

Canterbury Tales

General Prologue

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

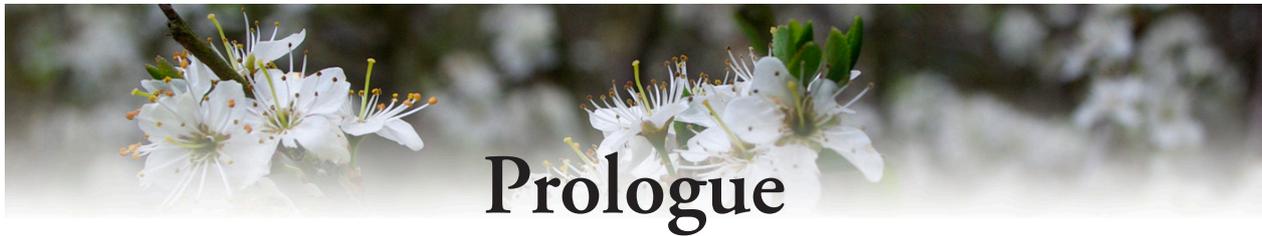
by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This story has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912, reprinted 1973. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference to the Riverside Chaucer 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

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Here bininneth the Book of the Tales of Canterbury

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote the droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote – When April has pierced the drought of March to the very root with his sweet showers, and bathed every vein of every leaf with such a cordial that the flowers have burst forth in abundance; and when Zephyrus with his sweet breath has refreshed the tender crops in every woodland and field, the young sun is already halfway through the sign of Aries and small birds are singing, having spent the night in joyous anticipation – nature so stirs their mood! – then folk long to seek out unfamiliar shores and distant saints and to go on pilgrimage; and especially, from every corner of an English shire, they go to Canterbury, to seek out that holy, joyful martyr Saint Thomas Becket whom they prayed to when the Black Death struck their district many years before, and who spared them.

It happened one day, during this season, that I lay in the Tabard Inn at Southwark, near the River Thames, ready to set off on my pilgrimage to Canterbury the very next day, with a stout heart and with a devout mind. During the evening a group of twenty-nine other people came into the hostelry, all from various walks of life and thrown together by chance, but all of them, like me, pilgrims bound for Canterbury. The rooms and the stables were spacious enough, everyone was well looked after and by the time the sun had set, I had spoken to all of them and felt so much in their fellowship that we arranged to rise early the next day and make our way towards Canterbury together as a group, as I shall now describe.

But first, since I have the time and the opportunity, before I proceed any further with my story I will describe each of them to you, who they were, their social standing, their occupation and what they were wearing. I will begin with a knight.

Since the moment that he had first ridden a horse, this worthy knight had loved chivalry, truth and honour, liberality and courtesy. He had conducted himself bravely in all his lord's conflicts, taking him far and wide in Christendom and in heathen lands, and was always honoured for his valour. He was at Alexandria when it was won. He had sat at the high table in Prussia. He had campaigned in Lithuania and in Russia more extensively than any other Christian knight. He was at the siege of Granada, against Algeciras, and

A disparate collection of people from all walks of life have congregated at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, south of the river Thames, opposite the medieval city of London, in order to set out on pilgrimage to Canterbury, about sixty miles away. A plan is hatched for this company to travel onwards as a group and to entertain one another by telling stories. The story judged to be the best will win for its narrator a free meal on their return.

Chaucer's prologue describes the pilgrims and introduces the framing narrative behind the 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.

in North Africa. He was at Atalia when it was won, and at many a glorious engagement in the eastern Mediterranean. This worthy knight had fought against the heathen in Turkey; he had been present at fifteen bloody battles, fought for Christendom at Tlemsen in the lists there, three times, and had always vanquished his enemy. He was strong, brave and intelligent but his demeanour was as gentle as a maiden's. He had never spoken harshly or unjustly to anyone in his life and he was, in fact, a very paragon of knight-hood.

As regards his presentation and equipment, his horse was a fine one but it was not decked out especially and his clothes were unpretentious and made to last; especially a strong leather doublet covered all over with marks left by his coat-of-mail, for he had only recently disembarked from his ship in order to come on this pilgrimage. Riding alongside him was his son, a young squire, a fine, romantic and energetic young man with hair so curly that it might have been coiffured with tongs! This young man was about twenty I would guess, of average height but wonderfully athletic and very strong. He had already ridden into conflict in Flanders, Artois and Picardy and given a good account of himself in this short time, in the hope of earning his lady's affection. His tunic was so richly embroidered that he looked like a meadow full of red and white flowers! and continually sang as he rode along, or played a flute. He was as fresh as the month of May. His gown was short, with long, wide sleeves and he seemed a very proficient rider and in full control of his horse. He was accustomed to composing songs, jousted well and danced, could write and draw very ably and was so amorous that he slept as much during the hours of darkness as does a nightingale. He was courteous, kind, always willing to be of help and quite accustomed to carving the meat at his father's table.



He had chosen to bring along with him only a yeoman. The man was clad in a green coat and hood and carried a quiver of sharp arrows discretely under his belt. He was an accomplished man and all the peacock feathers on his arrows were standing up proudly as they should. In his hand he carried a mighty longbow. He had a muscular head with close-cropped hair, a weather-beaten complexion and looked as though he would be quite at home in the forest. On his arm he wore a fine leather archer's wristguard and at his side he wore a sword and a small round shield. On his other side he wore a dagger, finely fashioned with a point as sharp as a spear. On his chest shone a silver Saint Christopher medallion and a hunting horn was secured around his torso with a green strap. I guess he was almost certainly a forester.

There was a nun, a prioress, with us, who smiled meekly and whose greatest expletive was Saint Loy! Her name was Madam Eglantine. She sung the divine service beautifully with a pleasing, nasal resonance and could speak French very competently as well, after

the old style she had learnt at the Benedictine Priory of Saint Leonard's at Stratford-by-Bow; she knew nothing of the sort of French now spoken in Paris. Her table manners were exemplary; she let nothing fall from her mouth onto the table and did not wipe up the sauce with her fingers. She could take a spoonful of something from a dish without spilling it onto her clothes, and took a great pleasure in courtesy. She kept her upper lip so clean with the napkin that not a trace of food could be found floating in her goblet when she had drunk from it. She never burped or farted but carried herself elegantly when she rose from the board, took pains to be polite and gracious and did her utmost to look dignified and to be thought refined.

As regards her sensibility, she was charitable and so gentle that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap, if it was bleeding or dead. She kept some little dogs which she fed on roasted meat, or milk or the finest bread and she would weep bitterly if she found one of them dead, or if someone had beaten it with a stick, for she had a compassionate soul and a tender heart. Her wimple was very neatly pleated and her face framed within it was very graceful; she had eyes as grey as glass, a small, delicate red mouth and a broad forehead almost a span across, I would think; she had certainly not been malnourished as a child. She wore a splendid cloak, I could see, and around her arm were two strings of coral beads with green gauds, to organise her prayers with. Hanging from them was a large gold brooch with, inscribed upon it, the letter A with a crown over it and then "Love conquers all" in Latin.

She had another nun with her who acted as her chaplain, and three priests. There was also a monk, a very proficient-looking man who went about inspecting his abbey's farms and estates and who loved hunting. He was strong and worldly and will make a good abbot one day, I think. He kept many a handsome horse in his stables and when he rode, his bridle tinkled and jingled in the breeze as loudly and clearly as any bell in the chapel which he had responsibility for and authority over. But because the rule of Saint Mary or of Saint Benedict is somewhat old and inflexible, he had decided that the old should give way to the new. He didn't give a plucked hen for that text which advises that hunting is an unholy pursuit, nor the one which suggests that a monk away from his cloister is like a fish out of water. He didn't think such sentiments were worth a cockle, and I said that I agreed with him. Why should he study and drive himself mad pouring over holy texts in his cloister, or work with his hands and do manual labour as Saint Augustine recommended that he do? How will the world be served by this? Let Saint Augustine roll up his sleeves and do it!

So this monk enjoyed a good gallop now and again and kept greyhounds that were as swift as a bird in flight. He enjoyed the pursuit of a hare more than anything, and spared no expense in this regard. His sleeves were trimmed with the finest grey fur and he had a beautiful gold fibula fastening his hood under his chin; its chief ornamentation involved an intricate love-knot. He was bald and his head shone like glass; in fact, so did his face to be honest, as though it had been rubbed with oil. He was fat and healthy and had bright eyes that darted about and shone like molten lead. His boots were supple and

his horse was as brown as a berry and very sprightly – he was certainly a fine figure of a man and not pale and emaciated like a ghost. The meal that he enjoyed most was roast swan.

There was a friar with us as well, a very jovial and well-spoken man. He was a limiter, and of all the four orders of mendicant friars, the most cheerful, talkative and convincing I have ever met. He had arranged for many young ladies to be quickly married, at his own expense! He was a pillar of his order.

This friar was well-known and loved by all the landowners in his district, and by some fine, upstanding women in the town as well. He had the power to give absolution, more so than a curate he said, for he was licenced by his order. He listened very sympathetically to every confession and the penance he gave was always very lenient, for in this way he often received more than just the goodwill of his flock; for when one gives generously to the mendicant orders, it is a sign of true repentance and if a man gives much, his contrition is assured. There are many men who are so sturdy that they will not weep, however much pain they are in, so rather than seeing their tears, he preferred to see their silver instead.

His clothing concealed a little stash of brooches and manicure tools, to give to pretty wives. He was very musical, he could sing melodiously, play the fiddle and took the prize for singing every time. His neck was as white as a lily, but he was as strong as a wrestler too. He was well-acquainted with the taverns in every town and knew the innkeepers and serving girls better than he knew any lepers or beggars or anyone who was chronically ill. There is no profit in dealing with the poor and infirm when one can deal instead with those who have plenty of money and merchandise, he thought. So to these people, he was very courteous, often servile. He seemed a paragon of virtue in their company.

This friar was the best beggar in his friary, and saw that all his brothers received a small share of his gains in return that none of them would trespass on his patch. Even if a widow was going about without shoes, he would greet her so pleasantly that he'd have a farthing off her before he left. He received far more than he gave to his brothers. He could frolic about like a puppy, and on days set aside for arbitration he didn't dress like a monk or a poor scholar in a threadbare habit, but like a cardinal or a pope. His habit was of double-worsted that hung like a bell that has been freshly cast in the foundry. He had cultivated a slight French lisp, to make his English sound very precise and refined and when he sang to his own accompaniment, his eyes twinkled like the stars on a frosty night. His name was Hubert.

There was a merchant with us as well, a man with a forked beard wearing clothes of various colours, sitting high up on his horse. His hat was of beaver skin, the kind worn in Flanders, and he had some magnificent buckles on his shoes. This merchant spoke very grandly and his theme was always the same: the profit that he had recently made. He harangued us all with the opinion that no expense should be spared to keep the southern North Sea open to commerce. He was very good at bartering and foreign exchange, he

applied his intelligence with great skill and was so dignified and confident in his business dealings and his buying and selling that nobody would have guessed that he was in debt. He was certainly a canny and experienced man, but I'm afraid I can't tell you his name, he didn't tell us.

There was a cleric with us, an Oxford scholar, who had long ago decided to specialise in logic. His horse was as thin as a rake and he wasn't exactly fat himself; his cheeks were hollow and he looked very serious. His coat was threadbare, for he hadn't yet secured any paid position in the Church and seemed too bookish to hold any responsible office. He would rather have had twenty books of Aristotle's philosophy, bound in black or scarlet standing beside his bed than a fine robe or a fiddle or a lute. Although he was a philosopher, he was no alchemist. He begged gold off his friends in return for hours of prayers for their souls, and spent it all on books. He lived for his studies and was very laconic when it came to conversation. He said not a word more than was necessary but was very polite and respectful, very precise and considered. His greatest concern was moral virtue, which he was very eager to learn, and to teach.

There was a Man of the Law in our company as well, a very intelligent and worldly fellow, who was accustomed to meeting his esteemed legal colleagues and clients outside Saint Paul's Cathedral; a fine man. He was discreet and well-respected – or at least he certainly gave this impression since he spoke with authority and assurance. He often presided as a judge over the travelling assizes, for which he held authority by royal commission. Because of his knowledge and his reputation, he had earned many fees and robes. He made a lot through conveyancing and drawing up deeds of purchase; his payment was always secure because none of his documents was ever found to be at fault. It was simple work for him and although he always seemed very busy, he often looked busier than he was. He had all the legal precedents to hand, dating back to the time of William the Conqueror and could argue a point of law faultlessly. He knew every legal statute by heart.

He was dressed quite modestly, in a multicoloured garment gathered at the waist by a silk belt which was patterned with narrow stripes. That's all I can say about his clothes, really.

There was a Franklin riding along with us with a beard that was as white as a daisy. His face was quite flushed and he liked to breakfast on a piece of bread dipped in a cup of wine. He liked fine-living, he was a true son of Epicurus and believed that the pursuit of happiness is the most important thing in life. He was a great host and a veritable Saint Julian the Hospitaller in his own county. His bread and ale was of the finest quality and he kept the best wine cellar in his district. His house was never without roast meat and baked fish, in such plentiful supply that it positively snowed in his manor with mouth-watering morsels, delicate dishes and wonderful wines. His menu would utilize everything that was in season and changed throughout the year. He raised many a plump partridge on his farm and many a pike and bream in his fishponds, and woe betide the cook if his utensils weren't ready to be called into action at a moment's notice, or if his

sauce was tasteless. The table was always set up and ready in his hall, covered with a tablecloth.

He presided over the Sessions as a Justice of the Peace and had often represented his shire in Parliament. He had been an auditor and a county sheriff and no finer man could possibly be found, outside the aristocracy. He wore a dagger suspended from his girdle, and a white silk purse.

With our company also was a haberdasher, a carpenter, a dyer, a weaver and a carpet-maker all clothed in the colours of a notable parish guild. Their garments were all new and their knives decorated with silver of the finest quality, not brass. Their belts and purses were just as impressive, well-suited to a distinguished burgher, one who is experienced and accustomed to sitting in the Guildhall on the high dais. Each seemed very likely to be appointed as an alderman very shortly, for they had enough possessions, a sufficient income and their wives were certainly keen on the idea. They would be foolish not to be. It is very pleasant to be called “Madam” and walk at the head of a church procession and be treated like royalty.

A cook was accompanying them, to boil the chickens with marrowbones and spices; but he was well-acquainted with London ale as well. He could roast, poach, grill and fry with the best of them, and make soups and excellent pies. But it was a great pity, I thought, that he had an ulcer on his shin. He could make a great rhubarb blancmange.

There was a shipman amongst us, from the West Country; perhaps from Dartmouth. He rode his hackney without much skill and wore a coarse woollen garment that hung to his knees, with a dagger suspended from his shoulder on a thin strap. He was very brown and weather-beaten but seemed to be quite an honest and agreeable fellow. He'd drawn many a draught of wine from the barrels coming across the sea from Bordeaux, whilst their owner was asleep on deck. He didn't lose any sleep over it. If he was compelled to protect his vessel by force of arms and gained the upper hand, he let the tides carry the bodies back home.

When it came to calculating these tides, the currents and the shoals, the phase of the moon or the depth of a harbour, or navigating a tricky river mouth, there was none better at it from Hull to North Africa. He was strong, courageous and shrewd in planning his voyages. His beard had been shaken by many a tempest at sea. He knew all the safe anchorages from the Baltic to Cape Finisterre and every creek in Britain and Spain. His cargo vessel was called the Magdalene.

There was a Doctor of Medicine with us as well, a physician who seemed to know everything there was to know about herbs and remedies, cauterisations and amputations and he was particularly well-versed in the effect of astrology upon all these things. He



treated those under his care with an eye upon the heavens; he was well adept at casting a horoscope for his patients and knowing the favourable times for treatment. He knew the reason for every illness, whether damp or cold, heat or aridity, where it came from and which humour it was affecting the most. He was very conscientious, and the moment he had determined the root cause of a malady he gave the sick man his cure.

His suppliers of herbs and potions were ready and waiting to send him drugs and ointments. Each benefitted from the success of the other and all his suppliers had a long-standing business relationship with him. He knew all the old books, of Aesculapius and Dioscorides, Rufus and Hippocrates, Galen, Haly Abbas, Rhazes, Serapion. He knew Avicenna as well as Averroës, Constantine, John of Gaddesden, Gilbertus Anglicus and Bernard of Gordon. He practiced moderation and never ate too much; his diet was nourishing and digestible. He spent little time reading the Bible. His clothes were blood-red and light blue in colour, lined with taffeta and fine silk, but he didn't spend a great deal of money on himself. He saved a lot of what he had received during outbreaks of the Black Death, because gold in medicines is a cordial and he particularly liked to have a stock of it around.

There was an old wife who came from near Bath in Somerset and she was a little deaf, unfortunately. She was so skilled at weaving, though, that her cloth was the equal of anything brought from Ghent or Ypres. She always stood before every other wife in her parish to give alms in church and if she wasn't first, she became so cross that all charitable thoughts left her at once! The linen scarves over her head on a Sunday weighed ten pounds! Her stockings were scarlet, her shoes were supple and new, she had a bold demeanour but a pale complexion, although her cheeks were red. All her life she had been a respectable woman and she had been married to five husbands in all, not counting affairs in her youth, which we won't go into here. She had been to Jerusalem three times and had crossed over many an out-of-the-way sea. She had visited Rome and Bologna, Cologne and the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, and was a great traveller. She had gaps in her teeth and rode easily upon her horse, with many scarves and a large hat, an outer mantle covering her broad hips and some sharp spurs. Her conversation was loud and loquacious, involving a lot of laughter, and she still knew how to flirt when it suited her to.

There was a parson with us, a good man of religious persuasion, poor in wealth but rich in thought and deed. He was a learned man, a priest who could preach Christ's gospel truly and was devoted to teaching his parishioners Christ's way. He was kind, patient, diligent and calm in adversity – virtues, in all honesty, that were constantly being tested. He was reluctant to issue curses for non-payment of tithes due to him and would rather give his own possessions to the poor and needy, for his own requirements were modest and easily satisfied.

His parish covered a large area and the hamlets were widely scattered about, but neither rain nor thunder would deter him from visiting the furthest habitation if anyone was sick or in trouble; for the sake of rich and poor alike he would set off on foot with only a

staff to aid him. He instructed his flock by example first and preaching second; he knew the spirit of the gospels and added this homily to it: that if gold should rust, what will iron do? For if a priest, whom we all rely upon to guide us, is foul, then no wonder if an uneducated man should be so as well. It's a disgrace, he believed – and all priests should take note of this – when a shepherd attempts to keep his sheep clean when he's covered in filth himself. A priest should set a good example through his own cleanness.

This parish priest hadn't delegated his duties to a vicar, pocketed the difference in salary and let his flock wade in muck. He hadn't run off to London to sing lucrative Masses for the dead in Saint Paul's Cathedral or join the staff of a private chapel somewhere. He had stayed in his parish to look after his flock, so that no wolf should cause any of them any harm through injury or miscarriage. He was a true shepherd, concerned only for the welfare of his sheep.

Although he was holy and virtuous he was not overly hard on the sinful. When he spoke, he was not threatening or overbearing but tried to instruct a man discretely and without



any fuss. To guide folk towards heaven through fairness and by good example was his highest aim. But if anybody was obstinate, regardless of whether he was a lord of a serf, he would sharply reprimand them. I don't think I have met a better priest anywhere. He had no time for pomp and reverence and certainly didn't pretend to be holier than anybody else, but taught the law of Christ and the twelve Apostles and made it his highest aim to follow that teaching himself.

With him was a ploughman, his brother, who had shifted many a cartload of dung in his time and was a hard and honest worker. He lived in peace and harmony, his greatest love was directed towards God, regardless of his own circumstances, and next to God he loved his neighbour as himself. He would thresh corn and dig ditches in the name of Christ for every poor and incapacitated person if he was able to, without asking for payment. He paid his tithes promptly and in full, both from his possessions and with his labour. He wore a smock, and rode upon a mare.

There was a reeve and a miller in our company, a summoner, a pardoner, a manciple and last of all, myself. That was all. The miller was a barrel-chested fellow, built like a brick shit-house. He won every wrestling contest he entered, nobody ever beat him. His shoulders sloped down from a massive neck and there was no door he couldn't heave off its hinges or break down with his head if he ran at it. His beard was as red as the hairs on any fox or sow and so wide that it hung down from his chin like a spade. The tip of his nose had a wart with a tuft of red hair growing out of it, his nostrils were black and wide and his mouth was like the stoke hole of a great furnace. He wore a sword and a small shield at his side. He liked to tell filthy jokes and had no qualms about stealing wheat or taking three times his due for milling it. And yet he was reckoned more honest than

most millers. He wore a white coat with a blue hood and could play the Northumbrian pipes very well, which he did for us as we set off upon our journey.

The manciple riding with us was a courteous fellow who was in charge of the purchasing for an Inn of Court in London. He could teach caterers a thing or two about buying stores and provisions – whether he paid cash or received the stores on credit, he always timed his purchases so that he never ran out of anything or held too much in stock, and he was often able to snap up a bargain when he got the timing right. Now isn't it truly a grace of God that such an uneducated man can match for wisdom the minds of a heap of learned men? He had more than thirty masters over him, all of them eminent lawyers and experts in their field, a dozen of whom could easily have been appointed to oversee the estates of any lord in England, to administer his finances, purchase as modestly as this lord wished and keep him out of debt (if he was sane) or help a whole shire to overcome any problem that it might have. And yet this manciple outshone them all in his dealings.

The reeve was a thin, close-shaven and bad-tempered old rascal with short hair, cut clean around the ears like a priest. His legs were long and he didn't seem to have any calf muscles at all, that I could see. However, he was able to keep a granary filled, or a storage bin, and no auditor would be able to pull a fast one on him. He knew, by the state of drought or by the rain, exactly how much wheat a bushel of seed corn should have produced and he looked after his lord's sheep, his cows, his dairy, pigs, horses and poultry and all of his stores. He knew exactly how things stood and kept the accounts, a responsibility he had held ever since his lord had turned twenty years of age. No one on the estate was allowed to fall into arrears. There was neither bailiff nor tenant farmer nor farm worker whose tricks and ruses he didn't know. They were all afraid of him, as much as they were of the Black Death.

He lived in a very pleasant house on some open heathland with trees shading his property and probably had more money to spend than his lord, for he had accumulated quite a store of wealth. He was accustomed to pleasing his manor lord by giving him loans and gifts of things that were in fact his lord's own property anyway, but thereby earning his thanks and maybe a new coat or a hood into the bargain. He had learned a good trade in his youth; he was an accomplished wright, a carpenter, and he sat upon a handsome grey horse named Scot. He wore a long, light-blue over-garment, tucked into his belt like a friar, and had a sword by his side that obviously hadn't seen any use for a very long time. He came from Norfolk, near a town called Baldeswell, I learned, and always rode at the very back of our company.

There was a summoner with us also, who had a youthful face that was red with acne. His eyes were set closely together and he seemed as hot and full of lust as a sparrow in the mating season. His eyebrows were black and scabby, he had a scanty, patchy beard and children ran away in fear when they looked at him. It seemed that there was no mercury, lead oxide or sulphur, borax, oil of tartar or lead ointment with enough power to cleanse or heal his white pustules and unsightly eruptions. He loved to eat garlic too,

onions, leeks and to drink strong red wine. Then he would start to chatter and cry out as though he was mad. When he was completely drunk he refused to speak anything other than Latin, although he knew only a few words of it, one or two phrases that's all; and that's not surprising since he heard it spoken every day. But even a jay can call out a single Latin word as clearly as the Pope! If you were to probe him any further, however, he would simply repeat a phrase of legal Latin, garbled out of all meaning.

He was a pleasant enough fellow, though, and a good friend to have I should imagine. For a large bottle of wine he'd be willing to let a fellow have access to his girlfriend for a year, and excuse him the sin in full! If he made a good friend anywhere he'd teach him not to be frightened of pulling a young maiden on the quiet out of any fear of the punishment which the archdeacon might give. Unless, of course, a man's soul resides in his purse, for that's the only place where the archdeacon can reach, he taught; but he's wrong there, for every guilty man should fear cursing and excommunication – a curse will kill, just as absolution saves. Beware the warrant that sends the excommunicated man to prison.

The young girls in his diocese were all in his power. He knew what they were up to and they did what he said. He wore a green garland on his head, as large as one outside an ale-house, and he'd hung a round, flat loaf called a stottie at his side like a small shield, presumably to eat as he went along. Alongside him rode his friend and comrade who was a pardoner from Charing Cross, recently returned from the Vatican. The man was singing: 'Come over here, my love, to me,' at the top of his voice, accompanied by the lower registers of the summoner; the two of them together making more noise than a trumpet. This pardoner had hair the colour of yellow wax, very light and thin and perfectly straight; it spread weightlessly over his shoulders and cascaded in shreds of nothing down his back. He wasn't wearing a hood for it was folded up in his luggage; he thought he would ride in the latest fashion, casually and lightly clad, except that he wore a cap. His eyes bulged like those of a hare. He wore a sacred image of the Saviour's face sewn onto his cap and carried his luggage in a wallet that was strapped closely to him in front of his saddle. It was crammed full of pardons, hot from Rome. His voice was as small and as shrill as a goat's and he wore no beard; but although he may never have shaved in his life before, he seemed to be freshly shaven. He looked a bit effeminate, if you ask me.

But concerning his profession, from Berwick-upon-Tweed in Northumberland to Ware in Dorset, there was no one quite like him. In his luggage he had a pillowcase that he swore was the veil once worn by the Virgin Mary. He had a scrap of cloth that he said was from the sail of the boat that Saint Peter had used on the Sea of Galilee when he was with Jesus. He had a brass cross full of pebbles and a glass jar full of pigs' bones, and with these relics he could make more money in a day than any of the poor people he encountered and sold his indulgences to could in two whole months. He joked and flattered and gave them the patter, and made monkeys of them all.

In church, however, he was very much the true ecclesiastic. He could read a lesson and

give a sermon, but his greatest accomplishment was the singing of the offertory, while the congregation were making their offerings after the Eucharist; for he knew that after this he could preach and exercise his tongue in the pursuit of silver, a task which he had become very proficient at. So he sang loudly and merrily.

And there you are. All these people were assembled in Southwark, at the inn called the Tabard, beside the Bell Inn. I'll quickly tell you how we spent the night and after that I'll go on to describe the pilgrimage itself. But first, I must beg you, through your courtesy, not to blame it on my coarseness or through any ill-will on my part if I describe things as they really were and spare no detail, but give you a truthful account of everything I heard. You all know as well as I do that to tell a story properly, a man must recount it as far as possible word for word as he heard it himself, however coarse, offensive and out of character that may be. Otherwise, he's being dishonest and making things up. He must tell it as he heard it and should spare no blushes, not even for his own brother. After all, whatever word may be used, it's only a word and as good as any other. Christ himself used plain language, as the gospels show, and he was never accused of being vulgar. Plato said, as those who can read him will verify, that words should convey a true sense of their own meaning. In addition, I ask you to forgive me if I have done any disservice to anybody in my story or misrepresented them. My skill is limited. I'm sure you'll understand.

Our host made a great fuss of us that evening and set before us a delightful meal, serving us with the finest foods that he could obtain. The wine was strong and we were all in the mood to have a drink. Our host was well-suited to be a very fine Master of Ceremonies in a hall; he was a large man with a glint in his eye, no more fitting burgher could be found in all of Cheapside. Not backwards in coming forwards, he spoke with authority, with intelligence, was obviously an educated man and a very sturdy one as well. He was also very good-humoured and fond of a joke. After supper he began to tease us and have fun with us, after we'd settled up with him, that is:

'Lords and ladies, you're all very welcome. I think I can say in all honesty that I haven't had such a fine company of people stay at my inn this entire year and I would like to make your pilgrimage a merry one if I can. And I've just thought, there is a way, I think, which will be quite entertaining and cost you nothing. You're all bound for Canterbury, may the blissful martyr Saint Thomas Beckett reward you for it. I know for certain that as you ride along you will want to chatter and tell each other jokes, for its no fun to be riding along as silent as stones. Therefore, I know of an ideal way for you all to be entertained and make it a pleasant journey. If you agree to abide by my judgement and do as I say, then tomorrow as you ride along, by my father's soul – may God rest it, for he's dead – you'll all be very merry indeed. I'll stake my head on it. So hold up your hands, let me know what you all think.'

We were all unanimous in holding up our hands, agreeing to let him tell us, at least, what he had in mind.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, listen to my advice, then,’ he said. ‘Please don’t be in any way disdainful but my plan is that each of you, to shorten the journey, shall tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back, something in the way, perhaps, of adventures that have occurred in times gone by. I mean it! and the one who tells the best story, that’s to say, by its content, by the entertaining way that it’s told and how amusing or uplifting it is, shall have a free meal here at this inn when we get back, paid for by us all. And to make you merrier still, I shall ride along with you at my own expense and be



your guide. If any refuse to take part, they’ll have to pay for everything as we travel along. If you all agree to this, say yes at once and I’ll get myself ready.’

We all agreed, said yes and swore our oaths very happily. Furthermore, we asked him if he would agree to lead us on our journey, to judge all our stories, set the value of the free supper and we would be ruled by whatever he decided. The wine was fetched at once. We all drank and then retired to our beds.

In the morning, as soon as the sky began to brighten, our host got up and played the part of the cockerel by waking us all up and gathering us together. Then we set off, at slightly more than walking pace until we came to the little brook of Saint Thomas a Watering. Here our host brought his horse to a standstill and shouted: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, listen please. You know the agreement you all made. I was a witness to it. So if you’re all willing, let’s see who would like to tell the first tale. As surely as I like to drink wine and ale, if anyone dares to go against my wishes, they’ll have to pay for everything that’s bought along the way. Each of you can draw a straw before we go any further, and the one who gets the shortest will begin.

‘Sir knight,’ he said. ‘My lord, honourable Sir, choose your token, for this is my wish. Come near, my lady prioress. And you, sir Oxford cleric, cheer up a bit and forget about your books for a while.

‘Take one, everybody.’

Everyone rode up to draw a token and whether by chance or destiny, the first tale fell to the knight in all honesty, which pleased everybody. He had no choice but to tell his tale, since this was what we had all agreed to do, as you know. What more is there to say?

When the knight saw that he had drawn the shortest straw: ‘Since I am to be the first to begin this game, then three cheers for my good luck!’ he shouted. ‘In God’s name, three cheers! Let us ride on, and listen to what I have to say.’

With that, we rode onwards and the knight happily began his tale, as you shall now hear.