

1380

THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S PROLOGUE

Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer, Geoffrey (1343-1400) - English poet, known as the most important writer of Middle English. His *Canterbury Tales* (~1380) are told by traveling pilgrims who meet at a tavern and have a storytelling contest to pass the time. Each tale is preceded by an introductory prologue. The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue - Introduces the Canon's Yeoman.

THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S PROLOGUE

When Saint Cecilia's Life was done, and whiles
We had not farther gone a good five miles,
At Boughton-under-Blean us did o'ertake
A man, who was clothed all in clothes of black,
And underneath he had a surplice white.
His hackney was of dappled-grey, so bright
With sweat that it was marvelous to see;
It seemed that he had spurred him for miles three.
The horse too that his yeoman rode upon
So sweat that scarcely could it go; and on
The breast strap of the harness foam stood high,
Whereof he was as flecked as is a pie.
A double wallet on his crupper lay,
And as it seemed, he went in light array.
Lightly, for summer, rode this worthy man,
And in my heart to wonder I began
What he could be, until I understood
The way he had his cloak sewed to his hood;
From which, when long I had communed with me,

I judged at length some canon he must be.
His hat hung on his back down by a lace,
For he had ridden more than trot or pace;
He had spurred hard, indeed, as madman would.
A burdock leaf he had beneath his hood
To curb the sweat and keep his head from heat
But what a joy it was to see him sweat!
His forehead dripped as a distillatory
Were full of plantain and of pellitory.
And this man when he came began to cry:
"God save," said he, "this jolly company!
Fast I have spurred," said he then, "for your sake,
Because I wanted you to overtake,
To ride on in this merry company."
His yeoman too was full of courtesy,
And said: "Good sirs, all in the morningtide
Out of your hostelry I saw you ride,
And warned my lord and master, full and plain,
And he to ride with you is truly fain
For his amusement; he loves dalliance."
"Friend, for your warning, God give you good chance,"
Said then our host, "for truly it would seem

Your lord is wise, and so I may well deem;
He is right jocund also, I dare lay.
Can he a merry tale tell, on the way,
Wherewith to gladden this our company?"
"Who, sir? My lord? Yea, yea, without a lie,
He knows of mirth and of all jollity
Not but enough; and also, sir, trust me,
If you but knew him as well as do I,
You'd wonder much how well and craftily
He can behave, and that in different wise.
He's taken on him many an enterprise
That were right hard for anyone that's here
(Unless he learned it) to effect, I fear.
As plainly as he rides, here among you,
It would be to your profit if you knew
Him well; you'd not give up his acquaintance
For much of wealth, I dare lay in balance
All that I have of goods in my possession.
He is a man of wondrous high discretion,
I warn you well, he's a surpassing man."
"Well," said our host, "then pray tell, if you can,
Is he a clerk, or not? Tell what he is."

“Nay, he is greater than a clerk, ywis,”
This yeoman said, “and briefly, if you’ll wait,
Host, of his craft a little I’ll relate.

“I say, my lord has so much subtlety
(But all his art you cannot learn from me,
And yet I help by working at his side),
That all this pleasant land through which we ride,
From here right into Canterbury town,
Why, he could turn it all clean upside-down
And pave it all with silver and with gold.”
And when this yeoman had this story told
Unto our host, our host said: “Ben’ cite!
This thing is wondrous marvelous to me,
Since your lord is a man of such science,
For which men should hold him in reverence,
That of his dignity his care’s so slight;
His over-garment is not worth a mite
For such a man as he, so may I go!
It is all dirty and it’s torn also.
Why is your lord so slovenly, pray I,
And yet has power better clothes to buy,
If but his deeds accord well with your speech?”

Tell me that, sir, and that I do beseech."
"Why?" asked this yeoman, "Why ask this of me?
God help me, wealthy he will never be!
(But I will, not stand back of what I say,
And therefore keep it secret, I you pray).
He is too wise, in faith, as I believe;
That which is overdone, as I conceive,
Won't turn out right, clerks say, and that's a vice.
In that, I hold him ignorantly nice.
For when a man has overmuch of wit,
It often happens he misuses it;
So does my lord, and this thing grieves me sore.
May God amend it, I can say no more."
"No matter then, good yeoman," said our host;
"Since of the learning of your lord you boast,
Tell how he works, I pray you heartily,
Since he's so clever and withal so sly.
Where do you dwell, if you may tell it me?"
"Within the suburbs of a town," said he,
"Lurking in corners and in alleys blind,
Wherein these thieves and robbers, every kind,
Have all their privy fearful residence,

As those who dare not show men their presence;
So do we live, if I'm to tell the truth."
"Now," said our host, "Let me go on, forsooth.
Why are you so discoloured in the face?"
"Peter!" cried he. "God give it evil grace!
I am so wont upon the fire to blow
That it has changed my colour, as I trow.
I'm not wont in a mirror, sir, to pry,
But I work hard to learn to multiply.
We stir and mix and stare into the fire,
But for all that we fail of our desire,
And never do we come to our conclusion.
To many folk we bring about illusion,
And borrow gold, perhaps a pound or two,
Or ten, or twelve, or any sum will do,
And make them think, aye, at the least, it's plain,
That from a pound of gold we can make twain!
It is all false, but yet we have great hope
That we can do it, and after it we grope.
But that science is so far us before,
We never can, in spite of all we swore,
Come up with it, it slides away so fast;

And it will make us beggars at the last."
The while this yeoman chattered on like this,
The canon nearer drew and did not miss
A thing he said; suspicion always woke
In him, indeed, when anybody spoke.
For Cato says suspicion's ever fed
In any guilty man when aught is said.
That was the reason why he drew so near
To his yeoman, his gossiping to hear.
And thus he said unto his yeoman then:
"Now hold your peace and do not speak again,
For if you do you'll pay it ruefully;
You slander me, here in this company,
And you uncover that which you should hide."
"Yea?" said our host, "Tell on, whate'er betide;
For all his threatening do not care a mite!"
"In faith," said he, "my caring is but slight."
And when this canon saw how it would be,
That his yeoman would tell his privity,
He fled away for very grief and shame.
"Ah," said the yeoman, "hence shall come a game.
All that I know anon now will I tell.

Since he is gone, the Fiend take him to Hell!
With him hereafter I'll have naught to do
For penny or for pound, I promise you!
He that first brought me into that ill game,
Before he die, sorrow have he and shame!
For it's no game to me, sirs, by my fay;
That I feel well, whatever men may say.
And yet, for all my smart and all my grief,
For all the sorrow, labour, and mischief,
I never could leave off, in any wise.
Now would to God that my wit might suffice
To tell of all pertaining to that art!
Nevertheless, I will relate a part;
Since now my lord is gone, I will not spare;
The things I know about I will declare."

**HERE ENDS THE PROLOGUE TO THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S
TALE**