Philosophers speak so obscurely of this craft that nobody can ever understand them, however intelligent they may be. They may as well chatter like jays and use the language of the birds to explain it all. And they will never achieve their goal. A man can only readily learn philosophy in such a way as to ruin him.



All you who practise alchemy, I caution you – stop, before you lose everything! Better late than never, as they say. Forever is a long time to wait for prosperity. Seek it as you may, you will never find it here. You are like Bayard the blind carthorse who boldly goes blundering on regardless, just as eager to run the cart over a huge stone and tip it over as to keep it on the lane. You are just like him, all those of you who practise alchemy. If your eyes are so short-sighted, see that your mind at least can see the way ahead and



be warned, for however long you stare and however widely you scan the horizon, your voyage won't earn you a penny and you'll lose everything you have.

Withdraw the fire before it gets out of control – stop meddling with this arcane science I mean, because if you don't, you can say goodbye to any success in life. I will quickly tell you what true philosophers say about it: Arnold from Villa Nova says in his *Rosarium Philosophorum* that: 'No one can destroy mercury without its conjugate being involved. The person who first discovered this was Hermes Trismegistus,

the father of philosophy, who explained that the dragon cannot die unless killed by its conjugate, both of whom are forever biting each other's tails; that is to say, the dragon, mercury, can only be destroyed by his brother, sulphur, since they are derived from the moon and the sun respectively. Therefore,' says Arnold, 'take heed of this – let no man pursue this arcane science unless he fully understands what philosophers have already, clearly explained. If he doesn't, he is a fool. For this science and this esoteric art,' he says, 'is the highest of all secrets, by God!'

There was once a disciple of Plato's who asked his master, in honest truth, as the *Chimica Senioris Zadith Tabula* tells us: 'Can you tell me the name of the Secret Stone?'

Plato answered: 'Take the stone that men call Titanos.'

'What's that?'

'Magnesia,'

'But what's that?'

'It is a fluid made of the four elements,' replied Plato.

'Tell me the proportions.'

'Certainly not, Philosophers are all sworn that they shall reveal it to nobody, nor write about it in any book, for it is so valuable and precious to Christ that he wishes it to remain hidden, except to those select few whom it will inspire or protect. That's all there is to it.'

So here I shall leave it, since God desires that no philosopher should tell a living soul how to come across this stone. I urge you all, for your own goods, let it go. For the man who makes God his adversary and busies himself doing things that God doesn't want him to do, will never prosper, even if he chooses to pursue alchemy for the rest of his life. That's the nub of it. My tale is done. God send every honest man relief from his sorrows. Amen.