

Canterbury Tales

Reeve'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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Reeve's Tale

The prologue of the Reeves tale

Whan folk had laughen at this nyce cas of Absolon and hende Nicholas, diverse folk diversely they seyde – When all the pilgrims had finished laughing at this ridiculous story about the minor cleric Absalon and the noble student Nicholas, many people had differing opinions on the matter, but for the most part they were able to make a joke of it. The only person I saw taking it at all badly was Oswald the Reeve, who was a carpenter by trade.

‘God!’ he began to grumble, ‘while we’re on the subject of fools being duped, I could tell a nice tale about a miller. But I’m old and don’t really want to take part in all this; my summer grass is now winter forage. You can see how old I am by my white hair. You can imagine that my heart feels as empty as the top of my head; unless I’m like a mouldy old medlar fruit that isn’t fully ripe until it has rotted down completely.

‘We old men are like that, though; we think we can still dance to every tune that the world throws at us. We are always prodded by the desire to be white at the top but green everywhere else, like a leek; for although our strength has gone we are always up for a laugh. And what we cannot do, we talk about instead. Yes, there is still fire to be raked in our old ashes; we possess four smouldering coals in particular: boasting, lying, getting annoyed and wanting things for ourselves. These four glowing embers belong to old age. Our old limbs may be crippled but there’s nothing wrong with our spirits, that’s for sure! I’ve always felt young, however many years have gone by since my tap was turned on. When I was born, Death drew open the tap of life and let it flow; and now the tap has run on until the barrel is almost empty. Us old folk prattle on like the last drips ringing on the tray, waiting only for our dotage.’

The dishonesty of a certain miller knows no bounds. When the warden of a Cambridge college falls sick, two students, the sort of young men who might well one day attain high office in the Church, are sent to supervise the milling of their college’s wheat. They know what to expect from this miller and are not disappointed, but when they have to spend the night at his house and are given a bed in the same room as his wife and daughter, they find a way to get even with him.

This tale from the Reeve follows the tale from the Miller, 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.

‘What on God’s Earth is all this in aid of?’ exclaimed our host. ‘Are we to spend all day discussing the virtues of old age? The devil made a reeve into a preacher when he made a cobbler cure the sick and steer a ship! Get on with your tale and don’t waste time – God! Look, here’s Deptford, the morning’s wearing on. Jesus, over there is Greenwich! Loads of scoundrels live there. Hurry up for Christ’s sake!’

‘Alright,’ said Oswald the Reeve. ‘But don’t get annoyed if I try to get my own back, for it’s lawful to shove someone backwards in self-defence. This drunken miller has told us all how a carpenter was made a fool of, probably on purpose because I’m a carpenter.

So by your leave, I shall redress the balance and give him like for like. I'll be as abusive as he's been and I hope he breaks his bloody neck. He can see a stalk in my eye, yet he cannot see the branch in his own.'

Here biginneth the Reves tale

At a place called Trumpington, not far from Cambridge, there's a bridge over a brook, with a mill nearby – and what I'm about to tell you is the truth. A miller lived there for a long time and he was as proud as any peacock. He could play the pipes and fish, mend nets, use a wood lathe, wrestle and shoot arrows from a longbow. At his waist he wore a long knife whose edge was as sharp as that of a sword. He kept a little dagger in his pocket as well, and another knife which he wore in his hose, one of Sheffield steel. Nobody dared to lay a hand on him. His face was round, he had a turned-up nose and his forehead sloped back making his head resemble an ape's. He was a complete bully in the market. If anyone touched him he would threaten violence and assault. He was a habitual thief of grain and flour too, and a cunning one at that. His name was Simkin.

This Simkin had a wife, who came from genteel stock; her father was the parson at Trumpington. He'd given many a bucketful of brass to secure her marriage. She'd been brought up in a nunnery, which suited Simkin, to be honest, for he'd declared that he would only marry a well-brought-up young lady and one who was chaste, for he was very proud of his status as a yeoman.

In all honesty, she was as proud as he was; as upright as a magpie. It was a sight to see them both on holy days, he in front, wearing a cape with a high collar clasped around his neck and she behind in a red dress, the same colour as her husband's hose. Nobody dared to address her in any other way but: 'Madam,' and nobody was brave enough to start an argument with her, or have a joke even, unless he wanted to be killed with a knife, a dagger or a long spike by Simkin. Jealous folk are always dangerous; or at least, that's what they want their wives to think. But she gave herself such airs because her father was really a celibate priest and she was illegitimate and as noble as ditch water if the truth be known. To disguise this fact she imagined that every woman should respect her because of her parentage and her education in a nunnery.

They had a daughter who was twenty years old, and no other children except for a little baby of six months old lying in a cradle, a boisterous little boy. The daughter was tall and big-boned with a turned-up nose like her father's and eyes as grey as glass. She had wide hips and large breasts riding high on her chest; but her hair was nice, I can't deny that. The parson, her grandfather, intended to make her his heir, both of his possessions and his house, since in his eyes, she was quite a comely lass. He was very fussy about her suitors and intended to find a worthy husband for her, a noble young man from a family with some ancestry, perhaps. The possessions of Holy Church should be passed on to those who are used to such things already and deserved them, he thought. He wished to

honour his Church ancestry despite his intention to usurp its goods.

This miller supplied much of the surrounding district with wheat and barley, flour and malt, and in particular, a Cambridge college known as King's Hall. At this time, the manciple of that college lay sick and many people feared that he would die and for this reason, the miller was cheating the college a hundred times more than he had ever done before. He was stealing their grain and their flour, and where previously he had defrauded them by quiet subtleties and courteous ruses, now he just blatantly thieved from them. The college warden had warned him and made a fuss, but the miller had taken no notice. He just puffed himself up and denied everything.

There were two young clerics, young students living in this hall. Both were high-spirited and eager to have fun and, for no other reason than to have some sport, they asked the warden one day if they could go to see their wheat being milled. Bravely, they declared that the miller would not be able to steal half a peck from them, neither by deception nor by force, they would lay their heads on it. After a little persuading, the warden allowed them to go.

One of the students was named John and the other Alan. They were both from up north somewhere, a town called Strother or something like it, I don't know where that is. Alan got all his things ready and threw the sack of grain onto his horse. Then off went Alan the cleric, with John alongside, with a good sword and a small shield. John knew the way, they needed no guide, and soon they threw the sack down beside the mill.

'Gud morning to yer, man,' Alan cried. 'Are yer there, Simmond? How's yer doorta an' how's yer wife?'

'Alan,' cried the miller, 'how nice to see you. And John! What's up? How can I help you?'

'Needs must, like,' said John. 'The man who has nooah servant must help hisself, or else heez a fool, as learned men say. Our manciple's gonna pop 'is clogs very soon, his rotten teeth are eat'n up his head. Therefore I've come along with Alan to grind our wheat and take it back again. So do it as quickly as you can and we'll be howay.'

'Certainly,' cried Simkin. 'I shall do it for you at once. What are you going to do while I'm busy at it?'

'I'll stand heer by the hoppa, 'n see it all gan in,' said John, 'I never sawer 'til now how the thing goowas back and forth like it does.'

'Then I'll howay down to the bottom 'n see the meal fall into the trough,' replied Alan. 'I'll enjoy that, for I have to see-a, I'm as ignorant as you aboo-ut the way the hoo-el thing works.'

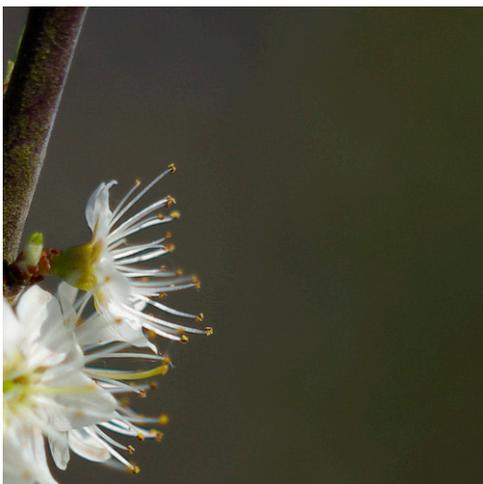
The miller smiled at their naivety. 'This is all a ruse,' he thought to himself. 'They think they can stop themselves from being cheated. But by God, I shall pull the wool over their educated eyes, for all their erudition and learning. The more tricks they can think

up, the more I'll steal from them in the end. I'll give them bran in place of flour. "The most learned clerics are not the wisest men," as the mare once said to the wolf. I don't give a straw for their arts and philosophies.'

When the miller saw that Alan and John were busy watching the machinery, he quietly slipped through a door and went outside into the open air, where he saw the students' horse tied up behind the mill, in some shade. He went over to the animal and untied its bridle. When the horse found that it was free, it galloped off whinnying in delight towards the fen where the wild mares were roaming. The miller went back into the mill and set to work, saying nothing about the horse but chatting amicably to the two students until all their wheat had been milled properly.

When the flour was all bagged up, John went out and saw that their horse had disappeared. 'Help!' he cried. 'Come quickly, help! Our horse is gone. Alan, for God's boobans! The warden's palfrey's not heer!'

Alan forgot about the flour and went rushing out, quality control and all commercial integrity suddenly the furthest thing from his mind. 'Which hweer did he goo-er?' he shouted.



The miller's wife suddenly appeared and said: 'Alas! Your horse is galloping off towards the open fen where all the wild mares are grazing. Some idiot couldn't have tied him up properly.'

'Alas!' cried Alan. 'John, lay down yer sword, cos we canna' run after him with'em roond us. I reckon we're boo-eth agile enough to catch him if we set off at once. H-why did yer not fasten the reeans properly, yer woolly?'

These foolish clerics, Alan and John, ran as fast as they could towards the fen. When the miller saw that they were gone, he took half a bushel of their flour and told his wife to go and make a big cake with it. 'I imagine those students were afraid that I was cheating them,' he said. 'But they're not clever enough to get one over on a miller. Let them go and play with the children. I don't imagine they'll be able to recapture their horse very quickly.'

Alan and John ran here and there crying: 'Hey! Whooah there! Stand still yer beest! You whistle, I'll cut off his retreat!' But even when it was getting dark, they still hadn't been able to catch him, try as they might. He always managed to run off. But at last, they cornered him in a ditch. Tired out, and as soaking wet with fen water as beasts left out in the rain all day, Alan and John returned at last to the mill.

'Alas! Why was I ever born!' complained John as they walked back towards the mill, leading Bayard by the reins. 'Now we'll be a laughing stock. Our flour has all been stoo-len and we'll be taken for fools – by the warden, by all oower mee-ats and by the miller,

damn it!’

When they arrived back they found the miller sitting comfortably beside his fire, for it was now dark. They couldn’t set off for Cambridge now so they begged him, for the love of God, to let them stay the night and offered him a penny for some food and shelter.

‘If I have anywhere I can put you up you’re welcome to it, such as it is,’ replied the miller. ‘Although my house is small, being scholars I should imagine you can make a room a mile wide out of twenty feet of space, so let’s see if it’s big enough or whether by arguments and logic you can make it even bigger still.’

‘By Saint Cuthbert, Simmond,’ replied John. ‘You have a merry wit man. I’ve heard it said, thoo-er, that a man has two choices – to tee-ak what he finds or tee-ak what he brings ‘n we’ve brought nowt. So bring us some food and drink, dee-er host ‘n we’ll pay a full price for it. You can’t entice a hawk with an empty hand, look, heers hoor silver, all ready-ter spend.’

The miller sent his daughter into Trumpington to buy ale and bread, roasted them a goose and made sure that their horse was well-secured. Then he made up a bed for them in his own chamber, with sheets and blankets, only ten or twelve feet away from his own bed. His daughter had a bed to herself in the same room. Here they had to lie, because there was nowhere else for them in the house. They ate and they chatted, made conversation, drank a lot of strong ale and at about midnight, they were ready for bed.



The miller looked as though his head had been varnished; he was past sanguine and was now pale with drink. He hiccupped and slurred his words as though he had a sore throat and a cold. He went to bed, and with him his wife, who was as jolly and talkative as a jay, such a thorough job she had made of wetting her whistle. She set the cradle next to her bed, so that she could rock it and put the baby to her breast, and when the jug of ale was all gone, the daughter retired as well, as did Alan and John.

The miller had drunk so much ale that he soon began to snore like a horse, and to fart like one as well. His wife began to snore just as loudly – you could have heard them from two furlongs away – and then the daughter started to make her own contribution to this wind ensemble.

Alan the cleric, listening to this performance, poked John in the ribs and asked: ‘Are you howee-ak man? Have y’ever heard such a melody? Which holy service d’yer think it belongs to? I wish a wildfire would burn ‘em all up! Whoever heard anything like it before? I’m not goo-in t-get any sleep tonight, that’s for shoower. But never mind. All might be for the best, John. So help me God, if I can, I’m gonna give yon wench over there a jolly

good seeing to. The law gives us the right to some compensation, after all, for it seeaz that if a man is aggrieved in one way he may seek satisfaction in another. Our corn is stoloen and we've been given the run-around all dee-er. Since I noo-ah I woont get prop-a compensation, I shall te-ak eezment in its plee-ass. By God, me mind is me-ad up.'

'Yer canna'do that,' whispered John. 'The miller's a bloody psychopath! If he wee-aks up he'll kill us boo-eth!'

'Don't worry y'sell, John, there's nowt in him to fear.' Alan rose from the bed and went over to lie beside the daughter. She was fast asleep on her back and Alan was so close to her when she woke up that she didn't have time to scream. Very quickly they were as one. Now enjoy this game, Alan, while I speak of John.

John lay still for a few minutes, tormenting himself with fears of ineptitude. 'Alas,' he thought. 'This is a wicked joke. I must look a right fool, lying here by myself. My mate has got something back for the wrong that's been done to us – he has the miller's daughter in his arms. He's taken his chance and got his reward, while I lie here like a sack of straw. When the story of this escapade goes around the college, I'll look a complete idiot and be the butt of all the jokes. I shall get up and chance my own arm, by God! Fortune favours the brave, as men say.'

John got up and went quietly over to the cradle, picked it up, carried it over and placed it in a similar position in relation to his own bed. Soon after this, the wife stopped snoring, got up and went out to have a piss. When she returned, she couldn't feel the cradle, so she felt around, but still there was no sign of it.

'Alas,' she said to herself. 'I almost made a dreadful mistake; I nearly got into bed with the two clerics! Oh, God bless me, but that would have been awful.'

She groped around, found the cradle, groped a little more, found the bed near to it and was very pleased when she felt the cradle and the bed, for she couldn't see a thing in the dark. She got in beside the student, lay still and began to fall asleep. After a little while, John leaped up and started doings things to her that she hadn't experienced for a very long time. He thrust firmly into her, hard and deep; she'd never had such a merry time!

These two clerics carried on like this until the third crow of the cock. Alan began to get tired as the light started to grow, for he'd been at it with the daughter all night. 'Farewell, Malin luv,' he said. 'The day is dawning. I can stee-er no longer. But I shall be yoo-er cleric always, so may I have joy.'

'Good luck my sweetheart,' she replied. 'But before you go, I'll tell you something. When you set off for home, as you pass the mill, behind the door you'll find a large cake



made from half a bushel of flour. It's made from your wheat – I helped my father to steal it from you. And darling, God save you and protect you!' With this, she almost began to weep.

Alan got up and thought: 'Before the room gets any lighter, I'll go back and lie beside John.' Then he found the cradle with his hand: 'Oh no! I've gone wrong. My head's still in the clouds with all this lovemaking. I've forgotten how the room was laid out. If the cradle's here, then the miller and his wife must be here as well.' So he went round to where the miller lay in his bed, curse it! He thought he was lying down beside his friend John, but it was the miller he was getting into bed with. He reached out, put his hand around the man's neck and whispered: John, you pig's head, wee-ak up man, for Christ's soul, and listen to this. By Saint James, I've gone all the wee-a with the miller's daughter three times tonight, man, while you've been snoring in this bed like a coward.'

'You bastard!' cried the miller. 'Have you done this? You traitor! Dishonest cleric! I'm going to kill you, prepare yourself for death! How dare you rape my lovely, highborn daughter?'

The miller caught Alan round the throat, but the cleric sprung away and punched the miller so hard in the face with his fist that a stream of blood ran from the man's broken nose and mouth onto his chest as they both rolled onto the floor and wrestled like two pigs in a sack. Up they rose and down they fell until the miller tripped on a stone and fell onto his wife, who was totally oblivious to what was going on, for she was sleeping soundly in the arms of John. She woke with a start and exclaimed: 'Help! Holy cross of Broomholme! Save us Lord! Wake us Simmond, the devil's here! My heart has stopped, I'm dead! There's a devil lying on my stomach, and one on my head. Help Simkin. Those bloody students are fighting.'

John got up as quickly as he could and groped along the wall for a staff. The miller's wife leapt out of bed also and, knowing the room much better than he did, found a staff quickly and fixed her eye on something glistening in the moonlight – for the moon was shining in through a tiny window in one of the walls. She could see two men wrestling there but couldn't make out much, except for a shiny white thing bobbing about. Thinking that it might be the night cap of one of the students, she advanced towards it and brought the staff firmly down upon the miller's bald head.

'Aahhh, you've killed me!' he cried.

Alan and John gave him a good kicking and let him lie still.

The clerics got dressed, readied their horse, picked up their sack of flour and set off for Cambridge, stopping off at the mill to collect the cake made from half a bushel of their flour.

So the arrogant miller received a good kicking, lost the flour he had stolen and paid for John and Alan's supper. His wife was made love to and his daughter lost her precious virginity – see what happens to a dishonest miller! There's truth in the old proverb: "Do

and get done by.” A cunning rascal had better watch his back, that’s all I can say. God, who sits high in majesty, save everybody riding here, great and small.

Now I’ve got my own back on the miller.