

Canterbury Tales

Shipman'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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Shipman's Tale

Our hoste up-on his stiropes stood anon, and seyde, 'good men, herkneth everich on; this was a thrifty tale for the nones!' – Our host stood up on his stirrups and shouted: 'Good men, listen to me – by heavens, that was a tale well-told! Now, Sir parish priest – for God's bones! – tell us a tale as you promised. I can see that you learned men of letters know what you are about, by God's dignity!'

'God bless us, why do you have to swear all the time?' answered the parson. 'What's wrong with you?'

'Listen to this!' exclaimed the Host. 'Pause here, for the pain that Christ suffered for us, because I think we are about to get a sermon. A Puritan wants to preach to us!'

'By my father's soul he shall not!' exclaimed the shipman. 'No Lollard heretic shall put a new interpretation on any gospel for *my* benefit! No. I give you warning. I can feel the imminent arrival of a tale from my jolly self, and I shall bell it out with such a merry ringing that everyone will wake up. And it shall not be philosophy either, or metaphysics, or anything laced with the erudite terms that lawyers like to use; there is little Latin able to come out of my mouth!'

Heer biginneth the Shipmannes Tale

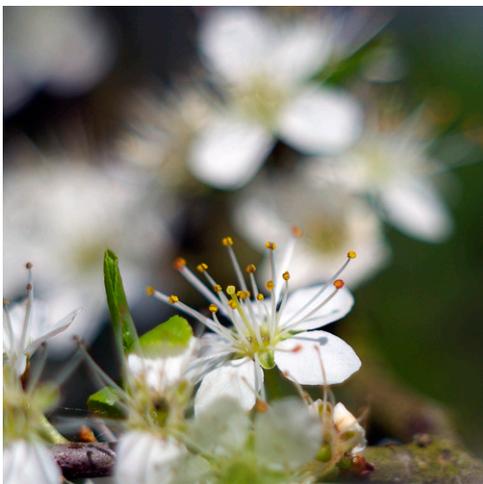
A Marchant whylom swelled at Seint Denys, that riche was, for which men helde him wys; a wyf he hadde of excellent beautee, and compaignable and revelous was she – There was once a rich merchant who lived a few miles down the River Seine from Paris at a town called Saint-Denis, and because he was wealthy, he was judged therefore to be intelligent and wise. He had a beautiful wife who had become very fond of socializing and of dancing, and this, as we know, can become a source of great expense and far from judicious. The spotlight that balls and parties attract can pass by like a shadow on a wall, and woe to him who has to pay for it all! The kind husband foots the bill, he buys clothes and jewels and other forms of glamour and ostentation to show off his wealth, and his wife happily dances in it all, and if he cannot pay, or will not, thinking it all a waste of money, as anyone might, then she must turn to another source of income to support her habit.

When a respectable merchant travels to Bruges in the Low Countries on business, he leaves his wife at home in Paris in the care of his greatest friend, a monk from a nearby abbey. Little does he suspect, though, that the hundred francs in gold coin he has just given to his friend as a loan will be used to purchase his wife's sexual favours; nor does he suspect that the repaid loan will be quickly spent on clothes by his grateful and now satisfied wife.

This tale from the Shipman follows the tale from the Pardoner in the Ellesmere MS and in British Library, Harley MS 7334, although it follows the tale from the Man of Law in Walter Skeat's Chaucer Society ordering, 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.

Regarding habits, this noble merchant lived very comfortably and spent a lot of the day at home, out of consideration for his friends and because his pretty wife was there – which is something that not all businessmen have the luxury of being able to do – but amongst all his many visitors and guests there was a monk, a fit young man of about thirty I would guess, who stayed with him frequently. This handsome young monk had known the merchant for so long that he was as familiar a face in the merchant's house as it is possible for a friend to be. And because they had been born in the same village, this merchant was fond of claiming that he and the monk were cousins, which the monk had never seen any reason to deny, for it suited him quite well and was a source of much pleasure to him.

Sir John, as they called him, was always very free with his gifts when he came to visit the merchant; he was very eager to please and never forgot the least page. He would give presents to the master of the house, then to all his household as their status demanded. They were always as glad to see him as a bird is to see the dawn!



Now it happened one day that this merchant was preparing to set out for Bruges to engage in some business, and for this reason he sent a messenger into Paris to invite Sir John to spend some time with him for a few days before he left. The monk had no difficulty in accepting this invitation because, through his prudent nature and because he was well versed in the ways of the world, he had the authority from his abbot to ride out and inspect all the farms and estates on the monastery's land whenever he pleased. He soon arrived down river at Saint-Denis, bringing

with him a large flagon of Malmsey and another, just as large, of a different wine, as well as a brace of game birds. No one is ever more welcome than Sir John! 'My dear cousin!' exclaimed the merchant.

So I will let them eat and drink and be merry for a day or two.

On the third day the merchant arose out of his bed and reflected with some concern upon the pressing urgency of his business. He went directly to his counting house to go through the year's accounts and to determine how things stood with him, that is to say, how his buying and selling had gone and how much profit he had made. He laid out all his books of account and his promissory notes and tokens from Lombard bankers and his bags of gold florins, for he had no shortage of wealth in his treasury, and bolted the door from the inside to guard against intrusion. And there he stayed until the middle of the morning.

Sir John got up early as well and took a walk in the gardens, where he soon fell into a convivial conversation with the merchant's young wife. She greeted him and he responded with every courtesy. She was accompanied only by a young girl not yet in her teens,

who was under her governance.

‘Oh, Sir John, dear cousin of mine,’ she said. ‘What is the matter? Why have you risen so early?’

‘Niece,’ he replied, ‘five hours sleep is sufficient for anyone, unless it be a man who is pale from a night of hard exercise, as husbands often are, like hares lying exhausted in their burrow after being chased to within an inch of their lives by the hounds! But my darling niece, why do you look so pale? Is it as I suspect, that our lord and master has been causing *you* too much exertion? You look in need of a good night’s sleep.’ And he laughed a good laugh and blushed at his own thoughts.

The lady shook her head. ‘Chance would be a fine thing!’ she exclaimed. ‘No, by the God who gave me soul and life, there is no married lady in the whole of France who gets less of that than I do. Alas! It makes me so unhappy, and I have no one to confide in. I have even thought of leaving my husband because of it, or ending my own life.’

The monk looked at her in dismay. ‘Alas, niece, God forbid that you should bring an end to your life! Tell me everything. I may be able to give you advice, or help in some other way. Let it all out. I swear by this breviary that I hold in my hand that your secrets will be safe with me.’

‘And I swear by your breviary,’ the lady replied, ‘that I shall never betray your trust, and may I go to hell for it if I ever divulge a word of any advice you may give me, and not because you are a relation of my husband’s but because of the love and affection I have for you.’



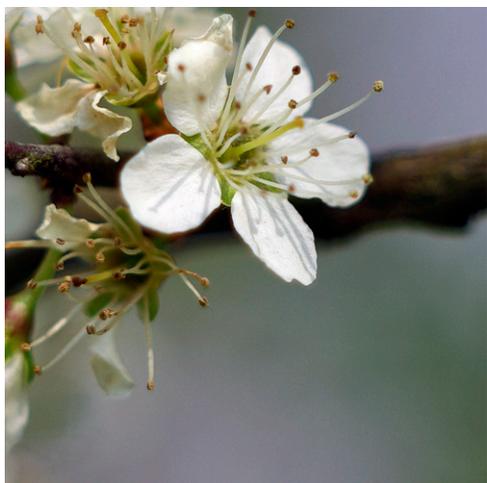
So they each swore their fidelity and assured each other of their discretion, then they kissed one another. ‘Cousin,’ she continued, ‘if I had the time, which I haven’t, not here, but I could tell you the saga of my life and what I have suffered since I got married, although I know my husband is one of your own family.’

‘Well, actually, he isn’t,’ said the monk quickly. ‘He isn’t, really!’ he exclaimed. ‘By God and Saint Martin, he is no more a cousin of mine than that leaf hanging from this tree. I call him ‘cousin’ only to have greater reason to see you. I have loved you for so long, and I love you above all other women, I swear this upon my calling! Tell me what is causing you so much sorrow; tell me quickly, before he comes along and hurries you up so you have to go in.’

‘My love,’ she said. ‘Oh my dear Sir John, I would rather that this didn’t have to be said, but I must say it, I can hide it no longer. My husband treats me worse than any woman has ever been treated since the world began! But since I am a wife, I have no right to reveal the secret side of our marriage, not what goes on in our bedroom, nor anywhere

else, and God forbid that I should ever reveal it. A wife must disclose only those things that bring credit to her husband. So to you alone I shall say this much: that, so help me God, he is not worth – in no way is he worth! – the value of a fly.

‘Most of all I resent his meanness. Women, as you well know, desire six things: that their husbands be in good health, intelligent and rich, willing to please us, hot-blooded in bed and generous when it comes to money. But by that Lord who bled for us, in order to buy clothes so that I may honour my husband next Sunday, I need a hundred franks or else I am lost! I would rather not have been born than have anyone find cause to criticise my fashion sense or make fun of my outfit, but if my husband finds out that I have spent all this, he will be beside himself! Therefore, I beg you, lend me this sum, or I must die. Sir John, lend me a hundred franks and, by God, you shall not find me ungrateful. I will repay you on a day that we can arrange, and in whichever way you feel may bring you the most pleasure. I leave this for you to decide. And If I don’t do everything you want



me to, may God take vengeance upon me. May I be torn apart by wild horses!’

‘My dear lady,’ replied this gentle monk. ‘What you have just said upsets me greatly and I give you my word that when your husband is in Flanders I will help to relieve you of all your anxieties. And I will bring you a hundred franks.’ Then he placed his arm around her waist and kissed her. ‘Leave here quietly,’ he said, ‘and we’ll go to eat, for I can see that it is nearly nine o’clock. Let us part in mutual good faith.’

‘I shall leave at once, else God forbid, Sir,’ she replied, and went off as happy as a magpie towards the kitchen. Having instructed the cooks to prepare a meal as quickly as they could, she went up to see her husband. She knocked at the door of the counting house.

‘Who’s there?’ came a gruff reply.

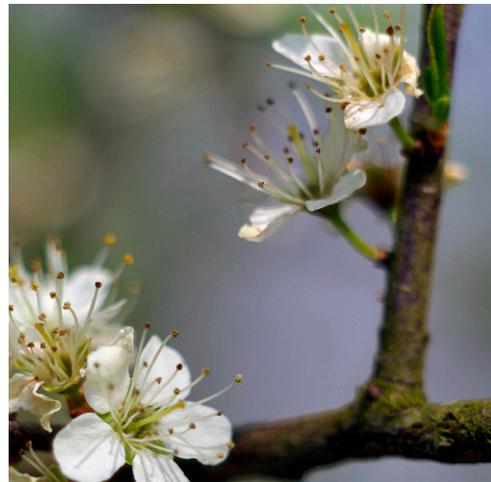
‘Saint Peter! Who do you think it is? And how long do you intend to remain here before coming down to breakfast? How much longer are you going to be, reckoning up and doing your sums and writing in your silly books? Let them all go to the devil! God has given you quite enough money. Come down and leave your books alone. Are you not ashamed that Sir John is having to go all day without eating? Let’s go and hear Mass and then sit down at the table.’

‘Wife,’ replied her husband patiently, ‘by rushing me you betray a very poor understanding of business. Scarcely ten merchants out of twelve will make enough money to keep them into their old age. We must practice good humour, conviviality, wear a good mask and keep our affairs at all times in good order but under close wraps. In this way we can make our way in the world; if not, we had better leave the business entirely and beg for a

living. I have to know exactly how things stand financially before I can take the chances and accept the uncertainties that are a necessary part of the merchant's profession. But as you wish. I am ready to come down. Tomorrow I shall go to Flanders and I shall return as soon as I can. Be courteous to everybody while I am away, be vigilant and honest. You have enough of everything to keep a thrifty household going during my absence; you have sufficient clothes, enough food, and the silver in your purse should not run out.'

And with this, he shut the door of his counting house and they made their way down to breakfast. A Mass was said, the trestles were put out and they all sat down to a meal that was in no way meagre.

When they had all finished, Sir John took his friend aside and said to him in private: 'Cousin, I know that you are about to set off for Bruges, may God and Saint Augustine guide you and make safe your journey. Ride carefully and make sure that you eat correctly, especially in this heat. We know each other well enough, so I shall say only farewell, cousin, and may God protect you. If there is anything I can do for you, by day or by night, if you would like me to do it and if it lies within my power, it shall be done. But there is one thing in particular, before you go, that I would ask. Could you lend me a hundred franks for a couple of weeks? I must purchase some livestock for one of our estates, and not for a thousand franks will I be an hour late in paying you back, I promise! But let this be a secret between us, I beg you, for I shall be negotiating a price for these animals tonight. And now, farewell dear cousin! Thank you for your company and for all your fine hospitality.'



This noble merchant smiled: 'Oh my dear cousin, Sir John,' he said. 'This is certainly a small request. My gold is yours, whenever you please. And not only my gold but everything that I gain by the two and fro of sweaty exertion, take as much of it as you want! I ask only one thing. You are well aware that money is the principal tool of a merchant's livelihood; we can borrow while our credit is good, but if we can offer no gold as security, then the game is well and truly up. So pay me back when you can.'

He quickly went to fetch a hundred gold franks and gave them to Sir John. No one else in the whole world knew of this loan. They drank and amused themselves, engaged in conversation and went for walks until it was time for Sir John to ride back his abbey.

The next morning arrives and this merchant in turn rides off, towards Flanders, accompanied by his able assistant who guides them both safely to Bruges. Here he goes swiftly about his business, buying and selling, borrowing and repaying, neither pausing to throw dice nor to dance, but playing only at being a merchant: and there we must leave him.

The following Sunday Sir John appeared once more in Saint-Denis with his chin and the top of his head all freshly shaved. There was not a person in the house who was not delighted to see him. And to get straight to the point, this fair wife was quite amenable to the swift fulfilment of their agreement, that is to say, that for a hundred franks he could have her in his arms to do with as he wished. And this, indeed, was what he did. They exerted themselves strenuously and happily all night and when morning came, Sir John took his leave with a: 'Farewell everybody! Have a good day!'

Nobody in the house, nor anyone in the town, had the slightest suspicion that anything untoward had taken place. Off went the monk to his abbey, or wherever he was going. I shall leave him for the moment.

When the businessmen had all concluded their deals and the wool markets were drawing to a close, the merchant left Bruges and made his way home to Saint-Denis where he greeted his wife with great joy and she him, so enthusiastically that he felt compelled to remind her that business is very taxing on the finances and what he first needed to raise was a loan of twenty-thousand French crowns!

So the merchant rode into Paris with a certain quantity of cash, intending to borrow the remainder that he owed from certain friends that he had there. But first he decided to pay a social call on Sir John, just to make sure that he was well and to tell him all about his recent business deals, as friends do when they visit one another, and not in any way to ask him for the money that he owed. He took Sir John out to dinner, described his trip to him and how, thanks be to God, he had taken delivery of everything he had wished to buy and would make a good profit, although he now needed to find twenty thousand French crowns in cash, but when he had raised this amount, he could rest easily.

Sir John answered: 'I am delighted to see you in such good health! And if I was wealthy you would not be short of twenty thousand crowns. By God and Saint James, you leant me gold the other day for which I offer you my eternal thanks, but I repaid your wife at home the full amount. The redeemable notes are sitting on your table. Now, by your leave, I must go. Our abbot wishes to set off on a journey very shortly and I must ride with him. Greet my sweet niece for me when you see her. Farewell dear cousin, till next we meet!'

This merchant, a worldly and intelligent man, concluded his business shortly afterwards through certain Lombard bankers and went home as happy as a jay. He fully expected to make a clear profit of a thousand franks from these dealings.

When he arrived home his wife met him at the gate, as she always did, and they spent all night enjoying each other's company in bed. As dawn broke, this merchant took his wife in his arms yet again, kissed her long and hard on the lips and rose once more to the occasion. 'No more!' cried his wife. 'By God, you have had enough!' But then they played immodestly together until at last he said: 'By God, I am a little cross with you, darling, although I don't want to be. Do you know why? Because I think you may have been the cause of a little frostiness between myself and cousin John. You should have warned

me that he had repaid me a hundred franks in redeemable notes. I think he looked a bit put out when I talked about the money that I had to raise, although God knows I had no intention of asking him for any. Please, darling, never do that again. Always tell me when a debtor has repaid me whilst I have been away, in case I might ask for money that is not owed to me any more.'

'I defy that false monk Sir John!' cried his wife, fearlessly. 'I know nothing about any redeemable notes, but he did bring me a quantity of gold. But how dare he! A curse upon him! He led me to believe that it was a gift. A gift to me, for all the hospitality that you have given him, and he told me to buy some fine clothes for myself so that I might increase your honour. But since I can see that I was mistaken, I shall make you a proposition. You will find worse debtors than I, for I will repay you readily, from day to day, and if I fail, remember that I am your wife, so take more than is owing if you wish. Remind me constantly. Rub it in as much as you can! I shall pay! For truly, I shall be wearing all the clothes that I have bought, and nothing shall be lacking. And because I will look so good for you, for God's sake, don't be angry but let's laugh and play! Let us join together! I shall repay you beneath the bedclothes.'

This merchant saw that there was nothing else to be done. 'Wife,' he said, 'I forgive you.'

This is the end of my tale. And may God let us all rise to the occasion when we need to, to our lives' end.

Amen.