

## “THE MILLER’S TALE”

by Geoffrey Chaucer

Once on a time was dwelling in Oxford  
A wealthy lout who took in guests to board,  
And of his craft he was a carpenter.

A poor scholar was lodging with him there,  
Who’d learned the arts, but all his phantasy  
Was turned to study of astrology;

*all his attention*

And knew a certain set of theorems  
And could find out by various stratagems,  
If men but asked of him in certain hours  
10 When they should have a drought or else have showers,  
Or if men asked of him what should befall  
To anything—I cannot reckon them all.

This clerk was called the clever Nicholas;  
Of secret loves he knew and their solace;  
And he kept counsel, too, for he was sly  
And meek as any maiden passing by.

He had a chamber in that hostelry,  
And lived alone there, without company,  
All garnished with sweet herbs of good repute;  
20 And he himself sweet-smelling as the root  
Of licorice, valerian, or setwall.

*spices*

His Almagest, and books both great and small,  
His astrolabe, belonging to his art,  
His algorithm stones—all laid apart  
On shelves that ranged beside his lone bed’s head;  
His press was covered with a cloth of red.

*astrology text*

And over all there lay a psaltery  
Whereon he made an evening’s melody,  
Playing so sweetly that the chamber rang;

*stringed musical instrument*

30 And “Angelus ad Virginem” he sang;  
And after that he warbled the King’s Note:  
Often in good voice was his merry throat.  
And thus this gentle clerk his leisure spends  
Supported by some income and his friends.

This carpenter had lately wed a wife  
Whom he loved better than he loved his life;  
And she was come to eighteen years of age.  
Jealous he was and held her close in cage.

40 For she was wild and young, and he was old,  
And deemed himself as like to be cuckold.

*a betrayed husband*

He knew not Cato, for his lore was rude:  
That vulgar man should wed similitude.

*one like himself*

A man should wed according to estate,  
For youth and age are often in debate.

*according to status*

But now, since he had fallen in the snare,  
He must endure, like other folk, his care.

Fair was this youthful wife, and therewithal  
As weasel's was her body slim and small.  
A girdle wore she, barred and striped, of silk.  
50 An apron, too, as white as morning milk  
About her loins, and full of many a gore;  
White was her smock, embroidered all before  
And even behind, her collar round about,  
Of coal-black silk, on both sides, in and out;  
The strings of the white cap upon her head  
Were, like her collar, black silk worked with thread,  
Her fillet was of wide silk worn full high: *headband*  
And certainly she had a lickerish eye. *seductive*  
60 She'd thinned out carefully her eyebrows two,  
And they were arched and black as any sloe. *berry*  
She was a far more pleasant thing to see  
Than is the newly budded young pear-tree;  
And softer than the wool is on a wether. *sheep*  
Down from her girdle hung a purse of leather,  
Tasselled with silk, with latten beading sown. *beaded with brass*  
In all this world, searching it up and down,  
So gay a little doll, I well believe,  
Or such a wench, there's no man can conceive.  
70 Far brighter was the brilliance of her hue  
Than in the Tower the gold coins minted new.  
And songs came shrilling from her pretty head  
As from a swallow's sitting on a shed.  
Therewith she'd dance too, and could play and sham  
Like any kid or calf about its dam. *mother*  
Her mouth was sweet as bragget or as mead *sweet drinks*  
Or hoard of apples laid in hay or weed.  
Skittish she was as is a pretty colt,  
Tall as a staff and straight as cross-bow bolt.  
80 A brooch she wore upon her collar low,  
As broad as boss of buckler did it show;  
Her shoes laced up to where a girl's legs thicken.  
She was a primrose, and a tender chicken  
For any lord to lay upon his bed,  
Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.

Now, sir, and then, sir, go befell the case,  
That on a day this clever Nicholas  
Fell in with this young wife to toy and play,  
The while her husband was down Osney way,  
Clerks being as crafty as the best of us;  
90 And unperceived he caught her by the puss,  
Saying: "Indeed, unless I have my will,

For secret love of you, sweetheart, I'll spill."  
And held her hard about the hips, and how!  
And said: "O darling, love me, love me now,  
Or I shall die, and pray you God may save!"

And she leaped as a colt does in the trave,  
And with her head she twisted fast away,  
And said: "I will not kiss you, by my fay!

100 Why, let go," cried she, "let go, Nicholas!  
Or I will call for help and cry 'alas!'

Do take your hands away, for courtesy!"

This Nicholas for mercy then did cry,  
And spoke so well, importuned her so fast  
That she her love did grant him at the last,  
And swore her oath, by Saint Thomas of Kent,  
That she would be at his command, content,  
As soon as opportunity she could spy.

"My husband is so full of jealousy,  
Unless you will await me secretly,  
110 I know I'm just as good as dead," said she.

"You must keep all quite hidden in this case."

"Nay, thereof worry not," said Nicholas,  
"A clerk has lazily employed his while  
If he cannot a carpenter beguile."

And thus they were agreed, and then they swore  
To wait a while, as I have said before.

When Nicholas had done thus every whit  
And patted her about the loins a bit,

120 He kissed her sweetly, took his psaltery,  
And played it fast and made a melody.

Then fell it thus, that to the parish kirk,  
The Lord Christ Jesus' own works for to work,  
This good wife went, upon a holy day;  
Her forehead shone as bright as does the May,  
So well she'd washed it when she left off work.  
Now there was of that church a parish clerk  
Whose name was (as folk called him) Absalom.

130 Curled was his hair, shining like gold, and from  
His head spread fanwise in a thick bright mop;  
'Twas parted straight and even on the top;  
His cheek was red, his eyes grey as a goose;  
With Saint Paul's windows cut upon his shoes,  
He stood in red hose fitting famously.

And he was clothed full well and properly  
All in a coat of blue, in which were let  
Holes for the lacings, which were fairly set.  
And over all he wore a fine surplice  
As white as ever hawthorn spray, and nice.

*in the shafts*

*faith*

*church*

*church vestment*

140 A merry lad he was, so God me save,  
And well could he let blood, cut hair, and shave,  
And draw a deed or quitclaim, as might chance.  
In twenty manners could he trip and dance,  
After the school that reigned in Oxford, though,  
And with his two legs swinging to and fro;  
And he could play upon a violin;  
Thereto he sang in treble voice and thin;  
And as well could he play on his guitar.  
In all the town no inn was, and no bar,  
That he'd not visited to make good cheer,  
150 Especially were lively barmaids there.  
But, truth to tell, he was a bit squeamish  
Of farting and of language haughtyish.

This Absalom, who was so light and gay,  
Went with a censer on the holy day,  
Censing the wives like an enthusiast;  
And on them many a loving look he cast,  
Especially on this carpenter's goodwife.  
To look at her he thought a merry life,  
She was so pretty, sweet, and lickerous.  
160 I dare well say, if she had been a mouse  
And he a cat, he would have mauled her some.  
This parish clerk, this lively Absalom  
Had in his heart, now, such a love-longing  
That from no wife took he an offering;  
For courtesy, he said, he would take none.

*incense burner*

*seductive*

The moon, when it was night, full brightly shone,  
And his guitar did Absalom then take,  
For in love-watching he'd intent to wake.  
And forth he went, jolly and amorous,  
170 Until he came unto the carpenter's house  
A little after cocks began to crow;  
And took his stand beneath a shot-window  
That was let into the good wood-wright's wall.  
He sang then, in his pleasant voice and small,  
"Oh now, dear lady, if your will it be,  
I pray that you will have some ruth on me,"  
The words in harmony with his string-plucking.  
This carpenter awoke and heard him sing,  
And called unto his wife and said, in sum:  
180 "What, Alison! Do you hear Absalom,  
Who plays and sings beneath our bedroom wall?"  
And she said to her husband, therewithal:  
"Yes, God knows, John, I bear it, truth to tell."

*pity*

So this went on; what is there better than well?  
From day to day this pretty Absalom

So wooed her he was woebegone therefrom.  
He lay awake all night and all the day;  
He combed his spreading hair and dressed him gay;  
By go-betweens and agents, too, wooed he,  
190 And swore her loyal page he'd ever be.  
He sang as tremulously as nightingale;  
He sent her sweetened wine and well-spiced ale  
And waffles piping hot out of the fire,  
And, she being town-bred, mead for her desire.  
For some are won by means of money spent,  
And some by tricks, and some by long descent.  
Once, to display his versatility,  
He acted Herod on a scaffold high.

But what availed it him in any case?  
200 She was enamoured so of Nicholas  
That Absalom might go and blow his horn;  
He got naught for his labour but her scorn.  
And thus she made of Absalom her ape,  
And all his earnestness she made a jape. *joke*  
For truth is in this proverb, and no lie,  
Men say well thus: It's always he that's nigh  
That makes the absent lover seem a sloth.  
For now, though Absalom be wildly wroth, *angry*  
Because he is so far out of her sight,  
210 This handy Nicholas stands in his light.  
Now bear you well, you clever Nicholas!  
For Absalom may wail and sing "Alas!"

And so it chanced that on a Saturday  
This carpenter departed to Osney;  
And clever Nicholas and Alison  
Were well agreed to this effect: anon  
This Nicholas should put in play a wile *devise a trick*  
The simple, jealous husband to beguile;  
And if it chanced the game should go a-right,  
220 She was to sleep within his arms all night,  
For this was his desire, and hers also.  
Presently then, and without more ado,  
This Nicholas, no longer did he tarry,  
But softly to his chamber did he carry  
Both food and drink to last at least a day,  
Saying that to her husband she should say—  
If he should come to ask for Nicholas—  
Why, she should say she knew not where he was,  
For all day she'd not seen him, far or nigh;  
230 She thought he must have got some malady,  
Because in vain her maid would knock and call;  
He'd answer not, whatever might befall.

And so it was that all that Saturday  
This Nicholas quietly in chamber lay,  
And ate and slept, or did what pleased him best,  
Till Sunday when the sun had gone to rest.

240 This simple man with wonder heard the tale,  
And marveled what their Nicholas might ail,  
And said: "I am afraid, by Saint Thomas,  
That everything's not well with Nicholas.  
God send he be not dead so suddenly!  
This world is most unstable, certainly;  
I saw, today, the corpse being borne to kirk  
Of one who, but last Monday, was at work.  
Go up," said he unto his boy anon,  
"Call at his door, or knock there with a stone,  
Learn how it is and boldly come tell me."  
The servant went up, then, right sturdily,  
250 And at the chamber door, the while he stood,  
He cried and knocked as any madman would:  
"What! How! What do you, Master Nicholay?  
How can you sleep through all the livelong day?"  
But all for naught, he never heard a word;  
A hole he found, low down upon a board,  
Through which the house cat had been wont to creep;  
And to that hole he stooped, and through did peep,  
And finally he ranged him in his sight.  
This Nicholas sat gaping there, upright,  
As if he'd looked too long at the new moon.  
260 Downstairs he went and told his master soon  
In what array he'd found this self-same man.

*condition*

This carpenter to cross himself began,  
And said: "Now help us, holy Frideswide!  
Little a man can know what shall betide.  
This man is fallen, with his astronomy,  
Into some madness or some agony;  
I always feared that somehow this would be!  
Men should not meddle in God's privity.  
Aye, blessed always be the ignorant man,  
270 Whose creed is, all he ever has to scan!  
So fared another clerk with astronomy;  
He walked into the meadows for to pry  
Into the stars, to learn what should befall,  
Until into a clay-pit he did fall;  
He saw not that. But yet, by Saint Thomas,  
I'm sorry for this clever Nicholas.  
He shall be scolded for his studying,  
If not too late, by Jesus, Heaven's King!

*an Oxford saint*

"Get me a staff, that I may pry before,

280 The while you, Robin, heave against the door.  
We'll take him from this studying, I guess."  
And on the chamber door, then, he did press.  
His servant was a stout lad, if a dunce,  
And by the hasp he heaved it up at once;  
Upon the floor that portal fell anon.  
This Nicholas sat there as still as stone,  
Gazing, with gaping mouth, straight up in air.  
This carpenter thought he was in despair,  
And took him by the shoulders, mightily,  
290 And shook him hard, and cried out, vehemently:  
"What! Nicholay! Why how now! Come, look down!  
Awake, and think on Jesus' death and crown!  
I cross you from all elves and magic wights!"  
And then the night-spell said he out, by rights,  
At the four corners of the house about,  
And at the threshold of the door, without:  
"O Jesus Christ and good Saint Benedict,  
Protect this house from all that may afflict,  
For the night hag the white Pater Noster!-  
300 Where hast thou gone, Saint Peter's sister?"

*evil creatures*

And at the last this clever Nicholas  
Began to sigh full sore, and said: "Alas!  
Shall all the world be lost so soon again?"  
This carpenter replied: "What say you, then?  
What! Think on God, as we do, men that swink."  
This Nicholas replied: "Go fetch me drink;  
And afterward I'll tell you privately  
A certain thing concerning you and me;  
I'll tell it to no other man or men."

*work*

310 This carpenter went down and came again,  
And brought of potent ale a brimming quart;  
And when each one of them had drunk his part,  
Nicholas shut the door fast, and with that  
He drew a seat and near the carpenter sat.  
He said: "Now, John, my good host, lief and dear,  
You must upon your true faith swear, right here,  
That to no man will you this word betray;  
For it is Christ's own word that I will say,  
And if you tell a man, you're ruined quite;  
320 This punishment shall come to you, of right,  
That if you're traitor you'll go mad—and should!"  
"Nay, Christ forbid it, for His holy blood!"  
Said then this simple man: "I am no blab,  
Nor, though I say it, am I fond of gab.  
Say what you will, I never will it tell  
To child or wife, by Him that harried Hell!"

*beloved*

330 "Now, John," said Nicholas, "I will not lie;  
But I've found out, from my astrology,  
As I have looked upon the moon so bright,  
That now, come Monday next, at nine of night,  
Shall fall a rain so wildly mad as would  
Have been, by half, greater than Noah's flood.  
This world," he said, "in less time than an hour,  
Shall all be drowned, so terrible is this shower;  
Thus shall all mankind drown and lose all life."  
This carpenter replied: "Alas, my wife!  
And shall she drown? Alas, my Alison!"  
For grief of this he almost fell. Anon  
He said: "Is there no remedy in this case?"  
340 "Why yes, good luck," said clever Nicholas,  
"If you will work by counsel of the wise;  
You must not act on what your wits advise.  
For so says Solomon, and it's all true,  
'Work by advice and thou shalt never rue.'  
And if you'll act as counselled and not fail,  
I undertake, without a mast or sail,  
To save us all, aye you and her and me.  
Haven't you heard of, Noah, how saved was he,  
Because Our Lord had warned him how to keep  
350 Out of the flood that covered earth so deep?"  
"Yes," said this carpenter, "long years ago."  
  
"Have you not heard," asked Nicholas, "also  
The sorrows of Noah and his fellowship  
In getting his wife to go aboard the ship?  
He would have rather, I dare undertake,  
At that time, and for all the weather black,  
That she had one ship for herself alone.  
Therefore, do you know what would best be done?  
This thing needs haste, and of a hasty thing  
360 Men must not preach nor do long tarrying.  
"Presently go, and fetch here to this inn  
A kneading-tub, or brewing vat, and win  
One each for us, but see that they are large,  
Wherein we may swim out as in a barge,  
And have therein sufficient food and drink  
For one day only; that's enough, I think.  
The water will dry up and flow away  
About the prime of the succeeding day.  
But Robin must not know of this, your knave,  
370 And even Jill, your maid, I may not save;  
Ask me not why, for though you do ask me,  
I will not tell you of God's privity.  
Suffice you, then, unless your wits are mad,  
To have as great a grace as Noah had.



Your wife I shall not lose, there is no doubt,  
Go, now, your way, and speedily about,  
But when you have, for you and her and me,  
Procured these kneading-tubs, or beer-vats, three,  
Then you shall hang them near the roof-tree high,  
380 That no man our purveyance may espy.  
And when you thus have done, as I have said,  
And have put in our drink and meat and bread,  
Also an axe to cut the ropes in two  
When the flood comes, that we may float and go,  
And cut a hole, high up, upon the gable,  
Upon the garden side, over the stable,  
That we may freely pass forth on our way  
When the great rain and flood are gone that day-  
Then shall you float as merrily, I'll stake,  
390 As does the white duck after the white drake.  
Then I will call, 'Ho, Alison! Ho, John!  
Be cheery, for the flood will pass anon.'  
And you will say, 'Hail. Master Nicholay!  
Good morrow, I see you well, for it is day!'  
And then shall we be barons all our life  
Of all the world, like Noah and his wife.

*preparations*

"But of one thing I warn you now, outright.  
Be well advised, that on that very night  
When we have reached our ships and got aboard,  
400 Not one of us must speak or whisper word,  
Nor call, nor cry, but sit in silent prayer;  
For this is God's own bidding, hence—don't dare!  
"Your wife and you must hang apart, that in  
The night shall come no chance for you to sin  
Either in looking or in carnal deed.  
These orders I have told you, go, God speed!  
Tomorrow night, when all men are asleep,  
Into our kneading-tubs will we three creep  
And sit there, still, awaiting God's high grace.  
410 Go, now, your way, I have no longer space  
Of time to make a longer sermoning.  
Men say thus: 'Send the wise and say no thing.'  
You are so wise it needs not that I teach;  
Go, save our lives, and that I do beseech."

This silly carpenter went on his way.  
Often he cried "Alas!" and "Welaway!"  
And to his wife he told all, privately;  
But she was better taught thereof than he  
How all this rigmarole was to apply.  
420 Nevertheless she acted as she'd die,  
And said: "Alas! Go on your way anon,

Help us escape, or we are lost, each one;  
I am your true and lawfully wedded wife;  
Go, my dear spouse, and help to save our life."  
Lo, what a great thing is affection found!  
Men die of imagination, I'll be bound,  
So deep an imprint may the spirit take.  
This hapless carpenter began to quake;  
He thought now, verily, that he could see  
430 Old Noah's flood come wallowing like the sea  
To drown his Alison, his honey dear.  
He wept, he wailed, he made but sorry cheer,  
He sighed and made full many a sob and sough.  
He went and got himself a kneading-trough  
And, after that, two tubs he somewhere found  
And to his dwelling privately sent round,  
And hung them near the roof, all secretly.  
With his own hand, then, made he ladders three,  
To climb up by the rungs thereof, it seems,  
440 And reach the tubs left hanging to the beams;  
And those he victualled, tubs and kneading-trough,  
With bread and cheese and good jugged ale, enough  
To satisfy the needs of one full day.  
But ere he'd put all this in such array,  
He sent his servants, boy and maid, right down  
Upon some errand into London town.

And on the Monday, when it came on night,  
He shut his door, without a candle-light,  
And ordered everything as it should be.  
450 And shortly after up they climbed, all three;  
They sat while one might plow a furlong-way.  
"Now, by Our Father, hush!" said Nicholay,  
And "Hush!" said John, and "Hush!" said Alison.  
This carpenter, his loud devotions done,  
Sat silent, saying mentally a prayer,  
And waiting for the rain, to hear it there.  
The deathlike sleep of utter weariness  
Fell on this wood-wright even. (as I guess)  
About the curfew time, or little more;  
460 For travail of his spirit he groaned sore,  
And soon he snored, for badly his head lay.

Down by the ladder crept this Nicholay,  
And Alison, right softly down she sped.  
Without more words they went and got in bed  
Even where the carpenter was wont to lie.  
There was the revel and the melody!  
And thus lie Alison and Nicholas,  
In joy that goes by many an alias,

470           Until the bells for lauds began to ring  
              And friars to the chancel went to sing.

              This parish clerk, this amorous Absalom,  
              Whom love has made so woebegone and dumb,  
              Upon the Monday was down Osney way,  
              With company, to find some sport and play;  
              And there he chanced to ask a cloisterer,  
              Privately, after John the carpenter.  
              This monk drew him apart, out of the kirk,  
              And said: "I have not seen him here at work.  
480           Since Saturday; I think well that he went  
              For timber, that the abbot has him sent;  
              For he is wont for timber thus to go,  
              Remaining at the grange a day or so;  
              Or else he's surely at his house today;  
              But which it is I cannot truly say."

              This Absalom right happy was and light,  
              And thought: "Now is the time to wake all night;  
              For certainly I saw him not stirring  
              About his door since day began to spring.  
490           So may I thrive, as I shall, at cock's crow,  
              Knock cautiously upon that window low  
              Which is so placed upon his bedroom wall.  
              To Alison then will I tell of all  
              My love-longing, and thus I shall not miss  
              That at the least I'll have her lips to kiss.  
              Some sort of comfort shall I have, I say,  
              My mouth's been itching all this livelong day;  
              That is a sign of kissing at the least.  
              All night I dreamed, too, I was at a feast.  
              Therefore I'll go and sleep two hours away  
500           And all this night then will I wake and play."

              And so when time of first cock-crow was come,  
              Up rose this merry lover, Absalom,  
              And dressed him gay and all at point-device,  
              But first he chewed some licorice and spice  
              So he'd smell sweet, ere he had combed his hair.  
              Under his tongue some bits of true-love rare,  
              For thereby thought he to be more gracious.  
              He went, then, to the carpenter's dark house.  
              And silent stood beneath the shot-window;  
510           Unto his breast it reached, it was so low;  
              And he coughed softly, in a low half tone:  
              "What do you, honeycomb, sweet Alison?  
              My cinnamon, my fair bird, my sweetie,  
              Awake, O darling mine, and speak to me!  
              It's little thought you give me and my woe,

Who for your love do sweat where'er I go.  
Yet it's no wonder that I faint and sweat;  
I long as does the lamb for mother's teat.  
Truly, sweetheart, I have such love-longing  
520 That like a turtle-dove's my true yearning;  
And I can eat no more than can a maid."

"Go from the window, Jack-a-napes," she said,  
"For, s'help me God, it is not 'come kiss me.'  
I love another, or to blame I'd be,  
Better than you, by Jesus, Absalom!  
Go on your way, or I'll stone you therefrom,  
And let me sleep, the fiends take you away!"  
"Alas," quoth Absalom, "and welaway!  
That true love ever was so ill beset!  
530 But kiss me, since you'll do no more, my pet,  
For Jesus' love and for the love of me."  
"And will you go, then, on your way?" asked she,  
"Yes truly, darling," said this Absalom.  
"Then make you ready," said she, "and I'll come!"

And unto Nicholas said she, low and still:  
"Be silent now, and you shall laugh your fill."  
This Absalom plumped down upon his knees,  
And said: "I am a lord in all degrees;  
For after this there may be better still  
540 Darling, my sweetest bird, I wait your will."  
The window she unbarred, and that in haste.  
"Have done," said she, "come on, and do it fast,  
Before we're seen by any neighbour's eye."  
This Absalom did wipe his mouth all dry;  
Dark was the night as pitch, aye dark as coal,  
And through the window she put out her hole.  
And Absalom no better felt nor worse,  
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse  
Right greedily, before he knew of this.  
550 Aback he leapt—it seemed somehow amiss,  
For well he knew a woman has no beard;  
He'd felt a thing all rough and longish haired,  
And said, "Oh fie, alas! What did I do?"  
"Teehee!" she laughed, and clapped the window to;  
And Absalom went forth a sorry pace.  
"A beard! A beard!" cried clever Nicholas,  
"Now by God's corpus, this goes fair and well!"

This hapless Absalom, he heard that yell,  
And on his lip, for anger, he did bite;  
560 And to himself he said, "I will requite!"  
Who vigorously rubbed and scrubbed his lips  
With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips,

But Absalom, and often cried "Alas!  
My soul I give now unto Sathanas, *Satan*  
For rather far than own this town," said he,  
"For this despite, it's well revenged I'd be.  
Alas," said he, "from her I never blenched!"  
His hot love was grown cold, aye and all quenched;  
For, from the moment that he'd kissed her arse,  
570 For paramours he didn't care a curse,  
For he was healed of all his malady;  
Indeed all paramours he did defy,  
And wept as does a child that has been beat.  
With silent step he went across the street  
Unto a smith whom men called Dan Jarvis,  
Who in his smithy forged plow parts, that is  
He sharpened shares and coulter busily.  
This Absalom he knocked all easily,  
And said: "Unbar here, Jarvis, for I come."  
580 "What! Who are you?" "It's I, it's Absalom."  
"What! Absalom! For Jesus Christ's sweet tree,  
Why are you up so early? Ben'cite! *God bless you*  
What ails you now, man? Some gay girl, God knows,  
Has brought you on the jump to my bellows;  
By Saint Neot, you know well what I mean."  
This Absalom cared not a single bean  
For all this play, nor one word back he gave;  
He'd more tow on his distaff, had this knave,  
Than Jarvis knew, and said he: "Friend so dear,  
590 This red-hot coultter in the fireplace here, *plow part*  
Lend it to me, I have a need for it,  
And I'll return it after just a bit."  
Jarvis replied: "Certainly, were it gold  
Or a purse filled with yellow coins untold,  
Yet should you have it, as I am true smith;  
But eh, Christ's foe! What will you do therewith?"  
"Let that," said Absalom, "be as it may;  
I'll tell you all tomorrow, when it's day"-  
And caught the coultter then by the cold steel *cold handle*  
600 And softly from the smithy door did steal  
And went again up to the wood-wright's wall.

He coughed at first, and then he knocked withal  
Upon the window, as before, with care.  
This Alison replied: "Now who is there?  
And who knocks so? I'll warrant it's a thief."  
"Why no," quoth he, "God knows, my sweet roseleaf,  
I am your Absalom, my own darling!  
Of gold," quoth he, "I have brought you a ring;  
My mother gave it me, as I'll be saved;  
610 Fine gold it is, and it is well engraved;

This will I give you for another kiss."  
This Nicholas had risen for a piss,  
And thought that it would carry on the jape  
To have his arse kissed by this jack-a-nape.  
And so he opened window hastily,  
And put his arse out thereat, quietly,  
Over the buttocks, showing the whole bum;  
And thereto said this clerk, this Absalom,  
"O speak, sweet bird, I know not where thou art."

620 This Nicholas just then let fly a fart  
As loud as it had been a thunder-clap,  
And well-nigh blinded Absalom, poor chap;  
But he was ready with his iron hot  
And Nicholas right in the arse he got.  
Off went the skin a hand's-breadth broad, about,  
The coulter burned his bottom so, throughout,  
That for the pain he thought that he should die.  
And like one mad he started in to cry,  
"Help! Water! Water! For God's dear heart!"

630 This carpenter out of his sleep did start,  
Hearing that "Water!" cried as madman would,  
And thought, "Alas, now comes down Noel's flood!"  
He struggled up without another word  
And with his axe he cut in two the cord,  
And down went all; he did not stop to trade  
In bread or ale till he'd the journey made,  
And there upon the floor he swooning lay.

Up started Alison and Nicholay  
And shouted "Help!" and "Hello!" down the street.  
640 The neighbours, great and small, with hastening feet  
Swarmed in the house to stare upon this man,  
Who lay yet swooning, and all pale and wan;  
For in the falling he had smashed his arm.  
He had to suffer, too, another harm,  
For when he spoke he was at once borne down  
By clever Nicholas and Alison.  
For they told everyone that he was odd;  
He was so much afraid of "Noel's" flood,  
Through fantasy, that out of vanity  
650 He'd gone and bought these kneading-tubs, all three,  
And that he'd hung them near the roof above;  
And that he had prayed them, for God's dear love,  
To sit with him and bear him company.

The people laughed at all this fantasy;  
Up to the roof they looked, and there did gape,  
And so turned all his injury to a jape.  
For when this carpenter got in a word,

'Twas all in vain, no man his reasons heard;  
With oaths imprenive he was so sworn down,  
That he was held for mad by all the town;  
For every clerk did side with every other.  
They said: "The man is crazy, my dear brother."  
And everyone did laugh at all this strife.

Thus futtered was the carpenter's goodwife,  
For all his watching and his jealousy;  
And Absalom has kissed her nether eye;  
And Nicholas is branded on the butt.  
This tale is done, and God save all the rout!

*Formatted, edited, and annotated by Ned Gallagher, Choate Department of English, December 2019.*