

**The Canterbury Tales
Geoffrey Chaucer**



Here begins the Book of the Tales of Canterbury.

The Prologue

When the sweet showers of April have pierced to the root the dryness of March and bathed every vein in moisture by which strength are the flowers brought forth; when Zephyr also with his sweet breath has given spirit to the tender new shoots in the grove and field, and the young sun has run half his course through Aries the Ram, and little birds make melody and sleep all night with an open eye, so nature pricks them in their hearts; then people long to go on pilgrimages to renowned shrines in various distant lands, and palmers to seek foreign shores¹. And especially from every shire's end in England they make their way to Canterbury, to seek the holy blessed martyr² who helped them when they were sick. 18

One day in that season, as I was waiting at the Tabard Inn at Southwark, about to make my pilgrimage with devout heart to Canterbury, it happened that there came at night to that inn a company of twenty-nine various people, who by chance had joined together in fellowship. All were pilgrims, riding to Canterbury. The chambers and the stables were spacious, and we were lodged well. But in brief, when the sun had gone to rest, I had spoken with every one of them and was soon a part of their company, and agreed to rise early to take our way to where I have told you. 34

Nevertheless, while I have time and space, before this tale goes further, I think it is reasonable to tell you all the qualities of each of them, as they appeared to me, what sort of people they were, of what station³ and how they were fashioned. I will begin with a knight. 42

¹ Palmers: pilgrims, who show that they are pilgrims by carrying palm branches.

² The holy blessed martyr: St. Thomas à Becket, who was martyred at Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.

³ Station: social standing.

There was a Knight and a worthy man, who, from the time when he first rode abroad, loved chivalry, faithfulness and honor, liberality and courtesy. He was valiant in his lord's war and had campaigned, no man farther, in both Christian and heathen lands, and ever was honored for his worth. He was at Alexandria⁴ when it was won; many times in Prussia he sat in the place of honor above knights from all nations; he had fought in Lithuania and in Russia, and no Christian man of his did so more often; he had been in Granada at the siege of Algeciras and in Belmaria; he was at Lyeys and in Attalia when they were won, and had landed with many noble armies in the Levant. He had been in fifteen mortal battles, and had thrice fought for our faith in the lists at Tremessen and always slain his foe; he had been also, long before, with the lord of Palathia against another heathen host in Turkey; and ever he had great renown. And though he was valorous, he was prudent, and he was as meek as a maiden in his bearing. In all his life he never yet spoke any discourtesy to any living creature, but was truly a perfect gentle knight. To tell you of his equipment, his horses were good but he was not gaily clad. He wore a jerkin⁵ of coarse cloth all stained with rust by his coat of mail, for he had just returned from his travels and went to do his pilgrimage. 78

His son was with him, a young Squire, a lover and a lusty young soldier. His locks were curled as if laid in a press. He may have been twenty years of age, of average height, amazingly nimble and great of strength. He had been, at one time, in a campaign in Flanders, Artois, and Picardy, and had borne himself well, in so little time, in hope to stand in his lady's grace. His clothes were embroidered, red and white, like a meadow full of fresh flowers. All the day long he was singing or playing upon the flute; he was as fresh as the month of May. His coat was short, with long, wide sleeves. Well could he sit a horse and ride, make songs, joust and dance, draw and write. He loved so ardently that at night-time he slept no more than a nightingale. He was courteous, modest and helpful, and carved⁶ before his father at table. 100

They had a Yeoman with them; on that journey they would have no other servants. He was clad in a coat and hood of green, and in his hand he bore a mighty bow and under his belt a neat sheaf of arrows, bright

⁴ Though the knight's battles were all actual battles, he seems to have had no particular allegiance to one nation or creed.

⁵ Jerkin. A close-fitting, hip-length, collarless jacket having no sleeves but often extended shoulders, belted and worn over a doublet by men. AHD.

⁶ Carved. Carved meat, i.e., served.

and sharp, with peacock feathers. He knew how to handle his gear like a good yeoman; his arrows did not fall short on account of any poorly adjusted feathers. His head was cropped and his face brown. He understood well all the practice of woodcraft. He wore a gay arm-guard of leather and at one side a sword and buckler; at the other a fine dagger, well fashioned and as sharp as a spear-point; on his breast an image of St. Christopher in bright silver, and over his shoulder a horn on a green baldric⁷. He was a woodsman indeed, I believe. 117

There was also a nun, a Prioress, quiet and simple in her smiling; her greatest oath was "by Saint Loy⁸." She was named Madame Eglantine. Well she sang the divine service, intoned in a seemly manner in her nose, and spoke French elegantly, after the manner of Stratford-atte-Bow, for of Parisian French she knew nothing. She had been well taught the art of eating, and let no morsel fall from her lips, and wet but her finger-tips in the sauce. She knew how to lift and how to hold a bit so that not a drop fell upon her breast. Her pleasure was all in courtesy. She wiped her upper lip so well that no spot of grease was to be seen in her cup after she had drunk; and very dainty she was in reaching for her food. And surely she was of fine behavior, pleasant and amiable of bearing. She took pains to imitate court manners, to be stately in her demeanor and to be held worthy of reverence. But to tell you of her character, she was so charitable and so tender-hearted she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap if it were dead or bleeding. She had certain small dogs, which she fed upon roasted meat or milk and finest wheaten bread. She would weep sorely if one of them died or was struck at sharply with a stick. She was all warm feeling and tender heart. Her wimple was pleated neatly. Her nose was slender, her eyes gray as glass, her mouth small and soft and red. Certainly she had a fine forehead, almost a span⁹ high; truly she was not undersized. Her cloak was neatly made, I could tell. About her arm was a coral rosary, the larger beads of green, upon which hung a brooch of shining gold; on it was engraved first an A with a crown, and after that *Amor vincit omnia*¹⁰. 162

⁷ Baldric. A belt, usually of ornamented leather, worn across the chest to support a sword or bugle.

⁸ Saint Loy: St. Eligius. Seventh-century miracle worker with the gift of prophecy, who foresaw his own death. Patron saint of various types of laborers.

⁹ Span. The distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger when the hand is fully extended, formerly used as a unit of measure equal to about nine inches (23 centimeters).

¹⁰ *Amor vincit omnia*. Love conquers all.

Another Nun, her chaplain, was with her, and three Priests. 163

There was a Monk, a very fine and handsome one, a great rider about the country-side and a lover of hunting, a manly man in all things, fit to be an abbot. He had many fine horses in his stable, and when he rode, men could hear his bridle jingling in a whistling wind as clear and loud as the chapel-bell where this lord was prior. Because the rule of St. Maurus or of St. Benedict was old and something austere, this same monk let such old things pass and followed the ways of the newer world. He gave not a plucked hen for the text that hunters are not holy, or that a careless monk (that is to say, one out of his cloister) is like a fish out of water; for that text he would not give a herring. And I said his opinion was right; why should he study and lose his wits ever poring over a book in the cloister, or toil with his hands and labor as St. Augustine bids? How shall the world be served? Let St. Augustine have his work to himself. Therefore he rode hard, followed greyhounds as swift as birds on the wing. All his pleasure was in riding and hunting the hare, and he spared no cost on those. I saw his sleeves edged at the wrist with fine dark fur, the finest in the country, and to fasten his hood under his chin he had a finely-wrought brooch of gold; in the larger end was a love-knot. His bald head shone like glass; so did his face, as if it had been anointed. He was a sleek, fat lord. His bright eyes rolled in his head, glowing like the fire under a cauldron. His boots were of rich soft leather, his horse in excellent condition. Now certainly he was a fine prelate. He was not pale, like a wasted spirit; best of any roast he loved a fat swan. His palfrey was as brown as a berry. 207

There was a begging Friar, lively and jolly, a very dignified fellow. In all the four orders there is not one so skilled in gay and flattering talk. He had, at his own expense, married off many young women; he was a noble pillar of his order! He was well beloved and familiar among franklins everywhere in his countryside, and also with worthy town women, for he had, as he said himself, more virtue as confessor than a parson, for he held a papal license. Very sweetly he heard confession, and his absolution was pleasant; he was an easy man to give penance, when he looked to have a good dinner. Gifts to a poor order are a sign that a man has been well confessed, he maintained; if a man gave, he knew he was contrite. For many people are so stern of heart that they cannot weep, though they suffer sorely; therefore, instead of weeping and praying, men may give silver to the poor friars. The tip of his hood was stuffed full of knives and pins as presents to fine women. And

certainly he had a pleasant voice in singing, and well could play the fiddle; in singing ballads he bore off the prize. His neck was as white as the fleur-de-lis, and he was as strong as a champion. He knew all the town taverns, and every inn-keeper and bar-maid, better than the lepers and beggar-women. For it accorded not with a man of his importance to have acquaintance with sick lepers; it was not seemly, it profited not, to deal with any such poor trash, but all with rich folk and sellers of victual. But everywhere that advantage might follow he was courteous, lowly and serviceable. Nowhere was any so capable; he was the best beggar in his house, and gave a certain yearly payment so that none of his brethren might trespass on his routes. Though a widow might not have an old shoe to give, so pleasant was his "*In principio*¹¹," he would have his farthing before he went. He gained more from his begging than he ever needed, I believe! He would romp about like a puppy-dog. On days of reconciliation, or love-days, he was very helpful, for he was not like a cloister-monk or a poor scholar with a threadbare cope, but like a Master of Arts or a cardinal. His half-cope was of double worsted and came from the clothes-press rounding out like a bell. He pleased his whim by lisping a little, to make his English sound sweet upon his tongue, and in his harping and singing his eyes twinkled in his head like the stars on a frosty night. This worthy friar was named Hubert. 269

There was a Merchant with a forked beard, in parti-colored garb. High he sat upon his horse, a Flanders beaver-hat on his head, and boots fastened neatly with rich clasps. He uttered his opinions pompously, ever tending to the increase of his own profit; at any cost he wished the sea were safeguarded between Middleburg and Orwell. In selling crown-pieces he knew how to profit by the exchange. This worthy man employed his wit cunningly; no creature knew that he was in debt, so stately he was of demeanor in bargaining and borrowing. He was a worthy man indeed, but, to tell the truth, I know not his name. 284

There was also a Clerk from Oxford who had long gone to lectures on logic. His horse was as lean as a rake, and he was not at all fat, I think, but looked hollow-cheeked, and grave likewise. His little outer cloak was threadbare, for he had no worldly skill to beg for his needs, and as yet had gained himself no benefice. He would rather have had at his bed's head twenty volumes of Aristotle and his philosophy, bound in red or black, than rich robes or a fiddle or gay psaltery. Even though he was a philosopher, he

¹¹ *In principio*. In the beginning. (The first words of Genesis and the Gospel of John.)

had little gold in his money-box! But all that he could get from his friends he spent on books and learning, and would pray diligently for the souls of who gave it to him to stay at the schools. Of study he took most heed and care. Not a word did he speak more than was needed, and the little he spoke was formal and modest, short and quick, and full of high matter. All that he said tended toward moral virtue. Gladly would he learn and gladly teach. 308

There was also a Sergeant of the Law, an excellent man, wary and wise, a frequenter of the porch of Paul's Church. He was discreet and of great distinction; or seemed such, his words were so sage. He had been judge at court, by patent and full commission; with his learning and great reputation he had earned many fees and robes. Such a man as he for acquiring goods there never was; anything that he desired could be shown to be held in unrestricted possession, and none could find a flaw in his deeds. Nowhere was there so busy a man, and yet he seemed busier than he was. He knew in precise terms every case and judgment since King William the Conqueror, and every statute fully, word for word, and none could chide at his writing. He rode in simple style in a parti-colored coat and a belt of silk with small cross-bars. Of his appearance I will not make a longer story. 330

Traveling with him was a Franklin, with a beard as white as a daisy, a ruddy face and a sanguine temper. Well he loved a sop of wine of a morning. He was accustomed to live in pleasure, for he was a very son of Epicurus, who held the opinion that perfect felicity stands in pleasure alone. He ever kept an open house, like a true St. Julian¹² in his own country-side. His bread and his wine both were always of the best; never were a man's wine-vaults better stored. His house was never without a huge supply of fish or meat; in his house it snowed meat and drink, and every fine pleasure that a man could dream of. According to the season of the year he varied his meats and his suppers. Many fat partridges were in his cage and many bream and pike in his fishpond. Woe to his cook unless his sauces were pungent and sharp, and his gear ever in order! All the long day stood a great table in his hall fully prepared. When the justices met at sessions of court, there he lorded it full grandly, and many times he sat as knight of the shire in parliament. A dagger hung at his girdle, and a pouch of taffeta, white as morning's milk. He had been sheriff and auditor; nowhere was so worthy a vassal. 360

¹² St. Julian. Julian the Hospitaller, the Patron Saint of travelers.

A Haberdasher, a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Dyer, and an Upholsterer were with us also, all in the same dress of a great and splendid guild. All fresh and new was their gear. Their knives were not tipped with brass but all with fine-wrought silver, like their girdles and their pouches. Each of them seemed a fair burgess to sit in a guildhall on a dais. Each for his discretion was fit to be alderman of his guild, and had goods and income sufficient for that. Their wives would have consented, I should think; otherwise, they would be at fault. It is a fair thing to be called madame, and to walk ahead of other folks to vigils, and to have a mantle carried royally before them. 378

They had a Cook with them for that journey, to boil chickens with the marrow-bones and tart powder-merchant and cyprus-root. Well he knew a draught of London ale! He could roast and fry and broil and stew, make dainty pottage and bake pies well. It was a great pity, it seemed to me, that he had a great ulcer on his shin, for he made capon-in-cream with the best of them. 387

There was a Shipman, from far in the West; for anything I know, he was from Dartmouth. He rode a nag, as well as he knew how, in a gown of coarse wool to the knee. He had a dagger hanging on a lace around his neck and under his arm. The hot summer had made his hue brown. In truth he was a good fellow: many draughts of wine had he drawn at Bordeaux while the merchant slept. He paid no heed to nice conscience; on the high seas, if he fought and had the upper hand, he made his victims walk the plank. But in skill to reckon his moon, his tides, his currents and dangers at hand, his harbors and navigation, there was none like him from Hull to Carthage. In his undertakings he was bold and shrewd. His beard had been shaken by many tempests. He knew the harbors well from Gothland to Cape Finisterre, and every creek in Spain and in Brittany. His ship was called the Maudelayne¹³. 410

With us was a Doctor, a Physician; for skill in medicine and in surgery there was no peer in this entire world. He watched sharply for favorable hours and an auspicious ascendant¹⁴ for his patients' treatment, for he was well grounded in astrology. He knew the cause of each malady, if it was hot, cold, dry or moist, from where it had sprung and of what humor. He was a thorough and a perfect practitioner.

¹³ Maudelayne. Magdalene, as in Mary Magdalene.

¹⁴ Ascendant. Astrological term, meaning the point of the ecliptic or the sign of the zodiac that rises in the east at the time of a person's birth or other event. AHD.

Having found the cause and source of his trouble, quickly he had ready the sick man's cure. He had his apothecaries all prepared to send him electuaries¹⁵ and drugs, for each helped the other's gain; their friendship was not formed of late! He knew well the old Aesculapius, Dioscorides and Rufus, Hippocrates, Haly and Galen, Serapion, Rhasis and Avicenna, Averroes, Damascene and Constantine, Bernard, Gatisden and Gilbertine¹⁶. His own diet was moderate, with no excess, but nourishing and simple to digest. His study was only a little on Scripture. He was clad in red and blue-gray cloth, lined with taffeta and sendal silk. Yet he was but moderate in spending, and kept what he gained during the pestilence. Gold is a medicine from the heart in physicians' terms; doubtless that was why he loved gold above all else. 444

There was a Good Wife from near Bath, but she was somewhat deaf, and that was pity. She was so skilled in making cloth that she surpassed those of Ypres and Ghent. In all the parish there was no wife who should march up to make an offering before her, and if any did, so angered she was that truly she was out of all charity. Her kerchiefs were very fine in texture; and I dare swear those that were on her head for Sunday weighed ten pounds. Her hose were of a fine scarlet and tightly fastened, and her shoes were soft and new. Her face was bold and fair and red. All her life she was a worthy woman; she had had five husbands at the church-door, besides other company in her youth, but of that there is no need to speak now. She had thrice been at Jerusalem; many distant streams had she crossed; she had been on pilgrimages to Boulogne and to Rome, to Santiago in Galicia and to Cologne. This wandering by the way had taught her various things. To tell the truth, she was gap-toothed; she sat easily on an ambling horse, wearing a fair wimple and on her head a hat as broad as a buckler or target. About her broad hips was a short riding skirt and on her feet a pair of sharp spurs. Well could she laugh and prattle in company. Love and its remedies she knew all about, I dare give my word, for she had been through the old dance. 477

There was a good man of religion, a poor Parson, but rich in holy thought and deed. He was also a learned man, a clerk, and would faithfully preach Christ's gospel and devoutly instruct his parishioners. He was benign, wonderfully diligent, and patient in adversity, as he was often tested. He was loath to

¹⁵ Electuary. A drug mixed with sugar and water or honey into a pasty mass suitable for oral administration.

¹⁶ Ancient Medical Authorities as well as more contemporary ones.

excommunicate for unpaid tithes, but rather would give to his poor parishioners out of the church alms and also of his own substance; in little he found sufficiency. His parish was wide and the houses far apart, but not even for thunder or rain did he neglect to visit the farthest, great or small, in sickness or misfortune, going on foot, a staff in his hand. To his sheep did he give this noble example, which he first set into action and afterward taught; these words he took out of the gospel, and this similitude he added also, that if gold will rust, what shall iron do? For if a priest upon whom we trust were to be foul, it is no wonder that an ignorant layman would be corrupt; and it is a shame (if a priest will but pay attention to it) that a shepherd should be defiled and the sheep clean. A priest should give good example by his cleanness how his sheep should live. He would not farm out his benefice, nor leave his sheep stuck fast in the mire, while he ran to London to St. Paul's, to get an easy appointment as a chantry-priest, or to be retained by some guild, but dwelled at home and guarded his fold well, so that the wolf would not make it miscarry. He was no hireling, but a shepherd. And though he was holy and virtuous, he was not pitiless to sinful men, nor cold or haughty of speech, but both discreet and benign in his teaching; to draw folk up to heaven by his fair life and good example, this was his care. But when a man was stubborn, whether of high or low estate, he would scold him sharply. There was nowhere a better priest than he. He looked for no pomp and reverence, nor yet was his conscience too particular; but the teaching of Christ and his apostles he taught, and first he followed it himself. 528

With him was his brother, a Ploughman, who had drawn many cartloads of dung. He was a faithful and good toiler, living in peace and perfect charity. He loved God best at all times with all his whole heart, in good and ill fortune, and then his neighbor even as himself. He would thresh and ditch and delve for every poor person without pay, but for Christ's sake, if he were able. He paid his tithes fairly and well on both his produce and his goods. He wore a ploughman's frock and rode upon a mare. 541

There was a Reeve also and a Miller, a Summoner and a Pardoner, a Manciple and myself. There were no more. 566

The Miller was a stout fellow, big of bones and brawn; and well he showed them, for everywhere he went to a wrestling match he would always carry off the prize ram. He was short-shouldered and broad, a thick, knotty fellow. There was no door that he could not heave off its hinges, or break with his head at a

running. His beard was as red as any sow or fox, and broad like a spade as well. Upon the very tip of his nose he had a wart, and on it stood a tuft of red hair like the bristles on a sow's ears, and his nostrils were black and wide. At his thigh hung a sword and buckler. His mouth was as great as a great furnace. He was a teller of dirty stories and a buffoon, and it was mostly of sin and obscenity. He knew well how to steal corn and take his toll of meal three times over; and yet he had a golden thumb, by God! He wore a white coat and a blue hood. He could blow and play the bagpipe well, and with its noise he led us out of town. 566

There was a gentle Manciple of an Inn of Court¹⁷, of whom other stewards might take example for craftiness in buying victuals. Whether he paid in cash or took on credit, he was so watchful in his buying that he was always ahead and in good standing. Now is it not a full fair gift of God that the wit of such an unlettered man shall surpass the wisdom of a great body of learned men? He had more than a score of masters, expert and diligent in law, of whom in that house there were a dozen worthy to be stewards of lands and revenues of any lord in England, to let him live upon his income, honorably, free from debt, unless he were mad, or live as plainly as he would; or able to help a whole shire in any case that might occur. And yet this Manciple hoodwinked all of them. 586

The Reeve was a slender, bilious man. His beard was shaven as close as could be, and his hair was cut short around his ears and docked in front like a priest's. His legs were full and lean like a stick; I could see no calf. He could well keep a bin and a garner and no inspector could get the best of him. In the drought or in the wet he could foretell the yield of his grain and seed. His lord's sheep, poultry and cattle, his dairy and swine and horses and all his stock, this Reeve had wholly under his governance, and submitted his accounts thereon ever since his lord was twenty years of age; and none could ever find him out in arrears. There was no bailiff nor herdsman nor other churl whose tricks and craftiness he didn't know. They were as afraid of him as of the plague. His dwelling-place was a pleasant one on a heath, all shaded with green trees. Better than his lord he knew how to pick up wealth, and had a rich private hoard; he knew how to please his master cunningly by giving and lending him out of what was his master's by right, and to win thanks for that, and a

¹⁷ Inn of Court. The inns of court were (and still are) the places at which those wishing to train for the Bar (legal profession) must reside and to which they must belong.

coat and hood as a reward too. In his youth he had learned a good trade and was a fine carpenter and workman. This Reeve sat upon a fine dapple gray cob named Scot. He wore a long surcoat of blue and at his side a rusty blade. He was from Norfolk, near a town they call Baldeswell. His coat was tucked up around him like a friar's, and he always rode last of us all. 622

A Summoner was with us there, a fire-red cherubim-faced fellow, salt-phlegmed and pimply, with slits for eyes, scabby black eyebrows and thin ragged beard, and as hot and lecherous as a sparrow. Children were terrified at his visage. No quicksilver, white-lead, brimstone, borax nor ceruse, no cream of tartar nor any ointment that would clean and burn, could help his white blotches or the knobs on his chaps. He loved garlic, onions and leeks too well, and to drink strong wine as red as blood, and then he would talk and cry out like mad. And after drinking deep of wine he would speak no word but Latin, in which he had a few terms, two or three, learned out of some canon. No wonder was that, for he heard it all day long, and you know well how a jay can call "Walter" after hearing it a long time, as well as the pope could. But if he were tested in any other point, his learning was found to be all spent. *Questio quid juris*¹⁸, he was always crying. He was a kind and gentle rogue; a better fellow I never knew; for a quart of wine he would allow a good fellow to have his concubine for a year and completely excuse him. Secretly he knew how to swindle anyone. And if anywhere he found a good fellow, he would teach him in such case to have no fear of the archdeacon's excommunication, unless a man's soul is in his purse, for it was in his purse he should be punished. "The Archdeacon's hell is your purse," he said. (But well I know he lied in his teeth; every guilty man should fear the church's curse, for it will slay, just as absolution saves, and also let him beware of a *significavit*¹⁹.) Within his jurisdiction on his own terms he held all the young people of the diocese, knew their guilty secrets, and was their chief adviser. He had a garland on his head large enough for an ale-house sign, and carried a round loaf of bread as big as a buckler. 668

With him rode a gentle Pardoner, of Roncesvalles, his friend and companion, who had come straight from the court of Rome. He sang loudly, "Come here, love, to me," while the Summoner joined him with a stiff bass; never was there a trumpet of half such a sound. This Pardoner had waxy-yellow hair, hanging

¹⁸ *Questio quid juris*: The questions is, which law (pertains to this case)?

¹⁹ *Significavit*: An order for imprisonment.

smooth, like a hank of flax, spread over his shoulders in thin strands. For sport he wore no hood, which was trussed up in his wallet; riding with his hair disheveled, bareheaded except for his cap, he thought he was all in the latest fashion. His eyes were glaring like a hare's. He had a veronica²⁰ sewed on his cap, and his wallet, brimful of pardons hot from Rome, lay before him on his saddle. His voice was as small as a goat's. He had no beard nor ever would have, his face was as smooth as if lately shaven; I believe he was a mare or a gelding. But as for his trade, from Berwick to Dover there was not such another pardoner. In his bag he had a pillow-case which he said was our Lady's kerchief, and a small piece of the sail which he said St. Peter had when he walked upon the sea and Jesus Christ caught him. He had a cross of latoun, set full of false gems, and pigs' bones in a glass. But with these relics, when he found a poor parson dwelling in the country, in one day he gained himself more money than the parson gained in two months. And thus, with flattering deceit and tricks, he made the parson and the people his dupes. But to give him his due, after all he was a noble ecclesiastic in church; he could read well a lesson or legend and best of all sing an offertory. For he knew well that when that was done he must preach and file his tongue smooth, to win silver as he well knew how. Therefore he sang merrily and loud. 714

Now I have told you in few words the station²¹, the array, the number of this company and why they were assembled in Southwark as well, at this noble inn, the Tabard, close to the Bell tavern. But now it is time to say how we behaved that same evening, when we had arrived at that inn; and afterward I will tell you of our journey and the rest of our pilgrimage. 724

But first I pray that by your courtesy you ascribe it not to my ill manners if I speak plainly in this matter, telling you their words and cheer, and if I speak their very words as they were. For this you know as well as I, that whoever tells a tale that another has told, he must repeat every word, as nearly as he can, although he may speak ever so rudely and freely. Otherwise, he must tell his tale falsely, or pretend, or find new words. He may not spare any, even if it were his own brother; he is bound to say one word as well as the next. Christ himself spoke plainly in Holy Scriptures and you know well there is no baseness in that. And

²⁰ Veronica: after St. Veronica who, having wiped the face of the suffering Jesus, received his image on her cloth, a Veronica held the same image, a sign that one had been on a pilgrimage to Rome

²¹ Station: social standing.

Plato, whoever can read him, says that the word must be cousin to the deed. 742

I also pray you to forgive me though I have not set folk here in this tale according to their station, as they should be. My wit is short, you can well understand. 746

Our host put us all in good spirits, and soon brought us to supper and served us with the best of provisions. The wine was strong and very glad we were to drink. Our Host was a seemly man, fit to be marshal in a banquet-hall, a large man with bright eyes, bold in speech, wise and discreet, lacking nothing of manhood: there is not a fairer burghess in Cheapside. He was in all things a very merry fellow, and after supper, when we had paid our bills, he began to jest and speak of mirth among other things. 760

“Now gentle people,” he said, “truly you are heartily welcome to me, for, by my word, if I shall tell the truth, I have not seen this year so merry a company at this inn at once. I would gladly make mirth if I only knew how. And I have just now thought of a mirthful thing to give you pleasure, which shall cost nothing. You go to Canterbury, God speed you, and may the blessed martyr duly reward you! I know full well, along the way you mean to tell tales and amuse yourselves, for in truth it is no comfort or mirth to ride along dumb as a stone.” 774

“And therefore, as I said, I will make you a game. If it please you all by common consent to stand by my words and to do as I shall tell you, now, by my father’s soul (and he is in heaven), tomorrow as you ride along, if you are not merry, I will give you my head. Hold up your hands, without more words!” 783

Our mind was not long to decide. We thought it not worth debating, and agreed with him without more thought, and told him to say his verdict as he wished. 787

“Gentle people,” said he, “please listen now, but take it not, I pray you, disdainfully. To speak briefly and plainly, this is the point, that each of you for pastime shall tell two tales in this journey to Canterbury, and two others on the way home, of things that have happened in the past. And whichever of you bears himself best, that is to say, that tells now tales most instructive and delighting²², shall have a supper at the expense of us all, sitting here in this place, beside this

²² Instructing and delighting: The Roman poet Horace said that poetry should aim to both instruct and delight.

post, when we come back from Canterbury. And to add to your sport I will gladly go with you at my own cost, and be your guide. And whoever opposes my judgment shall pay all that we spend on the way. If you agree that this will be so, tell me now, without more words, and without delay I will plan for that.” 809

We agreed to this thing and pledged our word with glad hearts, and prayed him to do so, and to be our ruler and to remember and judge our tales, and to appoint a supper at a certain price²³. We would be ruled at his will in great and small, and thus with one voice we agreed to his judgment. At this the wine was fetched, and we drank and then each went to rest without a longer stay. 821

In the morning, when the day began to spring, our host arose and played rooster²⁴ to us all, and gathered us in a flock. Forth we rode, a little faster than a walk, to St. Thomas-a-Watering²⁵. There our Host drew up his horse and said, “Listen, gentle people, if you will. You know your agreement; I remind you of it. If what you said at the hour of evensong last night is still what you agree to this morning at the time of matins²⁶, let us see who shall tell the first tale. So may I ever drink beer or wine, whoever rebels against my judgment shall pay all that is spent on the journey. Now draw cuts, before we depart further; he who has the shortest shall begin the tales. Sir Knight, my master and my lord,” said he, “now draw your lot, for this is my will, Come nearer, my lady Prioress, and you, sir Clerk, be not shy, study not; set your hands to them, every one of you.” 841

Without delay every one began to draw, and in short, whether it were by chance or not, the truth is, the lot fell to the Knight, at which every one was merry and glad. He was to tell his tale, as was reasonable, according to the agreement that you have heard. What need is there for more words? 849

When this good man saw it was so, as one discreet and obedient to his free promise he said, “Since I begin the game, what, in God’s name, welcome be the cut! Now let us ride on, and listen to what I say.” And at that word we rode forth on our journey. And

²³ Supper at a certain price: He would arrange for our meals and tell us the cost.

²⁴ Rooster. The rooster who crows at dawn and wakes the travelers.

²⁵ St. Thomas-a-Watering: a stream about two miles outside London.

²⁶ Evensong and matins: Generally speaking, evensong was the last prayer service of the day and Matins was the first in the morning.

he soon began his tale with a cheerful spirit, and
spoke in this way. 858

Here ends the Prologue of this book.

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