

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

**THE SAILOR'S TALE**

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 Sailor's Tale* - The story of a merchant who is cheated out of a large sum of money and his wife's favors.

## THE SAILOR'S TALE

A merchant, dwelling, once, at Saint Denis,  
Was rich, for which men held him wise, and he  
Had got a wife of excellent beauty,  
And very sociable and gay was she,  
Which is a thing that causes more expense  
Than all the good cheer and the deference  
That men observe at festivals and dances;  
Such salutations and masked countenances  
Pass by as does a shadow on the wall;  
But woe to him that must pay for it all.  
The foolish husband, always he must pay;  
He must buy clothes and other fine array,  
And all for his own worship, wealthily,  
In which, indeed, women dance jollily.  
And if he cannot thus, peradventure,  
Or cares not such expenses to endure,  
But thinks his money wasted or quite lost,  
Why then another man must pay the cost,  
Or else lend gold, and that is dangerous.

This noble merchant had a worthy house,  
To which, each day, so many did repair,  
Since he was generous and his wife was fair,  
'Twas to be wondered at; but hear my tale.  
Among his many guests of great and small  
There was a monk, a handsome man and bold,  
I think that he was thirty winters old,  
Who was for ever coming to that place.  
This youthful monk, who was so fair of face,  
Was so far intimate with the worthy man,  
And had been since their friendship first began.  
That in the house familiar was he  
As it is possible for friend to be.  
And in as much as this same goodly man  
And too, this monk of whom I first began,  
Were both born in the village they'd lived in,  
The monk claimed him for cousin, or such kin;  
And he again, he never said him nay,  
But was as glad thereof as bird of day;  
For to his heart it was a great pleasance.  
Thus they were knit by endless alliance,  
And each of them did other one assure

Of brotherhood the while their lives endure.  
Free was Dan John with money and expense  
When in that house; and full of diligence  
To please all there, whatever be his age.  
He ne'er forgot to tip the humblest page  
In all that house; according to degree  
He gave the master, then the company,  
Whene'er he came, some kind of honest thing;  
For which they were as glad of his coming  
As bird is glad when the new sun up-rises.  
No more of all this now, for it suffices.  
It so befell, this merchant, on a day,  
Prepared to make all ready his array,  
Since to the town of Bruges he was to fare  
To purchase there a quantity of ware;  
To which end he'd to Paris sent someone  
With messages, and he had prayed Dan John  
That he should come to Saint-Denis to pay  
Him and his wife a visit for a day,  
Said 'twas a thing he certainly must do.  
This noble monk, whereof I'm telling you.  
Had from his abbot, when he wished, license,

Because he was a man of great prudence,  
An officer, indeed, who out did ride  
To see to barns and granges, far and wide;  
And now to Saint-Denis he came anon.  
Who was so welcome as my lord Dan John,  
Our cousin dear, so full of courtesy?  
With him he brought a jug of rare malmsey,  
And still another full of fine vernage,  
And wild fowls, too, as was his long usage.  
And so I let them eat and drink and play,  
This monk and merchant, for a night and day.  
Upon the third day this good trader rises,  
And on his needs discreetly he advises;  
And up into his counting-house goes he  
To reckon up his books, as well may be,  
For the past year, to learn how matters stood  
And what he'd spent, and whether it were good,  
And whether he were wealthier than before.  
His books and bags, all that he had in store,  
He put before him on his counting-board;  
He was right rich in goods and rich in hoard,  
For the which cause he bolted fast his door;

He'd have no one disturb him while before  
Him stood his books and monies at that time;  
And thus he sat till it was well past prime.  
Dan John had risen with the dawn, also,  
And in the garden wandered to and fro,  
Having said all his prayers full reverently.  
Then came this goodwife, walking secretly  
Into the garden, walking slow and soft.  
And kissed him in salute, as she'd done oft.  
A little girl came walking at her side,  
Was in her charge to govern and to guide,  
For yet beneath the rod was this small maid.  
"O my dear cousin, O Dan John," she said,  
"What ails you that so early you arise?"  
"Dear niece," said he, "surely it should suffice  
To sleep for five full hours of any night,  
Unless 'twere for some old and languid wight,  
As are these married men, who doze and dare  
About as in the form the weary hare,  
Worn all distraught by hounds both great and small.  
But, my dear niece, just why are you so pale?  
I must suppose of course that our good man

Has you belaboured since the night began,  
And you were forced to sleep but scantily."  
And with that word he laughed right merrily,  
And, what of his own thoughts, he blushed all red.  
This pretty wife began to shake her head,  
And answered thus: "Aye, God knows all!" said she:  
"Nay, cousin mine, it stands not so with me.  
For by that God Who gave me soul and life,  
In all the realm of France there is no wife  
Who has less lust for that same sorry play.  
For I may sing 'Alas!' and 'Welaway  
That I was born!' but to no man," said she,  
"Dare I to tell how this thing stands with me.  
Wherefore I'm thinking from this land to wend,  
Or else of my own life to make an end,  
I am so fearful and so full of care."  
This monk began, then, at the wife to stare,  
And said: "Alas, my niece, may God forbid  
That you, for any care or fear morbid,  
Destroy yourself! But tell me of your grief;  
Perhaps I may, whatever the mischief,  
Counsel or help, and therefore do tell me



All the annoyance, for 'twill secret be;  
For on my breviary I make oath  
That never in my life, though lief or loath,  
Shall I your secret whisper or betray."  
"The same to you again," said she, "I say;  
By God and by this breviary, I swear,  
Though men this body of mine a-pieces tear,  
No I will never, though I go to Hell,  
Betray a single word that you may tell,  
And this, not for our kinship and alliance,  
But verily for love and true reliance."  
Thus are they sworn, and thereupon they kissed,  
And each told other such things as they list.  
"Cousin," said she, "if I had time and space,  
As I have not, and specially in this place,  
Then would I tell a legend of my life,  
What I have suffered since I've been a wife,  
From my husband, though he is your cousin."  
"Nay," quoth the monk, "by God and Saint Martin,  
He is no more a cousin unto me  
Than is this leaf a-hanging on the tree!  
I call him so, by Saint-Denis of France,

To have but better reason to advance  
With you, whom I have loved especially  
Above all other women, and truly;  
I swear this to you on the faith I own.  
Tell me your grief before your man comes down,  
Come, hasten now, and go your way anon."  
"My dearest love," said she, "O my Dan John,  
Right glad I were this counsel for to hide,  
But it must out, I can't it more abide.  
To me my husband is the poorest man  
That ever was, since first the world began.  
But since I am a wife, becomes not me  
To tell a living soul our privy,  
Either abed or in some other place;  
God guard that I should tell it, of His grace!  
For wife must never talk of her husband,  
Save to his honour, as I understand.  
But now to you thus much I can and shall:  
So help me God, he is not worth, at all,  
In any wise, the value of a fly.  
But yet this grieves me most- he's niggardly;  
And well you know that women naturally

Desire six things, and even so do I.  
For women all would have their husbands be  
Hardy, and wise, and rich, and therewith free,  
Obedient to the wife, and fresh in bed.  
But by that very Lord Who for us bled,  
Though in his honour, myself to array  
On Sunday next, I must yet go and pay  
A hundred francs, or else be but forlorn.  
Yet would I rather never have been born  
Than have a scandal or disgrace, say I.  
And if my husband such a thing should spy,  
I were but lost, and therefore do I pray,  
Lend me this sum, or else I perish, yea!  
Dan John, I say, lend me these hundred francs;  
By gad, I will not fail to give you thanks,  
If only you will do the thing I pray.  
For on a certain day I will repay,  
And give to you what pleasure and service  
I can give, aye, just as you may devise.  
And if I don't, God take on me vengeance  
As foul as once on Ganelon of France!"  
This gentle monk replied as you shall hear.

“Now truthfully, my own sweet lady dear,  
I have,” said he, “on you so great a ruth  
That I do swear and promise you, in truth,  
That when your husband goes to Flanders there,  
I will deliver you from all this care;  
For I will bring to you a hundred francs.  
And with that word he caught her by the flanks  
And hugged her to him hard and kissed her oft.  
“Go now your way,” he said, “all still and soft,  
And let us dine as soon as ever we may,  
For by my dial it’s the prime of day.  
Go now, and be as true as I shall be.”  
“Now all else God forbid, sir,” then said she.  
And in she went as jolly as a pie,  
And bade the cooks that they to kitchen hie,  
So that her men might dine, and that anon.  
Up to her husband is this wife then gone,  
And knocked upon his counting-room boldly.  
“Qui est la?” asked he.  
“Peter! It is I,”  
Said she; “What, sir, and how long will you fast?  
How long time will you reckon up and cast

Your sums and books and other tiresome things?  
The devil take away such reckonings!  
You have enough, by gad, of God's mercy;  
Come down today, and let your gold-bags be.  
Why, are you not ashamed that our Dan John  
Has fasted miserably all morning gone?  
What! Let us hear a Mass and then go dine."  
"Wife," said this man, "little can you divine  
The curious businesses that merchants have.  
As for us traders, as may God me save,  
And by that lord that all we call Saint Yve,  
Among twelve merchants scarcely two shall thrive  
Continually, and lasting into age.  
We must keep open house and blithe visage,  
While goes the world as it may chance to be,  
And hold all our affairs in secrecy  
Till we are dead; or else we must go play  
At pilgrimage, or else go clean away.  
And therefore have I great necessity  
That on this curious world advised I be;  
For evermore we merchants stand in dread  
Of chance and mishap as our ways we tread.

“To Flanders go I at the break of day,  
And I’ll come back as soon as ever I may.  
For which, my dearest wife, your aid I seek  
To be, to all, both courteous and meek,  
And to maintain our wealth be studious,  
And govern honourably and well our house.  
You have enough in every sort of wise  
That, to a thrifty, household, should suffice.  
You’ve clothes and food, I’ve seen to each detail,  
And silver in your purse shall never fail.”  
And with that word his counting-door he shut  
And down he went, no longer tarrying, but  
Right hastily a Mass for them was said,  
And speedily the tables there were spread,  
And to the dinner swiftly all they sped;  
And richly then the monk this merchant fed  
After the dinner Dan John soberly  
This merchant took aside, and privately  
He said to him, “Cousin, it stands just so,  
For I see well that you to Bruges will go.  
God and good Saint Augustine speed and guide!  
I pray you, cousin, that you’ll wisely ride;

Guard your health well, and govern your diet  
Temperately, especially in this heat.  
Neither of us requires outlandish fare;  
Farewell, dear cousin; God shield you from care.  
If anything there be, by day or night,  
If it lie in my power and my might,  
That you would have me do, in any wise,  
It shall be done, just as you may devise.  
“One thing, before you go, if it may be,  
I pray you do, and that is, to lend me  
A hundred francs, for but a week or two,  
For certain cattle I must buy, to do  
The stocking of a little place of ours.  
So help me God, I would that it were yours!  
I will not fail you, come next settling day,  
Not for a thousand francs, a mile away.  
But let this thing be secret, pray, for I,  
Even tonight, must go these beasts to buy;  
And farewell now, my own good cousin dear.  
And many thanks for entertainment here.”  
This noble merchant, civilly, anon,  
Answered and said: “O cousin mine, Dan John,

Now surely this is but a small request;  
My gold is yours and aye at your behest.  
And not gold only, no but all my ware;  
Take what you like, God shield that you should spare.  
“There’s but one thing, which you know well enow  
Of traders, for their money is their plow.  
We may on credit trade, while we’ve a name,  
But to be goldless is to lose the game.  
Pay it again when you are at your ease;  
In all I can, full fain am I to please.”  
These hundred francs he went and got anon,  
And privately he gave them to Dan John.  
No one in all the world knew of this loan,  
Saving this merchant and Dan John alone.  
They drink, and talk, and walk awhile, and play,  
Until Dan John sets out for his abbey.  
The morrow came and forth this merchant rides  
Toward Flanders; and his apprentice guides  
Until he came to Bruges all happily.  
Now went this merchant fast and busily  
About his trade, and bought, and borrowed gold;  
He neither played at dice nor danced, I’m told,



But like a merchant, briefly here to tell,  
He led his life, and there I let him dwell.  
On the first Sunday after he was gone,  
To Saint-Denis is come again Dan John,  
With face and tonsure shining from a shave.  
In all the house was not so small a knave,  
Nor any other, but was right glad, then,  
Because my lord Dan John was come again.  
And coming briefly to point, anon  
This lovely wife agreed with her Dan John  
That for these hundred francs he should, all night,  
Have her within his arms and bolt upright;  
And this agreement was performed in bed.  
In mirth all night a busy life they led  
Till it was dawn, when Dan John went his way,  
Bidding the household "Farewell!" and "Good-day!"  
For none of them, nor any in the town,  
Had of Dan John the least suspicion shown.  
So forth he rode, home to his own abbey,  
Or where he wished; no more of him I say.  
This merchant, when all ended was the fair,  
To Saint-Denis made ready to repair;

And with his wife he feasted and made cheer,  
And told her that, since goods were very dear,  
He needs must get more cash at his command,  
For he was bound by his own note of hand  
To pay some twenty thousand crowns anon.  
For which this merchant is to Paris gone  
To borrow there, from certain friends he had,  
Some certain francs unto his own to add.  
And when he'd come at length into the town,  
Out of great friendship never yet outgrown,  
Unto Dan John he went first, there to play,  
Not to talk business, nor ask money, nay,  
But to inquire and see to his welfare,  
And, too, to tell about his Flemish ware,  
As friends are wont when come from far or near.  
Dan John made him a feast and merry cheer;  
And he told him again, and specially,  
How he had purchased well and luckily-  
Thanks be to God!- all of his merchandise.  
Save that he must, nor fail in any wise,  
Obtain a loan, at least it would be best,  
And then he'd have some time for joy and rest.

Dan John replied: "No gladness do I feign  
That sound in health you are come home again.  
And if I were but rich, as I have bliss,  
These twenty thousand crowns you should not miss,  
Since you so kindly, but the other day,  
Lent me some gold; and as I can and may,  
I thank you, by the Lord and by Saint James!  
Nevertheless, to no hand but our dame's,  
Your wife at home, I gave the gold again  
Upon your counter; she'll remember when  
By certain tokens that I gave to her.  
Now, by your leave, I must get up and stir,  
Our abbot will be leaving town anon;  
And in his company I must be gone.  
Greet well our dame, your wife and my niece sweet,  
And farewell, cousin dear, until we meet."  
This merchant, being a man full wary-wise,  
Has got his loan and paid there in Paris,  
To certain Lombards, ready in their hand,  
The sum of gold, and got his note back, and  
Now home he goes as merry as a jay.  
For well he knew he stood in such array

That now he needs must make, with nothing lost,  
A thousand francs above his total cost.  
His wife, all ready, met him at the gate,  
As she was wont, though he came soon or late,  
And all that night with pleasure did they pet,  
For he was rich and cleanly out of debt.  
When it was day, this merchant did embrace  
His wife anew, and kissed her on her face,  
And up he goes and makes it rather tough.  
“No more,” cried she, “by God, you’ve had enough!”  
And wantonly again with him she played,  
Till, at the last, this merchant sighed and said:  
“By God,” said he, “I am a little wroth  
With you, my wife, though to be so I’m loath.  
And know you why? By God, and as I guess,  
You’ve been the causing of some small strangeness  
Between me and my cousin, dear Dan John.  
You should have warned me, really, ere I’d gone,  
That he to you a hundred francs had paid  
In cash; he was put out, I am afraid,  
Because I spoke to him of loans, by chance,  
At least I judged so by his countenance.

Nevertheless, by God our Heavenly King,  
I never thought to ask him such a thing.  
I pray you, wife, never again do so;  
But always tell me, ere away I go,  
If any debtor has, in my absence,  
Repaid to you, lest through your negligence  
I might demand a sum already paid."  
This wife was not astounded nor afraid,  
But boldly she spoke up and that anon:  
"Marry, I challenge that false monk, Dan John!  
I kept, of all his coins, not one to tell.  
He brought me certain gold- that know I well  
What! Ill success upon his friar's snout!  
For God knows that I thought, with never a doubt.  
That he had given it me because of you,  
To advance thus my honour, and yours too,  
In cousinhood, and for the merry cheer  
That he has found so many a time right here.  
But since I see our peace is thus disjoint,  
I'll answer you but briefly, to the point.  
You have far slacker debtors than am I!  
For I will pay you well and readily

From day to day; and if it be I fail  
I am your wife, tally it on my tail,  
And I will pay as soon as ever I may.  
For by my truth I have, on new array,  
And not on rubbish, spent it, every sou.  
And since so well I've spent it, all for you,  
All for your honour, for God's sake, I say,  
Do not be angry, but let's laugh and play.  
My jolly body's yours in pledge," she said,  
"By God, I will not pay you, save in bed!  
Forgive me, then, my own sweet husband dear;  
Let us be happy now- turn over here!"  
This merchant saw there was no remedy,  
And, thought he, chiding were but great folly,  
Since that the thing might not amended be.  
"Now wife," he said, "I do forgive, you see;  
But on your life, don't run so far at large;  
Conserve our wealth hereafter, so I charge."  
Thus ends my tale, and may the good God send  
Tales fair enough until our lives shall end! Amen.

**HERE ENDS THE SAILOR'S TALE**