**The Reeve's Tale**

Near Cambridge there's a brook, at Trumpington,

And there's a bridge that stands above the run,

And by that brook there stands a water mill.

Now it's the truth I'd tell you and I will.

A miller there had dwelt for many a day; 3925

As proud as any peacock, he could play

The pipes, knew how to fish, mend nets to boot,

Turned many a cup, could wrestle well and shoot.

A long knife by his belt was always seen,

Also a sword, no other blade as keen; 3930

His pouch contained a dagger. He was such

That none, for fear of death, would dare to touch

Him. He'd a Sheffield knife inside his hose.

Round was his face, and snub-like was his nose,

His head as bald as any ape's. He fully 3935

Was a swaggerer, a market-bully,

And on him none a finger dared to lay

Or one would pay, he promised, right away.

He also was a thief of corn and meal,

A sly one, too, his habit was to steal. 3940

Now he was known by name as Haughty Simkin.

He had a wife who was of noble kin;

Her father, who was parson of the town,

As dowry many a brass pan handed down

To get this Simkin in the family. 3945

She had been brought up in the nunnery;

Simkin would take no wife, he used to say,

Except a virgin raised the proper way,

So that his [yeoman](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#yeoman) status not be hurt.

She was proud as a magpie and as pert. 3950

A fair sight were these two on which to gaze:

He'd walk before her on the holy days

Wearing his hood all wrapped about his head,

And she'd come after in a cloak of red

(His hose were of the same). And not a one 3955

Called her a thing but "Madam"; there was none

So hardy, as they went along their way,

Who dared to flirt, to have the slightest play,

Lest Haughty Simkin take the fellow's life

With bodkin or with dagger, sword or knife. 3960

For jealous folks are dangerous (or so

They want their wives to think). This woman, though,

Was somewhat smirched and talked about, for which

She'd stand aloof like water in a ditch,

And she was full of scorn and great disdain; 3965

That she deserved respect she thought it plain,

What with her kin and all the wisdom she

Had learnt while she was in the nunnery.

These two had raised a daughter who was then

Aged twenty; there was no one else, save in 3970

The cradle lying, one half year of age,

A child who looked a proper future page.

The daughter was a well-developed lass;

She had a snub nose, eyes as gray as glass,

Her buttocks broad, her breasts were round and high; 3975

Her hair was very fair, I wouldn't lie.

The parson of the town, as she was fair,

Had in his mind to make this girl his heir,

Both of his chattels and his house, so he

Made sure she'd not be wed too easily. 3980

His hope was to bestow this little bud

Upon a house of fine ancestral blood;

For Holy Church's goods must be intended

For Holy Church's blood that's well descended.

His holy blood he'd honor and empower 3985

Though Holy Church he thereby might devour.

This miller made great profit without doubt

From tolls on wheat and malt from all about--

Especially the wheat and malt they'd haul

From that great Cambridge college Solar Hall; 3990

His mill was where they had to have it ground.

Now it so happened that one day they found

The college [manciple](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#manciple) sick in his bed;

They thought in fact he was as good as dead.

With that the miller's theft of grain was more 3995

(A hundredfold) than he had dared before;

Where once he stole as if with courtesy,

He now performed his theft outrageously.

The college warden fussed about the deed

Although the miller didn't give a weed, 4000

He'd only bluster and deny his crime.

Two students, young and poor, were at the time

Residing in this hall of which I spoke.

Headstrong and lusty, both were playful folk,

And simply for their mirth and jollity 4005

They pleaded that the warden let them be

The next to have a turn at going round

To take corn to the mill and have it ground;

Each hardily proposed to risk his neck

To see the man did not steal half a peck 4010

By sleight or use of force. To their intent

The warden finally granted his assent.

Now one was John and Alan was the other;

They had both been born in a town called Strother

Far in the north, I do not know just where. 4015

This Alan now was quickly to prepare,

The sack was on a horse without delay

And students John and Alan rode away,

Each with a sword and buckler by his side.

John knew the way, they didn't need a guide, 4020

Soon at the mill the sack was on the ground.

Spoke Alan first: "Hail, Simon, faith abound!

How fares thy lovely daughter and thy wife?"

Said Simkin, "Welcome, Alan, by my life,

And John as well! How now, what brings you here?" 4025

"Need," John replied, "by God, hath not a peer.

Who hath no knave must serve himself someway

Or else he be a fool, as clerics say.

Our manciple, I think, will soon be dead,

So aching aye the molars in his head; 4030

And therefore here now I and Alan be

To grind our corn and take it back. And thee,

I pray, will speed us quickly on our way."

Said Simkin, "By my faith, I shall! I say,

What would you do while I take this in hand?" 4035

"By God, right by the hopper I will stand,"

Said John, "to see how 'tis corn goeth in.

Yet saw I never by my father's kin

How that the hopper waggeth to and fro."

Then Alan answered with "John, wilt thee so? 4040

Then I will go beneath it, by my crown,

To see how that the cornmeal falleth down

Into the trough; that shall be my disport.

John, by my faith, we two be of a sort,

I be as ill a miller as art thee." 4045

This miller smiled at all their foolery;

He told himself, "All this is but a wile;

To trick them they think no one has the guile.

But by my thrift, hoodwinked they both shall be

For all the craft in their philosophy. 4050

For every trick, each clever move they make,

The more that I can steal the more I'll take;

Instead of flour I will give them bran.

'The greatest scholar's not the wisest man,'

As to the wolf, they say, once spoke the mare. 4055

For all their learning I don't give a tare."

Then out the door he hurried secretly,

When he had seen his time, and stealthily

He looked both left and right until he spied

The horse the [clerks](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#clerk) had ridden, standing tied 4060

Behind the mill beneath a shady limb.

The miller then went softly up to him

And stripped him of his bridle on the spot;

When he was loose, the horse began to trot

Toward the fen, where with wild mares he then 4065

Let out a whinny, ran through thick and thin.

The miller went back in, no word he spoke;

He set to work, and shared with them a joke

Or two, until their corn was fully ground.

But once the meal had all been sacked and bound, 4070

John went to find their horse had run away,

And started crying, "Harrow! Welladay!

Our horse is lost! Come, Alan, by God's bones,

Get on your feet, man, come! The horse," he groans,

"Our warden's palfrey now, alas, he's lost!" 4075

Both meal and corn from Alan's mind were tossed,

Precautions no more had him occupied.

"What sayest thee? Which way's he gone?" he cried.

The wife came running over to them then

And said, "Alas! he headed for the fen, 4080

Where mares are wild, as fast as he could go--

Thanks to the careless hand that tied him so,

For someone should have better tied the rein."

"Alas!" said John. "Alan, by Christ's sweet pain,

Lay down thy sword, I'll lay down mine also. 4085

I be as swift, God knows, as is a roe,

And, by God's heart, he won't escape us both.

But why did thee not barn him? By my oath!

Alan, by God, thee art a fool!" he cried.

These hapless clerks immediately hied 4090

Toward the fen, Alan as well as John.

And when the miller saw that they were gone,

One half a bushel he was quick to take

And bade his wife go knead it for a cake.

He said, "It goes, I think, as both clerks feared. 4095

Yet can a miller tweak a student's beard

For all his learning. Let them go their way!

Look how they run! Yea, let the children play.

Their catch is not so easy, by my crown."

These hapless students trotted up and down 4100

With "Whoa now! Whoa!" and "Stay there! Stay!

Stand clear!

Go whistle thee, I'll try to keep him here!"

To keep it short, right up to fall of night

They still had failed to catch, try as they might,

This horse, for he would run away too fast, 4105

Till in a ditch they captured him at last.

Then wet and weary, like beasts in the rain,

Came John and Alan trudging back again.

"Alas," said John, "the day that I was born!

We'll be derided now with shame and scorn. 4110

Our corn is swiped, we'll each be called a fool

Both by the warden and our friends at school,

And mainly by this miller. Curse the day!"

Thus John complained as they were on their way,

[Bayard](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Bayard) in hand, back to the mill with ire. 4115

They found the miller sitting by the fire,

For it was night, no farther might they fare.

They begged, for love of God, that he might spare

Some lodging, for which they'd pay rent to him.

"If there be any," he replied to them, 4120

"Such as it is you're welcome to your parts.

My house is small, but you have learnt the arts

And by your arguments can make a place

A mile in width from twenty feet of space.

Let's see if there is room, or else you may 4125

Make room by using words as is your way."

"Now, Simon, by Saint Cuthbert, I can tell

That thee art bright," John said, "and answer well.

'Tis said, 'A man takes one of these two things:

That which he finds or else that which he brings.' 4130

But specially I pray, our host so dear,

Get us some meat and drink for our good cheer.

We'll pay ye for it fully, that's for sure.

There's nary hawk an empty hand can lure;

Look, here's our silver, ready to be spent." 4135

This miller into town his daughter sent

For ale and bread, and roasted them a goose.

Their horse he tethered, no more getting loose.

In his own chamber he made them a bed

With sheets and blankets that were finely spread, 4140

Not more than ten or twelve feet from himself.

His daughter had a bed all by herself

That in that very chamber stood nearby--

The best that they could do, the reason why

Being the lack of room within the place. 4145

They supped and talked at ease, and all the space

They drank strong ale, and drank it like the best.

About midnight they finally went to rest.

The miller was shellacked out of his head,

So drunk that he was pale instead of red. 4150

He hiccuped and was talking through his snout

As if with head cold or asthmatic bout;

To bed he went, and with him went his wife,

Feeling as free as any jay with life,

Her jolly whistle she so well had wet. 4155

At their bed's foot the cradle had been set,

To rock the child and let it suck the dug.

And after all had been drunk from the jug,

The daughter off to bed was quick to go;

And then to bed went Alan, John also, 4160

And that was that, no sleeping draught they need.

The miller had imbibed till like a steed

He snorted in his sleep, and paid no mind

At all to what his tail might do behind.

His wife provided bass both loud and clear, 4165

Their snoring for a furlong one could hear.

The wench was snoring too for company.

The student Alan heard this melody,

Gave John a poke, and said, "Thee sleepest? How?

Hast ever thee heard such a song till now? 4170

Hear what a compline by them one and all.

The fire of hell upon their bodies fall!

Is there a stranger sound that so offends?

Yea, theirs shall be the flower of evil ends.

This whole night I'll get nary bit of rest. 4175

But wait--No matter, 'tis all for the best.

For, John," he said, "if ever it be true

That I may thrive, yon wench now I will screw.

Some recompense by law is given us,

For, John, the law so reckoneth and thus: 4180

If at one point a man should be aggrieved,

At yet another he shall be relieved.

Our corn is stolen, that is safe to say,

And he hath given us a fit all day;

I can't amend the loss, but there's an action 4185

By which at least I'll get some satisfaction.

By God's soul, it shall not be otherwise."

"Now, Alan," John replied, "let me advise,

The miller is a dangerous man," he said.

"If from his sleep he hap to rear his head, 4190

He might do both of us some villainy."

But Alan said, "He's less than is a flea."

Then up he rose and to the wench he crept.

She was supine as peacefully she slept,

Until, when she awoke, he was so nigh 4195

It would have been too late to give a cry,

And so, I'll briefly say, she took him on.

Play, Alan! Meanwhile I will speak of John.

John lay the time a furlong takes to walk

And gave himself a rueful little talk. 4200

"Alas," he thought, "this is a wicked jape!

Now may I say that I be but an ape.

My friend's appeased somewhat now for his harms,

He hath the miller's daughter in his arms.

He took a chance and now his needs be fed; 4205

I lie here like an old bran sack in bed.

And when this jape be told another day,

I'll be a fool, a 'cockney' they will say.

I'll rise and risk it, by my faith, instead!

'The cowardly's unlucky,' so it's said." 4210

So up he rose and softly headed for

The cradle, which he picked up from the floor;

To his bed's foot he softly carried it.

Soon after this, the wife her snoring quit

As she awoke and went outside to piss. 4215

She came back in, the cradle then to miss;

She couldn't find it as she groped along.

"Alas," she thought, "I almost headed wrong!

I almost got into the students' bed.

Ah, bless me, to what ill I would have sped!" 4220

She kept on till she found the cradle and,

By groping ever forward with her hand,

Then found the bed. She thought this well and good,

Being the bed whereby the cradle stood;

It was so dark she didn't know that she 4225

Crept in right by the clerk. There quietly

She lay, all set to sleep again, until

John soon leapt up and with a hearty will

Was lying on her. Hardly had this wife

Had such a merry fit in all her life, 4230

So hard and deep he thrust as if gone mad.

A jolly life that night these students had

Until the cock a third time was to sing.

Alan grew weary, day about to spring,

For he had labored all the livelong night. 4235

He said, "Farewell, my Molly sweet! The light

Of day is come, I may no longer bide.

But evermore, where I may go or ride,

I be thy clerk, as I may thrive 'tis so!"

She said, "Dear lover, fare-thee-well, then, go. 4240

There's one thing I should tell you, though, and will:

When you are heading homeward by the mill,

Right by the entrance of the door behind,

A loaf of half a bushel you will find,

And it was made out of the very meal 4245

That's yours, that which I helped my father steal.

God help you, lover, may he save and keep!"

And she, with that, almost began to weep.

Alan arose and thought, "Before 'tis day

I'll creep back in with John." Then right away 4250

His groping hand the baby's cradle found.

"By God," he thought, "I've turned the wrong way round.

My head is dizzy from my work tonight,

It hath me straying. This is not the right

Direction, by the cradle I can tell; 4255

The miller lieth here, his wife as well."

Then he, by twenty devils, took his way

To that bed where in fact the miller lay.

Thinking to find his comrade John, he crept

Right in beside the miller where he slept. 4260

He grabbed him by the neck and softly said,

"Hey, John, wake up, for Christ's soul, ye swinehead,

And listen. Wouldst thee hear of noble games?

I tell ye by that lord they call Saint James,

In this short night three times, without a slack, 4265

I screwed his daughter, flat upon her back,

While like a coward thee hast been in dread."

"You rascal, so you did?" the miller said.

"You false, you traitorous clerk," continued he,

"You shall be dead, then, by God's dignity! 4270

Who dares to be so bold as to disgrace

My daughter, come from such a worthy race?"

Then he grabbed Alan by the Adam's apple,

And Alan then with him began to grapple,

And with his fist he smashed the miller's nose, 4275

And blood streamed down upon the miller's clothes.

Bleeding from nose and mouth, upon the ground

Like two pigs in a poke they roll around;

They both get up, then down again they've gone--

Until the miller, tripping on a stone, 4280

Goes falling backwards, landing on his wife

(Who nothing knew of all this silly strife,

As she, contented, had been sleeping tight

With John the student, who'd been up all night).

She started from her slumber when he fell. 4285

"Help! Holy cross of Bromholm," was her yell,

"[In manus tuas](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#In_manus)! Lord, I call to thee!

Wake up, Simon! The fiend's on top of me!

My heart is broken! Help, I'm nearly dead,

One's on my belly, one is on my head! 4290

Help, Simkin, these false clerks are in a fight!"

John jumped right up as quickly as he might

And groped along the walls both to and fro

To seek a staff. She jumped right up also

And, more familiar with the place than he, 4295

Found by the wall a staff immediately.

She saw a little shimmer then of light

(For through a hole the moon was shining bright),

And by that light she caught sight of the two

But couldn't tell for sure just who was who. 4300

But something white then caught her eye; when she

Gazed at this white thing, she thought it must be

A nightcap that the student wore; she then

Drew nearer with her staff, went closing in,

And, thinking to give Alan quite a whop, 4305

She hit the miller on his barren top,

And down he went, and cried, "Help, or I die!"

The clerks then beat him up and let him lie,

Made ready, took their horse without delay

(Also their meal), and rode off on their way. 4310

And at the mill they also took the cake

From the half-bushel flour he had her bake.

And so the haughty miller took a beating,

And lost the grinding fee for all his cheating;

He bought and paid for all they had to sup, 4315

Both John and Alan, those who beat him up;

His wife was screwed, his daughter too. That's how

It is for millers who are false! And now

This proverb's truly said and understood:

"Who evil does should not expect some good"; 4320

One who beguiles, beguiled himself shall be.

And God, who sits above in majesty,

Save all this group, both high and low, for glory!

I've thus repaid the Miller with my story.