

Canterbury Tales

Knight's son's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

late-fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

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Canterbury Tale from the Squire

Geoffrey Chaucer

late fourteenth century

At Sarray, in the land of Tartarye, ther dwelte a king, that werreyed Russye – At Tzarev, in a land beyond the steppes, in central Asia, there once lived a king who waged war against Russia, to the death of many a valiant warrior. His name was Genghis Kahn, and he enjoyed such high renown that there was reckoned to be no finer king in the whole of the world. He possessed every quality befitting a king and lacked for nothing. He was wise, immensely wealthy and his energy was boundless; he maintained a perfect balance between justice and mercy, he was true to his word, honourable, and hated both cruelty and cowardice, and as for the religion he was born to, he maintained its faith and upheld its laws with vigour. He was young and strong, and as well-accomplished in the wielding of arms as any in his household. He was, in all, an excellent sovereign, and held in such high regard that there was none his equal.

This noble king, this Tartar Genghis Kahn, had a wife named Elpheta, and she had two sons by him, and a daughter named Canacee; and I have not the skill to describe his daughter's beauty, I dare not undertake so high a thing for my English is insufficient. It would take someone who could apply the colours of rhetoric like an Italian master to do so, and I am not nearly so skilful, so I will proceed as well as I can.

This king, this Genghis Kahn, was in the habit of celebrating his birthday every year with a feast in his capital city of Tzarev. And so it happened that in the twentieth year

of his reign, in the Ides of March, the feast was duly announced. Phoebus, the sun, was shining brightly, happy to be in the sign of Aries. The weather was warm and the little birds, what with the growth of new leaves everywhere and the season and the sunshine, were eager to sing their love songs to one another, joyful and content that the cold of winter had passed. Wearing magnificent clothes and adorned in his finest crown, Genghis Kahn sat on the high throne in his palace and presided over the feasting, which could not have been surpassed. To describe it

This tale from the Squire, the young son of the Knight, is one 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 in the late-fourteenth century. It brilliantly reflects the interests of a young man with the leisure to indulge his creative fantasies. If the Canterbury Tales were transposed into a twenty-first century pilgrimage, this young man would undoubtedly offer a similar tale to the one he does here, one that is firmly rooted in the genre of science fiction, with an astonishing melange of advanced travel, remote communication and unconventional zoology.



would take all the daylight hours of a summer's day and there is no space, nor any desire on my part I have to say, to describe the menu or the service, the unfamiliar sauces, the swans and the herons; and in that land, as old knights tell, there was a dish that was held in high regard although it is not favoured here at all – but no matter, I shall not interrupt my story to describe it.

When the third course had been served and eaten and the king was listening to his minstrels playing so beautifully in front of his table, suddenly there burst in through the door a knight mounted upon a metal horse, holding in his hand a glass mirror. Upon his thumb was a gold ring and by his side hung a naked sword, and he was armed from neck to toe. Only his head and his hands were exposed as he rode up to the high table where the king was seated. The entire hall fell absolutely silent and everyone waited for this strange knight to speak.

He saluted and greeted the king, the queen, and then all the noblemen as befitted their rank, and in such courteous terms that even Sir Gawain, had he returned from the land of Faerie, would not have been able to improve a single word of it. And when the pleasantries had been completed, this stranger began to deliver his message in earnest. He spoke in a manly voice, using the most perfect language; and the better to tell his tale, he used all the skills of the rhetoric arts, so well that I cannot hope to reproduce his style – I could not climb so high a stile! – but I will say that the following gives the gist of what he said:



‘The King of Arabia and of India,’ he announced, ‘who is my liege lord, salutes you on this festive if formal occasion and sends you, in honour of your celebrations and through my agency – I who stand before you awaiting your every pleasure – this metal horse. This marvellous piece of workmanship is able in the space of a day – that is to say, in the space of only twenty-four hours – to travel anywhere in the world. It will bear you wherever you wish to go, through rain or hail, anywhere that your heart may desire, without any danger to yourself. If you wish to fly as high into the air as an eagle, no problem! This steed will take you as loftily as you dare to go. You may rest or sleep upon his back in complete safety, and to turn again for home you simply flick this switch here. He who made this horse was a skilful engineer and waited for all the right constellations to rise before completing his work. He knew his pop rivets from his o-rings! This mirror too, that I have in my hand, has such power that in it may be seen any danger to yourself or to your realm. It will distinguish between friend and foe, and if any lady has set her heart upon anybody, and be he false, she will see his treason in this glass at once, shall see her rival and all her lover's deceits so openly that nothing shall be hidden. And this mirror, and this ring, he sends to your beautiful daughter Canacee, in celebration of this lusty springtime.

‘The virtue of the ring is this; that if Canacee chooses to wear it upon her thumb, or to carry it in her purse, there is no bird that flies beneath the heavens that she will not be able to understand the moment it begins to chirp, squawk or warble. She will be able to comprehend its language perfectly, she will know the meaning of its discourse and be able to answer fluently. And every plant that grows upon a root, she will know its medicinal properties and whom it will help, be his wounds never so life-threatening.

‘This naked sword that hangs by my side has the property that whoever it is used against, it will carve through his armour as a knife does through butter, notwithstanding that



the armour may be as thick as oak. And whoever is struck by this sword will never recover from the injury unless you yourself lay the flat of the blade against the wound. I tell you no word of a lie.’

And when this knight had finished speaking, he rode out of the hall and dismounted. His metal horse, which shone like the sun, stood in the outer court as still as a stone, while the knight was led to a chamber, relieved of the weight of his armour, and brought back again into the hall to eat.

The presents were ceremoniously gathered up, that is to say, the sword and the mirror, and taken by trusted officers into a high tower. And with great solemnity, the ring was presented to Canacee as she sat at the table. But in truth, the metal horse stood as solidly as though it was glued to the ground. They could find no lever and no pulley, no engine nor windlass that could move it an inch. And the reason for this was that they did not know where the right switches were. And therefore they left it where it was, and there it stood until the knight told them how to operate it, as you shall hear in a second.

Huge was the crowd that swarmed about this metal horse, staring at it; for it was as tall and as broad, as strong and as well-proportioned as an Arab stallion, and its eyes glistened with a lively intelligence. Certainly, from his tail to his ear, neither Nature nor art could have made any improvement, and so thought everybody. But most of all they wondered – how can this horse possibly move if it is made of metal? Some thought that it must be from an Otherworld, but there were as many different opinions as there were people staring at it. They hummed around it like a swarm of bees, or like busy tailors, tacking their theories, hemming their hypotheses, stitching fanciful notions together with a slender thread of reason; some said it was like Pegasus, the horse that had wings, others, that it was a Trojan horse sent to bring destruction upon them all. ‘My heart quakes with fear,’ said one. ‘I am sure it is full of armed men, intent upon taking this city by force. If this is so, we should be told!’

‘Rubbish!’ exclaimed another. ‘It is far more likely to be a subtle illusion, as conjurers often produce at feasts like this.’ And thus they jabbered away and gave their opinions, as everyone does about matters that lie far above their heads, tending to read the worst into everything.

And some of them wondered about the mirror that had been taken into the high tower, and how it could possibly be able to see the things that had been claimed for it. Someone suggested that it might be through some clever use of angles, or the composition of the glass, or some sly reflection, and said that there was just such a mirror at Rome. And those who had read Aristotle and other writers suggested some strange use of perspective. And others reflected upon the sword that could cut through anything, and spoke of Achilles, who had a spear that could both harm and heal, in just the same way. They spoke of the hardening of metal by quenching it in concoctions of herbs, and of astrological timing, which is all totally beyond me, I have to say.

They spoke of Canacee’s ring, and all said that they had never heard of one like it, save that Moses and Solomon had a reputation for such perceptive understanding. Thus the people, milling about, discussed these things among themselves; and God knows, some say that fern-ash glass is a miracle, but only because they’ve been told that it’s made from the ashes of ferns! And others wonder about the causes of thunder or the tides of the sea, or gossamer, or mist, until the phenomenon is properly explained to them. Thus they talked and argued until the king rose from the table.

By now it was mid-afternoon and the constellation of Leo was ascending unseen, concealed by the bright sky. Led by his minstrels who were playing loudly, this Tartar king, this Genghis Kahn, made his way to a richly-adorned chamber, which was soon filled with such beautiful music that it was like heaven to be there. All the young people danced lustily, for Venus was in the sign of the fish and looked down upon them with a friendly eye.

The king sits on his throne. The strange knight is sent for and invited to dance with the king’s daughter. Here is flirtation and jollity beyond the powers of a dullard such as myself to describe. He would need to be an experienced lover and a frequent reveller who could adequately convey a sense of the body language, the graceful and deliberate movements of these young men and women on the dance floor, the exchange of glances, the subtle deceptions for fear of jealousy. Who but Sir Lancelot could describe this? – and he is dead. Therefore I will move quickly on and say no more, but leave them until it is time for evening dinner.



The spices were fetched and the wine brought; and when they had eaten and warmed themselves with the wine, they made their way to the temple, and when the ceremonies were over it was back to the tables for some more wine! What need is there to describe it all? Everyone knows that at a king's feast there is an abundance – more fancy dishes than I can put a name to! After supper, the king went to see his metal horse, followed by all the guests. There had been such speculation about it that at no time since the final days of Troy had so much mental energy been expended over a horse.

The king asked the knight to explain its workings more fully, and how it was controlled. The knight laid his hand upon the animal's reins and immediately it began to trot and dance about. 'Sir, there is no more to say!' said the knight. 'When you wish to ride anywhere at all, you simply flick a switch in his ear; which I shall show you when nobody is around. You must also tell him where you want to go, or to which country, and when you are there, you must ask him to descend and operate another lever, for there lies the main control, and he will land you safely wherever you wish; and there he will stay, though the whole world may have sworn the contrary. He shall not be moved from that spot for anything! Unless you wish him to be, in which case you can flick this switch here, and he will vanish out of sight entirely and return only when you call him, in a way that I shall describe to you in a moment, when we are alone. Ride him as soon as you wish. There is nothing more to explain.'

When the king had heard all this and understood in his mind how it all worked, he returned happily to the banquet. The bridle was taken to the tower and placed among his finest and most treasured possessions, and the horse vanished, I know not where, you get no more from me. And so we leave this Genghis Kahn in drinking, dancing and revelry, until it is well-nigh dawn.

But at last, sleep, that friend to digestion, began to beckon, because those who work and drink hard need rest; and with a yawn, the king kissed all his guests good night and declared: 'It is time to go to bed.' They all thanked him with a yawn in reply and in twos and threes, began to retire into what little remained of the night. I shall say nothing of their dreams, since they were all drunk, and such free dreaming is worth nothing. They slept until late in the morning; all except Canacee. She was moderate, as women sometimes are, and had taken leave of her father and gone to bed while the night was still young. She preferred not to be tired or jaded in the morning. And after a light slumber she had awoken very excitedly, filled with joy as she remembered her mirror and the ring that she had been given; and she went pale, then blushed, for she had dreamed of her mirror. And before dawn had fully broken, she called to her nurse who was sleeping nearby in the room and said that she wished to rise.

This old woman, who was as wise as her mistress, answered: 'Madam, where will you go at this time in the morning? Everyone is asleep.'

'I want to go for a walk, since I can no longer keep my eyes closed,' Canacee replied. Her nurse shouted loudly and woke up all the ladies-in-waiting outside, more than a dozen

I should think, and Canacee herself arose, as bright as the young sun that in the sign of Aries was only four degrees above the horizon when Canacee at last stepped outside, lightly dressed for the season, with five or six of her ladies, and walked along a sunken lane through a parkland scene. A slight dampness rose in a mist and broadened the sun a little; but nevertheless it was such a lovely morning that all their hearts were light, what with the spring air and the sound of the birds singing; and immediately she heard them, Canacee knew what they meant, she understood everything that the birds were singing about and knew all their intent.

The point of a story is diminished by delay, and for this reason I will get to the climax very quickly and bring Canacee into the woods.

On a branch of an old, dead tree, as Canacee approached it, sat a falcon crying so piteously that all the woods resounded to her wails. This bird was so distressed that she had injured herself terribly with her beak. She shrieked and wailed constantly and beat herself to such an extent that a tiger, or some other cruel beast of the forest, were he capable of weeping, would have done so for sorrow, so loud were this bird's shrieks. For there has never yet been any living man who saw a fairer and more handsome and more perfectly shaped bird. She had the plumage of a peregrine, a foreign beauty, and as she perched, she rocked and swayed for lack of blood until she looked as though she was going to fall to the ground.



This fair king's daughter, Canacee, who wore on her finger the marvellous ring that allowed her to understand the language of the birds and gave her the ability to answer them in their own melodious tongue, had understood all that the falcon had said and nearly died for pity. She ran to the tree, looked sympathetically up at the falcon and held the skirt of her dress out wide, for she felt certain that the next time the bird swooned she would fall out of the tree. Canacee waited anxiously, and when the danger seemed to have receded a little, she called up to the hawk: 'What is the cause of your anguish? Is it through bereavement or through lost love? For well I know that these are the two things that cause a gentle heart most pain. You injure yourself so badly that either love or fear must be to blame, and since I see nothing chasing you, it must be love. For the love of God, how can I help? For I have never seen a bird or animal in such a pitiful state! You slay me with your sorrow! You torture me with compassion. For God's love, come down from that tree, and as surely as I am a king's daughter, if I know the cause of your agony and if it lies within my power, I shall heal you before nightfall, may the great god of Nature help me! And also, I can find some herbs to dress your wounds.'

The falcon shrieked at Canacee's reply, fell to the ground and lay there as still as a stone as though she was dead. Canacee took the bird into her lap and held her there until

she recovered consciousness. At once, the poor hawk began speaking again in her avian language: ‘That pity springs most easily from a gentle heart,’ she began, ‘and one that feels another’s hurt as though it were her own, is plain to every creature. For a gentle heart understands kindness and I can clearly see your compassion at my distress, my fair Canacee – it is the feminine mildness which Nature has given you; and for this reason I shall tell you why I am so upset.’ And while the falcon told her her story, Canacee could not help but weep.

‘I was born,’ she said, ‘Alas, that woeful day that I was born! – on a limestone rock face, and was brought up so well by my mother that I wanted for nothing until I was able to fly. Across the valley lived a tercel who seemed to be the fount of all gentleness; his duplicity was wrapped in such a humble demeanour, and was so well concealed and camouflaged by a feigned manner, that anyone would have been taken in by him, I swear!



‘Such was this HYPOCRITE! – pretending that cold was hot and letting no one know of his intent.

And after wooing me for a long time, with tears and entreaties such that my heart was drawn to pity him and have mercy upon his love for me, all innocent was I of his duplicity – and frightened for his welfare should I reject him – and upon oaths and sureties, I granted him my love; but upon this condition, that he would remain faithful to me always. I gave him my heart and all my thought. I exchanged my own heart for his. And when he saw that I had granted him my love and given my heart to him as freely as he offered his own to me, then he fell upon his knees in thanks, and so like a gentle lover in his manner, so overcome was he with joy, that Jason or Paris of Troy – Jason, certainly, would not have been worthy to unbuckle his boots as far as feigning and deceitfulness and learning to love two people at once is concerned! He was so joyful when I said yes. So immaculately he groomed his words and his behaviour. And I so loved him, for his dutiful attention and for the truth I perceived to lie in his heart; and if anything hurt him, be it ever so little, I felt the pain magnified in my own heart.

‘And so my will became the instrument of his will, as far as reason and honour would allow, and I have never loved as deeply as this, nor ever shall again. For now he has left me!’

And with that word the falcon began to cry, and fainted again in Canacee’s lap. Great was the sorrow that Canacee felt, and all her ladies when she told them, for they did not know how to help; and Canacee took this hawk home in her lap and gently wrapped her in plasters – at least, on the places where she had hurt herself with her beak. Then she went out to find some special herbs to make an ointment, and worked at this with all her energy until late in the evening. And by her bed, right beside her pillow, she made a nesting box for the hawk, and lined it with blue velvet, signifying fidelity in a woman.

And outside she had the box painted green, with pictures of all the false creatures who live duplicitous lives, portraits of blue tits, magpies, male hawks and owls, so the two of them could shout and complain at them.

And here I leave Canacee looking after the hawk; I will speak no more of her ring for the moment. I won't say any more about it until the time comes to describe how it played a part in this lady hawk being able to get her lover back, through the mediation of Genghis Kahn's son Cambalus. But first I must tell you of some marvellous battles and adventures.

First I shall tell you about Genghis Kahn, how he won many cities during his reign, then I'll tell you how his son Algarsif won the fair Theodora as his bride, and how he would have been in dire peril many times had it not been for his father's metal horse. Then I shall tell you about Cambalo, who fought against Genghis Kahn's two sons in the lists for the hand in marriage of Canacee. Only then will I come back to the hawk and the ring.

Apollo rose so high into the sky that he entered the house of Mercury...