**The Miller’s Tale**

by Geoffrey Chaucer (circa 1390)
Adapted from the Middle English by [Dr. David Breeden](http://www.davidbreeden.com/)

<http://www.lone-star.net/mall/literature/miller.htm>



Some time ago there was, dwelling at Oxford,
A rich lout who ran a boarding house.
By craft he was a carpenter.
With him there lived a poor scholar
Who had studied the arts, but his joy
Was toward the study of astrology.
He could reach certain conclusions,
Solve certain problems by interrogation,
If men asked him at what times
There might come drought or showers;
Or if men asked him what might happen
And such things as that;
I can't say all he could tell.

This student was called Handy Nicholas.
Of secret love he knew, and of pleasures;
And also he was subtle and very private,
And, like a maiden, meek in appearance.
A room had he in that boarding house,
Alone, without any company.
And it was well supplied with sweet herbs;
And he himself was as sweet as the root
Of licorice or ginger.
His Almageste, his books both large and small,
His astrolabe, which belonged to his art,
And his algorism stones lay neatly
On shelves resting at the head of his bed;
His clothes press was covered with a red wool cloth;
And above all this there lay a gay zither
On which he played melodies at night
So sweetly that all the room rang.
He would sing "The Angel to the Virgin";
And after that he would sing "The King's Note."
Often his merry throat was blessed.
And thus this sweet student spent his time
On his own income and with the help of friends.

The carpenter had recently married a woman
Which he loved more than his life;
Eighteen years old she was.
Jealous he was, and held her narrowly caged,
For she was wild and young, and he was old,
And feared he might become a cuckold.
He knew not Cato (for his wit was rude)
Who advised that men should marry their own age.
Men should wed their own type,
For youth and age is often at debate.
But since he was fallen in the snare,
He had to endure, like everyone else, his problem.

Fair was this young woman, and
As graceful as a weasel was her small body.
A belt she wore, with bars of silk,
An apron also as white as morning milk
And upon her loins many a piece of cloth.
White was her smock, and embroidered in the front
And also behind. Her collar
Was of coal-black silk, both within and without.
The ribbons of her white cap matched her collar;
Her broad headband was of silk, and set high.
And for a fact she had a lecherous eye.

Very daintily were her eyebrows plucked,
And those were angled and as black as any sloe.
She was much more fun to look at
Than is the early-ripe pear tree,
And softer than the wool of a sheep.
And by her belt hung a purse of leather,
Tasseled with silk, and pearled with metal.
In all this world, to seek up and down,
There is not a man so wise that he could imagine
So happy a darling or such a wench.
Brighter was the shining of her complexion
Than in the Tower the newly minted coins.
To speak of her song, it was as loud and lively
As any swallow sitting on a barn.
Also she could skip and make game
Like any kid or calf following his mother.
Her mouth was as sweet as honeyed drinks,
Or a hoard of apples laid in hay or heath.
Winsome she was, as is a jolly colt,
Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.
A brooch she wore upon her low collar,
As brood as is the boss of a shield.
Her shoes were laced high on her legs.
She was a primrose, a little pig's eye,
For any lord to lay in his bed,
Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.

Now, sire, and again, sire, so happened the case,
That once upon a time this Handy Nicholas
Started to flirt and play with this young woman
While her husband was gone to Oseneye,
Since students are very subtle and very sly.
Intimately he caught her, by the short hair,
And said, "I know that if I don't get what I want,
For secret love of you, lover, I will die."
He held her firmly by the thighs,
And said, "Lover, love me at once,
Or I will die, God help me!"

And she sprang like a colt does in a stall,
And turning her head away fast,
She said, "I will not kiss you, by my faith!
Why, let me be," said she, "let me be, Nicholas,
Or I will scream 'Rape' and 'Alas!'
Put away your hands, for your honor!"

Then Nicholas began to cry for forgiveness,
And spoke so beautifully, and pressed her so strongly,
That she at last gave in,
And swore an oath by Saint Thomas of Kent
That she would do his will,
When she could find a time to do it.
"My husband is so jealous that,
Unless we watch well and keep private,
I know well I am dead," said she.
"We must be very secret in this case."

"No, don't worry about that," said Nicholas.
"A student would have poorly used his time,
If he could not fool a carpenter."

And thus they agreed and swore
To watch for a time, as I have said before.
When Nicholas had done these things,
And stroked her well about the loins,
He kissed her sweetly and took his zither,
And played fast, making a melody.

Then it so happened on a holy day
That to the parish church
To do Christ's own work,
This good woman went.
Her forehead shone as bright as any day,
So was it washed when she stopped her work.
Now there was in that church a parish clerk
Who was named Absolon.

Curled was his hair, and it sparkled like gold,
And spread out like a fan large and broad;
Completely straight and even lay his hair's part.
His complexion was red, his eyes as gray as a goose.
With Saint Paul's window carved on his shoes,
In red stockings he went handsomely.
Dressed he was daintily and properly
All in a tunic of a light blue;
Very fair and thick were its laces set.
And over that he had a gay surplice
As white as is the blossom of a branch.
A merry child he was, so God me save.
Well he could let blood and clip and shave,
And make a charter of land or deed.
In twenty ways could he trip and dance
After the fashion of Oxford then,
And with his legs kick to and fro,
And play songs on a small lute;
Also he sang sometimes in a high voice;
And also he could play the guitar.
In all the town there was not a brew house nor tavern
That he didn't grace with his entertainment,
Wherever any sprightly barmaid was.
But truth to tell, he was a bit squeamish
Of farting, and in his speech a bit fastidious.

This Absolon, so jolly and lively,
Goes with a censer on the holidays,
Censing the women of the parish eagerly;
And many a lovely look on them he casts,
And namely on this carpenter's wife.
To look on her he thought was a merry life,
She was so proper and sweet and lecherous.
I dare to say, if she had been a mouse,
And he a cat, he would have caught her at once.

This parish clerk, this jolly Absolon,
Had in his heart such a love-longing
That he took no noon offering of any woman;
For courtesy, he said, he would have none.

The moon, when it was night, shown brightly,
And Absolon took his guitar
To awake his lover for lovemaking.
Out he went, jolly and amorous,
And soon he came to the carpenter's house
A little after the cocks had crowed,
And got himself against a window
That was part of the carpenter's wall.

He sung in his gentile, high voice,
Well accompanied by his guitar:
"Now, dear lady, if you will it,
I pray you to have mercy on me,"

The carpenter awoke and heard the song,
And soon enough said to his wife,
"What! Alisoun! Don't you hear Absolon,
Singing like that under our bedroom wall?"

And she answered her husband,
"Yes, God knows, John, I hear every word."

This goes on; what more do you need to know?
From day to day this jolly Absolon
So woos her and he is so woebegone
That he can't sleep, night or day;
He combs his broad locks and makes them handsome;
He woos her with go-betweens,
And swears he will be her own servant;
He sings, quavering like nightingale.

He sent her spiced wine, mead, and spiced ale,
And wafer cakes, piping hot, fresh out of the oven;
And, since she was a town girl, he offered a bribe.
For some folks will be won by money,
And some by beating, and some by courtesy.

One time, to show his litheness and skill,
He played Herod on a high scaffold.
But what availed him in this case?
She so loved this Handy Nicholas
That Absolon could go blow a buck's horn;
He got nothing but scorn for all his labor.
And thus she made Absolon her ape,
And all his earnest attempts she turned into a joke.

Very true is this proverb, it is no lie;
Men say this rightly: "Always near a sly one
Makes the distant one disliked."

It made no difference if Absolon was mad or wroth,
Because he was far from her sight,
And the nearby Nicholas stood in his light.

Now bear yourself well, you Handy Nicholas,
For Absolon may wail and sing "alas."
And so it happened on a Saturday,
This carpenter was gone to Osenay;
And Handy Nicholas and Alisoun
Agreed to this conclusion:
That Nicholas should develop a plan
That would trick the silly, jealous husband;
And if the game went correctly,
She would sleep in his arms all night,
For this was his desire and hers also.

And right enough, without more words,
This Nicholas would wait no longer,
But secretly to his room carried
Both food and drink for a day or two,
And told her to tell her husband
If he asked about Nicholas,
That she didn't know where he was,
That she had not seen him all day;
She believed that he must be ill,
For no matter how loud she called,
He would not answer for anything.

This went on all that Saturday.
Nicholas staying in his bedroom,
Eating and sleeping, or doing what he wanted,
Until Sunday when the sun went down.

This silly carpenter marveled greatly
At Nicholas, or what might be ailing him,
And said, "I am afraid, by Saint Thomas,
Something is wrong with Nicholas.
God shield him from dying suddenly!
This world is now out of joint, surely.
I saw today a corpse carried to church
That only last Monday I saw out working.
Go up," said he unto his servant,
"Knock at his door, or knock with a stone.
See what's the matter and tell me straight."

The servant went up bravely
And stood at the bedroom door
Crying and knocking like crazy.

"What! how! what are you doing, Master Nicholas?
How can you sleep all the long day?"

But all was for naught--he heard not a word.
A hole he found, low on a board,
A place were the cat went in and out,
And at that hole he looked in,
And at last he saw a sight.
Nicholas sat upright, gaping,
As if he had stared at the new moon.

Down the servant went quickly and told his master

How Nicholas had looked when he saw him.

The carpenter blessed himself
And said, "Help us, Saint Frideswide!
A man little knows what may happen to him.
This man has fallen, from his astronomy,
Into some madness or some agony.
I always knew that would happen!
Men should not know God's secrets.
Yea, blessed is the ignorant man
Who knows only his Creed!
This happened to another student of astronomy;
He walked out in the fields
To see the stars, and what should happen but
He fell into a pit;
He didn't see that!
But yet, by Saint Thomas,
I'm very sorry for Handy Nicholas.
He shall be scolded for his studying,
If I may say so, by Jesus, king of heaven!
Get me a staff that I can pry with,
While you, Robyn, lift up the door.
That should bring him out of his studies."



So to the bedroom door he began to go.
His servant was a strong fellow
And by the hasp he heaved the door;
It fell to the floor at once.
Yet Nicholas sat as still as stone,
And kept gaping up into the air.

The carpenter thought he was in despair,
And grabbed him strongly by the shoulders
And shook him hard, and yelled angrily,
"What! Nicholas! What, how! What, look down!
Awake and think on Christ's passion!
I protect you, by the cross, from elves and creatures."

Then he said the night spell quickly,
On all four corners of the house
And on the threshold of the front door:

"Jesus Christ and Saint Benedict,
Bless this house from every thing wicked,
Against night's spirits, the white paternoster!
Where go you, Saint Peter's sister?"

At last Handy Nicholas
Began to sigh greatly and said, "Alas!
Shall all the world be lost soon after now?"

The carpenter answered, "What say you?
What! think on God, as we do, men who work."

Nicholas answered, "Fetch me drink,
And then I will speak in private
Of certain things that concern me and you.
I will tell it to none other, for sure."

The carpenter went down and came again,
And brought a quart of strong ale;
And when each had drank his part,
Nicholas shut and locked his door,
And sat down by the carpenter.

He said, "John, my dear and beloved host,
You must swear to me here by your faith
That you will reveal this to no one;
For it is Christ's prophecy that I tell,
And if you reveal it to anyone, you are lost;
You shall suffer his vengeance
If you betray me: you shall go mad.
Nay, Christ forbid it, by his holy blood!"

Said then this silly man, "I am no blabbermouth;
Nor, though I talk, am I a lover of gab.
Say what you will, I shall never tell it
To woman nor child, by him that harrowed hell!"

"Now John," said Nicholas, "I will not lie;
I have found in my astrology,
As I have looked in the bright moon,
That on Monday next, at quarter night,
Shall fall a rain so wild and mad
That half so great was never Noah's flood.
This world," he said, "in less than an hour
Shall all be drowned, so hideous will be the shower.
Thus shall mankind drown, and lose its life."
The carpenter answered, "Alas, my wife!
And shall she drown? Alas, my Alisoun!"
He almost fell down for the sorrow,
And said, "Is there no remedy in this case?"

"Why, yes, by God," said Handy Nicholas,
"If you will listen to lore and reason.
You must not do as you think;
For thus says Solomon, that was very wise:
'Work according to advice and thou shalt not be sorry.'
And if you will work with the good advice
That I will give, without mast or sail,
Yet shall I save her and you and me.
Have you not heard how Noah was saved
Because our Lour had warned him before
That all the world should be lost in water?"

"Yes," said the carpenter, "long ago."

"Have you not heard," said Nicholas, "also
The sorrow of Noah with his family,
Before he could get his wife to the ship?
He would have rather, I will say,
To take all his black sheep
And leave the wife to a ship all by herself.
And therefore, do you know what is best?
This demands haste, and for hasty things
Men should not preach or delay.
Now, we should go get us
A kneading trough, or else a tub,
For each of us, but be sure that they be big,
So that we may swim, as in a barge.
And put in provisions sufficient
For one day only. Bah to the rest!
The water shall slacken and go away
In the morning of the next day.
But Robyn, your servant, must not know of this,
Nor your maid Jill can I save;
Ask not why, for though you ask me,
I will not tell God's secrets.
Let it suffice you, unless it make you crazy,
To have as great a grace as Noah had.
Your wife shall I well save, without doubt.
Go now your way and speed you about this business.
But when you have, for her and you and me,
Gotten these three kneading tubs,
Then shall you hang them high in the roof,
So that no man will discover our purveyance.
And when you have done thus, as I have said,
And have laid up our provisions,
And also an ax, to cut the cords in two
So that we may go when the water comes,
And break a hole high up on the gable,
Out toward the garden, over the stable,
So that we may freely pass on our way
When the great shower is gone,
Then shall you swim as merrily, I swear,
As does the white duck after her drake.
Then will I call, 'Hello, Alisoun! Hello, John!
Be happy, for the flood will pass soon.'
And you will wilt say, 'Hail, Master Nicholas!
Good morning; I see you're well today.'
And then shall we be lords all our lives,
Of all the world, as was Noah and his wife.
But of one thing I warn you strongly:
Be well advised on that night
When we enter into our ships
That none of us may speak a word,
Nor call, nor cry, but be in prayer;
For it is God's own dear wish.
Your wife must hang far from you
So that there be no sin between you,
No more in looking than in deed.
This rule has been spoken. Go, God speed you!
Tomorrow night, when men are all asleep,
Into our kneading-toughs we shall go,
And sit there, awaiting God's grace.
Go now your way. I have no more time
To make this a longer sermon.
Men say thus: 'Send the wise, and say nothing.'
You are so wise I need not tell you this.
Go, save our lives, I beseech you."

The silly carpenter went on his way.
Sometime he said "Alas!" ands sometimes "Welladay!"
And to his wife he told his secret,
And she was aware, and knew better than he
What all this quaint affair meant.
Nonetheless she acted as if she would die
And said, "Alas! Go right away!
Help us escape or we will be dead soon!
I am your true, faithful wedded wife;
Go, dear spouse, and help to save our lives."

Lo! What a thing affection is!
Men may die of imagination,
So deep can impressions be taken.
This silly carpenter began to shake;
He truly thought that he might see
Noah's flood come wallowing like the sea
To drown Alisoun, his dear honey.
He wept, wailed, made lamentation.

He sighs sorrowfully;
He goes and gets a kneading trough,
And after that a big tub and a little,
And secretly he sent them to his house,
And hung them, concealed, in the roof.
With his own hand he made three ladders
To climb by the rungs and the steps
Up to the tubs hanging in the beams,
And he provisioned both trough and tub
With bread and cheese and good ale,
Providing just enough for a day.
But before he had finished all this,
He sent his servant and also his maid
On a business trip to London.

On Monday, when it drew toward night,
He shut his door and, without using a candle,
Arranged all things as they should be.
And shortly, up all three climbed;
They sat still for awhile.

"Now, say the paternoster, quietly!" said Nicholas,
And "quietly," said John, and "quietly," said Alisoun.

The carpenter said his devotions
And sat still and said his prayers,
Waiting for the rain as if he heard it.
The dead sleep for weariness of attention.
Fell on this carpenter right, as I guess,
About curfew-time, or a little more;
For all the work of his soul, he groaned,
And soon he snored, for his head lay wrong.

Down the ladder stalked Nicholas,
And Alisoun hurried softly down;
Without a word they went to bed,
In the place the carpenter usually lay.
There was revel and melody;
And thus lithe Alisoun and Nicholas went
To the business of mirth and pleasure,
Until the bell of lauds rang the early morning,
And friars in the chancel went to sing.

The parish clerk, the amorous Absolon,
Who was for love all woebegone,
Upon the Monday had been at Oseneye
With company to disport and play,
And asked a cloisterer by chance
What he knew about John the carpenter;
And the cloisterer took him away from the church,
And said, "I don't know. I haven't seen him working
Since Saturday; I believe he has gone
For timber. Our abbot sent him;
For he often goes for timber,
And lives at the barn a day or two;
If not there, he is certainly at his house.
Where he is, I cannot certainly say.

Absolon was jolly and light of heart,
And thought, now is time to stay awake all night;
For surely I have not seen him stirring
About his door since the break of day.
So may I thrive. I shall, at cock's crow
Secretly knock at his window
That stands low there by his bedroom.
Then to Alisoun I will tell all
My love-longing. I can't fail
To at the very least get a kiss.
Some manner of comfort I shall have, in faith.
My mouth has itched all this long day;
That is a sign of kissing at the least.
Also, all night I dreamed I was at a feast.
Therefore, I will go sleep an hour or two,
And all the night then will I wake and play."

When the first cock had crowed, then
Up rose this jolly lover Absolon
And arrayed himself beautifully, to perfection.

But first, even before he had combed his hair,
He chewed grain and licorice
So he would smell sweet.
Under his tongue an herb he bore,
For thereby he thought to be gracious.

He roamed to the carpenter's house,
And still he stood under the window--
Unto his breast it reached, it was so low--
And softly he coughed with a quiet voice--
"What are you doing, honey-comb, sweet Alisoun,
My fair bird, my sweet cinnamon?
Awake, my love, and speak to me!
Very little do you think on my woe,
That I sweat for your love wherever I go.
No wonder is it, though, that I faint and sweat;
I moon like a lamb after the teat.
Indeed, lover, I have such a love-longing,
That like a true turtledove is my mourning.
I cannot eat as much as a maid."

"Get away from that window, Jack fool," she said;
"So help me god, it will not be 'come kiss me.'
I love another--else I would be to blame--
Another much better than you, by Jesus, Absolon.
Get on your way, or I will throw a stone,
And let me sleep, in the Devil's name!"

"Alas," said Absolon, and "welladay,
That true love was ever so ill used!
Then kiss me, since it can be no better,
For the love of Jesus, and for the love of me."

"Will you go away then?" said she.

"Yes, certainly, lover," said Absolon.

"Then get ready," said she, "I'm coming."

And to Nicholas she said quietly,
Now hush, and you shall laugh your fill."

Absolon got down on his knees
And said, "I am a lord of all ranks;
For after this I hope there comes more.
Lover, your grace, and sweet bird, your favor!"

She opened the window in haste.
"Get on with it," said she, "come on, and get on with it
Or the neighbors might see you."
Absolon wiped his mouth dry.

The night was as dark as pitch, or as coal,
And out the window she stuck her hole,
And Absolon it befell no better or worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse,
Savoring it before he knew what it was.
Back he jumped and thought it was strange,
For well he knew a woman has no beard.
He felt a thing all rough and long haired
And said, "Fie! Alas! what have I done?"

"Tee hee!" said she, and slammed the window shut.

Absolon went forth on his sorrowful way.

"A beard! A beard!" said Handy Nicholas,
"By God's body, that went beautifully."

Wretched Absolon heard every word,
And he began to chew his lip in anger.
He said to himself, "I shall repay you."

Who rubs now, who scrubs now his lips
With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips,
But Absolon, who says often, "Alas!
My soul I commit to Satan!
I would rather avenge this shame
Than have the whole town," said he.
"Alas," said he, "alas, that I did not turn aside!"
His hot love was cold and quenched;
For from the time that he had kissed her arse,
For lovemaking he gave not a cress;
He was healed of that malady.
Quite often he denounced lovemaking,
And wept like a beaten child.

A soft step he took over the street
To a blacksmith called Master Gerveys,
Who in his forge made plows.
He sharpened a share and coulter busily.

Absolon knocks softly,
"What, who are you?"

"It is I, Absalon.
Open up, Gerveys, quick!"

"What, Absolon! for Christ's sweet cross,
Why rise you so early? eh, forgive us all!
What ails you? Some merry girl, God knows,
Has brought you thus upon the stir.
By Saint Note, know well what I mean."

Absolon cared not a bean
For all the jokes; not a word did he say;
He had more tow on his distaff
Than Gerveys knew, and said, "Dear friend,
That hot coulter in the chimney there,
Loan it to me, I have something to do with it,
And I will bring it back very soon."

Gerveys answered, "Certainly, were it gold,
Or a bag of coins uncounted,
You shold have it, as I am true smith.
Ai, Christ's foot! what will you do with it?"

"For that," said Absolon, "be as be may.
I shall tell you all tomorrow."

He caught the coulter by the cold steel.
Softly he went out the door
And walked to the carpenter's wall.

He coughs first, and knocks then
Upon the window, just as he did before.

Alisoun answered, "Who is there?
Who knocks so? I believe it's a thief."

"Why, no," said he, "God knows, my sweet lover,
I am your Absolon, my darling.
I have," said he, "brought you a ring of gold.
My mother gave it to me, so God save me;
Very fine it is, and delicately engraved.
This will I give you, if you kiss me."

Nicholas had gotten up to piss
And thought he would surpass the joke;
Absolon would kiss his arse before he left.
He opened the window quickly,
And put out his arse secretly
Over the buttock to the thigh bone;
Then said the clerk Absolon,
"Speak, sweet bird, I know not where you are."

Nicholas then let fly a fart
As great as if it had been a thunder clap,
That with the stroke Absolon was almost blinded;
But he was ready with his hot iron
And hit Nicholas right on the arse.
Off went about a hand's breadth of skin,
The hot coulter so burned his butt,
And he thought he would die of the pain.

As if he were mad he began to cry,
"Help! water! water! water! help, for God's heart!"

This woke the carpenter from his slumber,
And he heard someone crying "water" as if he were mad,
And the carpenter thought, Alas, Noel's flood has come!
He sat up without further thought
And with his ax he cut the cord in two,
And down it all went; he stopped not to sell
Either bread or ale until he hit the sill
Upon the floor, and there in a swoon he lay.

Up jumped Alisoun and Nicholas,
And cried "Out" and "Harrow" in the street.
The neighbors, both rich and poor,
Ran to stare at this man
Lying in a swoon, pale and wan,
For with the fall he had broken his arm.
But stand he must for his own harm;
For when he spoke, he was soon overcome
By Handy Nicholas and Alisoun.
They told everyone that he was mad,
He was so afraid of Noah's flood
In his fantasy that in his vanity
He had bought three kneading troughs,
And had hung them in the roof above;
And that he had begged them for the love of God
To sit in the eve to keep him company.

The people began to laugh at his fantasy;
Into the roof they looked and gaped
And turned all his harm unto a joke.
Whatever the carpenter said in answer,
It was for nothing--no one heard his reasons.

He swore so many great oaths
That he was considered crazy in all the town;
For every clerk stood firmly by the other.
They said, "The man is crazy, my dear brother.
And every man began to laugh at this strife.

Thus screwed was this carpenter's wife,
Despite all his care and his jealousy;
And Absolon has kissed her lower eye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the butt.

This tale is done, and God save all of us!

Questions:

1. How do you react to the Miller’s Tale?
2. What impact does Chaucer’s Christianity have on his comedy?