

But I am old. Dirt doesn't go with doddering,
 Grass-time is done and I'm for winter foddering.
 My hoary top-knot writes me down for old;
 Same as my hair, my heart is full of mould,
 Unless I be like them there medlar-fruit,
 Them that gets rottener as they ripen to't,
 Till they be rotted down in straw and dung.
 That's how we get to be, no longer young.
 Till we be rotten we can never ripe.
 We hop along, as long as world will pipe;
 Our will is always catching on the nail,
 Wanting a hoary head and a green tail,
 Like leeks have got; the strength to play that game
 Is gone, though we love foolishness the same.
 What we can't do no more we talk about
 And rake the ashes when the fire is out.
 'Yet we have four live coals, as I can show;
 Lies, boasting, greed and rage will always glow.
 Those are the sparks among the ancient embers
 Though we be nigh unwelded in our members.
 Desire never fails, and that's the truth,
 For even now I have a colish tooth,
 Many as be the years now dead and done
 Before my tap of life began to run.
 Certain, when I was born, so long ago,
 Death drew the tap of life and let it flow;
 And ever since the tap has done its task,
 And now there's liddle but an empty cask.
 My stream of life's but drops upon the rim.
 An old fool's tongue will run away with him
 To chime and charter of monkey-tricks that's past;
 There's nothing left but dotage at the last!
 Our Host, on hearing all this sermoring,
 Began to speak as lordly as a king,
 And said, 'What does it come to, all this wirt?
 What! Spend the morning talking Holy Wirt?
 The devil that makes a Reeve
 Turns cobblers into doctors; I believe.

THE REEVE'S TALE

The Reeve's Prologue

When all had laughed at the preposterous lark
 Of Absalon and Nicholas the Spark,
 Various folk made various comment after;
 But the majority dissolved in laughter,
 Nor did I see a soul it seemed to grieve
 Unless it might be Oswald, the old Reeve,
 For, as he was a carpenter by trade,
 He was a liddle angry still and made
 Grumbling remarks and scolded for a bit.
 'As I'm a man I'd pay you back for it,'
 He said, 'with how they bleared a Miller's eye,
 If I liked dirt and wished to argufy.

Give us your story, if you've one in stock.
Why, look! Here's Depford and it's nine o'clock!
And Greenwich too, with many a blackguard in it.
High time to tell your story, so begin it!

'Now, gentlemen,' Oswald the Reeve replied,
'I hope as none will be dissatisfied
Though I should tweak the Miller by the cap,
For lawful 'tis to give him tap for tap.

'This drunken Miller we've had so much drool of,
Told how a carpenter was made a fool of,
Maybe to score off me, for I am one.
By y' r leave, I'll pay him back before I've done
In his own filthy words, you may expect.'
I hope to God he breaks his bloody neck.
He sees the mote in my eye, if there is un,
But cannot see the beam there is in his'n.'

The Reeve's Tale

At Trumpington, not far from Cambridge town,
A bridge goes over where the brook runs down
And by that brook there stands a mill as well.
And it's God's truth that I am going to tell.

There was a miller lived there many a day
As proud as any peacock and as gay;
He could play bag-pipes too, fish, mend his gear,
And turn a lathe, and wrestle, and poach deer.
And at his belt he carried a long blade,
Trenchant it was as any sword that's made,
And in his pouch a jolly little knife.
No one dared touch him, peril of his life.
He had a Sheffield dagger in his hose.
Round was his face and pugish was his nose;
Bald as an ape he was. To speak more fully,
He was a thorough-going market bully
Whom none dared lay a hand on or come near
Without him swearing that they'd buy it dear.

He was a thief as well of corn and meal,
And sly at that; his habit was to steal.
Simpkin the Swagger he was called in scorn.
He had a wife and she was nobly born;
Her father was the parson of the town;
A dowry of brass dishes he put down
In order to have Simpkin his relation.
The nuns had given her an education.
Simpkin would take no woman, so he said,
Unless she were a virgin and well-bred,
To save the honour of his yeoman stock;
And she was proud, pert as a magpie cock.

It was a proper sight to see the pair
On holidays, what with him strutting there
In front of her, his hood about his head,
And she behind him all decked out in red,
Like Simpkin's hose, for scarlet-red he had 'em.
No one dared call her anything but 'Madam',
No one who passed was bold enough to try
A bit of fun with her or wink an eye,
Unless indeed he wanted Sim the Swagger
To murder him with cutlass, knife or dagger,
For jealous folk are dangerous, you know,
At least they want their wives to think them so.
And then her birth was smirched to say the least;
Being the daughter of a celibate priest
She must maintain her dignity, of which
She had as much as water in a ditch.
She was a sneering woman and she thought
That ladies should respect her, so they ought,
What with her well-connected family,
And education in a nunnery.
They had a daughter too between them both,
She was a girl of twenty summers' growth;
But that was all except a child they had
Sall in the cradle, but a proper lad.
The wench was plump, well-grown enough to pass,
With a snub nose and eyes as grey as glass;

Her rump was broad, her breasts were round and high,
 She'd very pretty hair, I will not lie.
 The parson of the town, for she was fair,
 Intended to appoint the girl as heir
 To all his property in house and land
 And he was stiff with suitors to her hand.
 He purposed to bestow her if he could
 Where blood and ancient lineage made it good.
 For Holy Church's goods should be expended
 On Holy Church's blood, so well-descended,
 And holy blood should have what's proper to it
 Though Holy Church should be devoured to do it.
 This miller levied toll beyond a doubt
 On wheat and malt from all the land about,
 Particularly from a large-sized College
 In Cambridge, Solar Hall.* 'Twas common knowledge
 They sent their wheat and malt to him to grind it.
 Happened one day the man who ought to mind it,
 The college manciple, lay sick in bed,
 And some reported him as good as dead.
 On hearing which the miller robbed him more
 A hundred times than he had robbed before;
 For up till then he'd only robbed politely,
 But now he stole outrageously, forthrightly.
 The Warden scolded hard and made a scene,
 But there! The miller didn't give a bean,
 Blustered it out and swore it wasn't so.
 Two poor young Bible-clerks or students, though,
 Lived in this College (that of which I spoke).
 Headstrong they were and eager for a joke,
 And simply for the chance of sport and play
 They went and plagued the Warden night and day
 Just for a little leave to spend the morn
 Watching the miller grind their meal and corn,
 And each was ready to engage his neck
 The miller couldn't rob them half a peck
 Of corn by trickery, nor yet by force;
 And in the end he gave them leave, of course.

One was called John and Alan was the other,
 Both born in the same village, name of Strother,
 Far in the north, I cannot tell you where.
 Alan collected all his gear with care,
 Loaded it on a horse the warden had,
 And off he went with John the other lad,
 Each with his sword and buckler by his side.
 John knew the way – he didn't need a guide –
 Reaches the mill and down the sack he flings.
 Alan spoke first: 'Well, Simon, lad, how's things?
 And how's your canny daughter* and your wife?'
 Says Simpkin, 'Welcome, Alan! Odds my life,
 It's John as well! What, are you in the sequel?'
 'By God,' said John, 'Needs-must has got no equal,
 And it behoves a man that has nie servant
 To work, as say the learned and observant.
 Wor Manciple is like enough to dee,
 Such aches and torments in his teeth has he;
 So Alan here and I have brought wor sack
 Of corn for grinding and to bring it back.
 Help us get home as quickly as ye can.'
 'It shall be done,' said he, 'as I'm a man.
 What'll you do while I've the job in hand?'
 'By God,' said John, 'I have a mind to stand
 Right by the hopper here and watch the corn
 As it gans in. Never since I was born
 Saw I a hopper wagging to and fro.'
 Alan spoke up: 'Eh, John, and will ye so?
 Then I shall stand below a short way off
 And watch the meal come down into the trough;
 I need no more than that by way of sport,
 For John, in faith, I'm one of the same sort
 And diven't knaa nowt of milling, same as ye.'
 The miller smiled at their simplicity
 And thought, 'It's just a trick, what they're about,
 They think that nobody can catch them out,
 But by the Lord I'll blear their eyes a bit
 For all their fine philosophy and wit.'

The more they try to do me on the deal,
When the time comes, the more I mean to steal.
Instead of flour I will give them bran;

"The greatest scholar is not the wisest man,"
As the wolf said in answer to the mare.

Them and their precious learning! Much I care.

And when he saw his chance he sidled out
Into the yard behind and looked about
Without their noticing until at last

He found their horse where they had made him fast
Under an arbour just behind the mill.

Up to the horse he goes with quiet skill
And strips the bridle off him there and then.

And when the horse was loose, off to the fen
Through thick and thin, and whinneying, "Weehee!"
He raced to join the wild mares running free.

The miller then went back, and did not say
A word of this, but passed the time of day

With John and Alan till their corn was ground,
And when the meal was fairly sacked and bound,

John wandered out and found their horse was gone.

"Good Lord! Help! Help! Come quickly!" shouted John,
"Wor horse is lost, Alan! The devil's in it!

God's bones, man, use your legs! Come out this minute!
Lord save us all, the Warden's palfrey's lost."

Alan forgot his meal and corn and cost,
Abandoning frugality and care.

"What's that?" he shouted, "Palfrey? Which way? Where?"
The miller's wife ran clucking like a hen

Towards them, saying, "Gone off to the fen
To the wild mares as fast as he can go.

Curse on the clumsy hand that tied him so!
Should have known better how to knit the reins."

John said, "Bad luck to it, Alan, for Christ's pains,
Put down your sword, man so will I, let's gan!

We'll rin him like a roe together, man!

God's precious heart! He cannot scape us all
Why didn't you put the palfrey in the stall?"

You must be daft, bad luck to you! Hawway!
And off ran John and Alan in dismay,
Towards the fen as fast as they could go.

And when the miller saw that this was so,
A good half-bushel of their flour he took
And gave it over to his wife to cook.

"I think," he said, "these lads have had a fright.
I'll pluck their beards. Yes, let 'em read and write,
But none the less a miller is their match.

Look at them now! Like children playing catch.
Won't be an easy job to get him, though!"

These foolish Bible-clerks ran to and fro
And shouted, "Woa, lad, stand . . . Look out behind!
Whistle him up . . . I've got him . . . watch it . . . *mind!*"

But to be brief, it wasn't until night
They caught the palfrey, hunt him as they might
Over the fens, he ran away so fast;

But in a ditch they captured him at last.
Weary and wet, like cattle in the rain,
Came foolish John and Alan back again.

Said John, "Alas the day that I was born!
We've earned nowt here but mockery and scorn.
Wor corn is stolen and they'll call us fools,

Warden and all wor meits in the Schools,
And most of all the miller. What a day!"
So back they went, John grousing all the way,

Towards the mill and put the horse in byre.
They found the miller sitting by the fire,
For it was night, too late for going home,

And, for the love of God, they begged a room
For shelter and they proffered him their penny.
"A room?" the miller said, "There isn't any.

There's this, such as it is; we'll share it then.
My house is small, but you are learned men
And by your arguments can make a place

Twenty foot broad as infinite as space.
Take a look round and see if it will do,
Or make it bigger with your parley-voo."

'Well, Simon, you must have your little joke
 And, by St Cuthbert, that was fairly spoke!
 Well, people have a proverb to remind them
 To bring their own, or take things as they find them,'
 Said John. 'Dear host, do get us out the cup;
 A little meat and drink would cheer us up.
 We'll give ye the full payment, on my word.
 No empty-handed man can catch a bird;
 See, here's the silver, ready to be spent.'

Down into Trumprington the daughter went
 For bread and ale; the miller cooked a goose,
 And tied their horse up lest it should get loose
 Again, and in his chamber made a bed
 With clean white sheets and blankets fairly spread,
 Ten foot from his, upon a sort of shelf.
 His daughter had a bed all by herself
 Quite close in the same room; they were to lie
 All side by side, no help for it, and why?
 Because there was no other in the house.

They supped and talked and had a fine carouse
 And drank a lot of ale, the very best.
 Midnight or thereabout they went to rest.
 Properly pasted was this miller's head,
 Pale-drunk he was, he'd passed the stage of red,
 Hiccupping through his nose he talked and trolled
 As if he'd asthma or a heavy cold.
 To bed he goes, his wife and he together;
 She was as jolly as a jay in feather,

Having well wet her whistle from the ladle.
 And by her bed she planted down the cradle
 To rock the baby or to give it sup.

When what was in the crock had been drunk up,
 To bed went daughter too, and therupon
 To bed went Alan and to bed went John.
 That was the lot; no sleeping-draught was needed.
 The miller had taken so much booze unheeded,
 He snorted like a cart-horse in his sleep
 And vented other noises, loud and deep.

His wife joined in the chorus hot and strong;
 Two furlongs off you might have heard their song.
 The wench was snoring too, for company.

Alan the clerk in all this melody
 Gave John a poke and said, 'Are ye awake?
 Did ye ever hear sich sang for guidness sake?
 There's family prayers for ye among they noddies!
 Wild fire come doon and burn them up, the boddies!
 Who ever heard a canny thing like that?
 The devil take their souls for what they're at!
 All this lang neet I shall na get nie rest.

'But never ye mind, all shall be for the best;
 I tell ye, John, as sure as I'm a man,
 I'm going to have that wench there, if I can!
 The law grants easement when things gan amiss,
 For, John, there is a law that gans like this:
 "If in one point a person be agrieved,
 Then in another he shall be relieved."

'Wor corn is stolen, nivor doubt of that;
 Ill-luck has followed us in all we're at,
 And since no compensation has been offered
 Against wor loss, I'll take the easement proffered.
 God's soul, it shall be so indeed, none other!

John whispered back to him, 'Be careful, brother,
 The miller is a torble man for slaughter;
 If he should wake and find ye with his daughter
 He might do injury to you and me.'
 'Injury? Him! I coont him nar a flea!'

Alan rose up; towards the wench he crept.
 The wench lay flat upon her back and slept,
 And ere she saw him, he had drawn so nigh
 It was too late for her to give a cry.
 To put it briefly, they were soon at one.
 Now, Alan, play! For I will speak of John.
 John lay there still for quite a little while,
 Complaining and lamenting in this style:
 'A bloody joke . . . Lord, what a chance to miss!
 I shall be made a monkey of for this!

My meat has got some comfort for his harms,
 He has the miller's daughter in his arms;
 He took his chance and now his needs are sped,
 I'm but a sack of rubbish here in bed.
 And when this jape is told in time to come
 They'll say I was a softie and a bunni!
 I'll get up too and take what chance I may,
 For God helps those that help themselves, they say.'
 He rises, steals towards the cradle, lifts it,
 And stepping softly back again, he shifts it,
 And lays it by his bed upon the floor.

The miller's wife soon after ceased to snore,
 Began to wake, rose up, and left the room,
 And coming back she groped about in gloom,
 Missing the cradle John had snatched away.
 'Lord, Lord,' she said, 'I nearly went astray
 And got into the student's bed. . . . How dreadful!
 There would have been foul doings. What a bed-fall!
 At last she gropes to where the cradle stands,
 And so by fumbling upwards with her hands
 She found the bed and thinking nought but good,
 Since she was certain where the cradle stood,
 Yet knew not where she was, for it was dark,
 She well and fairly crept in with the clerk.
 Then lay quite still and tried to go to sleep.
 John waited for a while, then gave a leap
 And thrust himself upon this worthy wife.
 It was the merriest fit in all her life,
 For John went deep and thrust away like mad.
 It was a jolly life for either lad
 Till the third morning cock began to sing.
 Alan grew tired as dawn began to spring;
 He had been hard at work the long, long night.
 'Bye-bye,' he said, 'sweet Molly. . . . Are ye a night?
 The day has come, I cannot linger here,
 But ever mair in life and death, my dear,
 I am your own true clerk, or strike me dead!
 'Good-bye, my sweet,' she whispered, 'take good heed . . .

But first I'll tell you something, that I will!
 When you are riding homewards past the mill
 By the main entrance-door, a bit behind it,
 There's the half-bushel cake — you're sure to find it —
 And it was made out of the very meal
 You brought to grind and I helped father steal. . . .
 And, dearest heart, God have you in his keeping!
 And with that word she almost burst out weeping.
 Alan got up and thought, 'Dawn's coming on.
 Better get back and creep in beside John.'
 But there he found the cradle in his way.
 'By God,' he thought, 'I nearly went astray!
 My heid is tottering with my work to-need,
 That'll be why I cannot gan areel!
 This cradle tells me I have lost my tether
 You must be miller and his wife together.'
 And back he went, groping his weary way
 And reached the bed in which the miller lay,
 And thinking it was John upon the bed
 He slid in by the miller's side instead,
 Grabbing his neck, and with no more ado
 Said, 'Shake yourself, wake up, you pig's-head, you!
 For Christ's soul, listen! O such noble games
 As I have had! I tell you, by St James,
 Three times the neet, from midnight into morn,
 The miller's daughter helped me grind my corn
 While you've been lying in your cowardly way. . . .'
 'You scoundrel!' said the miller. 'What d'you say?
 You beast! You treacherous blackguard! Filthy rascal!
 God's dignity! I'll murder you for that!
 How dare you be so bold as to fling mud
 Upon my daughter, come of noble blood?'
 He grabbed at Alan by his Adam's apple,
 And Alan grabbed him back in furious grapple
 And clenched his fist and bashed him on the nose.
 Down miller's breast a bloody river flows
 Onto the floor, his nose and mouth all broke;
 They swallowed like two porkers in a poke.

And up and down and up again they go
 Until the miller tripped and stubbed his toe,
 Spun round and fell down backwards on his wife.
 She had heard nothing of this foolish strife,

For she had fallen asleep with John the clerk,
 Wary from all their labours in the dark.
 The miller's fall started her out of sleep.

'Help!' she screamed. 'Holy cross of Bromeholme* keep
 Us! Lord! Into thy hands! To Thee I call!
 Simon, wake up! The devil's among us all!
 My heart is bursting, help! I'm nearly dead,
 One's on my belly, and another's on my head.

Help, Sumpkin, help! These nasty clerks are fighting!
 Up started John, he needed no inciting,

And groped about the chamber to and fro
 To find a stick; she too was on the go

And, knowing the corners better than them all,
 Was first to find one leaning by the wall;

And by a little shaft of shimmering light
 That shone in through a hole — the moon was bright —

Although the room was almost black as pitch

She saw them fight, not knowing which was which;
 But there was something white that caught her eye

On seeing which she peered and gave a cry,
 Thinking it was the night-cap of the clerk.

Raising her stick, she crept up in the dark
 And, hoping to hit Alan, it was her fate

To smite the miller on his shining pate,
 And down he went, shouting, 'O God, I'm dying!'

The clerks then beat him well and left him lying
 And throwing on their clothes they took their horse
 And their ground meal and off they went, of course,
 And as they passed the mill they took the cake
 Made of their meal the girl was told to bake.

And thus the bumptious miller was well beaten
 And done out of the supper they had eaten,
 And done out of the money that was due
 For grinding Alan's corn, who beat him too.

His wife was plumbd, so was his daughter. Look!
 That comes of being a miller and a crook!

I heard this proverb when I was a kid,
 'Do evil and be done by as you did!'

Tricksters will get a tricking, so say I,
 And God that sits in majesty on high

Bring all this company, great and small, to Glory!
 Thus I've paid out the Miller with my story!