

# Canterbury Tales

## Miller's tale

*Geoffrey Chaucer*

*fourteenth century Middle English verse*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose**

**by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This Canterbury tale 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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richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



# Miller's Tale

*Here folwen the wordes bitwene the Host and the Millere*

When that the Knight had thus his tale y-told, in al the route nas ther yong ne old that he ne seyde it was a noble storie – When the knight had finished his tale, there was not a single person amongst us who did not say what a fine story it was and eminently worthy of being memorised and recited. Certainly all the educated people thought so. Our host laughed and swore: ‘By God! That went down very well! And now that the ice has been broken, let’s see who would like to tell another tale; for this game has certainly got off to a good start. Sir Monk, let’s hear from you. Let’s see if you can do as well as this knight.’

The miller, however, shouted out, swearing by blood and by bones – for he was somewhat the worse for drink – ‘I can tell you all a brilliant tale! It will certainly beat the knight’s.’ He was deathly pale, hardly able to stay upright on his horse even, and in no mood to doff his hat or be polite.

Our host could see that he had been swilling back rather too much ale and said: ‘Wait, Robin, my dear friend, let someone a little more sober tell his story, for we want this thing to be a success.’

‘Bollocks!’ exclaimed the miller. ‘Either I tell my tale or I leave this company right now.’

‘Go on, then, but may the devil take you, you drunken fool,’ said our host.

‘Listen then,’ said the miller. ‘But first, I admit it, I’m drunk. My words aren’t coming out properly, so if I say something wrong, put it down to this fine Southwark ale. I shall tell you all the story of a carpenter and his wife, and how a young Oxford cleric made a complete monkey out of that idiot carpenter...’

‘Stop right there!’ exclaimed the reeve. ‘Put an end to this drunken crap at once! It’s a sin to slander a man, and it’s a sin to cast aspersions on his wife, when there are plenty of other things to tell stories to us about.’

‘Oswald, my dear friend,’ replied the miller. ‘Only unmarried men can be sure they’ve never been cheated on by a wife. But I’m not saying *you’ve* been cheated on. There are many good wives, a thousand for every one that’s bad, I’m sure. You know this to be true

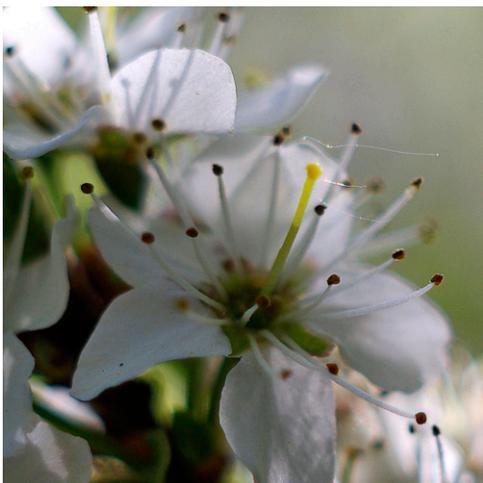
*Some have seen a steady deterioration in morality as ancient Thebes and Athens gives way to a medieval Christian landscape in the Miller’s tale, the Reeve’s tale and finally the Cook’s. In this tale from the Miller, an Oxford student and a minor cleric vie for the adulterous attentions of a young woman married to an affluent but aging carpenter. The ending, although crude and farcical, may perhaps serve as a warning from Geoffrey against believing anything an Oxford scholar might tell you, in those religious times.*

*This tale from the Miller follows the tale from the Knight, 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.*

yourself, unless you're a lunatic. What are you getting all upset about? I'm married you know, just like you, and I'd lay the oxen in my plough that I've never been cuckolded. She wouldn't do that to me. But a husband cannot pry into his wife's secrets any more than into those of God. If a man's able to receive everything he desires, that's all he needs to know, really.'

What more can I say? This miller wasn't bothered in the slightest what he said or whom he offended, but told his rough tale in his own way, and I think I will relate it to you just as I heard it. Therefore, all those of you with refinement, I ask, for God's love, that you do not accuse me of any malicious intent but understand that I must repeat to you all their tales, the good alongside the bad, or else I would be making up this story and not telling you the truth. So if any of you don't wish to know about it, turn the page and go to another tale. There are plenty of them here that concern gentility, morality and holiness. Don't blame me if you choose a tale you don't like. The miller was a working man, like the reeve, and they both told a rather bawdy tale, so make your own decision and don't blame me for it; and please don't take seriously what is only meant in fun.

### *Here biginneth the Millere his tale*



**W**hylom ther was dwellinge at Oxenford a riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord, and of his craft he was a Carpenter – In Oxford once there lived a rich old scoundrel who took in paying guests. He was a carpenter by trade. One of his lodgers was a poor Oxford scholar who had made progress in the liberal arts but whose mind was now turned with something of a passion towards the art of astrology. He would interrogate his charts and his horoscopes if men asked him to do so at favourable times, to determine what the weather had in store for them,

when it was likely to rain or whether there might be a drought, and a hundred other different things, I couldn't begin to explain them all.

This cleric was called gentle Nicholas and he liked to have fun and enjoy a secret romance or two. Because of these secret liaisons he liked to keep himself to himself and was not averse to a little subterfuge. He could be as coy as a maiden and had a room which he occupied alone, beautifully strewn with sweet-smelling herbs. He kept his body as fragrant as a liquorice root. His copy of *Ptolemy's Astronomical Treatise on the Motions of the Planets*, and all his other books, were kept on shelves above his bed, along with his astrolabe and his calculating aids, and his clothes box had a straw lid that folded down. On his top shelf lay a harp which he would play so beautifully at night that the entire room would ring with its melody. He would sing *Angelus ad virginem* and after that a song called King William's Note and his voice was always a delight to hear. This was the way this sweet cleric chose to spend his life, supported by his small income and

the charity of his friends.

The carpenter, his landlord, had recently married a much younger woman than himself, whom he loved more than his own life. She was only eighteen years old and he kept her locked away through jealousy, for she was young and carefree and he was old and very frightened of her having sex with other men. He was an uneducated fellow and had unfortunately not read Cato, who has advised that men should marry women the same age as themselves, for age and youth are often at loggerheads. But since he had fallen into this trap, he had to make the best of things, like everybody else.

His young wife was tall and very pretty, her waist was slim and she wore a girdle of striped silk beneath a pleated apron that was as white as the morning milk. Her dress was white also, with colourful embroidery in front and behind, she wore a collar of black silk, a silk choker and the ribbons hanging from her white hat were of black silk also. Beside her girdle hung a leather purse with silk tassels and a decorative border of small brass beads like little pearls.

She always had a wicked sparkle in her eye. Her eyebrows were as black as sloes and plucked into a delightful arc. She was more beautiful than the blossom on a pear tree and her skin was as soft as the finest wool. There is no man in the whole world with an imagination sufficient to conjure up an image of a more delectable creature or a more attractive young lady. Her complexion shone more brightly than a freshly-minted gold coin. Her singing voice was as eager, tuneful and strong as that of a swallow on a barn roof and she could skip and dance as well as any young goat or calf following behind its mother. Her mouth was as sweet as honeyed ale or a stash of apples in the hay. She moved like a playful colt, was as tall as a mast and held herself very upright. She wore a broach on her collar that was as large as the boss of a small shield and the laces of her shoes twined up her calves. She was a primrose, a poppet for any lord to lay in his bed, or any yeoman to marry.

Now sirs, to get back to my story: it happened that one day this gentle Nicholas found himself engaged in very friendly and convivial conversation with this sweet lady, as these young clerics are often very adept at doing, while her husband was over at Osney. At last, he found an opportunity to touch her in a very private place and said: 'I believe that, unless we can have sex together alone, in private, I shall die.'

He held her tightly around the hips and continued: 'Darling, love me now or I shall perish, so save me God!' But she sprang back from his advances like a colt under restraint in a farrier's pen and turned her head away.

'I shall not kiss you,' she said. 'By my faith, stop it Nicholas, stop it! I'll shout for help or scream or something. Take your hand away, please!'

But Nicholas begged so hard for her to be merciful upon him, and spoke so eloquently and propositioned her so intently that she granted him her love at last and swore an oath – by Saint Thomas of Kent! – that she would do his bidding when the first opportunity

arose.

‘But my husband is so full of jealousy,’ she explained. ‘Unless you can wait patiently and keep this matter absolutely secret and strictly between the two of us, I’m as good as dead! We must be very discrete about it.’

‘You need have no fears at all,’ replied Nicholas. ‘A cleric has wasted his years of education if he cannot get one over on a carpenter.’

So they agreed to wait for a suitable opportunity, as I have described. When Nicholas had said and done all this, he stroked her legs and her bottom, kissed her gently, then picked up his harp and began to play a rather urgent and energetic melody.

Now it happened not long afterwards that this good wife went to celebrate a holy day in the parish church. She had washed her forehead so clean that it shone, as she always did when she wasn’t working. In this church there was a parish clerk, a minor cleric whose name was Absolon. His hair was curly and, with a straight parting just in the right place, it stuck out like a large fan shining like the sun. His complexion was rosy and his eyes were as grey as a goose. He wore fancy shoes and red hose but otherwise dressed simply and appropriately in a short, light blue cassock and a surplice that was as white as blossom. He looked very elegant.



Absalon was a fine young man, so save me God! He could let blood and shave a man, cut hair, draw up a legal charter for the sale of land or a transfer of ownership and knew twenty ways to dance, all learnt at the Oxford school; he could throw his legs about with abandon and play songs on a lute and sing with a strong falsetto voice to the accompaniment of his guitar. There wasn’t a tavern or ale house in the whole of Oxford he wasn’t familiar with, so long as it had an attractive young barmaid serving in it. But he was a little offended by farting and didn’t like swearing very much.

This merry young man was carrying the censor on this particular holy day, energetically casting it about the wives of the parish, smiling engagingly at many of them and especially at the carpenter’s wife. He thought it would make for a lovely life indeed to be able to gaze at her all the time, she was so clean and attractive and well-dressed. I dare say that if she had been a mouse and he a cat, he would have pounced on her there and then. Absalon’s head was in such a spin that he refused to take anything from any of the wives when the time came for him to go around with the collection plate.

That night the moon shone brightly and Absalon took up his guitar, as though hoping to catch the attention of some amorous young lady, but off he went instead, happy and

with a yearning heart, towards the carpenter's house. It was a little after the first cock's crow when he sidled up to a small window in a wall of the house and in a small and gentle voice, began to sing *'Now, dear lady, if it should be your desire, I beg you, take pity and quench all my fire'*, to the fine accompaniment of his guitar.

The carpenter woke up, heard the singing and said to his wife: 'What? Alison! Can you hear Absalon crooning outside our bedroom window?'

'Yes, John, I can hear him quite clearly,' she replied. These words passed between them, and what can be better than friendly agreement? But as time went on, Absalon's wooing grew quite desperate. He was awake all night and all the day, combing his hair and making sure that he was always presentable. He wooed her through friends and through intermediaries, swore to be her servant and sang outside her bedroom all night like a nightingale. He sent her sweetened wine, mead and spiced ale, wafer-cakes, piping hot from the oven and because she was town and not gown, he even offered her money as well.

Well, some people can be won over with wealth, others by gentleness, still others by forceful coercion. On one occasion, to demonstrate his skill at acting, he played Herod on a stage outdoors. But what good could it do him? She so loves the gentle Nicholas that Absalon can go jump in a lake. He receives nothing for his labour but her ridicule and Alison treats him as her ape, causing him to dance around her and make a fool of himself. She made a joke of his earnest endeavours and confirmed the old proverb that 'possession is nine-tenths of the law'. However much Absalon may rage about it, he is confined to the fringes because Nicholas stands in his light.

Make the most of it, gentle Nicholas. Absalon may well wail and sing: 'Alas!'

One Saturday this carpenter, Alison's foolish, jealous husband, was due to set off for Osney. Alison and the gentle Nicholas agreed that if things were to go to plan they would soon be sleeping in each other's arms, for this was his desire and hers also. Straight away, Nicholas went quietly to his room with enough food and drink to last for a day or two, instructing Alison, should her husband ask about him when he got back, to say that she didn't know where he was, she hadn't seen him since Saturday morning and wondered whether he was ill, for her maid had got no reply when she called to him, he hadn't answered at all. Nicholas stayed quietly in his room, ate and slept and did as he wished until dusk on Sunday. This foolish carpenter wondered greatly that evening why Nicholas had been so quiet, when he was told, and what might be wrong with him.

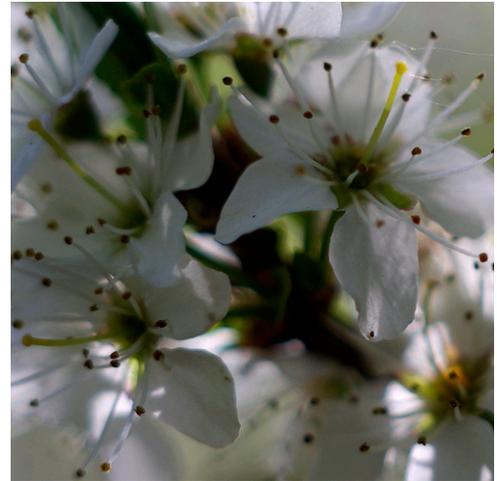
'God forbid that he should die suddenly, by Saint Thomas!' he exclaimed. 'Life in this world is so precarious nowadays. I saw the body of someone being carried into church today who was working only last Monday. Go up to his room,' he said to his boy. 'Call at the door or knock it with a stone or something. See what's going on and then come back and tell me.'

The boy bounded up the stairs, stood outside the door to Nicholas's chamber and shouted and hammered on the door as though he was mad.

'Hey! Hello! What are you doing, master Nicholas? Are you asleep? How can you sleep all day?'

But it was to no avail. Not a sound came from Nicholas's room. But low in the door, the boy noticed a hole which the cat used to go in and out through so he stooped down, peered intently through the opening and caught sight of Nicholas lying supine on the floor, staring wide-eyed with his mouth open as though he had just caught sight of the orb of the new moon. The boy went running back downstairs and told his master what he had seen.

The carpenter crossed himself and exclaimed: 'Help us, Saint Frideswide! A man little knows what the future may hold. This cleric, through his studies of astrology, is having a fit or suffering from some madness or other. I knew it would happen. Men should not pry into God's secret affairs. Blessed are the ignorant who know only their Creed and what their parson tells them. I've heard of another cleric who came to grief through astrology; he went out into the open fields to look at the stars one night, to see what he might be able to predict from them, didn't see a marl pit in front of him and fell straight down into it. He didn't predict that!



'But I feel sorry for gentle Nicholas. I shall see to it that he is berated for his studying and sorely reprimanded, by Saint Thomas. Give me a staff to use as a lever, while you, Robin, try to lift up the door. Between the two of us, we'll be able to rouse him I should imagine'

So they went up to the door of Nicholas's chamber and the boy, who was a strong lad, gripped the door by its furniture, heaved it up off its hinges and sent it crashing flat onto the floor. Nicholas was lying as motionless as a stone, staring vacantly into space. This carpenter imagined that he was in some sort of trance, so he gripped him firmly around the shoulders and shook him violently. 'What is it, Nicholas?' he cried. 'Stop staring up like that! Look down. Wake up! Think of Christ's passion. Here, I make the sign of the cross over you to protect you from elves and supernatural beings.'

Then he said the night spell to the four walls of the room and to the threshold where the door had just been standing: 'Jesus Christ and Saint Benedict,' he intoned, 'bless this house from every wicked creature and night-inhabiting goblin – here is a white Our Father...'

At last, gentle Nicholas began to sigh and moan: 'Alas! Is the entire world to be destroyed shortly?' he mumbled.

‘What are you talking about?’ asked the carpenter. ‘What did you say? Think about God, as we do who work for a living.’

‘Fetch me a drink,’ replied Nicholas. ‘Then I must speak to you in private about something that concerns us both. I cannot tell anyone else but you.’

This carpenter went out and quickly returned with a quart of ale, and when they had each drunk their share, Nicholas put the door back onto its hinges, closed it and went to sit down beside his landlord.

‘John,’ he said. ‘My dear host, you must swear upon your honour that what I am about to tell you will go no further than these four walls. It’s Christ’s own message that I’m about to relay. If you breathe a word of it to anybody you are lost. You’ll be punished with madness for certain.’

‘May Christ forbid that, by His holy blood!’ exclaimed the carpenter. ‘I’m no gossip and I’m no blabbermouth either, though I say so myself. Tell me what you wish. I won’t tell anyone, by Christ!’

‘John,’ said Nicholas. ‘Not a word of a lie, but I have discovered through my astrology, gazing into the bright moon, that this coming Monday, at the end of the first quarter of the night, the rain will begin to teem so torrentially that the downpour which fell during Noah’s flood will pale in comparison. In less than an hour this world will be inundated, so hideous and torrential will this rain be. Everyone will be drowned in it and all will lose their lives.’

‘Alas! My dear wife!’ exclaimed the carpenter. ‘Alison my darling!’ and his legs almost gave way in grief. ‘Is there nothing we can do?’

‘There is, actually,’ replied gentle Nicholas. ‘But only if you take my advice and act quickly on it. Solomon said – and it’s very true: “Do everything according to the council of others and you will never regret it.” And if you want to follow some excellent advice, then do as I tell you to and I’ll undertake to save you, myself and Alison. Haven’t you heard how Noah was saved when God warned him beforehand of the terrible Flood that drowned the world?’

‘Yes, replied the carpenter. ‘A long time ago.’

‘Then you must have heard about all the trouble that he had with the animals, before he was allowed to get his wife on board? He would much rather, I dare say, have given all his black sheep for his wife to have had a ship to herself. So, do you know the best thing that we can do? But this is urgent and requires haste, there’s no time to sit and discuss it or give a sermon. Go off at once and bring back a kneading trough or a washtub, one for each of us, and make sure they’re large enough, so we can use them like barges to float in. Make sure also that there’s enough food and drink inside each of them for a day. Don’t worry about the days after that, because the water will recede and drain away by the middle of the next morning. But don’t tell Robin, your servant, about this, nor your

maid Jill. I can't do anything for them, I'm afraid. Don't ask me why I can't, I won't tell you, for I cannot disclose God's private thoughts. It should be enough, unless you are mad, to have received the same divine grace that Noah did.

'Go quickly now, do all these things and I can save Alison and ourselves. And when you have obtained these kneading troughs for the three of us, hang them high up in the rafters so that no one can see them. And when you have done this, put all the food and drink inside, and also an axe, so that we can cut the ropes when the water comes. Then break a hole through the roof of the house, on the gable end above the stable, so we can float free when the deluge has passed and Alison can bob about as merrily as a white duck after her drake. Then I will call out: "Are you alright Alison? Alright John? Be merry, for the flood will recede soon." Then you'll reply: "Hello, Master Nicholas, good morning! I can see you clearly, for the sun has now risen." Then we will be lords over the entire world, for the rest of our lives, like Noah and his wife.

'But I must warn you about one thing. Before the rains come, we must already be inside our little boats and none of us must say a word, not a sound, for each of us must be deep in prayer. And you and your wife must hang your boats far apart from one another, so that you have no opportunity to engage in sin while we are praying, nor to look at one another even. This is God's commandment. So go at once. Tomorrow night, when everybody is asleep, we will get into our washtubs and sit there, awaiting God's grace.

'There's no more time to explain. "Send the wise and tell them only what they need to know", as the saying goes. You're clever enough that I don't have to say anything else. Go quickly and help us to save our lives, I beg you.'

**T**his foolish carpenter went on his way. 'Alas!' and 'Oh God, no!' he moaned to his wife as he told her everything that Nicholas had just said; although she knew more about it than he did, of course, and was fully conversant with Nicholas's devious plan. Nevertheless, she pretended to be shocked and frightened.

'Alas,' she cried. 'Go at once and help us to escape from this deluge, or we'll be lost. I am your faithful wedded wife. Go quickly and help to save us both!'

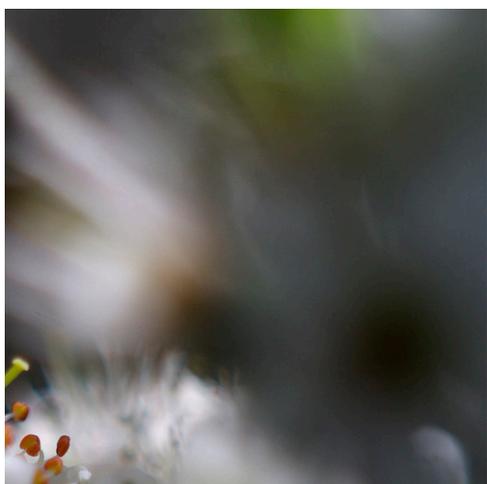
Lo! What a marvellous thing is faith. So deeply may men hold onto these beliefs and imaginings that they can die because of them. This foolish carpenter began to tremble. He imagined he could already see Noah's flood raging like a tempestuous sea towards Alison, his little honey. He weeps and wails, laments and complains. He sighs and groans.

He went off quickly and bought a kneading trough, a washtub and a brewing vessel, had them sent discretely to his house and hung them up in the roof space where no one could see them. Then he made three ladders so that they could all climb up into the rafters, and provisioned the troughs and tubs with bread, cheese and a large jug of good ale, enough to last for a day. But before doing this, he sent his boy and his maid to London on an errand.

On Monday, as the evening began to fade, the carpenter closed up his house without lighting any candles and got everything ready. Then without any delay they all climbed up and sat still for a short while in their tubs. Then: 'Now, to our Our Fathers and be quite,' said Nicholas.

'Quiet,' echoed Alison.

'Quiet,' echoed John.



This carpenter said his devotions, sat still and remained busy at his prayers, waiting to hear the first splosh of rain outside; but because he was so tired after making all the preparations, he fell fast asleep around curfew time or a little afterwards, and because his soul was so troubled he began to groan in his sleep and then to snore, because his head wasn't very comfortable. Nicholas crept down his ladder and Alison crept down hers, and without saying a word, they got into the bed where Alison and her husband usually lay to sleep. Then there was revel

and enjoyment! Alison and Nicholas lay together like this, busily occupying themselves with pleasure, playfulness and more-than-occasional ecstasy until the bell rang for lauds and the friars in their church began to sing.

This parish clerk, this minor cleric Absalon, stricken with love, had spent the day at Osney having fun with some of his friends, and happened to ask a monk about John the carpenter. The monk led him out of the church and in private said: 'I don't know. I haven't seen him here since Saturday. I imagine he's been sent by our abbot to the tithe yard to bring back some timber. He often goes away to fetch wood like this and usually spends a day or two at the grange. Unless he's at his house. But I can't say for certain where he is.'

Absalon was very happy to hear that John the carpenter might be away and thought: 'Now is the time to stay up late! I certainly didn't see him coming out of his house earlier this morning. I'll wait until the first crow of the cock and then discretely tap on the window of his bed chamber. Then I'll tell Alison everything. I'll tell her how much I love her and get a kiss from her at the very least. My mouth has been itching all day, which is a good sign, and last night I dreamed that I was at a banquet. I shall go and sleep for an hour or two, then hopefully I'll spend all night making love to Alison.'

So at the first crow of the cock, Absalon leapt out of his bed, put on his best clothes and, before combing his hair even, he chewed some liquorice and a cardamom pod to freshen his breath. Then he put a lucky true-love leaf under his tongue and made his way quickly to the carpenter's house, where he stood by the casement window of the bedroom. The sill was on a level with his knees. He coughed, and then quietly intoned: 'Alison, what are you doing, my honeycomb, my little bluetit, my sweet cinnamon? Wake up, my

darling, and speak to me. You spare little thought for the agony I feel as I fret and sweat for love of you. It's no wonder that I'm in such distress. I'm as sad as a lamb that's being kept from the breast. My darling, I love you so very much. My complaints are those of a turtle dove. I have lost all my appetite because of you. I eat like a maiden.'

'Go away you raving idiot!' cried Alison. 'God help me, there'll be no: "Be mine tonight" for you. I love someone else, thank God! Go away or I'll throw a stone at you. Let me sleep, you arsehole!'

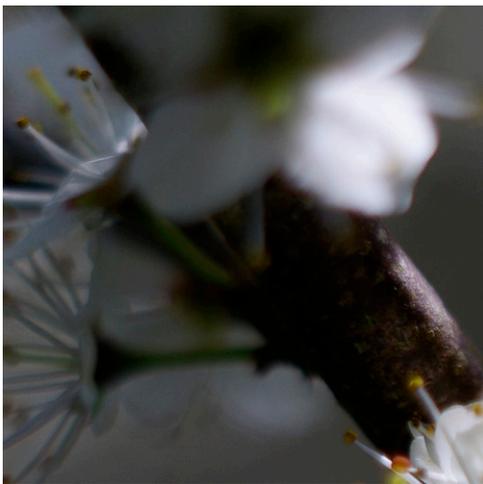
'Alas,' cried Absalon, 'that true love should be so beset with difficulty. Kiss me at least, my darling, if this is all I may hope for.'

'If I do, will you go away and leave me alone?'

'Yes.'

'Then stay where you are. I'm coming.'

'Stay quietly where you are, and have a laugh at this,' she said, turning to Nicholas before getting out of bed.



Absalon went down onto his knees and said: 'Now I feel like a lord, for I am sure there is more coming after this. Darling, my little dove, I'm ready!'

Alison opened the window. 'Stop it at once!' she said. 'Come on. Let's get this over with before the neighbours see you.'

Absalon wiped his mouth. The night was as dark as pitch, as black as coal. Alison went down onto her knees, stuck her bottom out of the window and opened her legs wide. Unaware of anything untoward, Absalon gave her a hard, passionate kiss with his lips and his tongue until his doubts were suddenly aroused. He sprung back, knowing that something was wrong. Women don't have beards!

'Alas! What have I done?' he exclaimed, for he had felt rough hairs.

'Tee-hee,' she giggled, and slammed the window shut.

Absalon withdrew at a weary pace. 'Ha-ha-ha, a beard, a beard!' laughed gentle Nicholas behind him. 'By God's body, that was a good one!'

Absalon heard this laughter and began to bite his lip in anger. 'I shall get you back for that,' he said.

Who rubs now, scrapes and wipes his lips with sawdust and straw, with cloth and wood shavings? – and abrades them with sand! 'Alas!' cries Absalon. 'May my soul be taken by

Satan himself if I would not give all of Oxford to have revenge for this insult! Alas that I did not turn my face away!

His passions were now fully quenched and icy cold. From this moment on, his desire for love was cured. He set not a curse beside a pretty girl, he defied them all and often wept like a child that had been beaten.

Absalon walked silently along the street to the workshop of a smith whose name was Gervase, who forged and fashioned the metalwork used to make ploughs. He was busy sharpening a ploughshare and its accompanying coulter. Absalon knocked casually on the door.

‘Open up, Gervase, quickly.’

‘Who’s there?’

‘Absalon.’

‘Absalon? By the blessed cross, what are you doing up so early? God bless you, but what’s wrong? But don’t tell me. By Saint Neot! I bet some pretty girl’s got you dancing about, if you know what I mean, eh?’

Absalon ignored the humour and innuendo – he had a lot more wool heaped up to spin than Gervase could guess at and said: ‘My dear friend, that red hot coulter cooling by the furnace there, could you lend it to me for a moment? I have something I want to do with it. I’ll return it to you very shortly.’

‘Of course! If it was gold or a sackful of coins you could borrow it, by the faith of my profession. But what the devil do you want with it?’

‘Don’t worry about that now,’ replied Absalon. ‘I’ll tell you later.’ He picked up the hot iron by the wooden handle, went quietly out through the door and back to the carpenter’s house. He coughed and then knocked on the window, as he had done before.

‘Who’s there?’ called Alison. ‘Are you a thief?’

‘No it’s not a thief, God knows, my sweet darling, it is I, your Absalon, my sweetheart. I have brought you a gold ring that my mother gave to me. The gold is very fine and beautifully engraved and I will give it to you if you will let me have another kiss.’

Nicholas had just got up to urinate and decided to put a stop to this nonsense once and for all. ‘Absalon can kiss my arse,’ he whispered. He threw up the window and stuck his bottom out.

‘Speak, sweet bird, I can’t see where you are,’ said this cleric, Absalon.

So Nicholas released an enormous fart that rang out like a thunderclap. Absalon was almost blinded by it. But he was ready with the hot iron, and branded Nicholas savagely across the buttocks with it. Nicholas’s skin blistered and came away a hand’s breadth on each cheek. He thought he was going to die.

‘Water! Water! Help me! Water, for the love of God!’ he cried, as though he was mad.

The carpenter woke up suddenly, and hearing someone crying: ‘Water! Water!’ thought: ‘Alas, here comes Noah’s flood!’ so he roused himself at once, cut the restraining rope with his axe, his kneading-trough came crashing down and before anyone knew what was happening, he and everything else had fallen through to the ground floor where he lay stunned and injured.

Alison leapt out of bed, put her head out of the window with Nicholas and shouted: ‘Out thief! Help someone, help!’ The neighbours all came running in to look at this man, the carpenter, who was lying dazed and pale upon the floor, for he had broken his arm, but he quickly had new problems to face as well because the moment he started to speak, Alison and gentle Nicholas interrupted him and told everybody that he had gone stark raving mad and was so terrified of Noah’s flood, because of his delusions, that he had bought three tubs and hung them in the roof space and begged the pair of them to sit in them with him.

Everybody roared with laughter when they heard this, peered into the rafters to have a look and turned all his misfortune into a joke. Whenever this carpenter tried to plead his case and tell them what had really happened, he wasted his breath. They wouldn’t listen. So many people were prepared to swear to his madness that the carpenter was taken for a lunatic. Clerics would say to one another: ‘The man is mad, my brother.’ Everyone had a good laugh about it.

So the carpenter’s wife was made love to despite his jealousy, the cleric Absalon kissed her private parts and the gentle Nicholas got a nasty burn on his arse. My tale is done, and God bless us all!