

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## THE REEVE'S TALE

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

### THE PROLOGUE

WHEN folk had laughed all at this nice case  
Of Absolon and Hendy Nicholas,  
Diverse folk diversely they said,  
But for the more part they laugh'd and play'd;\*      \*were diverted  
And at this tale I saw no man him grieve,  
But it were only Osewold the Reeve.  
Because he was of carpenteres craft,  
A little ire is in his hearte laft\*;      \*left  
He gan to grudge\* and blamed it a lite.\*\*      \*murmur \*\*little.  
"So the\* I," quoth he, "full well could I him quite\*\*      \*thrive \*\*match  
With blearing\* of a proude miller's eye,      \*dimming <1>  
If that me list to speak of ribaldry.  
But I am old; me list not play for age; <2>  
Grass time is done, my fodder is now forage.  
This white top\* writeth mine olde years;      \*head  
Mine heart is also moulded\* as mine hairs;      \*grown mouldy  
And I do fare as doth an open-erse\*;      \*medlar <3>  
That ilke\* fruit is ever longer werse,      \*same  
Till it be rotten \*in mullok or in stre\*.      \*on the ground or in straw\*  
We olde men, I dread, so fare we;  
Till we be rotten, can we not be ripe;  
We hop\* away, while that the world will pipe;      \*dance  
For in our will there sticketh aye a nail,  
To have an hoary head and a green tail,

As hath a leek; for though our might be gone,  
 Our will desireth folly ever-in-one\*: \*continually  
 For when we may not do, then will we speak,  
 Yet in our ashes cold does fire reek.\* \*smoke<4>  
 Four gledes\* have we, which I shall devise\*\*, \*coals \*\* describe  
 Vaunting, and lying, anger, covetise\*. \*covetousness  
 These foure sparks belongen unto eld.  
 Our olde limbes well may be unweld\*, \*unwieldy  
 But will shall never fail us, that is sooth.  
 And yet have I alway a coltes tooth,<5>  
 As many a year as it is passed and gone  
 Since that my tap of life began to run;  
 For sickerly\*, when I was born, anon \*certainly  
 Death drew the tap of life, and let it gon:  
 And ever since hath so the tap y-run,  
 Till that almost all empty is the tun.  
 The stream of life now droppeth on the chimb.<6>  
 The silly tongue well may ring and chime  
 Of wretchedness, that passed is full yore\*: \*long  
 With olde folk, save dotage, is no more. <7>

When that our Host had heard this sermoning,  
 He gan to speak as lordly as a king,  
 And said; "To what amounteth all this wit?  
 What? shall we speak all day of holy writ?  
 The devil made a Reeve for to preach,  
 As of a souter\* a shipman, or a leach\*\*. \*cobbler <8>  
 Say forth thy tale, and tarry not the time: \*\*surgeon <9>  
 Lo here is Deptford, and 'tis half past prime:<10>  
 Lo Greenwich, where many a shrew is in.  
 It were high time thy tale to begin."

"Now, sirs," quoth then this Osewold the Reeve,  
 I pray you all that none of you do grieve,  
 Though I answer, and somewhat set his hove\*, \*hood <11>  
 For lawful is \*force off with force to shove.\* \*to repel force  
 This drunken miller hath y-told us here by force\*  
 How that beguiled was a carpentere,  
 Paraventure\* in scorn, for I am one: \*perhaps  
 And, by your leave, I shall him quite anon.

Right in his churlish termes will I speak,  
I pray to God his necke might to-break.  
He can well in mine eye see a stalk,  
But in his own he cannot see a balk."<12>

Notes to the Prologue to the Reeves Tale.

1. "With blearing of a proude miller's eye": dimming his eye; playing off a joke on him.
2. "Me list not play for age": age takes away my zest for drollery.
3. The medlar, the fruit of the mespilus tree, is only edible when rotten.
4. Yet in our ashes cold does fire reek: "ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires."
5. A colt's tooth; a wanton humour, a relish for pleasure.
6. Chimb: The rim of a barrel where the staves project beyond the head.
7. With olde folk, save dotage, is no more: Dotage is all that is left them; that is, they can only dwell fondly, dote, on the past.
8. Souter: cobbler; Scottice, "sutor;" from Latin, "suere," to sew.
9. "Ex sutore medicus" (a surgeon from a cobbler) and "ex sutore nauclerus" (a seaman or pilot from a cobbler) were both proverbial expressions in the Middle Ages.
10. Half past prime: half-way between prime and tierce; about half-past seven in the morning.
11. Set his hove; like "set their caps;" as in the description of

the Manciple in the Prologue, who "set their aller cap". "Hove" or "houfe," means "hood;" and the phrase signifies to be even with, outwit.

12. The illustration of the mote and the beam, from Matthew.

## THE TALE.<1>

At Trompington, not far from Cantebrig,*	*Cambridge
There goes a brook, and over that a brig,	
Upon the whiche brook there stands a mill:	
And this is *very sooth* that I you tell.	*complete truth*
A miller was there dwelling many a day,	
As any peacock he was proud and gay:	
Pipen he could, and fish, and nettes bete*,	*prepare
And turne cups, and wrestle well, and shete*.	*shoot
Aye by his belt he bare a long pavade*,	*poniard
And of his sword full trenchant was the blade.	
A jolly popper* bare he in his pouch;	*dagger
There was no man for peril durst him touch.	
A Sheffield whittle* bare he in his hose.	*small knife
Round was his face, and camuse* was his nose.	*flat <2>
As pilled* as an ape's was his skull.	*peeled, bald.
He was a market-beter* at the full.	*brawler
There durste no wight hand upon him legge*,	*lay
That he ne swore anon he should abegge*.	*suffer the penalty

A thief he was, for sooth, of corn and meal,	
And that a sly, and used well to steal.	
His name was *hoten deinous Simekin*	*called "Disdainful Simkin"*
A wife he hadde, come of noble kin:	
The parson of the town her father was.	
With her he gave full many a pan of brass,	
For that Simkin should in his blood ally.	
She was y-foster'd in a nunnery:	
For Simkin woulde no wife, as he said,	
But she were well y-nourish'd, and a maid,	
To saven his estate and yeomanry:	

And she was proud, and pert as is a pie\*. \*magpie  
 A full fair sight it was to see them two;  
 On holy days before her would he go  
 With his tippet\* y-bound about his head; \*hood  
 And she came after in a gite\* of red, \*gown <3>  
 And Simkin hadde hosen of the same.  
 There durste no wight call her aught but Dame:  
 None was so hardy, walking by that way,  
 That with her either durste \*rage or play\*, \*use freedom\*  
 \*But if\* he would be slain by Simekin \*unless  
 With pavade, or with knife, or bodekin.  
 For jealous folk be per'lous evermo':  
 Algate\* they would their wives \*wende so\*. \*unless \*so behave\*  
 And eke for she was somewhat smutterlich\*, \*dirty  
 She was as dign\* as water in a ditch, \*nasty  
 And all so full of hoker\*, and bismare\*\*. \*ill-nature \*\*abusive speech  
 Her thoughte that a lady should her spare\*, \*not judge her hardly  
 What for her kindred, and her nortelrie\* \*nurturing, education  
 That she had learned in the nunnery.

One daughter hadde they betwixt them two  
 Of twenty year, withouten any mo,  
 Saving a child that was of half year age,  
 In cradle it lay, and was a proper page.\* \*boy  
 This wenche thick and well y-grown was,  
 With camuse\* nose, and eyen gray as glass; \*flat  
 With buttocks broad, and breastes round and high;  
 But right fair was her hair, I will not lie.  
 The parson of the town, for she was fair,  
 In purpose was to make of her his heir  
 Both of his chattels and his messuage,  
 And \*strange he made it\* of her marriage. \*he made it a matter  
 His purpose was for to bestow her high of difficulty\*  
 Into some worthy blood of ancestry.  
 For holy Church's good may be dispended\* \*spent  
 On holy Church's blood that is descended.  
 Therefore he would his holy blood honour  
 Though that he holy Church should devour.

Great soken\* hath this miller, out of doubt, \*toll taken for grinding



"By God, Simon," quoth John, "need has no peer\*.  
 Him serve himself behoves that has no swain\*,  
 Or else he is a fool, as clerkes sayn.  
 Our manciple I hope\* he will be dead,  
 So workes aye the wanges\* in his head:  
 And therefore is I come, and eke Alein,  
 To grind our corn and carry it home again:  
 I pray you speed us hence as well ye may."  
 "It shall be done," quoth Simkin, "by my fay.  
 What will ye do while that it is in hand?"  
 "By God, right by the hopper will I stand,"  
 Quoth John, "and see how that the corn goes in.  
 Yet saw I never, by my father's kin,  
 How that the hopper waggis to and fro."  
 Alein answered, "John, and wilt thou so?  
 Then will I be beneath, by my crown,  
 And see how that the meale falls adown  
 Into the trough, that shall be my disport\*:  
 For, John, in faith I may be of your sort;  
 I is as ill a miller as is ye."

\*equal

\*servant

\*expect

\*cheek-teeth <8>

\*amusement

This miller smiled at their nicety\*,  
 And thought, "All this is done but for a wile.  
 They weenen\* that no man may them beguile,  
 But by my thrift yet shall I blear their eye,<9>  
 For all the sleight in their philosophy.  
 The more \*quainte knackes\* that they make,  
 The more will I steal when that I take.  
 Instead of flour yet will I give them bren\*.  
 The greatest clerks are not the wisest men,  
 As whilom to the wolf thus spake the mare: <10>  
 Of all their art ne count I not a tare."  
 Out at the door he went full privily,  
 When that he saw his time, softely.  
 He looked up and down, until he found  
 The clerkes' horse, there as he stood y-bound  
 Behind the mill, under a lewesell\*:  
 And to the horse he went him fair and well,  
 And stripped off the bridle right anon.  
 And when the horse was loose, he gan to gon

\*simplicity

\*think

\*odd little tricks\*

\*bran

\*arbour<11>

Toward the fen, where wilde mares run,  
 Forth, with "Wehee!" through thick and eke through thin.  
 This miller went again, no word he said,  
 But did his note\*, and with these clerkes play'd,      \*business <12>  
 Till that their corn was fair and well y-ground.  
 And when the meal was sacked and y-bound,  
 Then John went out, and found his horse away,  
 And gan to cry, "Harow, and well-away!  
 Our horse is lost: Alein, for Godde's bones,  
 Step on thy feet; come off, man, all at once:  
 Alas! our warden has his palfrey lorn.\*"      \*lost  
 This Alein all forgot, both meal and corn;  
 All was out of his mind his husbandry\*.      \*careful watch over  
 "What, which way is he gone?" he gan to cry.      the corn\*  
 The wife came leaping inward at a renne\*,      \*run  
 She said; "Alas! your horse went to the fen  
 With wilde mares, as fast as he could go.  
 Unthank\* come on his hand that bound him so      \*ill luck, a curse  
 And his that better should have knit the rein."  
 "Alas!" quoth John, "Alein, for Christes pain  
 Lay down thy sword, and I shall mine also.  
 I is full wight\*, God wate\*\*, as is a roe.      \*swift \*\*knows  
 By Godde's soul he shall not scape us bathe\*.      \*both <13>  
 Why n' had thou put the capel\* in the lathe\*\*?      \*horse<14> \*\*barn  
 Ill hail, Alein, by God thou is a fonne.\*"      \*fool  
 These silly clerkes have full fast y-run  
 Toward the fen, both Alein and eke John;  
 And when the miller saw that they were gone,  
 He half a bushel of their flour did take,  
 And bade his wife go knead it in a cake.  
 He said; I trow, the clerkes were afeard,  
 Yet can a miller \*make a clerkes beard,\*      \*cheat a scholar\* <15>  
 For all his art: yea, let them go their way!  
 Lo where they go! yea, let the children play:  
 They get him not so lightly, by my crown."  
 These silly clerkes runnen up and down  
 With "Keep, keep; stand, stand; jossa\*, warderere.      \*turn  
 Go whistle thou, and I shall keep\* him here."      \*catch  
 But shortly, till that it was very night  
 They coulde not, though they did all their might,



Their capel catch, he ran away so fast:  
Till in a ditch they caught him at the last.

Weary and wet, as beastes in the rain,  
Comes silly John, and with him comes Alein.  
"Alas," quoth John, "the day that I was born!  
Now are we driv'n till hething\* and till scorn.                   \*mockery  
Our corn is stol'n, men will us fonnes\* call,                   \*fools  
Both the warden, and eke our fellows all,  
And namely\* the miller, well-away!"                   \*especially  
Thus plained John, as he went by the way  
Toward the mill, and Bayard\* in his hand.                   \*the bay horse  
The miller sitting by the fire he fand\*.                   \*found  
For it was night, and forther\* might they not,                   \*go their way  
But for the love of God they him besought  
Of herberow\* and ease, for their penny.                   \*lodging  
The miller said again, "If there be any,  
Such as it is, yet shall ye have your part.  
Mine house is strait, but ye have learned art;  
Ye can by arguments maken a place  
A mile broad, of twenty foot of space.  
Let see now if this place may suffice,  
Or make it room with speech, as is your guise.\*"                   \*fashion  
"Now, Simon," said this John, "by Saint Cuthberd  
Aye is thou merry, and that is fair answer'd.  
I have heard say, man shall take of two things,  
Such as he findes, or such as he brings.  
But specially I pray thee, hoste dear,  
Gar <16> us have meat and drink, and make us cheer,  
And we shall pay thee truly at the full:  
With empty hand men may not hawkes tull\*.                   \*allure  
Lo here our silver ready for to spend."

This miller to the town his daughter send  
For ale and bread, and roasted them a goose,  
And bound their horse, he should no more go loose:  
And them in his own chamber made a bed.  
With sheetes and with chalons\* fair y-spread,                   \*blankets<17>  
Not from his owen bed ten foot or twelve:  
His daughter had a bed all by herselfe,

Right in the same chamber *by and by*:	*side by side*
It might no better be, and cause why,	
There was no *roomer herberow* in the place.	*roomier lodging*
They suppen, and they speaken of solace,	
And drinken ever strong ale at the best.	
Aboute midnight went they all to rest.	
Well had this miller varnished his head;	
Full pale he was, fordrunken, and *nought red*.	*without his wits*
He yoxed*, and he spake thorough the nose,	*hiccuped
As he were in the quakke*, or in the pose**.	*grunting **catarrh
To bed he went, and with him went his wife,	
As any jay she light was and jolife,*	*jolly
So was her jolly whistle well y-wet.	
The cradle at her beddes feet was set,	
To rock, and eke to give the child to suck.	
And when that drunken was all in the crock*	*pitcher<18>
To bedde went the daughter right anon,	
To bedde went Alein, and also John.	
There was no more; needed them no dwale.<19>	
This miller had, so wisly* bibbed ale,	*certainly
That as a horse he snorted in his sleep,	
Nor of his tail behind he took no keep*.	*heed
His wife bare him a burdoun*, a full strong;	*bass <20>
Men might their routing* hearen a furlong.	*snoring
The wenche routed eke for company.	
Alein the clerk, that heard this melody,	
He poked John, and saide: "Sleepest thou?	
Heardest thou ever such a song ere now?	
Lo what a compline<21> is y-mell* them all.	*among
A wilde fire upon their bodies fall,	
Who hearken'd ever such a ferly* thing?	*strange <22>
Yea, they shall have the flow'r of ill ending!	
This longe night there *tides me* no rest.	*comes to me*
But yet no force*, all shall be for the best.	*matter
For, John," said he, "as ever may I thrive,	
If that I may, yon wenche will I swive*.	*enjoy carnally
Some easement* has law y-shapen** us	*satisfaction **provided
For, John, there is a law that sayeth thus,	
That if a man in one point be aggriev'd,	

That in another he shall be relievd.  
Our corn is stol'n, soothly it is no nay,  
And we have had an evil fit to-day.  
And since I shall have none amendement  
Against my loss, I will have easement:  
By Godde's soul, it shall none, other be."  
This John answer'd; Alein, \*advise thee\*:  
The miller is a perilous man," he said,  
"And if that he out of his sleep abraid\*,  
He mighte do us both a villainy\*."  
Alein answer'd; "I count him not a fly.  
And up he rose, and by the wench he crept.  
This wenche lay upright, and fast she slept,  
Till he so nigh was, ere she might espy,  
That it had been too late for to cry:  
And, shortly for to say, they were at one.  
Now play, Alein, for I will speak of John.

\*have a care\*

\*awaked

\*mischief

This John lay still a furlong way <23> or two,  
And to himself he made ruth\* and woe.  
"Alas!" quoth he, "this is a wicked jape\*;  
Now may I say, that I is but an ape.  
Yet has my fellow somewhat for his harm;  
He has the miller's daughter in his arm:  
He auntred\* him, and hath his needes sped,  
And I lie as a draff-sack in my bed;  
And when this jape is told another day,  
I shall be held a daffe\* or a cockenay <24>  
I will arise, and auntre\* it, by my fay:  
Unhardy is unsely, <25> as men say."  
And up he rose, and softly he went  
Unto the cradle, and in his hand it hent\*,  
And bare it soft unto his beddes feet.  
Soon after this the wife \*her routing lete\*,  
And gan awake, and went her out to piss  
And came again and gan the cradle miss  
And groped here and there, but she found none.  
"Alas!" quoth she, "I had almost misgone  
I had almost gone to the clerkes' bed.  
Ey! Benedicite, then had I foul y-sped."

\*wail

\*trick

\*adventured

\*coward

\*attempt

\*took

\*stopped snoring\*

And forth she went, till she the cradle fand.  
She groped alway farther with her hand  
And found the bed, and \*thoughte not but good\*      \*had no suspicion\*  
Because that the cradle by it stood,  
And wist not where she was, for it was derk;  
But fair and well she crept in by the clerk,  
And lay full still, and would have caught a sleep.  
Within a while this John the Clerk up leap  
And on this goode wife laid on full sore;  
So merry a fit had she not had \*full yore\*.      \*for a long time\*  
He pricked hard and deep, as he were mad.

This jolly life have these two clerkes had,  
Till that the thirde cock began to sing.  
Alein wax'd weary in the morrowing,  
For he had swonken\* all the longe night,      \*laboured  
And saide; "Farewell, Malkin, my sweet wight.  
The day is come, I may no longer bide,  
But evermore, where so I go or ride,  
I is thine owen clerk, so have I hele.\*"      \*health  
"Now, deare leman\*," quoth she, "go, fare wele:      \*sweetheart  
But ere thou go, one thing I will thee tell.  
When that thou wendest homeward by the mill,  
Right at the entry of the door behind  
Thou shalt a cake of half a bushel find,  
That was y-maked of thine owen meal,  
Which that I help'd my father for to steal.  
And goode leman, God thee save and keep."  
And with that word she gan almost to weep.  
Alein uprose and thought, "Ere the day daw  
I will go creepen in by my fellow:"  
And found the cradle with his hand anon.  
"By God!" thought he, "all wrong I have misgone:  
My head is \*totty of my swink\* to-night,      \*giddy from my labour\*  
That maketh me that I go not aright.  
I wot well by the cradle I have misgo';  
Here lie the miller and his wife also."  
And forth he went a twenty devil way  
Unto the bed, there as the miller lay.  
He ween'd\* t' have creeped by his fellow John,      \*thought





or upper storey; supposed to have been Clare Hall.  
(Transcribers note: later commentators identify it with King's Hall, now merged with Trinity College)

5. Manciple: steward; provisioner of the hall. See also note 47 to the prologue to the Tales.

6. Testif: headstrong, wild-brained; French, "entete."

7. Strother: Tyrwhitt points to Anstruther, in Fife: Mr Wright to the Vale of Langstroth, in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Chaucer has given the scholars a dialect that may have belonged to either district, although it more immediately suggests the more northern of the two.

(Transcribers note: later commentators have identified it with a now vanished village near Kirknewton in Northumberland. There was a well-known Alein of Strother in Chaucer's lifetime.)

8. Wanges: grinders, cheek-teeth; Anglo-Saxon, "Wang," the cheek; German, "Wange."

9. See note 1 to the Prologue to the Reeves Tale

10. In the "Cento Novelle Antiche," the story is told of a mule, which pretends that his name is written on the bottom of his hind foot. The wolf attempts to read it, the mule kills him with a kick in the forehead; and the fox, looking on, remarks that "every man of letters is not wise." A similar story is told in "Reynard the Fox."

11. Levesell: an arbour; Anglo-Saxon, "lefe-setl," leafy seat.

12. Noth: business; German, "Noth," necessity.

13. Bathe: both; Scottice, "baith."

14. Capel: horse; Gaelic, "capall;" French, "cheval;" Italian, "cavallo," from Latin, "caballus."

15. Make a clerkes beard: cheat a scholar; French, "faire la barbe;" and Boccaccio uses the proverb in the same sense.

16. "Gar" is Scotch for "cause;" some editions read, however, "get us some".

17. Chalons: blankets, coverlets, made at Chalons in France.

18. Crock: pitcher, cruse; Anglo-Saxon, "crocca;" German, "krug;" hence "crockery."

19. Dwale: night-shade, *Solanum somniferum*, given to cause sleep.

20. Burdoun: bass; "burden" of a song. It originally means the drone of a bagpipe; French, "bourdon."

21. Compline: even-song in the church service; chorus.

22. Ferly: strange. In Scotland, a "ferlie" is an unwonted or remarkable sight.

23. A furlong way: As long as it might take to walk a furlong.

24. Cockenay: a term of contempt, probably borrowed from the kitchen; a cook, in base Latin, being termed "coquinarius." compare French "coquin," rascal.

25. Unhardy is unsely: the cowardly is unlucky; "nothing venture, nothing have;" German, "unselig," unhappy.

26. Holy cross of Bromholm: A common adjuration at that time; the cross or rood of the priory of Bromholm, in Norfolk, was said to contain part of the real cross and therefore held in high esteem.

27. In manus tuas: Latin, "in your hands".