

THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S PROLOGUE & TALE

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

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 privy,
 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."

The Canon Yeoman's Tale

Part I

Seven years I've served this canon, but no more
 I know about his science than before.
 All that I had I have quite lost thereby;
 And, God knows, so have many more than I.
 Where I was wont to be right fresh and gay
 Of clothing and of other good array,
 Now may I wear my old hose on my head;
 And where my colour was both fresh and red,
 Now it is wan and of a leaden hue;
 Whoso this science follows, he shall rue.
 And from my toil yet bleary is my eye,
 Behold the gain it is to multiply!
 That slippery science has made me so bare
 That I've no goods, wherever I may fare;
 And I am still indebted so thereby
 For gold that I have borrowed, truthfully,
 That while I live I shall repay it never.
 Let every man be warned by me for ever!
 And any man who casts his lot thereon,
 If he continue, I hold his thrift gone.
 So help me God, thereby he shall not win,
 But empty purse and have his wits grow thin.
 And when he, through his madness and folly,
 Has lost his own, by willing jeopardy,
 Then will he incite others, many a one,
 To lose their wealth as he himself has done.
 For unto scoundrels it's a pleasant thing
 Their fellows in distress and pain to bring,
 Thus was I taught once by a learned clerk.
 Of that no matter, I'll speak of our work.
 When we are where we choose to exercise

Our elvish craft, why, we seem wondrous wise,
 Our terms are all so learned and so quaint.
 I blow the fire till my heart's like to faint.
 Why tell you what proportions of things went
 In working out each new experiment,
 As five ounces, or six, it may well be,
 Of silver, or some other quantity?
 Or tell you all the names, my memory fails,
 Of orpiment, burnt bones, and iron scales
 That into powder we ground fine and small?
 Or in an earthen pot how we put all,
 And salt put in, and also pepper dear,
 Before these powders that I speak of here,
 And covered all these with a plate of glass,
 And of the various other gear there was?
 And of the sealing of the pot and glass,
 So that the air might no way from it pass?
 And of the slow fire and the forced also,
 Which we made there, and of the care and woe
 That we took in our matter's sublimating,
 And in calcining and amalgamating
 Quicksilver, which is known as mercury crude?
 For all our skill, we never could conclude.
 Our orpiment and sublimed mercury,
 Our litharge that we ground on porphyry,
 Of each some certain ounces- it is plain
 Naught help ed us, all our labour was in vain.
 Neither the gases that by nature rose
 Nor solid matter either- none of those
 Might, in our working, anything avail.
 For lost was all our labour and travail,
 And all the cost, the devil's own to pay,
 Was lost also, for we made no headway.
 There is also full many another thing
 That to our craft pertains in labouring.
 Though name them properly I never can,
 Because, indeed, I am an ignorant man,
 Yet will I tell them as they come to mind,
 Though I'll not try to class each one by kind;
 Armenian bole, borax, the green of brass,
 And sundry vessels made of earth and glass,
 Our urinals and all our descensories,
 Vials and crucibles, sublimatories,
 Cucurbites, and alembics, and such freaks,
 All dear enough if valued at two leeks.
 There is no need to specify them all,
 The reddening waters and the dark bull's gall,
 Arsenic, sal ammoniac, and brimstone;
 And, too, of herbs could I name many a one,
 Valerian, agrimony, and lunary,
 And others such, if I but wished to tarry.
 Our lamps that burned by day and burned by night
 To bring about our end, if but we might,

Our furnace, too, white-hot for calcination,
 And waters all prepared for albication,
 Unslaked lime, chalk, and white of egg, I say,
 Powders diverse, and ashes, dung, piss, clay,
 Little waxed bags, saltpetre, vitriol;
 And many a different fire of wood and coal;
 Alkali, salt, potassium carbonate,
 And our burnt matters, and coagulate,
 Clay mixed with horses' or men's hair, and oil
 Of tartar, alum, glass, yeast, wort, argoil,
 Realgar, and our matters absorbent,
 And with them, too, our matters resorbent,
 And how we practised silver citrination
 And our cementing and our fermentation,
 Our moulds and testers, aye, and many more.
 I will tell you, as I was taught before,
 The bodies seven and the spirits four,
 In order, as my master named of yore.
 The first of spirits, then, quicksilver is,
 The second arsenic, the third, ywis,
 Is sal ammoniac, the fourth brimstone.
 The seven bodies I'll describe anon:
 Sol, gold is, Luna's silver, as we see,
 Mars iron, and quicksilver's Mercury,
 Saturn is lead, and Jupiter is tin,
 And Venus copper, by my father's kin!
 This wicked craft, whoso will exercise,
 He shall gain never wealth that may suffice;
 For all the coin he spends therein goes out
 And is but lost, of which I have no doubt.
 Whoso, then, will exhibit such folly,
 Let him come forth and learn to multiply;
 And every man that has aught in coffer,
 Let him appear and be philosopher.
 Perhaps that craft is easy to acquire?
 Nay, nay, God knows! And be he monk or friar
 Canon, or priest, or any other wight,
 Though he sit at his books both day and night
 In learning of this elvish, fruitless lore,
 All is in vain, and by gad it's much more!
 To teach an ignorant man this subtlety-
 Fie! Speak not of it, for it cannot be;
 And though he has booklore, or though he's none,
 In final count he shall find it all one.
 For both of them, and this by my salvation,
 Come to one end seeking multiplication;
 They fare the same when they've done everything;
 That is to say, they both fail, sorrowing.
 Yet I forgot to tell you in detail
 Of the corrosive waters and limaille,
 And of some bodies the mollification,
 And on the other hand of induration,
 Oils, and ablutions, metals fusible-

More than a bible it would need to tell,
 The largest ever; therefore I think best
 That of these names I say no more, but rest.
 For I believe that I've told you enough
 To raise a devil, be he never so rough.
 Ah no! Let be; the old philosopher's stone
 Is called elixir, which we seek, each one;
 For had we that, then were we safe enow.
 But unto God in Heaven do I vow,
 For all our art, when we've done all things thus,
 And all our tricks, it will not come to us.
 The thing has caused us to spend all we had,
 For grief of which almost we should go mad,
 Save that good hope comes creeping in the heart,
 Supposing ever, though we sorely smart,
 The elixir will relieve us afterward;
 The tension of such hope is sharp and hard;
 I warn you well, it means go seeking ever;
 That future time has made men to dis sever,
 Trusting that hope, from all that ever they had.
 Yet of that art they cannot well grow sad,
 For unto them it is a bitter-sweet;
 So it appears; for had they but a sheet
 With which to wrap themselves about by night,
 And a coarse cloak to walk in by daylight,
 They'd sell them both and spend it on this craft;
 They can withhold naught till there's nothing left
 And evermore, wherever they'll be gone,
 Men know them by their smell of foul brimstone;
 For all the world they stink as does a goat;
 Their savour is so rammish and so hot
 That, though a man a mile away may be,
 The odour will infect him, trust to me!
 Thus by their smell and their threadbare array,
 If men but wish, these folk they'll know, I say.
 And if a man but ask them privately
 Why they do go clothed so unthriftilly,
 They right away will whisper in his ear
 And say that if they should be noticed here,
 Why, men would slay them, what of their science;
 Lo, thus these folk impose on innocence!
 Pass over this; unto my tale I'll run.
 Before the pot upon the fire be done,
 Of metals in a certain quantity
 My lord it tempers, and no man save he-
 Now he is gone I dare say this boldly-
 For, as men say, he can work artfully;
 Always I well know he has such a name,
 And yet full often has he been to blame;
 And know you how? Full oft it happens so,
 The pot broke, and farewell! All vanished, O!
 These metals have such violence and force
 That crucibles cannot resist their course

Unless they are built up of lime and stone;
 They penetrate, and through the wall they're gone,
 And some of them sink right into the ground-
 Thus have we lost, at times, full many a pound-
 And some are scattered all the floor about,
 Some leap up to the roof. Beyond a doubt,
 Although the Fiend's to us not visible,
 I think he's with us, aye, that same scoundrel!
 In Hell, wherein he is the lord and sire,
 There's not more woe, nor rancour, nor more ire.
 For when our pot is broken, as I've said,
 Each man will scold and think that he's been bled.
 One said that it was due to fire-making,
 One said it was the blowing of the thing
 (There I was scared, for that was what I did);
 "O straw! You silly fool!" the third one chid,
 "It was not tempered as it ought to be."
 "Nay," said the fourth, "shut up and list to me;
 It was because our fire was not of beech,
 That's why, by all the wealth I hope to reach!"
 I cannot tell where one should put the blame;
 There was a dreadful quarrel, just the same.
 "What!" cried my lord, "there's no more to be done,
 Whatever 'twas, I'll know the reason soon;
 I am quite certain that the pot was crazed.
 Be as it may, do not stand there amazed;
 As always, sweep the floor up quickly lad,
 Pluck up your hearts and be both blithe and glad."
 The rubbish in a heap then swept up was,
 And on the floor was spread a large canvas,
 And all this rubbish in a sieve was thrown,
 And sifted, picked, and whirled, both up and down.
 "By gad," said one, "something of our metal
 There is yet here, although we have not all.
 Although this thing has gone awry for now,
 Another time it may be well enow.
 We must put all our wealth at adventure;
 A merchant's luck, gad! will not aye endure,
 Believe me, in his high prosperity;
 Sometimes his freight will sink beneath the sea,
 And sometimes comes it safely unto land."
 "Peace," said my lord, "next time I'll understand
 How to proceed and with a better aim;
 And, save I do, sirs, let me be to blame;
 There was defect in something, well I know 't."
 Another said the fire was far too hot.
 But were it hot or cold, I dare say this,
 That we concluded evermore amiss.
 We fail of that which we desire to have,
 And in our madness evermore we rave.
 And when we're all together, then each one
 Seems as he were a very Solomon.
 But everything that glisters like fine gold

Is not gold, as I've often heard it told;
And every apple that is fair to eye
Is yet not sound, whatever hucksters cry;
And even so, that's how it fares with us:
For he that seems the wisest, by Jesus,
Is greatest fool, when proof is asked, in brief;
And he that seems the truest is a thief;
That shall you know ere I from you do wend,
When of my tale I've made at length an end.

Part II

There is a canon of religion known
Among us, who'd contaminate a town,
Though 'twere as great as Nineveh the free,
Rome, Alexandria, Troy, and others three.
His tricks and all his infinite treacherousness
No man could write down fully, as I guess,
Though he should live unto his thousandth year.
In all this world for falsehood he's no peer;
For in his terms he will so twist and wind
And speak in words so slippery of kind,
When he communicates with any wight,
That he soon makes a fool of him, outright,
Unless it be a devil, as he is.
Full many a man has he beguiled ere this,
And will, if he may live a further while;
And yet men walk and ride full many a mile
To seek him out and have his acquaintance,
Naught knowing of his treacherous simulance.
And if you care to listen to me here,
I'll make the proof of what I say quite clear.
But most religious canons, just and true,
Don't think I'm slandering your house, or you,
Although my tale may of a canon be.
Some rogue's in every order, pardon me,
And God forbid that for one rascal's sake
Against a group we condemnation make.
To slander you is nowise my intent,
But to correct what is amiss I'm bent.
This tale I tell here not alone for you,
But even for others, too; you know well how
Among Christ's twelve disciples there was not
One to play traitor, save Iscariot.
Then why should all the rest be put to blame
Who guiltless were? Of you I say the same.
Save only this, if you will list to me,
If any Judas in your convent be,
Remove the man betimes, I counsel you,
Lest shame or loss or trouble should ensue.
And be displeased in nothing, I you pray,
But hear what on this matter I may say.
In London was a priest, an annualear
Who had therein dwelt many a quiet year,

A man so pleasant and so serviceable
To the goodwife who shared with him her table,
That she would never suffer him to pay
For board or clothing, went he ever so gay;
Of spending-silver, too, he had enow.
No matter; I'll proceed as I said, now,
And tell about the canon all my tale,
Who gave this priest good cause to weep and wail.
This canon false, he came, upon a day
Into the chaplain's chamber, where he lay,
Beseeching him to lend him a certain
Amount in gold, the which he'd pay again.
"Lend me a mark," said he, "for three days, say,
And when that time's done, I will it repay.
And if you find me false, I shall not reck
If, on a day, you hang me by the neck!"
This priest brought him a mark, and quickly, too,
Whereat this canon thanked him, said adieu,
And took his leave and went forth on his way,
And brought the money back on the third day,
And to the priest he gave his gold again,
Whereof this priest was wondrous glad, 'tis plain.
"Truly," he said, "it no wise bothers me
To lend a man a noble, or two, or three,
Or any modest thing that is my own,
To him who has the disposition shown
That in no wise will he forgo to pay;
To such a man I never can say nay."
"What!" cried this canon, "Should I be untrue?
Nay, that for me would be a thing quite new.
Truth is a thing that I will ever keep
Unto that day, at last, when I shall creep
Into my grave, or otherwise God forbid!
Trust this as surely as you trust your creed.
I thank God, and in good time be it said,
That there was never yet man ill repaid
For gold or silver that to me he lent,
Nor ever falsehood in my heart I've meant.
And, sir," said he, "out of my privity,
Since you have been so very good to me,
And showed to me so great a nobleness,
Somewhat to quit you for your kindness,
I'll show to you, and if you'd learn it here,
I'll teach you plainly all the methods dear
I use in working at philosophy.
Give it good heed, for you'll see with your eye
I'll do a masterpiece before I go."
"Yes?" asked the priest, "Yes, sir, and will you so?
Mary! Thereof I pray you heartily."
"Right at your service, sir, and truthfully,"
Replied the canon, "else, may God forbid!"
Service this thief could offer, and he did!
Full true it is that service in this guise

Stinks, as take witness of these old men wise;
 And soon enough I will this verify
 By this canon, the root of treachery,
 Who always had delight, nor could refrain-
 Such devilish thoughts within his heart did reign-
 When he brought Christian folk to tribulation.
 God keep us from his false dissimulation!
 Naught understood this priest with whom he dealt,
 And of his coming harm he nothing felt.
 O hapless priest! O hapless innocent!
 Blinded by avarice malevolent!
 O luckless one, full blind is your conceit,
 Nothing are you aware of the deceit
 Which this sly fox arranges here to be!
 His wily stratagems you cannot flee.
 Wherefore, at once to make the ending known,
 By which your troubles will be clearly shown,
 Unhappy man, I'll hasten on to tell
 The folly into which you blindly fell,
 And, too, the treachery of that other wretch,
 As far as what I know of him may stretch.
 This canon was my lord, you think I mean?
 Sir host, in faith, and by the Heaven's Queen,
 It was another canon, and not he,
 Who has a hundred-fold more subtlety!
 He has betrayed the people many a time;
 Of his deceit it wearies me to rhyme.
 Whatever of his falsehood I have said,
 For shame of him I feel my cheeks grow red;
 At any rate, my cheeks begin to glow,
 For redness have I none, right well I know,
 In all my visage; for the fumes diverse
 Of metals, whereof you've heard me rehearse,
 Have all consumed and wasted my redness.
 Now take heed of this canon's wickedness.
 "Sir," this to the priest, "let your man be gone
 For quicksilver, that we have some anon;
 And let him bring us ounces two or three;
 And when he comes, just so soon shall you see
 A wondrous thing you've never seen ere this."
 "Sir," said the priest, "it shall be done, ywis."
 He bade his servant go to fetch them all,
 And since the lad was ready at his call,
 He got him forth and came anon again
 With this quicksilver, truly to explain,
 And gave these ounces three to the canon;
 And he took them and laid them fairly down,
 And bade the servant coals to go and bring,
 That he might get to work with everything.
 The coals at once were brought, and all was well;
 And then this canon took a crucible
 Out of his bosom, showing it to the priest.
 "This instrument," said he, "you see- at least

Take in your hand, and put yourself therein
 An ounce of quicksilver, and here begin,
 And in God's name, to be philosopher!
 There are but few to whom I would proffer
 To make my science clear and evident.
 For you shall learn here, by experiment,
 That this quicksilver will I mortify
 Right in your sight anon, without a lie,
 And make it as good silver and as fine
 As any that's in your purse or in mine,
 Or elsewhere, aye, and make it malleable;
 Otherwise hold me false, unfit as well
 Among good folk for ever to appear.
 I have a powder here that cost me dear,
 Shall do all this, for it's the root of all
 My craft; you'll see what shall therewith befall.
 Dismiss your man and let him stay without,
 And shut the door fast while we are about
 Our secret work, that no man may espy
 The way we work in this philosophy."
 All was then done as canon had decreed;
 This servant took himself straight out, indeed,
 Whereat his master barred the door anon,
 And to their labour quickly they were gone.
 The priest, at this damned canon's ordering,
 Upon the fire anon did set this thing,
 And blew the fire and busied him full fast;
 Within the crucible the canon cast
 A powder (I know not whereof it was
 Compounded, whether of chalk, or maybe glass,
 Or something else- it was not worth a fly)
 To blind the priest with; and he bade him high
 The coals to pile the crucible above.
 "In token of how much I bear you love,"
 This canon said, "your own two hands, and none
 Other, shall do this thing that shall be done."
 "Thank you," the priest replied, and was right glad,
 And heaped the coals up as the canon bade.
 And while he laboured thus, this fiendish wretch,
 This canon false- may him the foul Fiend fetch!-
 Out of his bosom took a beechen coal,
 Wherein right cunningly he'd bored a hole
 In which, before, he'd put of silver limail
 An ounce, and which he'd stopped up, without fail,
 With blackened wax, to keep the filings in.
 And understand you well that this false gin
 Was not made there, but it was made before;
 And there were other things I'll tell you more
 About hereafter, which with him he'd brought;
 Ere he came there, to cheat he'd taken thought,
 And ere they parted he did even so;
 Till he had skinned him he could not forgo.
 It wearies me when of him I do speak,

For on his falsehood I myself would wreak,
If I knew how; but he is here and there;
He is so restless he abides nowhere.
But take heed now, sirs, for God's very love!
He took this coal whereof I spoke above,
And in his hand he bore it privily.
And while the priest did pile up busily
The burning coals, as I told you ere this,
This canon said: "My friend, you do amiss;
This is not piled up as it ought to be;
But soon I shall amend all that," said he.
"Now let me thereof have a hand the whiles,
For I've great pity on you, by Saint Giles!
You are right hot, I see well how you sweat,
Take here a cloth and wipe away the wet."
And while the simple priest did wipe his face,
This canon took his coal, and with grave grace,
Laid it above and well to middleward
Upon the crucible, and blew it hard
Until the flames did blaze, up hot again.
"Now give us drink, sir," said the canon then,
"For soon all shall be well, I undertake;
Let us sit down, and let us merry make."
And when this treacherous canon's beechen coal
Was burnt, then all the filings from the hole
Into the crucible fell down anon;
As so, in reason, it must needs have done,
Since so well centred over it was;
But thereof nothing knew the priest, alas!
He deemed that all the coals alike were good,
For of the trick he nothing understood.
And when this alchemist was ready, he
Said to the priest: "Rise up and stand by me;
And since I know that metal mould you've none,
Go sally forth and bring here a chalk-stone;
For I will make one of the very shape
That ingot moulds have, if I can them ape.
And, too, bring in with you a bowl or pan
Full of clear water, and you'll see, dear man,
How well our business here shall thrive, in brief.
And yet, that you may have no unbelief,
Or think that somehow I'm not doing right,
I'll never be a moment out of sight,
But go with you and come with you again."
The chamber door, then, briefly to explain,
They opened and they shut, and went their way.
And as they went they took the key, I say,
And came again, without a long delay,
Why should I tarry here the livelong day?
He took the chalk and shaped it in such wise
As moulds are made, as further I'll apprise.
I say, he took, then, out of his own sleeve
A tain of silver (Hell the man receive!)

Which was an ounce, no more or less, in weight;
Now here's the trick, the way of which I'll state!
He shaped his mould in length and breadth to be
Like to the tain of silver, as you see,
So slyly that the priest this never spied;
And in his sleeve did then the model hide;
And from the fire he took his crucible
And poured it in the mould, for all went well,
And in the bowl of water then did cast
The mould and all, and bade the priest, at last:
"Seek what there is, put in your hand and grope,
And you shall find there silver, as I hope;
What- devils out of Hell!- should it else be?
Filing of silver silver is!" cried he.
He put his hand in and a tain took out
Of silver fine, and glad, you cannot doubt,
Was this priest when he saw that it was so.
"God's blessing, and His Mother's dear also,
And all the saints', too, may you have, my friend,"
The priest replied, "and may they curse my end
Unless you will vouchsafe to teach to me
This noble craft and all this subtlety;
I will be yours in all that ever I may!"
Said then the canon: "Yet will I essay
A second time, that you may take good heed
And be expert in this, and at your need
When I am absent on another day,
You may this science and its arts essay.
Quicksilver take," said he, "one ounce, no more,
As you'll remember that we did before,
And as you treated that, so do with this
And like the first 'twill change, which silver is."
The priest then followed carefully the plan,
As he'd been bidden by this cursed man,
The canon; long and hard he blew the fire
To bring about the thing he did desire.
And this said canon waited all the while,
All ready there the poor priest to beguile,
And, for assurance in his hand did bear
A hollow stick (take heed, sirs, and beware!),
In end of which an ounce was, and no more,
Of silver filings put, all as before
Within the coal, and stopped with wax, a bit,
To keep the filings in the hole of it.
And while the priest was busy, as I say,
This canon, drawing close, got in his way,
And unobserved he threw the powder in
Just as before (the Devil from his skin
Strip him, I pray to God, for lies he wrought;
For he was ever false in deed and thought);
And with his stick, above the crucible,
Arranged for knavish trickery so well,
He stirred the coals until to melt began

The thin wax in the fire, as every man,
 Except a fool, knows well it must, sans doubt,
 And all that was within the stick slipped out,
 And quickly in the crucible it fell.
 Good sirs, what better do you wish than well?
 When now the priest was thus beguiled again,
 Supposing naught but truth, I should explain,
 He was so glad that I cannot express,
 In any way, his mirth and his gladness;
 And to the canon he did proffer soon
 Body and goods. "Yea," was the canon's tune,
 "Though I am poor, I'm artful as you'll find;
 I warn you plainly, there's yet more behind.
 Is there some copper in your place?" asked he.
 "Yea," said the priest, "I think there may well be."
 "If not, go buy us some, and quickly too,
 Good sir, make haste and fetch us it, pray do."
 He went his way, and with the copper came,
 And in his hands this canon took the same,
 And of the copper weighed out but an ounce.
 My tongue is far too simple to pronounce,
 As servant to my wit, the doubleness
 Within this canon, root of wickedness.
 Friendly he seemed to those that knew him not
 But he was fiendly both in heart and thought.
 It wearies me to tell of his falseness,
 Nevertheless yet will I it express
 To end that all men may be warned thereby,
 And for no other reason, truthfully.
 Within the crucible he puts the ounce
 Of copper which upon the fire he mounts,
 And casts in powder, making the priest blow,
 And at his labouring to stoop down low,
 All as before, and all was but a jape;
 Just as he pleased, he made the priest his ape.
 And afterward into the mould he cast
 The copper; into the water pan at last
 Plunging the whole, and thrust therein his hand.
 And in his sleeve (as you did understand
 Before) he had a certain silver tain.
 He slyly took it out, this damned villain,
 While still the priest saw nothing of the plan,
 And left it in the bottom of the pan;
 And in the water groped he to and fro
 And very stealthily took up also
 The copper tain, of which the priest knew naught,
 And hiding it, he by the breast him caught,
 And spoke to him, thus carrying on his game:
 "Stoop lower down, by God, you are to blame!
 Come, help me now, as I did you whilere,
 Put in your hand and search and learn what's there."
 This priest took up the silver tain anon,
 And then the canon said: "Let us be gone

With these three plates, the which we have so wrought,
 To some goldsmith, to learn if they're worth aught.
 For by my faith, I wouldn't, for my hood,
 Have them, save they are silver fine and good,
 And that immediately proved shall be."
 Unto the goldsmith, then, with these tains three,
 They went, and put the metal in assay
 By fire and hammer; no man could say nay,
 But they were silver, as the ought to be.
 This foolish priest, who was more glad than he?
 Never was gladder bird for dawn of day,
 Nor nightingale in season of the May,
 Nor was there ever one more fain to sing;
 Nor lady happier in carolling
 Or speaking much of love and woman's meed;
 Nor knight in arms to do a hardy deed
 To stand in graces of his lady dear-
 Than was the priest this sorry craft to hear;
 And to the canon thus he spoke and said:
 "For love of God, Who for us all was dead,
 And as I may requite it unto you,
 What shall this recipe cost? Come, tell me now?"
 "By 'r Lady," said this canon, "it is dear,
 I warn you well; for now in England here
 One friar and I are all who can it make."
 "No matter," said he, "now, sir, for God's sake,
 What shall I pay? Oh, tell me this, I pray!"
 "Truly," said he, "it is right dear, I say;
 Sir, in one word, if this thing you will have,
 You shall pay forty pounds, so God me save!
 And were it not for friendship shown ere this
 To me, you should pay more than that, ywis."
 This priest the sum of forty pounds anon
 In nobles fetched, and gave them, every one,
 To this said canon for this said receipt;
 His business was all fraud and all deceit.
 "Sir priest," he said, "I do not care to lose
 My secret craft, and I would 'twere kept close;
 So, as you love me, keep it privily;
 For if men knew all of my subtlety,
 By God above, they'd have so great envy
 Of me, because of my philosophy,
 I should be slain, there'd be no other way."
 "Nay, God forbid!" replied the priest. "What say?
 Far rather would I spend all coin, by gad,
 That I possess (and else may I grow mad!)
 Than that you fall in any such distress."
 "For your good will, I wish you all success,"
 Replied the canon, "farewell, many thanks."
 He went, and ne'er the priest this mountebank's
 Face saw thereafter; and when this priest would
 Make his own test, at such time as he could,
 Of this receipt, farewell! it would not be!

Lo, thus bejaped and thus beguiled was he!
 And thus he had his introduction in
 The way men fall to ruin and to sin.
 Consider, sirs, how that, in each estate,
 Between men and their gold there is debate
 To such degree that gold is nearly done.
 This multiplying blinds so many a one
 That in good faith I think that it may be
 The greatest cause of this said scarcity.
 Philosophers they speak so mistily
 About this craft, plain men can't come thereby
 With any wit that men have nowadays.
 They may well chatter, as do all these jays,
 And in vague cant set their desire and pain,
 But to their purpose shall they ne'er attain.
 A man may easily learn, if he have aught,
 To multiply, and bring his wealth to naught.
 Lo, such a gain is in this pleasant game
 A man's mirth it will turn to grief and shame,
 And it will empty great and heavy purses,
 And causes alchemists to get the curses
 Of all of those who thereunto have lent.
 O fie! For shame! Those who the fire resent,
 Alas! can they not flee the fire's fierce heat?
 If you have tried it, leave it, I repeat,
 Lest you lose all; better than never is late.
 Never to thrive at all were a long date.
 And though you prow, you never gold shall find;
 You are as bold as Bayard is, the blind,
 That blunders forth and thinks of danger, none;
 He is as bold to run against a stone
 As to go ambling down the broad highway.
 And so fare you who multiply, I say.
 If your two fleshly eyes can't see aright,
 Look to it that your mind lack not for sight.
 For, though you look about and though you stare,
 You shall not win a mite in traffic there,
 But you shall waste all you may scrape and turn.
 Avoid that fire, lest much too fast it burn;
 Meddle no more with that base art, I mean,
 For if you do, you'll lose your savings clean.
 And now I'll tell you briefly, if I may,
 What the philosophers about this say.
 Arnold of Villanovana I will cite.
 In his Rosarium he brings to light
 These facts, and says- in this I do not lie:
 "No man can mercury ever mortify,
 Unless its brother's aid to it he bring,
 And also he who first did say this thing
 Was father of philosophers, Hermes;

He said the dragon, doubtless, takes his ease
 And never dies, unless there's also slain
 His brother, which, to make the matter plain,
 Means, by the dragon, mercury, none other,
 And brimstone's understood to mean the brother,
 That out of Sol and Luna we can draw.
 And therefore," said he, "give heed to my saw,
 Let no man busy him ever with this art
 Unless philosophers to him impart
 Their meaning clearly, for unless he can
 Their language grasp, he's but an ignorant man.
 This science and this learning, too," said he,
 "Must ever the most secret secrets be."
 Also there was a student of Plato
 Who on a time said to his master so,
 As his book Senior will bear witness;
 And this was his demand, in truthfulness:
 "Tell me the name, sir, of the Secret Stone."
 And Plato answered in this wise anon:
 "Take, now, the stone that Titanos men name."
 "What's that?" asked he.
 "Magnesia is the same,"
 Plato replied.
 "Yea, sir, and is it thus?
 This is ignotum per ignotius.
 What is magnesia, good sir, I do pray?"
 "It is a water that is made, I say,
 Out of four elements," replied Plato.
 "Tell me the root, good sir," said he, "if so,
 What then, is water, tell me if you will."
 "Nay, nay," said Plato, "and now peace, be still."
 Philosophers are sworn, aye, every one,
 That they will thus discover it to none,
 Nor in a book will write it for men here;
 For unto Christ it is so lief and dear
 That He wills that it not discovered be,
 Save where it's pleasing to His deity
 Man to inspire, and also, to defend
 Whom that He will; and lo, this is the end.
 And thus do I conclude: Since God in Heaven
 Wills that philosophers shall not say even
 How any man may come upon that stone,
 I say, as for the best, let it alone.
 For whoso makes of God his adversary,
 To work out anything that is contrary
 To what He wills, he'll surely never thrive,
 Though he should multiply while he's alive.
 And there's the end; for finished is my tale.
 May God's salvation to no good man fail! Amen.

HERE ENDS THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE

