**The Reeve’s Prologue**

1 When folk had laughed their fill at this nice pass

2 Of Absalom and clever Nicholas,

3 Then divers folk diversely had their say;

4 And most of them were well amused and gay,

5 Nor at this tale did I see one man grieve,

6 Save it were only old Oswald the reeve,

7 Because he was a carpenter by craft.

8 A little anger in his heart was left,

9 And he began to grouse and blame a bit.

10 S' help me, said he, full well could I be quit

11 With blearing of a haughty miller's eye,

12 If I but chose to speak of ribaldry.

13 But I am old; I will not play, for age;

14 Grass time is done, my fodder is rummage,

15 This white top advertises my old years,

16 My heart, too, is as mouldy as my hairs,

17 Unless I fare like medlar, all perverse.

18 For that fruit's never ripe until it's worse,

19 And falls among the refuse or in straw.

20 We ancient men, I fear, obey this law:

21 Until we're rotten, we cannot be ripe;

22 We dance, indeed, the while the world will pipe.

23 liesire sticks in our nature like a nail

24 To have, if hoary head, a verdant tail,

25 As has the leek; for though our strength be gone,

26 Our wish is yet for folly till life's done.

27 For when we may not act, then will we speak;

28 Yet in our ashes is there fire to reek

29 Four embers have we, which I shall confess:

30 Boasting and lying, anger, covetousness;

31 These four remaining sparks belong to eld.

32 Our ancient limbs may well be hard to wield,

33 But lust will never fail us, that is truth.

34 And yet I have had always a colt's tooth,

35 As many years as now are past and done

36 Since first my tap of life began to run.

37 For certainly, when I was born, I know

38 Death turned my tap of life and let it flow;

39 And ever since that day the tap has run

40 Till nearly empty now is all the tun.

41 The stream of life now drips upon the chime;

42 The silly tongue may well ring out the time

43 Of wretchedness that passed so long before;

44 For oldsters, save for dotage, there's no more.

45 Now when our host had heard this sermoning,

46 Then did he speak as lordly as a king;

47 He said: To what amounts, now, all this wit?

48 Why should we talk all day of holy writ?

49 The devil makes a steward for to preach,

50 And of a cobbler, a sailor or a leech.

51 Tell, forth your tale, and do not waste the time.

52 Here's Deptford! And it is half way to prime.

53 There's Greenwich town that many a scoundrel's in;

54 It is high time your story should begin.

55 Now, sirs, then said this Oswald called the reeve,

56 I pray you all, now, that you will not grieve

57 Though I reply and somewhat twitch his cap;

58 It's lawful to meet force with force, mayhap.

59 This drunken miller has related here

60 How was beguiled and fooled a carpenter-

61 Perchance in scorn of me, for I am one.

62 So, by your leave, I'll him requite anon;

63 All in his own boor's language will I speak.

64 I only pray to God his neck may break.

65 For in my eye he well can see the mote,

66 But sees not in his own the beam, you'll note.

**The Reeve’s Tale**

1 At Trumpington, not far from Cambridge town,

2 There is a bridge wherethrough a brook runs down,

3 Upon the side of which brook stands a mill;

4 And this is very truth that now I tell.

5 A miller dwelt there, many and many a day;

6 As any peacock he was proud and gay.

7 He could mend nets, and he could fish, and flute,

8 Drink and turn cups, and wrestle well, and shoot;

9 And in his leathern belt he did parade

10 A cutlass with a long trenchant blade.

11 A pretty dagger had he in his pouch;

12 There was no man who durst this man to touch.

13 A Sheffield whittler bore he in his hose;

14 Round was his face and turned-up was his nose.

15 As bald as any ape's head was his skull;

16 He was a market-swaggerer to the full.

17 There durst no man a hand on him to lay,

18 Because he swore he'd make the beggar pay.

19 A thief he was, forsooth, of corn and meal,

20 And sly at that, accustomed well to steal.

21 His name was known as arrogant Simpkin.

22 A wife he had who came of gentle kin;

23 The parson of the town her father was.

24 With her he gave full many a pan of brass,

25 To insure that Simpkin with his blood ally.

26 She had been bred up in a nunnery;

27 For Simpkin would not have a wife, he said,

28 Save she were educated and a maid

29 To keep up his estate of yeomanry.

30 And she was proud and bold as is a pie.

31 A handsome sight it was to see those two;

32 On holy days before her he would go

33 With a broad tippet bound about his head;

34 And she came after in a skirt of red,

35 While Simpkin's hose were dyed to match that same.

36 There durst no man to call her aught but dame;

37 Nor was there one so hardy, in the way,

38 As durst flirt with her or attempt to play,

39 Unless he would be slain by this Simpkin

40 With cutlass or with knife or with bodkin.

41 For jealous folk are dangerous, you know,

42 At least they'd have their wives to think them so.

43 Besides, because she was a dirty bitch,

44 She was as high as water in a ditch;

45 And full of scorn and full of back-biting.

46 She thought a lady should be quite willing

47 To greet her for her kin and culture, she

48 Having been brought up in that nunnery.

49 A daughter had they got between the two,

50 Of twenty years, and no more children, no,

51 Save a boy baby that was six months old;

52 It lay in cradle and was strong and bold.

53 This girl right stout and well developed was,

54 With nose tip-tilted and eyes blue as glass,

55 With buttocks broad, and round breasts full and high,

56 But golden was her hair, I will not lie.

57 The parson of the town, since she was fair,

58 Was purposeful to make of her his heir,

59 Both of his chattels and of his estate,

60 But all this hinged upon a proper mate.

61 He was resolved that he'd bestow her high

62 Into some blood of worthy ancestry;

63 For Holy Church's goods must be expended

64 On Holy Church's blood, as it's descended.

65 Therefore he'd honour thus his holy blood,

66 Though Holy Church itself became his food.

67 Large tolls this miller took, beyond a doubt,

68 With wheat and malt from all the lands about;

69 Of which I'd specify among them all

70 A Cambridge college known as Soler Hall;

71 He ground their wheat and all their malt he ground.

72 And on a day it happened, as they found,

73 The manciple got such a malady

74 That all men surely thought that he should die.

75 Whereon this miller stole both flour and wheat

76 A hundredfold more than he used to cheat;

77 For theretofore he stole but cautiously,

78 But now he was a thief outrageously,

79 At which the warden scolded and raised hell;

80 The miller snapped his fingers, truth to tell,

81 And cracked his brags and swore it wasn't so.

82 There were two poor young clerks, whose names I know,

83 That dwelt within this Hall whereof I say.

84 Willful they were and lusty, full of play,

85 And (all for mirth and to make reverly)

86 After the warden eagerly did they cry

87 To give them leave, at least for this one round,

88 To go to mill and see their produce ground;

89 And stoutly they proclaimed they'd bet their neck

90 The miller should not steal one half a peck

91 Of grain, by trick, nor yet by force should thieve;

92 And at the last the warden gave them leave.

93 John was the one and Alain was that other;

94 In one town were they born, and that called Strother,

95 Far in the north, I cannot tell you where.

96 This Alain, he made ready all his gear,

97 And on a horse loaded the sack anon.

98 Forth went Alain the clerk, and also John,

99 With good sword and with buckler at their side.

100 John knew the way and didn't need a guide,

101 And at the mill he dropped the sack of grain.

102 Ah, Simon, hail, good morn, first spoke Alain.

103 How fares it with your fair daughter and wife?

104 Alain! Welcome, said Simpkin, by my life,

105 And John also. How now? What do you here?

106 Simon, said John, by God, need makes no peer;

107 He must himself serve who's no servant, eh?

108 Or else he's but a fool, as all clerks say.

109 Our manciple- I hope he'll soon be dead,

110 So aching are the grinders in his head-

111 And therefore am I come here with Alain

112 To grind our corn and carry it home again;

113 I pray you speed us thither, as you may.

114 It shall be done, said Simpkin, by my fay.

115 What will you do the while it is in hand?

116 By God, right by the hopper will I stand,

117 Said John, and see just how the corn goes in;

118 I never have seen, by my father's kin,

119 Just how the hopper waggles to and fro.

120 Alain replied: Well, John, and will you so?

121 Then will I get beneath it, by my crown,

122 To see there how the meal comes sifting down

123 Into the trough; and that shall be my sport.

124 For, John, in faith, I must be of your sort;

125 I am as bad a miller as you be.

126 The miller smiled at this, their delicacy,

127 And thought: All this is done but for a wile;

128 They think there is no man may them beguile;

129 But, by my thrift, I will yet blear their eyes,

130 For all the tricks in their philosophies.

131 The more odd tricks and stratagems they make,

132 The more I'll steal when I begin to take.

133 In place of flour I'll give them only bran.

134 'The greatest clerk is not the wisest man,'

135 As once unto the grey wolf said the mare.

136 But all their arts- I rate them not a tare.

137 Out of the door he went, then, secretly,

138 When he had seen his chance, and quietly;

139 He looked up and looked down, until he found

140 The clerks' horse where it stood, securely bound.

141 Behind the mill, under an arbour green;

142 And to the horse he went, then, all unseen;

143 He took the bridle off him and anon,

144 When the said horse was free, why he was gone

145 Toward the fen, for wild mares ran therein,

146 And with a neigh he went, through thick and thin.

147 This miller straight went back and no word said,

148 But did his business and with these clerks played,

149 Until their corn was fairly, fully ground.

150 But when the flour was sacked and the ears bound,

151 This John went out, to find his horse away,

152 And so he cried: Hello! and Weladay!

153 Our horse is lost! Alain, for Jesus' bones

154 Get to your feet, come out, man, now, at once!

155 Alas, our warden's palfrey's lost and lorn!

156 This Alain forgot all, both flour and corn,

157 Clean out of mind was all his husbandry,

158 What? Which way did he go? began to cry.

159 The wife came bounding from the house, and then

160 She said: Alas! Your horse went to the fen,

161 With the wild mares, as fast as he could go.

162 A curse light on the hand that tied him so,

163 And him that better should have knotted rein!

164 Alas! quoth John, Alain, for Jesus' pain,

165 Lay off your sword, and I will mine also;

166 I am as fleet, God knows, as is a roe;

167 By God's heart, he shall not escape us both!

168 Why didn't you put him in the barn? My oath!

169 Bad luck, by God, Alain, you are a fool!

170 These foolish clerks began to run and roll

171 Toward the marshes, both Alain and John.

172 And when the miller saw that they were gone,

173 He half a bushel of their flour did take

174 And bade his wife go knead it and bread make.

175 He said: I think those clerks some trickery feared;

176 Yet can a miller match a clerkling's beard,

177 For all his learning; let them go their way.

178 Look where they go, yea, let the children play,

179 They'll catch him not so readily, by my crown!

180 Those simple clerks went running up and down

181 With Look out! Halt! Halt! here! 'Ware the rear!

182 Go whistle, you, and I will watch him here!

183 But briefly, till it came to utter night

184 They could not, though they put forth all their might,

185 That stallion catch, he always ran so fast,

186 Till in a ditch they trapped him at the last.

187 Weary and wet, as beast is in the rain,

188 Came foolish John and with him came Alain.

189 Alas, said John, the day that I was born!

190 Now are we bound toward mockery and scorn.

191 Our corn is stolen, folk will call us fools,

192 The warden and the fellows at the schools,

193 And specially this miller. Weladay!

194 Thus John complained as he went on his way

195 Toward the mill, with Bayard once more bound.

196 The miller sitting by the fire he found,

197 For it was night, and farther could they not;

198 But, for the love of God, they him besought

199 For shelter and for supper, for their penny.

200 The miller said to them: If there be any,

201 Such as it is, why you shall have your part.

202 My house is small, but you have learned your art;

203 You can, by metaphysics, make a place

204 A full mile wide in twenty feet of space.

205 Let us see now if this place will suffice,

206 Or make more room with speech, by some device.

207 Now, Simon, said John, by Saint Cuthbert's beard,

208 You're always merry and have well answered.

209 As I've heard, man shall take one of two things:

210 Such as he finds, or take such as he brings.

211 But specially, I pray you, mine host dear,

212 Give us some meat and drink and some good cheer,

213 And we will pay you, truly, to the full.

214 With empty hand no man takes hawk or gull;

215 Well, here's our silver, ready to be spent.

216 This miller to the town his daughter sent

217 For ale and bread, and roasted them a goose,

218 And tied their horse, that it might not go loose;

219 And then in his own chamber made a bed,

220 With sheets and with good blankets fairly spread,

221 Not from his bed more than twelve feet, or ten.

222 The daughter made her lone bed near the men,

223 In the same chamber with them, by and by;

224 It could not well be bettered, and for why?

225 There was no larger room in all the place.

226 They supped and talked, and gained some small solace,

227 And drank strong ale, that evening, of the best.

228 Then about midnight all they went to rest.

229 Well had this miller varnished his bald head,

230 For pale he was with drinking, and not red.

231 He hiccoughed and he mumbled through his nose,

232 As he were chilled, with humours lachrymose.

233 To bed he went, and with him went his wife.

234 As any jay she was with laughter rife,

235 So copiously was her gay whistle wet.

236 The cradle near her bed's foot-board was set,

237 Handy for rocking and for giving suck.

238 And when they'd drunk up all there was in crock,

239 To bed went miller's daughter, and anon

240 To bed went Alain and to bed went John.

241 There was no more; they did not need a dwale.

242 This miller had so roundly bibbed his ale

243 That, like a horse, he snorted in his sleep,

244 While of his tail behind he kept no keep.

245 His wife joined in his chorus, and so strong,

246 Men might have heard her snores a full furlong;

247 And the girl snored, as well, for company.

248 Alain the clerk, who heard this melody,

249 He poked at John and said: Asleep? But how?

250 Did you hear ever such a song ere now?

251 Lo, what a compline is among them all!

252 Now may the wild-fire on their bodies fall!

253 Who ever heard so outlandish a thing?

254 But they shall have the flour of ill ending.

255 Through this long night there'll be for me no rest;

256 But never mind, 'twill all be for the best.

257 For, John, said he, so may I ever thrive,

258 As, if I can, that very wench I'll swive.

259 Some recompense the law allows to us;

260 For, John, there is a statute which says thus,

261 That if a man in one point be aggrieved,

262 Yet in another shall he be relieved.

263 Our corn is stolen, to that there's no nay,

264 And we have had an evil time this day.

265 But since I may not have amending, now,

266 Against my loss I'll set some fun- and how!

267 By God's great soul it shan't be otherwise!

268 This John replied: Alain, let me advise.

269 The miller is a dangerous man, he said,

270 And if he be awakened, I'm afraid

271 He may well do us both an injury.

272 But Alain said: I count him not a fly.

273 And up he rose and to the girl he crept.

274 This wench lay on her back and soundly slept,

275 Until he'd come so near, ere she might spy,

276 It was too late to struggle, then, or cry;

277 And, to be brief, these two were soon alone.

278 Now play, Alain! For I will speak of John.

279 This John lay still a quarter-hour, or so,

280 Pitied himself and wept for all his woe.

281 Alas, said he, this is a wicked jape!

282 Now may I say that I am but an ape.

283 Yet has my friend, there, something for his harm;

284 He has the miller's daughter on his arm.

285 He ventured, and his pains are now all fled,

286 While I lie like a sack of chaff in bed;

287 And when this jape is told, another day,

288 I shall be held an ass, a milksop, yea!

289 I will arise and chance it, by my fay!

290 'Unhardy is unhappy,' as they say.

291 And up he rose, and softly then he went

292 To find the cradle for expedient,

293 And bore it over to his own foot-board.

294 Soon after this the wife no longer snored,

295 But woke and rose and went outside to piss,

296 And came again and did the cradle miss,

297 And groped round, here and there, but found it not.

298 Alas! thought she, my way I have forgot.

299 I nearly found myself in the clerks' bed.

300 Eh, ben'cite, but that were wrong! she said.

301 And on, until by cradle she did stand.

302 And, groping a bit farther with her hand,

303 She found the bed, and thought of naught but good,

304 Because her baby's cradle by it stood,;

305 And knew not where she was, for it was dark;

306 But calmly then she crept in by the clerk,

307 And lay right still, and would have gone to sleep.

308 But presently this John the clerk did leap,

309 And over on this goodwife did he lie.

310 No such gay time she'd known in years gone by.

311 He pricked her hard and deep, like one gone mad.

312 And so a jolly life these two clerks had

313 Till the third cock began to crow and sing.

314 Alain grew weary in the grey dawning,

315 For he had laboured hard through all the night;

316 And said: Farewell, now, Maudy, sweet delight!

317 The day is come, I may no longer bide;

318 But evermore, whether I walk or ride,

319 I am your own clerk, so may I have weal.

320 Now, sweetheart, said she, go and fare you well!

321 But ere you go, there's one thing I must tell.

322 When you go walking homeward past the mill,

323 Right at the entrance, just the door behind,

324 You shall a loaf of half a bushel find

325 That was baked up of your own flour, a deal

326 Of which I helped my father for to steal.

327 And, darling, may God save you now and keep!

328 And with that word she almost had to weep.

329 Alain arose and thought: Ere it be dawn,

330 I will go creep in softly by friend John.

331 And found the cradle with his hand, anon.

332 By God! thought he, all wrong I must have gone;

333 My head is dizzy from my work tonight,

334 And that's why I have failed to go aright.

335 I know well, by this cradle, I am wrong,

336 For here the miller and his wife belong.

337 And on he went, and on the devil's way,

338 Unto the bed wherein the miller lay.

339 He thought to have crept in by comrade John,

340 So, to the miller, in he got anon,

341 And caught him round the neck, and softly spake,

342 Saying: You, John, you old swine's head, awake,

343 For Christ's own soul, and hear a noble work,

344 For by Saint James, and as I am a clerk,

345 I have, three times in this short night, no lack,

346 Swived that old miller's daughter on her back,

347 While you, like any coward, were aghast.

348 You scoundrel, cried the miller, you trespassed?

349 Ah, traitor false and treacherous clerk! cried he,

350 You shall be killed, by God's own dignity!

351 Who dares be bold enough to bring to shame

352 My daughter, who is born of such a name?

353 And by the gullet, then, he caught Alain.

354 And pitilessly he handled him amain,

355 And on the nose he smote him with his fist.

356 Down ran the bloody stream upon his breast;

357 And on the floor, with nose and mouth a-soak,

358 They wallowed as two pigs do in a poke.

359 And up they came, and down they both went, prone,

360 Until the miller stumbled on a stone,

361 And reeled and fell down backwards on his wife,

362 Who nothing knew of all this silly strife;

363 For she had fallen into slumber tight

364 With John the clerk, who'd been awake all night.

365 But at the fall, from sleep she started out.

366 Help, holy Cross of Bromholm! did she shout,

367 In manus tuas, Lord, to Thee I call!

368 Simon, awake, the Fiend is on us all

369 My heart is broken, help, I am but dead!

370 There lies one on my womb, one on my head!

371 Help, Simpkin, for these treacherous clerks do fight!

372 John started up, as fast as well he might,

373 And searched along the wall, and to and fro,

374 To find a staff; and she arose also,

375 And knowing the room better than did John,

376 She found a staff against the wall, anon;

377 And then she saw a little ray of light,

378 For through a hole the moon was shining bright;

379 And by that light she saw the struggling two,

380 But certainly she knew not who was who,

381 Except she saw a white thing with her eye.

382 And when she did this same white thing espy,

383 She thought the clerk had worn a nightcap here.

384 And with the staff she nearer drew, and near,

385 And, thinking to hit Alain on his poll,

386 She fetched the miller on his bald white skull,

387 And down he went, crying out, Help, help, I die!

388 The two clerks beat him well and let him lie;

389 And clothed themselves, and took their horse anon,

390 And got their flour, and on their way were gone.

391 And at the mill they found the well-made cake

392 Which of their meal the miller's wife did bake.

393 Thus is the haughty miller soundly beat,

394 And thus he's lost his pay for grinding wheat,

395 And paid for the two suppers, let me tell,

396 Of Alain, and of John, who've tricked him well.

397 His wife is taken, also his daughter sweet;

398 Thus it befalls a miller who's a cheat.

399 And therefore is this proverb said with truth,

400 An evil end to evil man, forsooth.

401 The cheater shall himself well cheated be.

402 And God, Who sits on high in majesty,

403 Save all this company, both strong and frail!

404 Thus have I paid this miller with my tale.