**The Reeve's Tale**

PROLOGUE

 When folks had laughed at what had come to pass 3855

For Absalon and Handy Nicholas,

Different ones had different things to say

But for the most part took it all in play.

I didn't see the tale one man aggrieve,

Except, that is, for old Oswald the [Reeve](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#reeve). 3860

Since carpentry had been the fellow's craft,

The tale left him with ire while others laughed.

He started grumbling, carping right away.

 "As I may thrive," he said, "you I'd repay

With blearing of a haughty miller's eye 3865

If I chose to give ribaldry a try.

But I'm too old for playing anyhow;

Grass-time is gone, my hay's cold fodder now.

This white top all my lengthy years declares,

And my heart, too, is moldy like my hairs. 3870

It's as if I were like the medlar tree,

The fruit of which will worsen gradually

Till rotten in the refuse or the straw.

We old men live, I fear, by that same law,

Until we rot we never can be ripe. 3875

We jig as long as this old world will pipe;

It ever pricks our will just like a nail

To have a hoary head and a green tail,

As does a leek. Although our might is gone,

Our will is that the folly carry on. 3880

What we can't do we still can well expound;

In our old ashes fire can still be found.

 "Four burning coals, I'll tell you, we possess:

Boasting, lying, wrath, and covetousness.

The elderly are keepers of these embers, 3885

And although weak may be our aged members

Desire will never fail us, that's the truth.

Yet I have always had a coltish tooth,

Though many a year has gone by since the one

When first my tap of life began to run. 3890

Yes, surely at my birth, without delay,

Death drew the tap that life might run away,

And ever since the tap of life has run

Till almost empty has become the tun;

The stream of life is dripping all the time. 3895

The simple tongue may well ring out and chime

Of wretched woes that passed so long before;

The old are left with dotage, nothing more."

 On hearing such a preachy sort of thing,

Our Host spoke up as lordly as a king: 3900

"Now all this wisdom, what's the use of it?

Are we to speak all day of Holy Writ?

The devil's turned a reeve to preacher's mission,

A cobbler's now a skipper or physician.

Now tell your tale at once, don't be so wordy. 3905

Here's Deptford, it's already seven-thirty.

There's Greenwich, where there's many a rascal found,

And of your tale we've yet to hear a sound."

 "Now, sirs," responded then Oswald the Reeve,

"I pray that none among you I'll aggrieve 3910

Though I shall make this Miller look the fool.

Meet force with force and that's a proper rule.

 "We now have heard here from this drunken Miller

Of the beguiling of a carpenter,

Which may have been in scorn, for I am one. 3915

And, by your leave, now justice shall be done.

In his own churlish terms shall be my speech.

God, may his neck be broken, I beseech;

He well can see a speck that's in my eye,

But in his own a beam he can't espy." 3920